ABSTRACT

Field theory largely treats the cultural dimensions of social fields as an emergent property of their objective structures. In this article, I reconsider the role of culture in fields by studying how the logics that govern their emergence develop. As a study case, I examine the rise of the field of transnational humanitarianism by focusing on the early endeavors of the International Committee of the Red Cross (established 1863). I show that the specific nineteenth century strand of Calvinist doctrine espoused by the early Red Cross activists motivated and shaped the genesis of the humanitarian field through its convictions about the nature of war, state and society relations, and charity. Activists drew on this doctrine to justify and advocate the establishment of a permanent, independent, and neutral humanitarian field. Based on this analysis, I argue that preexistent belief systems have a key role in differentiating new fields from existing social institutions.

KEYWORDS: Field theory, Bourdieu, Humanitarianism, Red Cross, Differentiation

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Sociologists are increasingly using field theory to make sense of bounded domains of social action, but they rarely ask why new fields emerge to begin with. In circumventing this question, authors have taken two different strategies. Some analyze already-existing fields and, while acknowledging their historicity, leave aside questions of what caused these fields to emerge and what alternative paths could have shaped them differently (or, for that matter, precluded their appearance) (Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo 1995; Mayrl 2013). Other authors provide descriptive accounts of field-formation by demonstrating that one type of social action came to be organized under an independent logic at a certain point in time, and that a competition for prestige and domination ensued around it, but they offer little in terms of explaining what caused actors to believe that an autonomous realm dedicated to this form of action was indeed necessary (Krause 2011; Mudge 2011). In this, field scholarship—going back to Bourdieu (2000:99–102)—subscribes to a Durkheimian version of differentiation theory that sees the increasing division of the social world as an inherent aspect of the transition to modernity (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007), thereby requiring little explanation of why new and relatively autonomous social fields appear.

Contemporary sociology contains several different strands of field theory (e.g., DiMaggio 1991; Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Martin 2003), but recent scholarship highlights the potential of Bourdieusian field analysis for comparative historical sociology (Go and Krause 2016; Gorski 2013a). If we are to truly capitalize on the potential of Bourdieusian field theory for historical analysis, it is doubly important to reexamine how this approach tackles the emergence of new social structures. Because Bourdieusian sociologists have not been very interested in why new fields emerge, they tend to take the appearance of an objective and observable "space of positions," which is “a battlefield” over identity claims and hierarchized positions (Wacquant 2008:222), as the starting point of their analyses. These studies typically begin with the assumption that actors already see present beings as necessary conditions for
their work, and thus they value certain given “stakes” to such extent that they compete over them with others. This assumption has led sociologists to privilege the strategic and competitive dimension of field action, rather than explore its meaning-laden subjective facets.

However, a growing body of literature in cultural sociology and the “third wave” of comparative historical sociology shows that culture can give rise to enduring social arrangements, such as the modern contract (Biernacki 2014), the self-help industry (Illouz 2008), and multiple market patterns (Zelizer 2010). Indeed, work in this area demonstrates time and again that meanings are the mediator between structure and agency, and that to truly understand a historical process, sociologists must trace how actors’ interpretations have shaped social processes, and how people interact with extant cultural structures and social conditions (Reed 2011). The appearance of a new "space of positions" is no different, as it requires that actors find those positions meaningful for the performance of a critical social function. The tendency of field analysts to focus on the structural dimension of fields leaves them ill-equipped to explain why so many actors—artists, environmentalists, physicians, and scientists—have become convinced that their type of work must be set aside from all others and waged for its own sake in an autonomous realm, and how this collective belief contributed to the establishment of concrete, institutionalized social patterns.

Here, I demonstrate how culture plays a generative role in the emergence of new fields. I claim that preexisting belief systems orient actors to identify specific endeavors as unique and essential, to the extent that they must be waged in an independent social space—a field—according to their own internal logic. Rather than being self-explanatory and emerging from already-existing field dynamics, these beliefs rest on independent cultural antecedents that need to be explained in their own right. Understanding that preexisting beliefs are key to the constitution of new social domains will provide sociologists with an explanation of why (rather than how) new fields appear, and how their specific determinants take shape.
As a study case, I examine the genesis of the field of humanitarian aid in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Red Cross movement (est. 1863) founded a systematized field dedicated to humanitarian work, which until then was usually conducted under the auspices of medical and religious institutions or in an ad-hoc manner. The movement marked humanitarianism as a unique endeavor that follows its own independent logic and must be pursued for its own sake. Despite the multiple objections the movement faced, it grew exponentially and disseminated a set of practices and beliefs about humanitarianism that were shared across national boundaries and served as the basis for the field of humanitarian work. But since humanitarian work existed as a social activity long before the Red Cross emerged without occupying an independent social field, why the sudden push to grant it such autonomy in the late nineteenth century?

To address this question, I draw on archival research at the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Library of Geneva, professional journals and publications, and news archives. The analysis shows that a set of nineteenth century Calvinist beliefs about warfare, charity, and the relations between state and society convinced the founders of the Red Cross that humanitarianism must be waged as an autonomous field (rather than proffered under the auspices of church or state). These actors believed humanitarian organizations ought to exist as a permanent feature of civil societies, that they should be independent and pursue relief work as an end unto itself, and that they should be considered neutral and be protected from all belligerents. Although this proposal was controversial in philanthropic and diplomatic circles, it resonated with existing public concerns about battlefield medicine and charity, leading to its popularization and, ultimately, to the establishment of an independent domain of relief organizations. In other words, the differentiation of relief work into a new social field was motivated by the meanings assigned to humanitarianism.
The distinct advantage of applying a Bourdieusian historical sociological model to the study of the emergence of the humanitarian field is that it provides a *conjunctural* mode of explanation. That is, it seeks to explain social action by relating the conditions that have historically shaped actors’ inclinations and beliefs to the specific circumstances in which they act (Bourdieu 1990). Rather than depicting the genesis of the humanitarian field as “caused” solely by the religious beliefs of the founding Red Cross members, it allows us to see those beliefs in interaction with broader nineteenth century stances about war, peace, medicine, and philanthropy, and to identify their intersection with the interests of state governments and professional communities. This perspective accounts not only for the formulation of the basic logics of humanitarian action, but also for their acceptance in society at large. As the analysis will show, a religious worldview provided the Red Cross founders with the categories by which to critique the state of battlefield medicine and propose solutions, but the unique set of social circumstances in which these ideas were received made them particularly welcome and acceptable in wider circles.

