

Article

An American Hero: Faith-Based Emergency Health Care in Karen State, Myanmar and Beyond

Alexander Horstmann

School of Humanities, Tallinn University, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia; alexander.horstmann@tlu.ee

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Abstract: This article examines the vastly expanded mobility of displaced Karen villagers in the evangelical humanitarian movement, the Free Burma Rangers. This builds on ethnographic fieldwork on humanitarian cultures in the Thai-Burmese borderlands conducted since 2007 with a Thai research team and funded by Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious Diversity. While refugees are too often presented as victims, the article argues that by joining the mission, the Karen freedom fighters become ambassadors of a political ideology and evangelism. Bringing Christianity with them from their displaced homes, displaced Karen meet the evangelical humanitarian organization in the Karen hills or in the Thai refugee camps, train with them, and supply the villagers left behind with emergency health care and religious messages. Sponsored by American evangelical churches, the US military, and resettled Karen communities in the West, the freedom fighters of the Free Burma Rangers mobilize people and resources all over the globe. Recently, they have expanded their operations beyond Myanmar to places as far as Syria, Iraq and South Sudan, thus getting involved in what it presents as a global struggle between good and evil.

Keywords: Myanmar; war; humanitarian aid; Evangelism; ethnic minorities; emergency health care

1. Introduction

Taking up humanism as its constituency: The Free Burma Rangers:

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s Grace in its various forms”.

1, Peter 4: 10.

Beginning every interview with a prayer, American missionary and humanitarian worker David Eubank tells us that he is giving himself to God and depends on his guidance. Eubank leads the humanitarian service organization, the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), the work of which spans continents by helping the wounded with emergency healthcare in the hilly borderlands of Myanmar, in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, Sudan, Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria.

In his famous lectures on bio-politics, Michel Foucault showed how the state introduced new technologies to measure and manage its population (Dean 2010, pp. 117–21; Foucault 2007). Crisis, warring, and never-ending suffering provide new opportunities for humanitarian organizations and propel them to the forefront of media attention (Redfield 2006, pp. 5–6; Redfield 2013). Examining the use of *témoignage* (witnessing) in the work of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Peter Redfield notes that international NGOs now play a central role today in defining secular moral truth for an international audience (Redfield 2006, p. 5). In this article, Foucault’s idea about technologies is used to investigate and question the use of humanitarian aid and to highlight the uneven power relations between people constructed as active donors and as passive recipients. However, this essay also argues that some Karen who join FBR to become Rangers become part of the humanitarian mission of the organization.

Combining medical expertise, expert knowledge, and public outrage, public health aid organizations are able to mobilize both the most vulnerable people affected by violence and conflict as well as the substantial financial and moral support from a great field of followers (Redfield 2013). In the case of FBR, the organization also involves ethnic minority villagers in Myanmar for witnessing and fact finding, by training them to produce human rights documentation that FBR can then disseminate via its website. FBR claims to work with permission of the ethnic armed organizations, having established a solid foothold in the religiously and ethnically complex minority regions. Unlike other humanitarian organizations, FBR does not content itself to keep people alive. Rather, it plays on the notion of a global Christian family and Christian bonds. Defending life in the context of moral and political outrage about the injustice and oppression of Christian minorities in Burma, FBR practices a form of situated, global humanitarian activism (Redfield 2006, p. 5). As described vividly by Devji, this activism can be fruitfully compared to other activisms, e.g., for climate change, especially those that entail an element of dangerous protest or sacrifice for a higher aim (e.g., Devji 2005).

In the following, this paper looks into emergency healthcare for the wounded in the borderlands of Myanmar's ethnic minority areas through the example of the evangelical Free Burma Rangers. An ethnographic study of FBR has been completed in the context of a larger project that looks into the relationship of human-divine interactions in the evolution of humanitarianism, responding to life in crisis in Karen State, Eastern Myanmar (Horstmann and Jung 2015; Horstmann 2011, 2017). This area in Southeastern Myanmar had a civil war that dates back to 1949 and where a fragile ceasefire has only recently been agreed upon. Initially, it was intended to just grasp the reasons for the conflict, the local capacities to navigate it, and the organization of the Karen to manage their everyday lives and their survival. Vernacular, local knowledge-driven humanitarianism and the self-organization of humanitarian action for recovering and reconstruction became the major code that was structuring people's behavior and navigation in a conflict spanning decades and generations, becoming almost a normality rather than being a disruptive exception. The important theme of humanitarianism was chosen as a lens to understand the efforts of recovery and reconstruction and used ethnography for a critical approach to the idea of helping and giving.

