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UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Disasters and the rise of global religious philanthropy

Jayeel Cornelio[1,2,3] and Julio C. Teehankee[4] (iD)

[1]Development Studies Program, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines; [2]Graduate School, University of St La Salle, Bacolod City, Philippines; [3]Center for Asian Democracy, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, USA and [4]Department of International Studies, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines
Corresponding author: Jayeel Cornelio; Email: jcornelio@ateneo.edu

Abstract

This article seeks to make sense of the rise of global religious philanthropy in relation to disaster. Global religious philanthropy refers to the transnational activities of religious organizations to respond to humanitarian crisis. These organizations can be faith-based initiatives or religious groups or denominations that have created humanitarian services for the specific purpose of relief and recovery in other countries. The first part spells out what we mean by the rise of global religious philanthropy in disaster response. It is not so much a shift as it is a rediscovery of the religious roots of humanitarian work. But at the same time, it is also a contemporary development that is part of the globalization of risk, humanitarian aid, and religion itself. The second part will explain the rise in two ways. First, faith-based and religious organizations hold what we describe as a global imaginary. In this imaginary, the world is in crisis and it offers an opportunity to demonstrate global compassion. Second, the rise of global religious philanthropy is also tied to the expansion of religious movements, some of which are in emerging economies. The expansion renders the religious field competitive. This is why, in a paradoxical manner, their humanitarian activities are also acts of strength and power that contend with the state and other players in the religious field.

Keywords: Disaster; religion; religious philanthropy; humanitarian action; transnationalism; faith-based organizations

Religious organizations have played an increasingly important role in development work. In development studies, their participation has been described as the turn to religion, a trend that emerged in the 1980s as far as the West is concerned (Tomalin 2013). The turn recognizes the engagements of religious groups on the ground. These groups, after all, are directly familiar with the immediate circumstances of

their communities. At the same time, the turn recognizes the religious lives of stakeholders, both development workers and their partner communities (Clarke 2013). In recent years, religious organizations have become influential too in disaster response. In some cases, they are, in the eyes of affected populations, more efficient and decisive than other humanitarian organizations or even the state itself (Fanany and Fanany 2013). The global significance of their disaster work cannot be emphasized enough.

This article seeks to make sense of the rise of global religious philanthropy in relation to disaster. Our interest is thus not simply to map out the various interventions of local religious organizations in their respective disaster contexts.[1] We instead take a global perspective. Global religious philanthropy refers to the transnational activities of religious organizations to respond to humanitarian crises. These organizations can be faith-based initiatives or religious groups or denominations that have created humanitarian services for the specific purpose of relief and recovery in other countries. In a broad sense, religious philanthropy is not only about donating money within a religious community (Wuthnow and Hodgkinson 1990). Their philanthropic acts, underpinned by religious convictions, cover a wide range of activities to support the relief, recovery, and overall welfare of affected populations.[2]

Argument and significance

Our overall argument is that the contemporary rise of global religious philanthropy is made possible by the interplay of two religious dispositions. The first is that global religious philanthropy espouses what we describe as a global imaginary. In this imaginary, the world is in crisis and it offers an opportunity to demonstrate global compassion. Many of these groups frame disasters in a very religious manner, drawing, for example, from their interpretations of sacred texts and their moral views. Second, the rise of global religious philanthropy is also tied to the expansion of religious movements, some of which are in emerging economies. In this sense, the field of global religious philanthropy is not only competitive in relation to its secular counterpart. It is internally competitive. This is why what religious organizations do and how they respond are not uniform for every kind of disaster situation around the world.[3] Therefore, inasmuch as their acts are of global compassion, they are also, in a paradoxical manner, acts of strength and power. As our article presents an overview of the rise of global religious philanthropy, we will draw from different cases from around the world to

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[1] To illustrate, Islamic organizations like *Nahdlatul Ulama* and *Muhammadiya* are two of the most influential in Indonesia. They have designed programs catered mostly for the youth to identify and understand the hazards in their respective areas. They have been strategic in implementing their respective programs. *Nahdlatul Ulama*, for example, has designed programs for Islamic boarding schools based on the premise that these will be local centers for information dissemination. *Muhammadiyah* provides training to members of youth organizations in their respective areas. These two faith-based organizations are into capacity building because, in their view, community participation is crucial to disaster preparedness. Affected populations use 'coping and survival strategies to face and respond to the situation long before outside help' arrives (Mulyasari and Shaw 2012: 146). See also Ha (2015) for the Korean case and McLaughlin (2013) for the Japanese.