This article makes three main contributions to the literature. First, it responds to the mounting criticisms of Bourdieusian sociology as being impervious to culture as a generative social force. By conjoining field analysis and cultural sociology, I show how including preexistent belief systems in field analysis can help sharpen its grasp on culture. Second, it provides an approach that helps identify how religious belief gives rise to long-lasting social domains. Abundant evidence shows that religion continues to be an integral aspect of humanitarianism (Barnett and Stein 2012), but research has not yet identified the precise contribution of religious commitments to the determinants of the contemporary humanitarian sector. For example, Stamatov (2013) and Young (2006) demonstrate the decisive influence of religion on the emergence of older types of humanitarianism—in particular abolitionism—but do not show what contribution (if any) the activism they analyze has made to twentieth century
humanitarian international nongovernmental organization (INGO) activism. Examining the humanitarian field through the already-existing belief systems that motivated its creation will shed light on this little-understood link. Finally, the article explains why broad social-institutional humanitarian arrangements emerged only in the nineteenth century, even though concern over distant suffering had been a staple of European civil discourse since the late eighteenth century (Boltanski 1999; Illouz 2003). Much has been written about the historical origins of empathy and advocacy for distant sufferers (Davis 1975; Fassin 2012; Haskell 1985; Stamatov 2013), international law (Cabanes 2014), international interventions (Bass 2009), and the dissemination of the INGO model (Boli and Thomas 1999), but little is known about how existing sentiments and modes of action gave rise to an autonomous field of humanitarianism or why this only happened in the late nineteenth century. Scholars have certainly acknowledged the existence of an autonomous “humanitarian space” (Barnett 2011) or field (Krause 2014), in which aid workers aim to act impartially and be treated as neutral agents, but they have not yet examined the logics upholding such a space, and how it came to be seen as pertinent and necessary to the humanitarian community starting in the 1860s, when other models of relief work were often preferred. Expanding field analysis to include pre-field beliefs will address this gap as well.

**FIELDS, VALUES, AND LOGICS**

To understand why new fields emerge, we need to understand the meanings actors assign to their existence. Field analysts usually account for the role of meanings in fields by using the concept of “stakes,” defined as the “field-specific capital that orients practice relatively independently of other stakes, such as money and power” (Krause 2011:90, italics added). Whether it is artistic purity in the art world, excellence in the field of sports, or innovativeness in the field of science, such field-specific capital provides a metric by which to hierarchically position field actors and serves as an indicator of worth and prestige.
Because capital is inherently relational in Bourdieu’s definition and in the Marxian tradition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), it can exist only within a network of actors who already desire it and compete over it (for further discussion, see Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Because capital is a product of field competition, confining meaning to forms of capital means seeing culture as an emergent property of fields, thereby ruling out culture as having any independent effect on the creation of fields. Indeed, there has been growing criticism of field analysts’ tendency to privilege the objective, structural aspects of fields over their cultural, meaning-laden dimension (Alexander 1995; Alexander and Smith 2003; Emirbayer and Schneiderhan 2013). This critique has prompted field scholars in turn to highlight the role of culture in fields by, for example, analyzing the psychological identifications and imageries that fields espouse (Steinmetz 2007), unpacking the ceremonies and performances that reaffirm and reproduce field-specific capitals and hierarchies (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006), and stressing the importance of thick description in explication of the meanings of field action for the actors involved (Büyükokutan 2011).

However, despite this growing attunement to culture, the assumption remains that culture affects fields insofar as it arises from already-existing objective structures. This, indeed, leads back to Bourdieu’s own view of the relation between objective structures and symbolic representations. When studying objective structures, claims Bourdieu (1989:15), the sociologist must set aside the subjective representations agents hold to uncover how objective structures “form the basis for these representations.” Symbolic representations, according to Bourdieu, must “also” be considered to understand how actors “purport to transform or preserve these structures.” For example, in his analysis of the juridical field, Bourdieu is highly sensitive to the power of language—legalistic language in this case—in constituting the objects it names (e.g., when the law recognizes certain social groups). However, Bourdieu is quick to differentiate himself from “radical constructivists,” such as Foucault, by
highlighting that, while the law creates the social world, “it is this world which first creates the law.” Thus, “symbolic acts of naming achieve their power of creative utterances to the extent . . . that they propose principles of vision and division objectively adapted to the preexisting divisions of which they are the products” (Bourdieu 1987:839 italics added). In other words, when actors seek to impose “principles of vision and division” upon a social world, they are acting within an already constituted social domain with specific interests and power relations. Neither actors’ words nor their beliefs about how social action ought to be organized are in themselves sufficient to create new structures without reference to the established “objective” structures that—according to Bourdieu—already undergird them.

The same intuition is evident in Bourdieu’s analysis of the rise of new fields, which he sees as the process by which a social space disengages from other social spaces economically, institutionally, and politically. The appearance of a specific nomos, a universally recognized principle underpinning the distribution of power in a field, and along with it the cultural features of the field, occurs once the objective structures of that field are already constituted (Bourdieu [1992] 1996). For example, according to Bourdieu (1999:55), when the field of law emerged, juridical writings

[took] their full meaning . . . as political strategies aimed at imposing a particular vision of the state, a vision in agreement with the interests and values associated with the particular position of those who produce them in the emerging bureaucratic universe.

But by seeing cultural products as an effect of objectively existing social worlds, field analysis cannot explain why actors come to believe that the creation of new fields—in the sense of differentiating one social space from others—is necessary, what makes them act toward this end, and what effect this might have on social relations independent of established objective structures.

Expanding the scope of contemporary field analysis to a wider view of culture as a generative factor in the workings of fields will help address this problem. Gorski (2013b:334) recently
revised field analysis from a Weberian perspective, positing that the emergence of new fields is associated with the appearance of a new “discourse of ultimate value”; that is, a discourse that designates the values that field members hold to be sacred and constitutive for their field (e.g., truth for science, justice for the judicial field). Such a discourse is formalized and disseminated through systematic theories about the proper ways to pursue those values and via cultural representations of those theories. To take Gorski's point further, a discourse of ultimate value provides the cultural blueprint for a field in formation: it defines why a field ought to exist, what the ideal type of action it formalizes should look like, and what conditions will allow it to flourish. Subsequent competitions for domination may erupt between actors in the field, but they are most often not about ultimate values per se, but rather about how best to emulate them. As Bourdieu (1993:134, italics added) writes, “Someone who wants to achieve a revolution in the cinema . . . says ‘That is not real cinema.’ . . . He pronounces anathemas, but in the name of a purer, more authentic definition of the principles in whose name the dominant dominate.”

The assumptions about the ways in which field action ought to be waged, as formalized by the discourse of ultimate value, are often referred to as the logics of the field. Such logics are field specific and often mutually exclusive: the logic of the economic field assumes that all categories of social life are commensurable (thereby excluding “irrational” categories from its purview), whereas the logic of the art field rejects equation of artistic worth with monetary worth. As Bourdieu's ([1992] 1996) study of the literary field shows, before the genesis of this field, the production of literature (or, more precisely, fiction) was organized according to the logics of nonliterary fields. In the market field, it was oriented toward profitability by appealing to a mass reading public; in the field of patronage, it was subordinated to patrons’ expectations and wishes. The rise of the literary field in the nineteenth century was marked by the belief that literature ought to be written “for its own sake.” That is, the logic under
which it is produced became autonomous from nonliterary fields; authors now ideally work without regard for the desires of patrons and publishers.

Cultural sociologists and social historians have repeatedly demonstrated that new types of discourse consecrating one value or the other emerge out of historical circumstances and cultural dynamics (Illouz 2008; Shapin and Schaffer 1985). In particular, scholars have explicated the direct effects religious belief has had on the ways actors have historically thought about social problems and conceived of solutions, and on the ways those solutions gave rise to permanent social institutions (Gorski 2003; Kahl 2005). Because the logics of social fields are embedded in a discourse of ultimate value, I explain the genesis of a new field by investigating what anterior belief system gave rise to an ultimate value, and how founding field actors became convinced that certain logics were indispensable for the true fulfillment of this value.