In a research team led by Decha Tangseefa (Kyoto) consisting of Thai scholars, who focused on violent displacement in Karen State, the life trajectories of Karen refugees and their involvement in and with international and local NGOs, as well as mutual self-help groups and transnational networks from 2007–2013, were researched. This research began on the Thai border in 2007, meeting with the Karen diaspora in the refugee camps, in the border town of Mae Sot, and in the villages of northwestern Thailand where displaced Karen villagers worked on the farms, including those belonging to other Karen who have Thai citizenship. Later, following the cease-fire in 2011, the Thai-Myanmar border was able to be crossed to do fieldwork in the countryside of Southeastern Myanmar, where discussions were held with a few NGOs and INGOs in Maesot and in Chiang Mai, including the Karen Human Rights Group, the Back Pack Health Workers, and FBR. A meeting was arranged with Eubank's father, veteran missionary Allan Eubank, who used to be based in Chiang Mai with his wife and who inspired David Eubank to become a missionary and a soldier. The author was welcomed warmly by FBR members and got to know some of its Karen leaders and to observe some activities in the office shared with Partners in Chiang Mai, and in the training camp. In addition, the author was able to stay in close touch and have conversations with young Karen informants who have been trained as Rangers have been on FBR missions, and have since then stayed stand-by, ready to be called for another mission. There was also a benefit from Allan Eubank's autobiography "Where God Leads ... Never Give Up" (Eubank 2015).

On a theoretical plane, attention has been given to the word, faith, in faith-based humanitarianism. The author has been inspired by Thomas Tweed's notion of religion as an itinerary and a compass for people's cross-boundary mobility: "Religions are confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and superhuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries." The idea of "making homes and crossing boundaries" is the heart of his theory. Tweed sees

religion as serving as a compass that encompasses the past, present and future (including the afterlife), and as an itinerary to “position women and men in natural terrain and social space” and “enable and constrain terrestrial, corporeal, and cosmic crossings” (Tweed 2006, pp. 54, 74–75). From this view, religious practice (religioning) can be liberating: In looking at religion, not only as a tool of existential struggle but also as a vehicle of agency, meaning-making, border crossing, and homemaking, it can be understood that religion is a political project and political aspiration, reaching out in a transnational context and space. While Tweed brings out nicely the emotional dimension of religion as an existential spiritual need, Vasquez sees religions more as a dynamic material and historical expression of the practices of embodied individuals who are embedded in social fields and ecological networks (Vasquez 2010). Vasquez thus paints a more differentiated picture of the role of religion in volatile contexts, one that puts more focus on the political and on power.

In this essay, interest is placed on the notion of faith as integral to the ideology of the FBR. Faith is here first of all conceptualized as solidarity, but also as a duty to help. Faith constitutes the reasoning behind FBR’s physical as well as moral intervention. Faith provides the orientation for villagers who become displaced and confused. Faith is thus used as a form of healing for the traumata afflicted on displaced families. In this article, interest is placed on overhauling the paradigm of the giver and recipient and looking at the nature of the encounter between them and the greatly expanded mobility of the Karen who have become Rangers. Using the infrastructure of the FBR as a resource, the new Rangers become cultural ambassadors of a more cosmopolitan evangelism in their own right, far beyond their role as nurses who are engaged in practical aid. The members of the Eubank family repeatedly told me that they do not act out of leadership or any unilateral interests, but that they simply want to bring love and hope to the people and that they take their mandate to act and inspiration from Jesus Christ alone. As Eubank says: “What the Burmese army does to the Karen, or the IS to the Kurdish, is just wrong and one cannot stand still.”

Is the FBR an emancipatory force mobilizing the most vulnerable? Certainly, the many grassroots initiatives encountered in the Myanmar-Thailand borderlands provide a crucial space for violently displaced villagers. Patronage from a transnational faith-based, organization in particular, may provide a sanctuary for villagers on the run. While those displaced lose their homes, an alliance with and patronage from powerful international humanitarian organizations, governments, and churches opens up original opportunities for mobility and political action (cf. Horstmann and Jung 2015).

Situating FBR in a larger debate, the question is asked: how do such organizations shape new landscapes of humanitarian assistance and mobilization? How does the insertion into these new assemblages of humanitarian aid and intervention situate the individual self within Christian infrastructures of humanitarian aid? Given the human rights documentation of the FBR and their accumulation of knowledge about the Karen and others, what is the place of anthropology and anthropological knowledge and construction of the figure of the displaced migrant-refugee and her/his agency in the humanitarian regime? What kind of socialization emerges in the recruitment and mobilization that takes place between the Eubank family and their Karen hosts?