[2] See the introduction to the special issue of the *Asian Journal of Social Science* on religious philanthropy in Asia (Kuah-Pearce and Cornelio 2015).

[3] A special issue of *Asian Ethnology* that explores some of these concerns was recently edited by Fountain and McLaughlin (2016).

argue our point. These cases involve transnational faith-based and religious organizations. Making sense of their rise is how we are adding to recent writings that map out the operations of transnational environmental faith-based organizations (Lee and Kong 2015).

Giving attention to religious philanthropy in global history is significant in at least two respects. First, disaster is a global phenomenon made possible by shared risks and vulnerabilities (Beck 1992). But what gives the impression that it is inescapable regardless of where one is in the world is climate change. Climate change may not be the only source of vulnerability but it is pervasive. For John Urry (2011: 47), humanity's 'catastrophic futures' are brought about by the impact of climate change on many aspects of social life. Its consequences are not only environmental but also social. In this sense, climate change is both a way of talking about and experiencing the world. In this regard religion has much to offer. This explains why Pope Francis (2015) in *Laudato Si'* calls for a 'universal fraternity' as a global civic responsibility to address climate change. As we will revisit in the latter part, climate change presents itself as a collectively perceived mode of 'evil, danger, or chaos' that shores up the public influence of religion in global society (Beyer 2008: 300; see also Bergmann 2015).

Secondly, religion is very much part of the history of global humanitarianism itself. Humanitarianism is generally assumed to be a secular enterprise. But its historical roots have a distinctly religious character as far as the West is concerned. During the colonial period, religious individuals were themselves moved to react to the harsh conditions to which colonizers subjected other peoples (Stamatov 2013). In the 18th century, the evangelical movement, which had the ethos of saving souls, gave birth to 'charitable activities and a burst of social reform' (Barnett 2011: 53). These charitable activities quickly spread around the world but have along the way lost their religious character. Red Cross is a primary example.

In this article, however, we are interested in the contemporary phenomenon of transnational religious and faith-based organizations that respond to disasters around the world. This is obvious in the case of big faith-based organizations like Caritas International, World Vision, Christian Aid, and Tearfund, all of which are Christian in orientation and coming from the UK and North America. And yet, we find similar developments in other religions. There are Buddhist organizations like Tzu Chi and Soka Gakkai that are emerging in East Asia. Islamic charities, which date back to the 1970s, are also emerging. One prominent example is Islamic Relief (Benthall 2016). The initiatives of religious groups in emerging economies are also playing a big role such as the disaster work of *Iglesia ni Cristo* in the Philippines (Cornelio 2017) and the International Nepal Fellowship.

In a way then the participation of religious groups in disaster work is simply bringing humanitarian work back to its roots. It is not so much a shift as it is a rediscovery of the religious roots of humanitarian work. But at the same time, it is also a contemporary development that is part of the globalization of risk, humanitarian aid, and religion itself.[4] As Lee and Kong (2015: 2984) point out, these organizations are 'starting to take on a transnational form with a *modus operandi* distinct from organizations whose operations remain within national boundaries'.

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[4]Transnational religious networks have also been formed to respond to AIDS, which international organizations and the media have framed as a 'global disease' (Burchardt 2015: 48).

The rise of global religious philanthropy

Numerical figures specific to religious organizations that deal with disaster are difficult to obtain. But the presence of religiously affiliated international non-government organizations is telling. There are 907 according to a recent edition of the Yearbook of International Organizations (UIA 2016). At the same time, scholarly literature has started to give attention to global religious philanthropy. Observing its growing significance, Elizabeth Ferris's (2005) work more than a decade ago examined the place of faith-based organizations in the context of broad humanitarian work. She rightly pointed out that these organizations are 'unique players in the international humanitarian community in that they are rooted in their local communities and yet have global reach' (Ferris 2005: 325).

Apart from faith-based organizations, religious groups too are mobilizing themselves to respond to disaster contexts around the world. Our work, for example, has documented this development in the Philippines, one of the countries most vulnerable to disaster and climate change (Cornelio 2017). In some cases, religious organizations in disaster response have caught the attention of the media because their contributions have surpassed the state's (Stetzer 2017). Many of these organizations operate transnationally with the aim of being immediately present in disaster situations. In a way, what religious groups do to respond to climate change demonstrates how religion is a form of 'creative adaptation' in a world 'in turmoil' (Bergmann 2015: 188). It is not surprising then that even the Parliament of World Religions now recognizes climate change as a global risk that needs collective and transnational multifaith work (Halafoff 2015).