Understanding the genesis of the transnational humanitarian field through the words and deeds of its founding carrier group—the Red Cross—will not only explain how this movement became a dominant humanitarian INGO; it will also explain why this movement worked to establish an autonomous field of humanitarianism. Even though many other actors in mid-nineteenth century Europe (e.g., physicians, nurses, and peace activists) adhered to the ultimate value of saving lives, we need to understand the specific logics espoused by the Red Cross (neutrality, independence, and permanence in the global arena) to understand why a field emerged.

**THE HUMANITARIAN FIELD: HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

_The home front experience_
Public concern over social suffering had been on the rise in European civil societies since the late eighteenth century (Fassin 2012; Illouz 2003), but the mid-nineteenth century saw an explosion of anxiety over the effects of war on soldiers and civilians. This was partly due to mass conscription and growing suffrage (Paret 1992). Soldiers were being sent away for longer periods of time (compared to their pre-Napoleonic counterparts), and their families were increasing demands to improve medical facilities on the front. But medical aid became all the more pressing because mid-nineteenth century battlefield practices were significantly more ferocious than their eighteenth century predecessors. Indeed, the Napoleonic Wars did away with many of the previously held customs prescribing civility and restraint on the battlefield (Kestnbaum 2005). Another reason for the growing concern was the mid-century mass expansion of long-distance journalism, and the introduction of the telegraph and photography to news reporting (Bass 2009; Neier 2003), which made the poor medical conditions on the front apparent. Panic often erupted on the home front when particularly gruesome reports arrived. Furthermore, since states lacked the means to bring casualties to honorable burial (Bell 2007) or commemorate their loss (Winter 1995), family members were often left to believe their loved ones may have died ingloriously and senselessly. Secularizing currents in Western Europe contributed to a growing sense of unease about the afterlife that only exacerbated concern about war casualties (Kselman 1993; see also Faust 2008).

The Peace Societies established in Europe and the United States throughout the century, and the associated demilitarization movements (many of which knew and corresponded with Red Cross figures [Calhoun 2008]), drew further attention to the ravages of war. These movements propagated the disarmament of nations, based on the belief that permanent peace is an achievable goal (Mazower 2012). Such ideas also circulated within socialist and intellectual circles.
However, depictions of warfare were not only negative, as some military officials, historians, and intellectuals romanticized the battlefield. Inspired by Clausewitzian views of war, such writers viewed warfare as part and parcel of the divine order aimed at the realization of the noblest human virtues of courage and self-denial (Best 1980). Newspapers often communicated similar sentiments, publishing military leaders’ heroic tales from the battlefield (Neier 2003).

Charity on the battlefield was often similarly romanticized. One commentator believed that “the suffering that war brings about takes nothing away from its beauty. . . . Suffering produces pity, and pity is beautiful because it crosses the abyss that separates enemies!” (Fréd 1873). Philanthropists also saw the battlefield as the most honorable site in which to display their charitable aspirations. Traveling individuals and societies appeared unannounced at battle sites to care for the wounded, and they enthralled Victorian readers with their reports of courage and charity. Rather than simply conveying horrific descriptions of the state of the wounded, these stories tended to depict the battlefield as exciting and exotic, sparking popular imagination and moving others to follow. For example, in a book promising to recount the “wonderful adventures” of its author “in many lands” during the Crimean War, a volunteer tellingly confessed: “no sooner had I heard of war somewhere, than I longed to witness it” (Seacole [1857] 1988:73). In short, for numerous reasons, the battlefield and the state of medical care for the wounded was a central preoccupation in mid-nineteenth century European and North American societies.

Nineteenth century battlefield medicine

What were the conditions on the front? Most mid-nineteenth century medical care on the battlefield was provided by religious groups and military medical facilities. Both steadily improved their facilities, and both received public recognition for their efforts. However,
neither showed much interest in dissociating their type of work from other institutions (for religious orders, the religious field; for military medical facilities, the military) or setting humanitarian aid apart as an independent endeavor.

Commentators praised faith-based relief groups, such as the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (Breycha-Vauther and Potulicki 1954), the Sovereign Military Order of Malta (Sire 1994), Quaker associations, and various Sisters of Charity (The Union League Club 1882), for demonstrating “the power of the simple gospel of Christ to meet the needs of broken hearts and dying men” (British Quarterly Review 1870). However, such movements lacked the broad relational set of positions that defines a field, and they did not work to promote programs that may give rise to field structures.

Official medical corps drastically improved their services in the first half of the century (Holmes 2001), and initiatives such as the introduction of military nurses into the battlefield (led by Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War) and the work of the United States Sanitary Commission were celebrated. However, overall medical relief remained ill-equipped and little prepared for the realities of war, and as a result thousands of wounded soldiers were regularly left untreated in the battlefield (Haller 2011; McCallum 2008). The medical corps also lacked the relative autonomy that defines fields, as physicians and nurses employed by militaries were acting within the confines and logics of the armed forces. Charitable individuals who wanted to provide assistance on the battlefield had few options other than to travel at their own expense to the war front and offer whatever help they could, often with no medical experience, training, or protection.

*The Red Cross and its role in the genesis of the field of humanitarianism*

In contrast to the existing relief organizations, the early Red Cross advocated for humanitarian activities to be recognized as independent (rather than being in service of the
military or religious organizations) and to be organized in permanent volunteer professional
institutions. Five Swiss Calvinist philanthropists established the International Committee of
the Red Cross (ICRC)—the first organ of the movement—in Geneva in 1863. Jean-Henri
Dunant, one of the founding philanthropists, had previously published his experiences in
organizing battlefield relief, and he called for volunteer societies to be established for this
purpose. The ICRC was founded in response to this call, and it proposed that volunteer
societies would provide impartial humanitarian aid at times of war, working closely with
militaries yet remaining unsubordinated to them. Their freedom to make independent
decisions according to their own evaluation of humanitarian needs would be key to their
success (CICR 1904).

By 1863, the ICRC had secured the support of the Swiss Federal Council and the cooperation
of most European powers. The 1864 Geneva Convention—proposed by the committee,
endorsed by the Swiss Federal Council, and signed initially by 12 European states—
established key conditions for the humanitarian work these societies would undertake. The
Convention designated wounded soldiers and medical workers (ranging from military
medical staff to local volunteers offering help) in the battlefield as inviolable, and established
that militaries must allow the wounded to be treated, regardless of nationality (ICRC 1864). It
thereby established a legal infrastructure (very much relevant today) to provide humanitarians
in conflict zones with the inviolability indispensable for their type of work (Moir 1998). The
ICRC worked to publicize the Convention and the type of aid they proposed, and they made
great efforts to distinguish humanitarian aid workers legally, operationally, and culturally
from other actors on the battlefield. ICRC publications, and the publicized testimonials of
workers and witnesses to their work, popularized an image of courageous relief volunteers
who put their lives at risk to save others. News of its work soon motivated volunteering
across Europe, as well as in the United States and Asia.
In response to the ICRC’s efforts, volunteers and state officials across Europe (and, soon after, in the United States and Asia) began establishing national Red Cross societies. Their number rose from 11 in 1865 to 21 in 1875 and 33 by the end of the century. These national societies saw themselves as part of a transnational movement and communicated regularly with the ICRC and other national societies; yet, they were each independent financially and operationally from one another. In many locations, a central national society worked alongside multiple provincial Red Cross societies, as well as additional unaffiliated societies. In 1919, the International Federation of the Red Cross was established to coordinate the peacetime relief work of the national Red Cross societies. With this mass expansion, and the proliferation of organizations claiming to subscribe to the ethos of the Red Cross, competition between organizations often ensued. This occurred on the national level, as local societies struggled over funding sources and the monarch’s favor, and on the international level, as different organizations struggled over the definition of humanitarianism and its role in the world (Dromi 2016). Despite this competition, the Red Cross continues to enjoy unique prestige in the world of humanitarianism.