FBR presents itself as providing much more than professional health-care services. Its ideology resembles that of the much larger Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), who have set the tone for assisting populations in danger by going beyond the bureaucratic boundaries and limitations of the Red Cross (Redfield 2006). Being led by a former US army ranger FBR—not unlike MSF—regards itself to be in “perpetual warfare” (Redfield 2013, p. 20). The difference is that the founder of FBR sometimes carries a gun (for self-defensive purposes), unthinkable for MSF.

As described by Redfield, MSF justifies its existence by responding to permanent crises and states of exception. FBR also responds to the state of war, but is taking sides with the victims of injustice, violence and oppression as well as with the ethnic armed organizations. FBR, evangelic in nature, describes itself as a sailboat helmed by Jesus. In this sense, FBR does not attempt to be neutral, but takes sides with the good Karen. Its placement in warfare is further accentuated not only by its para-military training, military discipline, and by the nature of its military equipment, as well its stated willingness

to engage in armed conflict. Not unlike movie hero John Rambo, Eubank presents himself as a warrior who comes to places of conflict to liberate innocent civilians from the claws of their oppressors.

As a missionary and partly armed humanitarian organization engaged in healthcare, the author argues, FBR represents an expression of the failure of international organizations and governments in protecting the most vulnerable. There is interest in the mandate of FBR as an organization that used to operate as a secret, secluded, and hidden organization, but has been more open, transparent and even spectacular in more recent times. The example of FBR sheds light on global connections of a humanitarian organization and its position in political alliances of conservative Christians in the USA, politicians, and the US military. The example demonstrates the important role of international NGOs and their engagements with local forces in the politics of protection. FBR is an important piece in the process of political community formation in the local arena. It is an American missionary group, but one that is strongly immersed in the local arena of Karen State in Myanmar. Burma is represented as a showpiece of evil, whereby a ruthless Burma Army is oppressing innocent villagers. Burma thus becomes the center for the spiritual and financial mobilization of mission groups in the US and in Europe. The focus on Burma is further highlighted by celebrity humanitarianism. The Bush family, and especially the former president's wife, Laura Bush, developed a keen interest in Burma and the fate of state counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi. On her trips to the Thailand-Burma border, she also met with the FBR. Since then, FBR has enjoyed special support from Laura Bush as an ambassador for liberalism and democracy in Burma.

The Bush family is also known for its vocal support of missionary churches in Texas. In this sense, Laura Bush is clearly intervening in local politics and contributing to the emergence of an American Front on the side of the democratic opposition as well as Karen Christians on the Eastern frontier of Myanmar. Celebrity humanitarianism is further accentuated by regular visits from Hollywood star and special envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie. The Karen are introduced as persecuted Christians, worthy of media attention by the global Christian community. In the global humanitarian field, FBR and other faith-based groups have succeeded in transforming victimhood into a heroic struggle to assist and liberate persecuted Christians from evil worldwide. In this way, religious solidarity is helping to build a global liberation project, mobilized by donations from local parishes and faith communities, that shrinks distances in a globalized mission.

Humanitarian organizations, such as MSF, substantially add to Foucault's governmentality, establishing alternative networks and actors who monitor the world for human rights violations, making evidence of atrocities public, bringing them to the attention of the media, and assisting the most vulnerable. They want more than just to provide medical help. They want to give back dignity and provide a bit of normality in a context of permanent crisis. Crucially, FBR provides not only medical assistance, but also solidarity with the displaced, thus echoing Agamben's contribution on the politics of life. Revising the Foucauldian theory of biopower, bare life is the remainder of the destroyed political bios. One of the most politically pressing questions raised by *Homo Sacer* is whether emancipatory movements can mobilize bare life itself (Agamben 1995). It is this aspect of socialization and placement of a Western humanitarian organization and movement, grounded in a charismatic evangelical church in Texas, in the ethnic minority regions of Eastern Myanmar that is of interest.

In a similar line that activists and Western mercenaries were engaging with or fighting for the Karen National Liberation Army and democratic underground forces before, FBR has established a special relationship and symbiosis with the Karen, and has become a glocal organization, embedded in the local rebellion as much as in global Christian solidarity networks. FBR has its own corporate spirit, uniform, military discipline and training, and soldier's spirit, combining elements of emergency health care, militarism, and proselytizing, which it introduces to its natural local partner, the Karen National Liberation Army. The founder of FBR, David Eubank, was adopted by the Karen community and received a Karen name (Tha-U-Wa-A-Pa = Father of the White Monkey). David has become the white brother who brings freedom to the oppressed, love, and hope. He has become a local figure and trusted friends for many Karen.