Like any humanitarian agency, faith-based and religious organizations involved in disaster work have different initiatives. Some are immediately focused on relief operations. In their activities around the world, Tzu Chi, a Buddhist charity, relies on volunteers from their own ranks and partner communities. Their cash-for-work program incentivizes broad participation in clearing disaster areas and rebuilding destroyed shelters (Lau and Cornelio 2015). A Christian organization, the International Nepal Foundation (INF) is known for its relief work providing non-food items to affected populations (Barwick 2017). Although focused only on Nepal, INF is uniquely transnational for its activities and offices in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. LDS Charities, the humanitarian arm of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, provides 'short-term, life-sustaining support to the most vulnerable people' during disaster (LDS Charities 2017: 17). In 2016 alone, the organization carried out 119 operations in 49 countries.

At the same time, many faith-based organizations are increasingly investing in long-term development plans. They are informed by recent shifts in post-disaster recovery efforts – linking relief, rehabilitation, and development (LRRD) (Daly et al. 2016). Hence, organizations like Tzu Chi and World Vision have invested immediately in permanent housing based on their experience after a massive flooding in Taiwan in 2009 (Hsu et al. 2014). Islamic Relief has done the same thing in Indonesia, even working with schools to implement programs related to sustainable development and disaster risk reduction (Benthall 2016). Whether what these faith-based organizations do is different from their secular counterparts is not clear. Research suggests that the differences are not entirely significant (Heist and Cnaan 2016). This of course does not

deny that in some cases there is accompanying missionary work that creates tension on the ground.

Ultimately, what an organization specifically does is beholden to limitations in funding, expertise, and even local dynamics. The study of Lee and Kong (2015) on how a transnational faith-based organization can embed itself in a different society is instructive. To introduce itself in Singapore, Creation-Carers, a Christian environmental organization based in England, had to leverage personal relationships to establish institutional links. Although the Evangelical identity of its stakeholders was helpful in initially building relationships, some locals became wary that humanitarian workers were smuggling in their Western values. Potential partners clearly had a strong postcolonial consciousness about their own environmental activities in the country and the region. At the same time, Creation-Carers also had to deal with how the Singaporean state managed religious diversity. This compelled them to downplay their religious identity in their activities. Interestingly, these negotiations are not unique to Creation-Carers. Soka Gakkai is a Buddhist group from Japan that is present too in Singapore. It has to repackage itself as a charity organization working with the government to address environmental concerns and advocate peace (Cornelio 2018).

What these examples show is that the rise of global religious philanthropy is tempered by local conditions: 'The territory then, with its existing relationships between actors such as the state and religious organizations, plays a crucial role in the embedding process of transnational organizations' (Lee and Kong 2015: 2993). At the same time, as the new players in post-disaster reconstruction, faith-based organizations and other non-government organizations with religious affiliations have to deal with the practices of the wider, secular network of humanitarian agencies (Feener and Daly 2016). Accountability, for example, which has become a standard in disaster operations remains unevenly practiced even among religious NGOs (Madianou et al. 2016). Finally, how they are to deal with people of different faiths is a typical question they have to confront as their activities are typically treated with suspicion (Wilkinson 2017). This difficulty has perhaps become most acute for various Islamic charities, some of which are accused of colluding with terrorist organizations or opposition parties (Benthall 2016).

Explaining the rise of global religious philanthropy

In development work, religion for a long time was a neglected institution. Academics and policy elites, after all, framed development as a secular endeavour, with corresponding social analyses and prescriptions on how to effect modernization in societies after World War II. The 'turn to religion' in development work, as Tomalin (2013: 10) puts it, is relatively recent. And although strides have been made in recognizing the role of religious organizations to such efforts as peacebuilding and conflict resolution, many secular entities may still treat religion as a backward institution that could affect progressive efforts in such areas as gender equality and reproductive health. Nevertheless, religion continues to play an increasingly important role in development work and now even in disaster response.