*Humanitarianism as a social field*

In what ways did the Red Cross contribute to the genesis of a humanitarian field? Although different authors working in the Bourdieusian tradition emphasize different aspects of the field concept, examining Bourdieu’s key works on field analysis (Bourdieu [1992] 1996; Bourdieu and Johnson 1993) and existing field work on humanitarianism (Krause 2014) shows at least four key indicators to the existence of a field: (1) actors and organizations that recognize each other as working for similar ends (albeit in very different ways) and in relation to each other; (2) a shared belief among those actors in the existence of hierarchy and positions, as well as an agreement over who occupies which position; (3) a relatively consensual set of norms governing interaction between field actors; and (4) a shared belief in
the stakes, or the ultimate value, toward which those actors orient their work and over which they compete. The Red Cross was crucial in fulfilling these four conditions for the humanitarian field.

First, the ICRC’s endeavors created both the multiplicity of organizations identifying themselves as humanitarian and the cultural framework allowing various organizations to define themselves as such. Such organizations generally recognize each other as working in the same domain, even if they occasionally compete with each other over influence and funding. Second, the ICRC created a set of positions for humanitarian actors and agencies, with an official national Red Cross in each country, peripheral associations attached to (or competing against) each national society, and charitable foundations and aristocrats that act as patrons for these humanitarian societies. Although humanitarian NGOs differ in worldview and scope, most of these positions are widely agreed upon (e.g., most would agree that the ICRC has a unique position that grants it access to many national governments and international organizations [Best 1980; Fassin 2012]). Third, the ICRC’s efforts to concert and regulate the humanitarian associations that sprouted in the late nineteenth century gave rise to a set of standards and rules that guide NGO interactions within nations and across national boundaries (Hutchinson 1996). Finally, through its legislative and publishing efforts, the ICRC helped permeate a shared ethos for the humanitarian community. According to this ethos, saving lives impartially is an absolute necessity and must be performed at all costs. Humanitarian INGOs continue to disagree over the proper way to emulate this ethos. More generally, the ICRC promoted the view that humanitarianism is a cause unto itself that must be pursued for its own sake. Just as the mid-nineteenth-century Parisian literary elite (Flaubert, Baudelaire) established the notion of “art for art’s sake” as the ultimate standard for worthy literature (thereby marking the genesis of an autonomous literary field) (Bourdieu
so too did the early Red Cross proffer the ethos of organized, neutral, and independent transnational humanitarianism as universally binding for the humanitarian field.

Historians have celebrated the innovativeness of the Red Cross founders in putting these processes in motion (Chaponnière 2010; Gumpert 1938) and have portrayed the movement as “rediscovering” eighteenth century criteria of civility (Best 1980). However, we know very little about why the ICRC insisted that humanitarianism must be a unique species of social action, requiring independent volunteer societies, rather than pushing for improvements to the state medical facilities or other solutions. The notion that volunteer associations should take it upon themselves to care for the wounded was—as we shall see—controversial, and policymakers were more willing to entertain improvements to the standing military medical facilities than to support new volunteer societies.

**The Origins of the Logics of the Field**

To understand the origins of the ICRC demands, I focus on the two international conferences that were fundamental for establishment of the Red Cross and—by extension—the foundational structures of the humanitarian field. The first conference took place in October 1863, included delegates from 18 states, and marked the official inauguration of the movement. The second conference took place in August 1864, and culminated in the signing of the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, better known as the Geneva Convention. The Convention resonated with the growing appeal of international law as a means by which to influence states and their conduct in the international arena (Mazower 2012). I also draw on commentary on the proceedings and results of these conferences, published by ICRC members and local Red Cross societies. Although ICRC members were cautious about making overt comments about their faith in the presence of their Catholic and non-Christian guests, much of their commentary during and
after the conferences clarifies the connection between the humanitarian logic they promoted and their Protestant faith.

For example, four years after foundation of the ICRC, two of its key members—Gustave Moynier and Louis Appia—published a treatise outlining how they understood their project and the outcomes of the two conferences. Their comments on the motives they ascribe to it are instructive:

We have shown that it is to the influence of Christianity on civilization that armies owe, in a great measure, the assiduous care bestowed upon wounded soldiers. The sentiments of that kind of philanthropy which is called humanizing, those more particularly of honour and patriotism, can do much, and we should be very unwilling to depreciate their value . . . [but] we frankly declare that we see in Christian sentiments the wisest and most energetic motive for every philanthropic enterprise. We consider this most powerful force as the best means to regulate human actions, and to sustain the devotion of man at a moment when all his faculties are to be exerted; in short, we find in it the true expression of that international bond which ought to unite all nations upon the common ground we have indicated. (Moynier and Appia 1870:293)

Moynier and Appia cite Christianity not only as a worthy motivation for charitable undertakings on an individual level (i.e., in providing the proper character by which to devote oneself to the philanthropic mission), but more importantly as pertaining to interpersonal and even international relations and social arrangements. That is, they view Christianity as a guiding ethic that civilizes nations and armies, and they find in it the cosmopolitan stance crucial for humanitarianism. Indeed, Moynier and Appia (1870:293) refer repeatedly to the “Christian spirit which ought to preside over every part of the work” in which they engaged.

*The Calvinist Awakening and the Red Cross*

The position expressed by Moynier and Appia, that religious morality—once publicly established—would have a strong civilizing effect, was common among the many European Protestant revivals of the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in the Reformed world. Many revivalist movements espoused a strong sense of reformist social activism, but few were as
determined to instate Christian morality through public order as the Calvinist Réveil movement (the Awakening).

The Réveil movement originated in Geneva—the intellectual center of the Reformed world. It grew in response to what it saw as an overly rationalized and subdued established church, which discouraged heated public theological debate and even suspended and defrocked ministers for what it saw as overly passionate doctrinal preaching on topics such as justification by faith alone or the divinity of Christ. The Réveil called for a restoration of rigorous and orthodox Calvinist theology and developed stout ideas about the need for reformation of individual beliefs and practices in Geneva (Stewart 2006). The notion of reinvigorating Calvinist identity this way appealed to many Genevans, in part because of rising local concern about the migration of Catholics into the city, which was already home to contentious relations between the Protestant majority and Catholic minority (Olson 1998). Between the late 1810s and the middle of the century, the movement became influential in Francophone parishes beyond Geneva (especially among the Huguenot diaspora), as well as in Dutch- and German-speaking congregations. Réveil theologians such as Henri-Louis Empaytaz, François Gaussen, César Malan, and Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné gained international prestige, and they preached in the churches and schools that the founders of the Red Cross attended.