The humanitarian and political intervention of FBR makes it a political force that directly involves itself in the violence in Myanmar. As stated above, the fact that David Eubank is an American missionary does not help to lessen the religious tension present but may even intensify it. As a movement with a clear political message, FBR may endanger those vulnerable communities they are supposed to protect. FBR may have saved hundreds of lives or more, but the way the organization positions itself as an enemy of the Burma military is problematic, as is its active involvement and overlap with the ethnic minority armies. The embeddedness of FBR in the structure of the non-state ethnic armed organizations is also problematic as the armed organizations exert pressure on vulnerable village communities as well, in the form of recruitment and taxation. Most problematic, the donations strengthen FBR and, in part, the ethnic armed organizations (which are supplied with trained Rangers), but less the traditional mutual support and security networks of the ordinary Karen. While the donations enable the Free Burma Rangers to purchase equipment and medical supplies and to recruit personnel, ordinary Karen villagers have hardly any voice in FBR media representations, appearing only as passive and happy recipients of the organization's generosity. The transition from a victim of atrocities to a ranger, nurse, and enlightened warrior and missionary is introduced as a natural pathway. It is a conversion process in the double sense: The young men portrayed in this article give themselves to Jesus (making a transition from animism) and to the Rangers (making a transition from the jungle village). Conversion can be understood in multiple senses: not only conversion to a religion but also to a lifestyle or an identity, a truth regime of presenting the American kingdom of God as a desirable form of governing the world at large.

In this sense, FBR may well be one opportunity for young Karen soldiers to find a home, belonging, the spirit of teamwork and, potentially, martyrdom. These young displaced Karen convert to the imagined community of a global Christian community, firmly based in the imagination of the American and Christian political thought that has identified the Karen as worthy of material as well as spiritual support. FBR has thus enabled an unexpected and incomprehensible mobility of Karen Rangers to global theatres of conflict and no-go-areas. FBR is expanding, identifying new enemies and new vulnerable groups that seek their military and medical assistance, reaching out to places and conflicts around the globe. The young Karen who join FBR begin a new life on the Thai-Burmese border and find employment with one of the CBOs in the humanitarian economy of Mae Sot or Chiang Mai. Being part of the FBR, they also join a political project and missionary adventure, going on tour to collect donations from church congregations for further dangerous missions with FBR. However, FBR also participates in proselytizing activities among the internally displaced. By far not all displaced Karen or other ethnic minorities are Christian, and the villagers belonging to Buddhism or animism may well feel uncomfortable with the powerful Christian message of FBR members. Local cosmologies, cultural traditions, and rituals weave powerful sense-scapes among the minority groups of the Karen, Karenni, and Kayah who resist the pressure of soft missionization in the refugee camps (Dudley 2010). While old Christians welcome church re-building in their communities, internally displaced villagers from animistic communities may be quite lost amidst the Bible songs of the Good Life Club as they have different visions of a good life or might simply be confused. FBR constitutes an astonishing case of religious mobility and mobilization in the context of a flourishing humanitarianism and the rise of moral ideologies (cf. Fasson 2011) in an increasingly fragile and violent world. The Karen who participate in the missions of FBR, as well as other humanitarian organizations, become missionaries in their own right who leave their protected environment to go out on dangerous missions as well doing missionary work in the hills of Eastern Myanmar, in the refugee camps of Northwestern Thailand, and as Rangers in Myanmar and elsewhere. These Karen cultural ambassadors are not the passive and victimized refugees that are known from media images, but are homegrown missionaries who use their enhanced mobility in the West to establish religious centers wherever they are. Doing so, Karen Rangers resemble the Karen native missionaries who, trained by the Western white brother, were much more successful in proselytizing the heathen among many ethnic minorities in Burma than the white overlord, using vernacular prose (Hayami 2018). The way of traveling with modern military equipment, jeeps, and modern airplanes contrasts with Jesuit Vinai Boonlue's metaphor of

walking caused by suffering and poverty that he develops in his sensitive and ethnographic dissertation (Boonlue 2015).