We have noted above, however, that the rise of religious philanthropy is not so much a shift as it is a rediscovery of the religious heritage of humanitarian activities (Benthall 2016; Barnett 2011; Stamatov 2013). But we make the case that if there

was anything novel that has taken place in the past decades, it is clearly that religious philanthropy has internalized a transnational character. New players are even coming from emerging economies. This global rise, as it were, is in relation to disaster.

How then can we explain the rise of religious philanthropy in responding to disaster? One explanation is that the resources of religion can help in different ways. For one, religious sites such as temples could readily serve as refuge, as in the case of people affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in Thailand (Reale 2010). Also, religious groups are very much in touch with their respective communities and their immediate needs. In some cases, they are more aware and thus efficient in responding than are government agencies. In Yogyakarta, for example, religious leaders are reliable sources of information to raise awareness about disaster (Joakim and White 2015). At the same time, religious groups could offer help in memorializing loss and helping communities cope with trauma. These interventions recognize people's deep religious beliefs. A study in post-Haiyan Philippines shows that faith in the form of prayer and ritual has potential contributions to enhancing community resilience (Wilkinson 2015). Resilience in this regard is not only in its emotional sense. The religious convictions of a community can be harnessed too to foster collective action (Ager et al. 2015).

These instances, however, are very much local in orientation; they are initiatives of local religious groups responding to the needs of their respective communities. As such they do not account for the rise of transnational religious philanthropy. As we have noted in the introduction, this assessment is called for because climate change presents itself as an adversary shared by humanity. Although consciousness and acceptance of climate change as a global issue is uneven around the world, faith-based and religious organizations working on disaster have clearly embraced it as such. Many religious leaders themselves have become very conscious of caring for the 'common home' (Pope Francis 2015; see also Sachdeva 2016).

There are two ways in which we account for the rise of global religious philanthropy in relation to disaster. The first is that these organizations have imbided a theological vision that the world is in crisis. It is a global imaginary that demands global compassion. It is in this sense that climate change is a shared idea that unifies people of faith. And yet we want to critically note too how this development is paralleled by internal competitions within the field of faith-based and religious organizations and with the state itself. In our view, global religious philanthropy, inasmuch as there is a conscious effort to make it an interfaith effort, is colored by the deployment of influence and power.

Global imaginary

How faith informs humanitarian work varies (Clarke 2008). For many religious organizations, faith is active in that it is the clear motivation for mobilization. In some cases it is passive, secondary only to broader humanitarian virtues. In terms of converting other people as a motivation, faith can also take on a persuasive mode. But it can also be exclusive with some religious groups choosing to help only their own followers. Although there are these distinctions, the line is not necessarily clear or even uniform among faith-based stakeholders who might be working in the same field. Thus the content of that faith demands perceptive research as well. Religious doctrines vary, after all.

Here we propose one potential area of inquiry: their religious vision of the state of the world. We suggest that how faith-based and religious organizations understand the world in crisis is a potential common thread that brings them together. At the same time, the reality of disasters 'challenges religious belief systems to respond' (Bergmann 2015: 198). As in development work, disaster response opens up the opportunity for religion to assert itself as a social institution of relevance in global society. Disaster response, in other words, is a performance of faith-based and religious organizations informed by a global imaginary (Beyer 2008). If climate change is a shared evil that confronts humanity and religions themselves, how do religious humanitarian organizations frame it using the resources of their faith?

The global imaginary is that the world is in crisis. A few illustrations are called for. The global character of crisis is clear in Christian Aid's worldview. In its recent annual report, Rowan Williams, the organization's chairman, asserts that no contemporary crises 'can be dealt with by one nation alone. Climate change, health threats, violence, and terror – none of these stops at national boundaries' (Christian Aid 2017: 4). The organization is present in 37 countries, most of which are in the global South. In the past year alone it has carried out 44 emergency responses that reached 1.2 million affected people. Climate change, in its view, 'hits poor and vulnerable communities first and hardest, and jeopardises the development gains they make' (Christian Aid 2017: 17). Inspired by its religious belief in the merciful Allah, Islamic Relief echoes Christian Aid's focus on the poor and the vulnerable in times of disaster. In its important policy document on climate change, Islamic Relief points out that developing countries, low-lying islands, and poor and marginalized communities are most vulnerable. It also contends that because these communities have 'contributed less' to the problem, climate change is 'a moral issue of social justice' (Islamic Relief 2014: 11). Islamic Relief is thus 'among the first on the ground in an unfolding crisis and working in areas other organisations cannot access' (Islamic Relief 2017: 17). In the previous year 47% of its charitable expenditures went into crisis management and disaster response. The organisation was in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Mali, Nepal, and Somalia, countries that were affected by massive flooding. Another Christian organization, World Vision is mostly focused on the welfare of children with a global outlook. In fact, it aspires to a 'world where every child experiences Jesus' promise of life in all its fullness' (World Vision International n.d.-a). Its understanding of disaster is considerably wide, covering both natural and man-made hazards. It observes though that emergencies have become complex, referring to the combination of both types of hazards. Around the world, 'the number and scale of these complex emergencies has surged in the past decade with the proliferation and intensification of civil conflicts' (World Vision International n.d.-b). Complex emergencies render children among the most vulnerable sectors of affected populations.