Réveil theology is complex and was not uniform across these different locations (or, for that matter, within Geneva itself), but several of its common doctrinal points are particularly instructive to our understanding of the nascent Red Cross movement:

1. The Réveil strongly opposed the view that Calvin’s texts should be read in their sixteenth-century context and that nineteenth century theology should be made to fit the spirit of its time (i.e., be modernized, rationalized, and less confrontational with other faiths or with
secularism). Réveil ministers believed Calvin’s writings were as relevant in the nineteenth century as in the sixteenth century, and they preached strict and literal orthodoxy (Roney and Klauber 1998).

2. In tandem with their objection to modernizing Calvinist theology, numerous Réveil spiritual leaders criticized the self-assured tones in which nineteenth century Europeans described progress and modernity. They highlighted the poverty, moral corruption, and, in particular, the wars the century was seeing. Speaking to the Evangelical Society of Geneva in 1859, minister Merle d'Aubigné (1859:17) exclaimed:

   The scourge of war, armed with untold hardships . . . these terrible battles in the middle of a surprised Europe, which have let streams of blood flow just as the century boasted of its progress and dreamed of the brotherhood of peoples, have filled us with sadness and compassion . . . we hear through the Alps and the glaciers the thunder of war, and we receive, trembling, the heart-wrenching cries of the wounded.

3. The Réveil placed great emphasis on making an impression not only within the church but also on every sphere of human activity and ensuring that everyone in the polity—elect or not—adhered to their interpretation of Calvinist law. Traditionally, almost every Calvinist polity had some form of communal, ecclesiastical disciplinary body, specifically focused on moral conduct (rather than witchcraft or blasphemy) (Gorski 2003). The movement saw the reinvigoration of faith-based social activism as emulating the principles of the Swiss Reformation—specifically, the belief that “the godly community was not only possible, but imperative . . . [and it] would reconcile within itself all human endeavor by subordinating it to and directing it towards the fulfillment of God’s will” (Gordon 2002:317–18). In this spirit, movement members established charitable voluntary societies focusing on temperance, poverty relief, and other social causes (Roney and Klauber 1998).
Role differentiation between church and state was traditionally a staple of Reformed Protestantism, but the Réveil espoused a particularly suspicious view of the state. Movement theologians saw charity, in particular, as belonging outside the state’s purview (e.g., in matters of poor relief). According to theologian Abraham Kuyper ([1899] 1931:81), who was heavily influenced by the Réveil, the state itself originated in human sinfulness: although the division of the world into states, along with the installment of magistrates and the legislation of secular laws, is meant to preserve the human race from perishing in its own unavoidable sinfulness (and is thus Godly), the power invested in the state constricts human liberty and—if left unchecked—may constrain the work of Christianity in the world. Kuyper ([1891] 1991:69) took particular issue with the state taking responsibility for what ought to be acts of individual Christian charity:

The art of “giving for Jesus’ sake” ought to be much more strongly developed among us Christians. Never forget that all state relief for the poor is a blot on the honor of your Savior.

Here we see the combination of adamant orthodoxy, a sharp critique of modernity (and especially of modern warfare), a strong drive for social activism and communal discipline, and a suspicious stance toward the state and its unchecked power. These were principles that the young Dunant, a central figure in the YMCA as well as founder of the ICRC, heard when he attended the sermons of prominent Réveil theologians in the 1840s. Dunant was deeply influenced by their passionate evangelism (Roney 1996). Both Dunant and Appia were members of the Committee for the Wounded of the Evangelical Society of Geneva, which sought to provide relief to wounded soldiers in the late 1850s (Warner 2013). The faith-based relief and social reform culture of mid-century Geneva similarly brought together jurist Moynier and physician Théodore Maunoir—central ICRC figures and Réveil enthusiasts—at the Geneva Society for Public Welfare, which was concerned with social issues such as prison conditions, alcoholism, and orphan care (Boissier 1963). Due to the economic boom
Geneva had enjoyed since the 1810s, these men were raised with professional and theological education, and they had the wealth and connections needed to act on their charitable aspirations.

*The Logics of the Emerging Field*

Three aspects of the proposals raised in 1863 (and again in 1864) became central themes in future debates and writings in the humanitarian community. First was that the network of aid societies they proposed to establish should occupy a *permanent* position in every country, rather than being local and war-specific. Second was that these societies should be impartial and therefore *independent* from state (or any other) influence, being staffed mainly by volunteers rather than military personnel. Third was that these societies would be considered *neutral* by virtue of their humanitarian activities, and such neutrality would be similarly conferred upon their chief beneficiaries—the wounded. These features of the Red Cross proposal were rooted in a wider worldview espoused by the ICRC founders about the nature of war and charity, drawn from the *Réveil*.

*The permanence of charity*

Toward the end of his life, Dunant claimed that he (or, more precisely, his movement) “created the permanence of charity.”3 This was no exaggeration. In most locations, aid societies emerged only once a war broke out and were disbanded once war ended, so establishing that aid societies must be a standing feature in civil societies was an achievement for the ICRC. The committee cited this often as its crucial intervention in the philanthropic world, as the introduction to the inaugural issue of its official bulletin boasted: “what distinguishes our societies from their predecessors . . . is their permanence even at times of peace” (CICR 1869:2).
But this notion actually clashed with the views of the Peace Societies—influential parties within intellectual circles—that worked toward disarmament and saw attempts to moderate warfare as a distraction that relieved belligerents of responsibility for the consequences of armed conflict. Indeed, letters sent to the ICRC over the years chided humanitarians for only “laboring to mollify a barbarous custom,” whereas the Peace Societies “are laboring to destroy it” (Moneta and Caldara 1892:62). Some delegates to the inaugural Red Cross conference also claimed that keeping in place a large-scale volunteer society at times of peace was infeasible, because volunteer societies had been, until then, motivated by a sense of urgency that the delegates thought only war could provide. Once a war ended, so they believed, passion would die out and activists would lose interest in their charitable activities (as an Austrian philanthropist complained in a letter to the ICRC, “each armistice sees an end to our work’s efficiency”). In fact, the American national relief society (founded in 1866) and several other local societies failed to gather public attention and, with the absence of war, dispersed. In short, the idea for a long-standing humanitarian sector was far from readily acceptable.

And yet, the ICRC insisted at the inaugural international conference that a permanent, standing committee should be established “in each of the capitals of Europe.” It would recruit the “most honorable” volunteers and would “come to an agreement with its government that, if a war were to erupt, its offer of services would be accepted.” Crucially, such committees would “exist before the eruption of those conflicts that make their intervention necessary, so as not to be caught unprepared.” At times of peace, committees would “study service of the field and the most effective use of resources . . . prepare instructions for inexperienced volunteer nurses . . . [and] support the invention . . . [of] medical supplies or ways of transportation” (CICR 1904:11). These were not intended as simple ad hoc societies; they were to be stable institutions in their respective societies.
The ICRC delegates—Dufour and Moynier in particular—justified this stance by reasoning that the world would indeed supply humanitarian emergencies indefinitely. This idea was rooted in the theology of its members, who were pessimistic about the notion of perpetual peace. ICRC president Dufour expressed this view as he opened the 1863 inaugural conference:

Despite the philanthropic efforts of the Peace Congress—efforts that deserve our respect and sympathy without a fair bit of illusion about their chances of success—as long as human passions remain (and they will surely endure for a very long time) there will be wars in this world. Thus, rather than to pursue the fantasy of their eradication, it would be truly useful to mankind to focus on making their consequences less terrible. (CICR 1904:9)

At the same time, the committee rejected the idea that war was a natural element of the world order “as established by God,” as such a view would “lend Providence views that are incompatible with its essential attributes” (Moynier 1882:225). In line with the Réveil belief in the unavoidable nature of sinfulness, committee members contended that war originates in unavoidable human sinfulness: it is a “calamity of human origin from which our race seeks to recover, albeit slowly” (ibid). Committee members did not see their project as bringing an end to war in itself, but rather civilizing war by mellowing its atrocities and by soliciting the help of volunteers, thereby bringing it under the permanent aegis of religious scrutiny. Their commentary on the aims and successes of the project made it clear that their mission was far from confined to wartime alone; rather, they intended to have long-term involvement in international relations: “[T]he morality of the Gospel [has] inspired in men an active pity toward fellow men in pain . . . slowly but surely, all social relations, will become affected by the infusion of new blood in the veins of the civilized races” (Moynier 1882:259–60).

Delegates to the 1863 ICRC meeting debated what aid societies ought to do in peacetime, but they ultimately accepted the need for the permanent presence of aid societies, with the understanding that these societies were intended primarily for wartime relief and would
devote their resources at peacetime mainly for preparation and training. The succession of
wars in Central Europe in the 1860s to 1870s and in the Balkans in the 1870s to 1890s helped
convince wider publics of the necessity of a permanent humanitarian sector. These aid groups
received international acclaim when their work in battlefields appeared in European and U.S.
newspapers, leading to increased donations and support. The question of whether the
societies ought to exist permanently was de facto answered by their continued involvement in
wars and, as mission creep set in, additional peacetime crises. In this, the committee’s
sensibility that war was unavoidable and should be anticipated spread beyond Geneva into
other religious and national contexts. For example, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian
War, the president of the German Red Cross concluded that “their task was far from finished
once peace had been achieved”; on the contrary, they had to “return to the work with renewed
courage and redoubled zeal in order to maintain, improve, develop the emergency means, and
to be always ready for the outbreak of a new war (which, God willing, will be as far away as
possible!)” (Comité central allemand 1872:57). The establishment of the Red Cross as a
permanent fixture in a growing number of nations was augmented by Red Cross periodicals,
reports, international conferences, and even a museum that boosted the movement’s visibility,
for itself and others, thereby contributing to a shared sense of enduring collective identity.

The ICRC pushed forward the controversial proposal to establish a standing humanitarian
sector because its members distrusted the power of human progress in achieving a lasting
peace, and they were pessimistic about humankind’s ability to overcome its passions. As
explicated in the previous section, this worldview was a central feature of the Réveil. Because
war could not be eradicated, the ICRC saw its mission as establishing aid societies that would
make wars a more civil affair through subordination to Christian ethics.

*The Independence of Humanitarianism*
The vision of the Red Cross as a permanent civilizing agent inspired by transcendent Christian morality gave rise to an intertwined notion: humanitarians should not only have a permanent position in civil societies, but they should also be independent from all extraneous influences and be completely impartial in their interventions.

Many parties found the notion of impartiality admirable as an abstract ideal, but the idea that humanitarian societies must be separated from other institutions—particularly the state—to provide impartial care was controversial when presented. Objectors claimed there was no reason why militaries themselves should not reinforce their medical facilities. British and Dutch statesmen, for example, claimed in 1863 that their medical care and ethics had sufficiently improved so as not to require additional volunteers. Practical objections were also made: a letter from the War Office in London to the ICRC explained that volunteers would “create confusion in the organisation of the Hospital Department.”6 The French delegate to the 1863 Conference further claimed that volunteer-based societies may be unreliable and unmanageable. Ethical objectors claimed that moving responsibility away from the state and toward impartial volunteer societies would make war an easier affair for states to conduct (Chenu 1870).

And yet, despite these objections, ICRC representatives insisted in 1863 and in follow-up meetings that simply enhancing the existing military medical facilities would be insufficient. Representatives contended that medical corps subordinated to military decision-makers would likely be influenced by war-related financial considerations, which would be blind to the wounded’s medical needs. Moynier reasoned that, at times of war, military staff may be unwilling to offer impartial care to wounded enemy soldiers (or be prevented from doing so). He envisioned aid societies’ role as inherently independent of the military:

We would like the wounded who are scattered across the battlefield to be rescued by nurses from either side of the battle; this would require that . . . [these nurses] would
wear a distinct sign that would be recognized and would command the same respect as
the robes of a priest or a nun. Army leaders would also . . . officially inform their troops
about the existence of volunteer corps, about the insignia that marks them out, and of
their peaceful and beneficent mission. (CICR 1904:12–13)

Moynier and Appia’s (1870:220) commentary on the proceedings of the conference provide
further insights into the reasons for this insistence. Subordination to any external authority
would "completely denaturalize the work of the [aid] committees." In the battlefield, "men
who, from motives of pure charity, devote themselves to the relief of their brethren, have no
need for any other restraint other than moral law." Their aim, as independent parties, was to
move belligerents to "care for the enemy wounded like those of their own army, as this
imperative is directly derived from the love of one's neighbor, as presented by Jesus Christ
himself as the compendium of divine law" (Moynier 1899:161). The differentiation between
social institutions, a key aspect of Calvinist thought, was thus seen as a key condition for
humanitarianism to thrive.

The committee supplied accounts of impartial humanitarians in reports from the battlefields
of Europe in the 1860s (the Second Schleswig War of 1864 was a case in point [Appia
1864]). Once news from the Franco-Prussian warfront in 1870 revealed the inadequacy of the
French military, support in philanthropic circles for impartial aid societies increased
dramatically.7 As national Red Cross societies formed in an increasing number of states,
volunteers were regularly dispatched to provide relief in wars in which their home countries
were not involved (e.g., the Second Boer War [1899 to 1902] drew activists to Africa from
numerous European countries), garnering further public praise for independent volunteer
relief work.

The ICRC took care not to publically criticize belligerents, so as to maintain the appearance
of impartiality, even when it was invited to observe war practices (e.g., during the Serbo-
Bulgarian War [1885]). As the ICRC president put it, they did “not [want] to exercise such an
authority without having been officially invested with it” (CICR 1890:22). Clara Barton (1898:13), of the American National Red Cross, similarly wrote: “It is not my duty, nor is it within my power, to analyze and criticize all the intricate workings of a government and its armies in the field.” Direct communication with state powers in the early decades of the movement was similarly cautious. When Dunant wrote to French Empress Eugénie during the Franco-Prussian War, in response to news of French indifference to the convention on the front, he asked to merely turn her attention to "the [Geneva] Convention of 1864 . . . which was ratified by all European states," and to advise her that the foreign press has been extremely critical of France for failing to comply with it, making no direct accusations.

The notion of independence—drawn from the aspiration to subordinate war to a Christian moral code and the Réveil objection to state-sponsored charity—was thus a central factor in the growing perception that relief societies ought to answer only to universal values and be solely concerned with saving human lives (rather than furthering the military interest of their state or providing care only to their own compatriots).