2. Heroic Mission: The Performance of Morality and Motivation

The narrative of heroism is highlighted in the staged performance of dramatic images on video clips circulated among American and worldwide church congregations. The family is at the center of Christian discourse on moral values. Dave's family is center stage in all of FBR's cinematic presentations. His wife, his two teenage daughters, and his young son are all actively involved in FBR activities. Dave's wife and children are outspoken actors and humanitarians in their own right and comment confidently on FBR missions.

The video clip shows David's teenage daughter riding a white horse, making its way confidently through the deep jungle. The white horse exemplifies both the purity of the mission, its noble task, and the family's total dedication to the cause. It seems that the daughter is an angel with wings who can fly away from the danger zone if needed. David's wife, Karen, is a teacher. She and her team provide villagers with entertainment through the Good Life Club.

The Good Life Club wants to encourage villagers through making handicrafts, playing children's games, singing songs, and learning Bible stories. The Good Life Club is about proselytizing in a playful way. Young people all over America prepare Christmas gifts, clothes, woolen caps, and other useful things for the villagers. Karen and her team members lead encouraging prayers. One of the main principles of FBR is that displaced villagers should feel that there is someone to assist them if they need it. For Dave, he "does not value his own family above any other Karen family." Life being full of wonders, and protected by the armed wing of the ethnic organizations, the Eubank family has thus far not been hurt.

Taking into account the fact that the founder of FBR, a humanitarian organization that helps the wounded in Myanmar and other conflicts around the world, strongly feels that he is on God's mission, the humanitarian practices of FBR can be read as a transnational and portable religious practice and experience that has involved Karen warriors in operations in Eastern Myanmar, more lately expanding their activities around the globe.

FBR's key religious expression is prayer. The prayer is geared to action and personalized to the Rangers. FBR is also part of a prayer group that offers prayers for Burma by appointment in Myanmar, Thailand, the USA and many other places around the world. In a film trailer, David Eubank asks God why he has been sent on this journey and why there is so much suffering in the world. This statement, "What I am doing here?" is taken as a starting point to explore the ways FBR legitimizes its intervention—medical, military and missionary all at once—in a space of warfare and crisis. The notion of humanity or humanitarianism is unpacked and instead highlights the ideology of warfare—war against evil, indeed the pleasure in war against evil, in action, in adventure—a language used not only by Eubank, but also by Pentecostalism and mainstream political discourse worldwide. Participating in an un-proclaimed war for humanity and justice there is interest in the drastically expanded mobility of Karen people who participate in local and global operations, but also in the new predicaments and impasses in which they find themselves. Indeed, FBR has documented atrocities against Karen civilians and showcased them in visual material on their website, CNN and faith-wire reports, and even provided film material on human rights violations for the production of *Rambo V*, also known as *John Rambo* (2008), blurring the lines of the real, the unreal, fiction and war.

Thus, in this essay, the way that displacement in Southeastern Myanmar is being used for a missionary calling within a missionary and a faith-based humanitarian service group that has sent emergency health teams to all ethnic minority regions in Myanmar over the last decades is highlighted. While exodus has only negative connotations, the connection to religion perhaps enables us to think of displacement as a strategy for achieving greater protection. In this more positive notion of agency, religion is a tool with which the Rangers develop a sense of vision and practical cosmopolitanism. With this tool in their hands, displaced Karen can regain control over their lives, and shape and

sacralize spaces at home and in the Diaspora by placing themselves in and outside the international regime of refugee protection.

3. The Free Burma Rangers

Starting out in a little, Texas-based church, the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) is a community-based organization founded by David Eubank. David's father, Allan Eubank, was a veteran American missionary, based in Chiang Mai. Before studying mission work, Allan Eubank served as a captain in the US Army during the Korean War. After training as a seminarian and missionary, he settled down in Chiang Mai with his wife Joan to bring God to the Thai and ethnic minority people of northern Thailand and eastern Myanmar. Allan and Joan started to convert the Lao Song in Nakhon Pathom (Northeastern Thailand, on the border with Laos) but had to wait 50 long years to earn their first baptisms. In a second project, he also aimed to evangelize among the *Talako* local religious movement in Karen state, Eastern Myanmar. He expects a breakthrough there any time now, with the spiritual leader converting or being prepared for conversion. Building on traditional Thai drama (*lakorn*), he and his wife established a full-time theatre troupe that performs the story of Jesus in Thai villages.

His son, David, used to serve as special envoy of the US Army in the Myanmar-China borderland. David was born in Texas, but grew up in Thailand with his parents, Allan and Joan. Later, he was training as a theologian in the US Fuller seminary, when his father called him up as the Wa people were looking at Eubank's Green Beret uniform, identifying him as a warrior, prophet and leader. Eubank also claims that he was able to enter Aung San Suu Kyi's military-guarded home, and that Suu Kyi asked Eubank to save the people of Burma and that they prayed together for the future of Burma.