It is worth noting that faith-based organizations are not the only ones involved in humanitarian work around the world. Religious groups are too. The Latter-Day Saints, for example, often associated with their foreign missionaries who could speak local dialects, have their own LDS Charities. Their extensive humanitarian work is based on 'a desire to follow the example of Jesus Christ in relieving suffering, lifting burdens, and providing hope' (LDS Charities 2017: 7). They are applying this mission on a global scale, with emphasis too on emergency situations. LDS Charities (2018), with the mission of relieving 'suffering following natural disasters, civil unrest, or famine

around the world', rely on donations of the members of the church. In 2016, they ran 119 projects in 49 countries. Another example of a religious group is Tzu Chi. Although a registered charity in other countries, Tzu Chi is also a Buddhist movement that originated in Taiwan (Huang 2009). It is very well known for its relief operations around the world, relying mostly on its volunteers. In a speech delivered by its founder, Master Cheng Yen (2017: 61) claims that 'the Earth is ill. The Four elements of earth, water, fire, and air are out of balance. The quake that struck the Philippines and the wildfires ravaging British Columbia remind us to live with sincere piety and vigilant care'. While Christian Aid and Islamic Relief view disasters as a moral problem affecting the world's poor, Tzu Chi also sees it as a moral issue but in a different manner: 'Natural disasters are actually closely connected to the human mind and behaviour. When people indulge themselves in pursuing pleasures and satisfying their material desires, it leads to an overexploitation of the planet's natural resources and causes various forms of destruction to the Earth' (Master Cheng Yen 2017: 61).

The common thread that runs through all these illustrations is that the world is in crisis. The sectors most affected by disasters include the poor and the children in developing countries. The global outlook is clearly informed by their religious worldviews such as what God calls them to do and the moral causes of the problem. This is why responding to disasters is a moral and religious duty at once. It is in this light that doubts about the effectiveness of religion and faith to mobilize humanitarian actors are unfounded.

We began this section by discussing how faith does this mobilization in several ways. What we have done here though is to spell out a significant aspect of that faith which has not been explored in the literature – the global imaginary. The statements of these humanitarian organizations reveal to us that the world's crises do not necessarily engender religious fatalism.[5] After all, religious eschatologies, especially in Christianity, speak of decay and ultimately destruction (Sachdeva 2016).

Deployment of power

Accounting for the rise of global religious philanthropy must also factor in its wider religious field. The religious field is competitive not only in relation to secular humanitarian organizations but also to other religions at play. There are two important considerations why we argue it in this manner.

As discussed above, the field of disaster response (and development work, more broadly) has taken for granted the role of religion. The entry of religious institutions and faith-based organizations is relatively recent, especially in disaster work. That this has been the case is in itself indicative of the neglect of religion in global affairs (Beyer 2008). Disasters have opened up the opportunity for religion to play a role, which, as we have also discussed above, is a rediscovery of the religious heritage of humanitarian work in history. The prominent role of big faith-based organizations coming from

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[5]A local example in Indonesia might be also instructive in this regard. Muhammadiyah views disasters with an optimistic outlook in the sense that they provide an opportunity to contribute. Their faith teaches its humanitarian workers to be patient, grateful, and open to collaborating with other people (Baidhawy 2015).

developed countries like World Vision, Christian Aid, and Islamic Relief can be understood as an assertion of religious influence given the fact that the wider development and humanitarian field they inhabit is largely secular.

