A series of explosions rocked the Afghan city of Kunduz on the night of October 3, 2015. Over the course of an hour, a U.S. Air Force gunship fired 211 shells at a building its crew identified, at the time, as a Taliban stronghold. However, far from being a terrorist base, the small building housed the Kunduz Trauma Centre—a hospital providing free, high-quality medical care to trauma victims. The hospital housed 140 beds, three operating rooms, an intensive care unit, an X-ray facility, a pharmacy, and physiotherapy practitioners—rare commodities in northeastern Afghanistan. The facility made no political distinctions among its patients, treating wounded Taliban and Afghan government personnel side by side. At least forty-two people died in the attack, including fourteen staff members, twenty-four patients, and four patient family members.¹ The hospital, large parts of which were destroyed, was permanently shut down, cutting locals off from their main source of medical support.

The Kunduz hospital airstrike sparked international outrage. Within hours of the attack, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a strong condemnation, and called for an impartial investigation into the events of that night. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein called the event “tragic, inexcusable, and possibly even criminal.”² Photographs of the ruins circulated widely in international media, and demonstrations occurred in Geneva, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere.³ However, similarly deadly—and considerably deadlier—incidents had occurred in Afghanistan prior to the Kunduz attack and had received far less international exposure: a 2009 U.S. airstrike in the village of Granai—among the casualties, ninety-three children dead;⁴ a 2010 NATO attack on Sangin village—fifty-two civilians dead;⁵ U.S. warplanes bombing of a wedding party in
Wech Baghtu in 2008—among the casualties, twenty-three children dead;6 an attack on a wedding celebration in Haska Meyna later in the same year—forty-seven were reportedly killed.7 Despite the staggering noncombatant death tolls in these and other incidents, few of them received nearly the same international attention as the Kunduz hospital airstrike.

Part of the international anger over the hospital bombing certainly stems from the fact that Westerners were killed in Kunduz, when Afghan deaths sadly receive far less notice outside of Afghanistan, but numerous Westerners have previously died in the cross-fires and have not received such attention. However, the Kunduz Trauma Centre was different because it was operated by the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), renowned for its volunteer medical humanitarian projects in the harshest conflict zones. Like many of its peer organizations, MSF prides itself on being impartial by treating all those in need without discriminating among them; being independent of all constraints not relating directly to humanitarian work; and being neutral, and thus not taking a side in hostilities or political controversies. The MSF flags that were placed on the roof of the Kunduz Trauma Centre demarcated the hospital as neutral territory. By striking this building, the U.S. Air Force did not simply contravene international humanitarian law, which designates such spaces inviolable. It violated a sacred international norm—that humanitarian NGOs occupy a special position outside of all routine conflict considerations and should thus be protected from all harm. As an international organization, MSF was able to communicate its censure of this violation across boundaries and to draw international outrage unlike any other type of actor in Afghanistan.

But while the work MSF does in Afghanistan and elsewhere is commendable, the idea that volunteer societies ought to do it is remarkably new. In fact, critical voices in scholarly and policy conversations have raised questions about whether NGO work ultimately displaces local state and civil society institutions. However, the question of how humanitarian NGOs have come to possess such extraordinary prestige and international authority in the first place is rarely asked. In this book, I investigate how organizations like MSF, Oxfam International, the International Rescue Committee, and other international humanitarian NGOs have come to be sanctified in international law, politics, society, and culture. To do so, I examine the history of the oldest and largest network of humanitarian organizations in existence today, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and in particular its founding committee, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). While normally Red Cross societies in different countries are at least partially supported by their national governments (and are thus not
entirely “nongovernmental”), the Red Cross movement provided the template and the institutional infrastructure that have supported humanitarian NGOs in the past 150 years. The ICRC specifically is behind the Geneva Convention, which provides the legal protections that allow humanitarian NGOs to work in conflict zones.