Seeing the suffering of the ethnic minority people, he decided to found FBR to provide efficient help. As the Karen have a 200-year history of Christianization, they hold special meaning, as a people, for American Baptist missionaries. The Karen are at the center of the staffing of FBR and of protecting their activities through the Karen National Liberation Army troops or other ethnic armed organizations. David Eubank spends his time in and out of the ethnic conflict zones of Myanmar, Syria and Iraq, and also travels to the US and Europe to promote FBR.

FBR coordinates its activities closely with American Christian groups, especially with the INGO Partners Relief and Development, and also with human right groups, working in a similar way on human rights documentation. However, being a missionary organization, FBR works mostly with faith-based groups and missionary churches. There is little contact between FBR and other international organizations working on similar human rights issues or in the medical domain, and little contact with the Catholic faith. FBR nonetheless positions itself as part of a democratic front that is bringing values of freedom, culture, and religion to a vandalized and mismanaged country of the global South.

The intention to save lives through emergency health care is, in a sense, an honorable and uncontested one. It is indicative to compare the FBR with the much better-known Medicine sans frontiers. While the well-known French Doctors without Borders works on a principle of human rights, however, the Rangers perceive themselves as being in a sacred struggle of good against evil. While the French doctors remain impartial, the Rangers take sides with the ethnic armies. While the French doctors are secular, the Rangers follow Jesus' call. While the French doctors use only medicine and scalpels, the Rangers are armed, even for defensive goals. While the Rangers normally avoid any contact with the Burma Army, they are not pacifists and are willing to stand their ground with the displaced villagers and to defend them if necessary. Sharing this philosophy, they appear to be more a salvation army than a purely humanitarian organization. The boundary between humanitarian and military work seems to blur even more in FBR's engagement in Iraq and Syria, where FBR members are more directly involved in the battles between the Kurdish fighters and the Islamic State (IS) troops.

Positively formulated, FBR's reason for existence is to assist those marginalized groups most affected by violence. Most significantly, FBR establishes a presence in spaces that are not normally visited by foreign humanitarians, because they are simply regarded as too dangerous or because humanitarian organizations do not receive permission to go. It is the identity marker and strength of

the Rangers that they appear in war spaces to demonstrate that the displaced marginalized groups are not alone, and that the Rangers will assist them, share time with them, and even defend them if necessary. The Rangers' leader, David Eubank, does not hide his political viewpoint, showcasing the atrocities of torture, abuse, rape and brutal killing of civilian populations, he argues that we cannot close our eyes and that we have to act.

Taking an American, Christian political standpoint, Eubank risks perpetuating a conflict while ignoring the local knowledge, cultural resources, and ethnic diversity of the Karen and other groups. The military aspect of FBR is due to the fact that its founder used to work as a special envoy of the US Army while his father, a veteran missionary in Chiang Mai, served as an officer during the Korean War. Strictly speaking, FBR is a civil society organization, placed within the international church, which draws its mandate from the Lord and its support from private donations.

While MSF withdraws in political protest at military intimidation, the Rangers use military equipment and walk with ethnic minority armies to force their way to the front zone. While its engagement for the wounded deserves applause, the fact that the Rangers are armed, as well as their close alliance with the ethnic insurgents, positions them as an enemy of the Burma Army and puts Rangers as well as villagers at risk. Its highly desired medical service may contribute to the insecurity of and form a potential threat to extremely vulnerable communities of internally displaced people in Iraq or Myanmar.

Through this lens, the religious experience that is associated with the careers of refugees who are drawn to the Rangers is explored. At the center is an evangelical expression about the presence of the "saving angels" in a "landscape of evil." The young nurses who serve FBR are themselves migrants away from their homes. The devotional experience of serving FBR propels a specific personal trajectory, placing her/him in a global field as much as a political and ethnic agent as a humanitarian one. Most of all, however, it places her/him in a global religious field, a global religious community, as a servant of God. Humanitarian assistance becomes, in Csordas' words, a "portable practice" that dramatically broadens the radius of the participants while taking them hostage in a sort of crusade that brings the participating Rangers into great danger (Csordas 2009, p. 4). Indeed, a few Rangers have lost their lives in action, or have been interrogated and tortured, as reported by FBR on its website. FBR has become closely associated with the displaced and victimized Karen, being seen as good people who have no responsibility for their fate. The Karen are widely known as Christians, flourishing under the material and spiritual support of the American Baptist missionaries, as are the Kachin. However, the majority of the Karen are not Christian, but Theravada Buddhist and Animist, following the Mon-Burmese and Karen cultural traditions as well as resilient spirit beliefs. The fact that most villagers are not Christian does not stop the Rangers from involving the displaced people in Christian prayer, gospel song, and long hours of Bible teaching in the Good Life Club.

