

Jonathan Benthall

Humanitarianism as Ideology and Practice: Insights by Social-Cultural Anthropologists

Humanitarianism has an ideological aspect, representing the industrialized world's aspirations to relieve suffering in societies faced by acute crisis, but may also be conceived as a self-evidently practical response to needs. Social-cultural anthropologists helped since the 1980s to lay the foundations for "humanitarian studies", especially in questioning many professional assumptions, but also in breaking down the distinction between "man-made" and "natural" disasters, analysing the relationships of relief aid to the world of marketing and media, and describing the common factors in refugee movements. I will go on to consider the links between humanitarianism and religion, including Christianity and Islam, and to compare the Christian ideal of charity with other similar traditions – which is helpful if an ethnocentric stance is to be avoided. Recent theoretical concepts such as "humanitarian governance" will be introduced, with a final affirmation of the unique contribution made by ethnographic fieldwork.

Jonathan Benthall is an honorary fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University College London, and was formerly Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Founder Editor of *Anthropology Today*, and Chair of the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC), Oxford. His publications include *Disasters, Relief and the Media* (1993, new edition 2010), *The Charitable Crescent: Politics of Aid in the Muslim World* (with Jérôme Bellion-Jourdan, 2003, new paperback edition 2009), *Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age is Haunted by Faith* (2008) and *Islamic Charities and Islamic Humanism in Troubled Times* (2016). He reviews regularly for the *Times Literary Supplement*.