The neutrality of humanitarians and beneficiaries

The designation of aid societies as standing outside the mundane workings of the military and the battlefield was completed by the principle of neutrality, which requires belligerents to protect volunteers and wounded soldiers. Until the mid-nineteenth century, physicians, nurses, and wounded soldiers were very much at risk of attacks or imprisonment by enemy forces (aside from some protection occasionally provided by local agreements between belligerent sides). Unlike the previous two logics, neutralization of actors on the battlefield requires the active restriction of acceptable wartime practices, making it a particularly sensitive topic with some belligerents. Although it was greeted with some doubt about its practicality in 1863 (both within and outside the committee), neutralization became the main concern of the 1864 Geneva Convention, less than a year later: 6 out of its 10 articles dealt
with it directly. This third principle furthered the differentiation of the humanitarian world from other social domains.

The Convention established that all medical staff, volunteers, ambulances, and chaplains should remain untouched, and they would be allowed to care for the wounded of all nations at all times. It further extended neutrality to the wounded, specifying that “wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong, shall be collected and cared for” and be repatriated once fit for travel, rather than imprisoned, tortured, or killed (ICRC 1864). The Convention required military officials to notify local civilians “of the neutrality which humane conduct will confer” and to assure them that no action would be taken against people tending to the wounded of either side of a battle (ibid).

Dunant and the Dutch physician J.H.C. Basting were among the key proponents of including the issue of neutrality in the 1863 conference agenda. They believed that news of war and suffering would spontaneously ignite a sense of Christian charity in civilians of all localities, and an agreement of neutrality for volunteers would prevent belligerents from standing in the way of this work. The agreement by a growing number of nations to the principle of neutrality signified to the ICRC an important step toward subduing the uncontrolled passions and violence of the battlefield. As Moynier (1899:163) put it, this was a step in “advancing the Kingdom of God in this world.” In the eyes of ICRC leadership, despite the fact that acceptance of their proposal was not explicitly acknowledged by all other actors as a religious act, divine inspiration had made this success possible:

[R]ulers who endorse [the Geneva Convention] do so as an act of faith . . . the motives they obey are purely religious, regardless of what they say; they are simply too little accustomed to see religion play such a role in the relations between peoples. (Moynier 1899:163)

Despite the practical doubts initially raised by some ICRC members, the widespread approval and enthusiasm with which the proposal was greeted served as further proof of their own religious superiority:
The [Geneva Convention’s] design is eminently Christian. It pleases us to take note . . . that [by ratifying it] people of all faiths agree to pay respect to our religion . . . [and] to a group of men firmly attached to the Evangelical faith. (Moynier 1899:164)

The promise of neutrality was quickly transmitted to the field. A medical worker wrote from Pamplona during the 1872 to 1875 Third Carlist War: “My main goal has been to establish the neutrality of the wounded, even during the civil war, and I had the good fortune to succeed. I looked . . . for the wounded insurgents and I cared for them while ensuring their protection” (Comité central espagnol 1872:197). This promise also inspired volunteers to come to the battlefield. During the Franco-Prussian War, the ICRC was surprised by the uninvited appearance of civilians who believed the committee would confer neutrality upon them and send them to the front. ICRC staff “had to answer them, the Geneva Convention in hand, that . . . the International Committee has not standing to provide it,” since this was a law to be observed by the belligerents themselves (CICR 1871:81).

This new arrangement of humanitarian activism on the battlefield spread the notion that INGOs (Red Cross and others) must to be afforded a safe space at times of war, so as to allow Christian charity to thrive. This not only enabled the operational integration of volunteer relief forces into conflict zones, but it marked humanitarian activities as beyond the control of the state and as such, at least in principle, safeguarded within a protected space. It was thus a crucial element in differentiation of the humanitarian field.

**EXPANSION AND DIFFUSION: FROM A MOVEMENT TO A FIELD**

To gain the international body of adherents that would eventually constitute a field, the principles of permanence, independence, and neutrality had to expand beyond the confines of the diplomatic and philanthropic circles in which they had been proposed. Their mass dissemination in the 1860s and 1870s was facilitated by their cross-denominational religious
appeal, and boosted by their interaction with existing concerns and cultural currents in North Atlantic civil societies.

Many late-nineteenth century religious institutions sponsored their own relief associations that formed ties to the Red Cross movement (in Prussia, for example, the Red Cross worked alongside a host of religious relief organizations who were now afforded neutral status thanks to the Geneva Convention⁹). This association promoted the Red Cross and motivated volunteers to join. Numerous church leaders and religious activists described the growth of these activities as a clear sign of Christianity’s regained eminence in late-nineteenth century societies. In the United States, one pastor saw in it “the oneness of America and Europe in all that touches the permanent interests and triumphs of Christian charity and universal brotherhood.”¹⁰ Local churches occasionally proclaimed “Red Cross Sundays” to raise funds and awareness.¹¹ Some of the press and lay supporters also perceived the movement and its effects on the growing transnational humanitarian field as a religious project. For example, an American historian wrote to Dunant, suggesting in excited words that the Red Cross insignia might be inspired by the Cross of St. George. If this was indeed true, she claimed, "that would make the modern [Red Cross] society the last link in a chain whose first link was the Christian spirit of passive resistance to the persecutions of Diocletian, and another of those links is the Crusader's spirit of active resistance to the advances of the Turks."¹² ICRC members also received letters from the Catholic institution, conveying the Pope’s approval of their project.¹³ Letters to the committee congratulated it for its “godly work” and for working toward the realization of “the civilization of God.”¹⁴

As the movement grew in later decades of the nineteenth century, ICRC leaders made conscious efforts to downplay the religiosity of their organization, so as to reaffirm their open invitation for people of all faiths to participate (CICR 1873).¹⁵ This became more pressing as its identification with Christianity brought the movement some unwelcome attention outside
of Europe. Reports from the Serbian battlefield complained about Ottoman troops mistaking the cross emblem for enemy insignia, with “the flag of the Red Cross particularly exacerbating their fury.” Ottoman Red Cross activists, in a controversial act, replaced the cross with a crescent and renamed their society accordingly, so as to prevent such violence in the future (Benthall 1997). Downplaying the movement’s religious affiliation helped establish links and new societies in states such as Persia, Siam, and Japan, thereby expanding the reach of the transnational humanitarian field beyond the Christian world. As Best (1980:3) claimed, the Geneva Convention grew across cultures and religious divides to become “the most nearly universally known and seemingly accepted statements about what is due to man from man.”

The increasing secularization of the humanitarian field went hand-in-hand with its progressive professionalization and, as part of these processes, the emergence of a nondenominational humanitarian culture. Several growing professions that espoused an ethos of disinterestedness supported the notion of an independent, neutral, and permanent relief sector. The new profession of nursing was directly relevant to the Red Cross, but international lawyers, physicians, and war correspondents were also significant advocates, as all three benefitted professionally from the growth of this field (Boissier 1985). The project also appealed to women’s philanthropic associations—which had formed over the past several decades and traveled independently to war-ridden areas to provide relief—as it created an institutionalized way for such associations to mobilize and gain legitimacy (Moorehead 1999). These various agents helped disseminate the notions the Red Cross proffered without necessarily attaching religious meanings to them.