FBR is a humanitarian organization embedded in a much wider picture of geopolitical factors, situated deeply in the political conflict in Myanmar and, being a global player, connecting the local of the ethnic Karen and other ethnic minority groups in Myanmar into global formations and communities. It particularly relates the displaced Karen migrants to American and international church congregations who, with their donations, enable FBR to expand their services, and who are also connected to Karen in multiple networks and transnational webs.

As such, and from a perspective of humanitarianism as everyday practice, the Rangers actively participate in what Redfield has called global advocacy (Redfield 2006, pp. 8ff; 2013). FBR particularly uses the concept of witnessing to construct the moral truth of atrocities committed for an international audience. While FBR does not have the scale of a humanitarian dinosaur such as MSF, they have expanded their operations from Myanmar to other conflict zones, e.g., Kurdistan in Iraq, and the Nuba mountains in Sudan. The Rangers normally shun media and the Eubank family, in particular, has remained secretive in order to protect its ethical integrity and its informants from possible persecution. However, the first media presentations have now emerged and the Rangers have sent their material to CNN and other media outlets. The Rangers' public relations include presentations and

fundraising in evangelical churches in Chiang Mai, Texas and Prague. In addition, US children prepare Christmas gifts, crafts and woolen caps for distribution among the needy as part of the activities of the Good Life Club. FBR is now preparing a major documentary film on FBR's story and its humanitarian adventures to hit the cinemas and Netflix and actively raising funds for the project. The film will put its humanitarian interventions before a global audience.

Religion as faith is closely associated with a life in motion as it offers a vital resource of interpretive and practical agency, in particular for people seeking to re-establish their lives in a new place. The informal and private networks can be an important source of encouragement and assistance. Religion can thus be conceptualized as flows of "crossing and dwelling" that move around the world to create invented communities (Horstmann and Jung 2015). Refugee ministries and urban ministries that are organized around the world and work in slums and refugee camps work among the most vulnerable groups for the Kingdom of God. The missionaries and Christian volunteers organize through outreach campaigns to reach the most disadvantaged populations and offer humanitarian assistance in the form of grassroots education and emergency health care. The missionaries specializing in urban mission or refugee mission volunteer in migrant churches, work in train station missions among the homeless, establish shops in red-light districts and pay prostitutes to stay away from sex-work, offer relief to drug addicts, establish their tents alongside garbage collectors, offer shelter to North Korean defectors, offer education and shelter to orphans, and emergency health care to the wounded. Christian missionaries have opened hundreds of orphanages in the most crisis-stricken countries affected by natural disaster and violent conflict.

4. Helping the Wounded: The Free Burma Rangers in Action

In one of the most protracted civil wars, the Burma Army has inflicted tremendous suffering on civilian populations in ethnic areas of Burma, resulting in large-scale displacement. The Burma Army suspected the villagers of providing food and shelter to the armed wing of the political organization of the Karen, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). FBR sees the Karen ethnic army as a pro-democratic force and trains and—not unlike mercenaries who share the liberation ethos of the ethnic armed forces—supplies their soldiers and nurses to work for the Rangers. It is the dilemma of many international humanitarians that they cannot access or stay in crisis zones. Humanitarians the world-over have become more vulnerable to attack. The training of personnel for humanitarian purposes paired with quasi-military organization and discipline makes FBR vulnerable to critique, and the government of Myanmar has not allowed FBR into Rakhine State in Western Myanmar, accusing FBR of providing military training to ethnic armed organizations in Kachin State.

The Rangers overcome this problem by deciding for themselves where they go and when they go. This clearly implies a great risk. As their presence would also endanger the displaced, the Rangers have to move quickly. However, David Eubank and his team ask the Rangers to stay on with the people if they cannot flee. This means—in principle—that Rangers must be willing to die in action. This challenge requires hard training in the base camp. More than 350 Rangers from most ethnic minorities have been trained in the White Monkey base camp in Chiang Mai province and at the main training camp in KNLA's 5th brigade in northern Karen state. While the core of its staff is Karen, FBR today is a multi-ethnic group that incorporates members from other ethnic minority groups as well. In the beginning, there was David and his most loyal Karen followers, KNLA soldiers and medics, often themselves displaced by the violence and active in the KNU departments of health, welfare, education and youth. Now, there are no less than 70 teams operating in Karen, Kayah, Shan, Kachin, Chin and Arakan states. Each team consists of four to five Rangers: A team leader, a medic, a photographer/videographer, a security specialist to map their route and liaise with rebel armies, and a Good Life Club counselor, who is in charge of the educational and health needs of village children.