When I first visited the archive of the ICRC in Geneva in 2012, my research interests revolved around the ways the Red Cross worked to elicit sympathy across borders in the nineteenth century. Since the ICRC emerged through the private initiative of five Genevans in the 1860s, I started by examining their early professional correspondences. Looking at the diaries, personal correspondences, and meeting protocols, I was struck by the ways these early activists employed theological reasonings as they grappled with organizational and ethical issues relating to humanitarian work. To better understand the religious context in which they were operating, I turned to the teachings, writings, and sermons of the clergy working in Geneva at the time—especially those belonging to the Réveil movement, to which the ICRC founders belonged. The Réveil was a nineteenth-century conservative Calvinist movement that emphasized, among other things, the active involvement of private charity in addressing public problems. Before I knew it, my research had turned to the role of religion in shaping civil society organization.

This book does not use these archival findings to provide an exhaustive retelling of the history of humanitarian NGOs or to identify the overall historical origins of humanitarian practices and sentiments. Instead, it asks how the idea that humanitarian work is best provided by nongovernmental organizations—impartial, neutral, and independent ones—became so prevalent among practitioners and policy makers alike. It argues, in brief, that the Réveil provided the founders of the Red Cross movement with the logics that shaped their ideas about how good relief work ought to be waged. Based on their religious beliefs, the founders of the Red Cross became convinced that humanitarian work is a unique endeavor that must be conducted under its own ethical code, free of any political consideration. The framework the Red Cross propagated was at once malleable enough to transverse political and professional boundaries with ease and durable enough to withstand considerable challenges from competitors to the Red Cross’s hegemony. The ethical underpinnings that inform contemporary humanitarian work today thus emerged from a specific strand of Swiss Calvinism. The unique standing of the international humanitarian NGOs we know today, then, is the result of a century-and-a-half-old cultural project that has bridged religion, politics, professions, and social movements.
While much of its analysis is historical, the book has widespread implications for twenty-first-century public policy and international development programs. For one thing, understanding contemporary humanitarian policies as historically and culturally specific (rather than universally valid) helps identify alternate options for providing international aid, which—as chapter 1 will show—have been marginalized. Historicizing current beliefs about humanitarian work can and should further contemporary conversations on international aid ethics. In addition, understanding the dominance of a religious movement in establishing the still-existing infrastructure of the humanitarian NGO sector is doubly important in this day and age. Numerous contemporary aid organizations highlight their secular identity and draw boundaries between themselves and their religious counterparts, believing religion to be primarily a source of violence. In contrast, this book demonstrates the capacity of religious frameworks to voice grievances, conceive of solutions, and mobilize for their execution—a point that should be taken into account in future discussions of humanitarian policy.

In order to interpret the historical findings, I draw on Bourdieusian field analysis and on the Strong Program in Cultural Sociology. By bringing cultural sociology into field analysis, I draw attention to the role of religious beliefs in generating the field of transnational humanitarian work, where many contemporary applications of field theory see beliefs as emerging from already-existing economic, political, or organizational social structures. In this, I claim that the appearance of a new social field requires a preexisting belief system (religious or otherwise) that orients actors to believe that specific endeavors are so unique and essential that they require an independent social space, a field, where they can be waged according to their own internal logic. In the interest of accessibility, I have relegated much of the theoretical metacommentary to the notes. Similarly, while the International Committee of the Red Cross only adopted its current name in 1876, I refer to it as ICRC for continuity throughout the text, except where the name change was of particular importance. Similarly, I left commentary on sources and methods to the appendix. I focused the text on those aspects of the history of the Red Cross movement that show the cultural dynamics of the nascent humanitarian field, and thus demonstrate my theoretical intervention in action.

Although much of the story ahead took place in the nineteenth century, there are numerous equivalences between the challenges the founders of
the International Committee of the Red Cross faced and those with which humanitarian NGOs grapple today. Indeed, as the last two chapters of the book will demonstrate, the tensions inherent to the moral framework the founders laid down remain germane to the humanitarian field today, across its different organs and divisions.