Furthermore, in many states, humanitarian culture was propelled by its intertwining with a deep sense of patriotic pride and a belief in a national obligation to extend international help (often without specific identification with one religion or another) (Dromi 2016). In various
parts of Europe and the United States, the equivalence of nationalism and charity latched on to already-existing types of charitable volunteer work that were popular among aristocratic women and seen as expressions of patriotism (Lawson 2002; Quataert 2001). Moynier himself, as president of the ICRC, confessed in private of a “feeling of patriotic satisfaction” at the fact that many humanitarian initiatives were based in Switzerland. This, to him, was a “guarantee and a pledge of their Helvetic neutrality, to which all of Switzerland attaches great value.”

At the same time, humanitarian culture also spread through the socio-emotional work the Red Cross and similar organizations performed with soldiers’ families in the home front during war. Over the first decades of its existence, the ICRC and many of the national committees were in a much better position than the state to collect information about prisoners’ conditions and communicate this to their families. As late as the First World War, various Red Cross societies served as “the eyes and ears of the families at home” (Winter 1995:38). In some instances, much of the consolation and moral support typically performed by religious actors or social workers de facto fell upon the shoulders of Red Cross volunteers (Winter 1995). Thus, humanitarian culture—based on the conviction that the humanitarian field must be independent, neutral, and permanent—was disseminated in religious and nonreligious settings, and continued to expand through religious organizations, professional circles, and nationalist associations.

**DISCUSSION**

beliefs (namely the anxiety caused by Puritans’ uncertainty about their fate) and their effects on social and economic behavior (i.e., proto-capitalism). But in *Religious Rejections*, Weber showed how new types of ethics motivated the emergence of new value spheres and their differentiation from one another. According to Weber, the appearance of new ethics that were distinct to specific value spheres was the key outcome of the historical process of rationalization. For example, when “world religions” began to appear as rationalized belief systems, a new ethic of “world-denying” or “acosmic” love emerged. This universalized ethic was incommensurable with the social structure of tribal societies, as it introduced a principle of universality. This new ways of thinking about social relations saw humankind as subject to the same ethics regardless of kinship. The ethic of acosmic love clashed not only with the traditional kinship-based social organization, but also with the values of other emerging spheres (e.g., economy or politics). In this way, *Religious Rejections* demonstrates how a new type of ethic, as interpreted by a group of adherents, can contribute to newfound autonomy of a value sphere (Weber [1920] 2009b; see also Bellah 1999). The autonomy of the humanitarian field was similarly motivated by a set of ethical convictions—those of the Réveil. The interaction between the Réveil and the conditions surrounding mid-nineteenth century battlefield relief moved the Red Cross founders to identify humanitarian help as a universal necessity that must surpass parochial political and religious antinomies.

In his evaluation of the promises and limitations of differentiation theory, Jeffrey Alexander claimed that—since its early Durkheimian iteration—this theory has lacked specificity and has favored sweeping and deterministic explanations of why institutional specialization occurs. He cautioned that an excessive insistence on the generality of this theory will lead to a mistaken view of differentiation as an automatic process, which is a natural response to societal strain (Alexander 1990). Accounts of the emergence of new social fields have taken this path, seeing field genesis as an unavoidable aspect of the transition to modernity that
requires little explanation in itself (Bourdieu 1985:729–30). But while Durkheim articulated such a deterministic notion of differentiation in his early work (Durkheim 1997), he highlighted the constitutive role of religious belief in shaping the objective structures of society in his later work (Durkheim 2012). Thus, both Weber and Durkheim were interested in how religious ideas shape social action and how they lead to the differentiation of values, and—crucially—both saw the objectification of religious ideas as necessary to the development of different spheres. Carrying the same insight into the analysis of social fields would help overcome the critiques of its limited view of culture. Seeing culture (religious or otherwise) as an active element in the constitution of new fields would help explain why certain types of autonomous domains evolve at certain historical points and why they take the shape they do.

Moving forward, the approach used in this study can illuminate not only field genesis but also other outcomes for social fields. For example, to date, students of fields have focused on fields that indeed materialized, but this approach can help examine why, if many of the same conditions were present, certain fields did not materialize. Could a field of Esperanto have emerged in the late nineteenth century? Or a field of theosophy? What explains the emergence of what Mudge and Vauchez (2012) call a “weak field” rather than a strong one? The demise of fully formed fields could also be explained. Phrenology, eugenics, and alchemy were, for extended periods, arguably social fields, and yet they disappeared. Was it simply because of their inability to produce satisfactory results, or—more likely—was it because they had become morally marred to the extent that they could not sustain themselves? Such questions can be answered by examining the cultural underpinnings of social fields.

A significant payoff of using field analysis with an emphasis on the cultural antecedents of field logics is its insight into the role of religion in giving rise to what is often assumed to be
a secular endeavor (again, in line with the Weberian historical project [Weber (1905) 2009a]). For some scholars, the concern for the suffering of others evolved as a result of secularization and as part of the rise of a secular civil society in the eighteenth century. Their claim is that once theological explanations for collective suffering became untenable, collective suffering (in the form of warfare or natural disaster) came to be conceived as unacceptable and requiring intervention (Fassin 2012:252; Illouz 2003). Indeed, contemporary humanitarian organizations often highlight their humanistic and secular features. But the current study demonstrates that early organizers and supporters of organized humanitarianism saw themselves as making a religious intervention in a depraved and barbarous social reality, with the aim to reinstate a religious moral code they believed to apply universally and to have been lost with modernity. The article demonstrates that the contemporary humanitarian field rests on the logics that those historical actors promoted.

It is further notable that the Red Cross grew not from the rationalized, humanistic state church that evolved around the turn of the nineteenth century, but from the mid-century revivalist movement that countered such modernized, humanistic theology and promoted a decidedly conservative interpretation of Calvinist theology. Indeed, Stamatov (2013) demonstrates that radicalized religious actors are historically the ones to advocate globally on behalf of mistreated peoples, and they put in place the infrastructure for contemporary long-distance activism. Understanding that fields may emerge out of specific beliefs about how social action should be organized will help identify such counterintuitive precursors to contemporary social institutions.
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1 For other examples, see books published by volunteers Pearson and MacLaughlin (1871) and Taylor (1874).
2 The committee was first known as *Comité Internationale de Secours aux Militaires Blessés*. Here, I refer to it continuously as the ICRC for clarity.
3 Letter from Jean-Henri Dunant to Herrn Dr. med Kolb, December 26th, 1896, Bibliothèque de Genève, ms fr 5102 96 (109).
4 Letter from Dr. W. Schlesinger to ICRC, November 14, 1869, Vienna. ICRC Archive, AF 1,3/30(T).
5 The American National Red Cross was reconstituted in 1881, under the leadership of Clara Barton.
7 Despite her initial objections, Florence Nightingale became an active supporter of the establishment of a British Red Cross.
9 ICRC officials noted approvingly the cooperation between the early Prussian Red Cross and the myriad religious aid societies (Jean-Henri Dunant personal files, n.d., Bibliothèque de Genève MS Fr 2115N 5-1).


Why the “Red Cross” flag was chosen, and the extent to which it represents either Christianity or Switzerland, remains unclear (Hutchinson 1996:35).

Letter from M. Ristich to British Consul-General White, Belgrade, September 6, 1876. Accounts and papers of the House of Commons, State Papers—Turkey (Vol. XC).