The other consideration for us, which is significant to highlight too in the narrative of religion in global history, is the rise of new faith-based actors from emerging or postcolonial societies. We have mentioned above such organizations as Tzu Chi, Soka Gakkai, and *Iglesia ni Cristo*. These organizations come from generally religious societies so the secularism of development work is not, we argue, the immediate context. What has made their participation feasible is that in many societies in which they work, government institutions are inefficient. Religious groups, by contrast, have efficient mechanisms of organizing their respective communities, thus giving them visibility and enhanced credibility even in the field of disaster response (Rivera and Nickels 2014; Tear Netherlands, n.d.). Even *Médecins Sans Frontières*, in their work in post-Haiyan Philippines, observed that the presence of religious organizations changed the humanitarian environment. These organizations were for the most part working on their own because of 'distrust of local and national government' (Hofman and Tiller 2015: 28). At the same time, their emergence parallels the growth of their respective economies and the very success of their religious expansion. In this light, their humanitarian work is very much part of the narrative of the growth of their global religious influence.

Philanthropy has thus become an arena for faith-based actors to generate social capital that can later be converted into political influence. The structure of political opportunity for these faith-based actors to cultivate trust is more open in local communities that suffer from government incapacity. In Solomon Islands, for example, church leaders are recognized for wielding 'more influence than any other form of authority' primarily due to their understanding of and involvement in the community dynamics and power structures (Reale 2010: 44). Moreover, village-level disaster plans in the said state are being implemented through the synergy of Solomon Islands Christian Association (the country's main ecumenical body), National Disaster Management Office, Australian Agency for International Development, and the National Council of Churches in Australia. Every community, including remote areas, also has at least one church. Thus, given the government's inability to reach remote communities, churches were vital in the identification of necessary disaster management plans.

The impact of Mary Queen of Viet Nam (MQVN), a Catholic Church located in New Orleans, Louisiana, amidst the failure of government agencies in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is another good example. The church successfully empowered the communities to take action vis-à-vis the government's inaction by simultaneously leading protests against, and engaging in, dialogues with the government. The high level of the church's engagement eventually paved the way for one of its members, Joseph Cao, to unseat the nine-term congressional incumbent. Cao decided to enter the electoral race upon witnessing the government response to Hurricane Katrina. The case of MQVN's activism demonstrated that 'community-based, faith institutions can empower their communities to take action, and over time work to address what they deem is broken and untrustworthy about their local, state, and national governments' (Rivera and Nickels 2014: 211).

Conclusion

We wish to reiterate our key points. The contemporary rise of global religious philanthropy is girded by a global imaginary that frames the world in crisis and offers an opportunity to demonstrate global compassion based on their sacred texts and moral views. But at the same time, their acts of global compassion are converted into acts of strength and power. This is what makes their involvement paradoxical.

It is reflected in the success of faith-based and religious groups operating around the world to respond to disaster. They are demonstrating their ability to rally human and financial capital. The global field of religious philanthropy and disaster work is thus competitive. But at the same time, as demonstrated by the cases cited in this article, faith-based actors have gained higher levels of public trust and socio-political legitimacy over the government leaders and institutions within their communities.

Our article has shown that religious actors are playing pivotal roles to respond to disasters on a global scale. Their active involvement in global philanthropy is indicative of efforts to contribute beyond people's spiritual formation. Their work is a rediscovery of the religious character of humanitarian work but at the same time a novel phenomenon given the transnational responses. Put differently, the persistence of global religious philanthropy is fuelled by transnational mechanisms that are reliant on both efficiency and sacralised disorder.

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Jayeel Cornelio is Professor in the Development Studies Program at the Ateneo de Manila University. He also holds visiting professorships at the Graduate School of the University of St La Salle and the Center for Asian Democracy at the University of Louisville. He is the author of People's Christianity: Theological Sense and Sociological Significance (with Jose Mario Francisco) and lead editor of the Routledge International Handbook of Religion in Global Society (with Francois Gauthier, Tuomas Martikainen, and Linda Woodhead). Email: jcornelio@ateneo.edu.

Julio C. Teehanke is Professor of Political Science and International Studies at De La Salle University, where he served as Dean of the College of Liberal Arts from 2013 to 2017. Currently, he is the Chief of Party of PARTICIPATE PH, a nonpartisan pro-democracy coalition between the Ateneo School of Government, La Salle Institute of Governance, and civil society organizations. He is also the Regional Manager of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. He has published extensively on issues of popular participation, governance, democratization, and contested institutions in East and Southeast Asia. Email: julio.teehankee@dlsu.edu.ph.