The Rangers today operate in many different frontier and conflict zones of Myanmar, especially in Shan State, Kachin State, and Rakhine State. Expanding from its model with the Karen, FBR has trained emergency teams for other ethnic minority armed groups. Over the years, FBR has become a force

that has gradually increased its activities, working together with other humanitarian organizations, especially with the faith-based organization partners (relief and development), other faith-based groups organized in the Border Consortium, as well as with human rights organizations, such as the very professional Karen Human Rights Group and other community based organizations. Volunteers and staff often switch between these groups.

Many of its nurses also served in the armed wing of the KNU, the Karen National Liberation Army. Due to their military-style camouflage, the Rangers are easily recognized and identified as part of the enemy by the Burma Army. The Rangers are well equipped, use the latest military equipment, and provide training and military support in logistics and orienteering, communications and satellite. They travel into the area by jeep until they reach the conflict zone. From there, they have to walk through the rough forest, avoiding the roads, and by night. They make contact with the camps of internally displaced people and begin to work immediately on their arrival. The medics feed children and old people, operate on land-mine victims, and help deliver babies. As the only Rangers present, and as the internally displaced villagers basically lack everything, the Rangers save numerous lives. Blankets, clothes, medicine, foodstuffs, mosquito repellents, and even radios are distributed. Being constantly in and out of the conflict zones, the Rangers document and report tirelessly and in detail on ongoing human right abuses. While FBR acts on its own initiative, it is part of an extensive network of community-based organizations in the different ethnic borderlands that are willing to sacrifice for nationalist or religious reasons.

5. Concluding Remarks

Religion can also have a confining and disciplinary aspect, and be involved in othering. According to Tweed, all transnational migrants are natural theorists of religion. While Tweed exemplifies its centrality for belonging and imagination, religion has been largely left out of refugee studies. This neglect is due to a diminished understanding of religion. Talal Asad ([Asad \[1993\] 2009](#)), in his *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), critiques the study of religion for universalizing a Western definition of religion that centers on interiority. Vasquez says that the focus on cultural meaning has blurred the political function of religion. While religion is central to solidarity and cohesion, in the sense of Durkheim, Christian missionization also involves truth claims and politics of othering. Missionization is about the disciplining of bodies, management of populations, and the design of community and public space (e.g., [Han 2013](#)). Missionization mediates the competition for political and economic resources—e.g., humanitarian resources—targeted at the souls of the displaced. To speak of the creative imposition of sacralities in the diasporic space moves the conversation towards the notion of religion and faith-based humanitarianism as an enabling and constraining force.

In this essay, FBR practices a situated and glocalized humanitarian activism that engages the Karen and even brings senior Karen staff to places as far away as Syria and Iraq for humanitarian action. In this sense, the organization and its religious ethos remains American, but that the involvement of senior Karen personnel integrates these Karen Rangers into global travel, global landscapes of conflict and reverse missionization. While their recruitment into FBR and their conversion to a new lifestyle does enhance their mobility greatly, the majority of Karen villagers remain mere recipients of humanitarian assistance and have little voice in its design.

In elucidating the creative force in which the encounter with FBR both shapes and limits the mobility and the new religious experience, Tweed's theory of religion was engaged as a compass and anchor to find orientation and a place in a hostile environment, by taking a somewhat inverse route: In moving their lives towards a refugee career, the Karen staff does not rely on the old religion of the homeland, but on the new and experimental one of Free Burma Rangers, where religion is closely associated to the adventure. While a minority of Karen members have indeed converted to Christianity during their serving for FBR, the majority were Christian, but their Christianity was probably not identical with the more Western ideology of FBR to which they joined. Committed to instant response, FBR demonstrates the failure of many humanitarian organizations who depend on the permission

of the state in order to be able to help. The way that FBR has crossed state borders to help and has organized into camps and in the borderlands of Myanmar and elsewhere puts FBR in a special position among humanitarian organizations, and into the limelight of humanitarian work and religious ethics in today's crisis-ridden world.

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