

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent: Their origin and development

by Jean-Luc Blondel

1. The Principles in the history of the Red Cross: from 1863 to 1952

From the very first, the founding members of what was to become the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement realized that it was necessary to comply with a number of essential principles. The work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent is based on the fundamental idea of *impartial assistance to anyone who is suffering, whether friend or foe*.

This idea, which was conceived on a battlefield, was expressed in the resolutions and declarations of the first Conference, held in October 1863, and in Article 6 of the Geneva Convention of 22 August 1864, which provided that "*wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong, shall be collected and cared for*". To make this injunction feasible and effective, the 1864 Convention gave ambulances and medical personnel a new status, thereafter termed neutrality, which guaranteed their protection from attack by the belligerents.

It was not long before members of the Movement were speaking of Principles, or Fundamental Principles. As early as 1869, at the Berlin International Conference, the ICRC was assigned the task of safeguarding and spreading knowledge of those Principles.¹

¹ Excerpt from Gustave Moynier's speech, approved by the Conference. Records of the proceedings of the International Conference held in Berlin from 22 to 27 April 1869, p. 264: "We believe that the *raison d'être* of the International Committee is also to act as a moral and historical link between all central committees, to be a guardian, as it were, of the 1863 resolutions which constitute the committees' common charter

In the early years, unity of thought within the Movement was ensured by the similarity of the individuals involved and, less directly, by their common cultural background. Although there was no written agreement on the subject, certain notions soon became recognized as essential to the Red Cross idea. As *Gustave Moynier*, one of the Movement's founders, said: "*The Societies, which are all members of the Red Cross federation, are bound one to the other by their more or less formal undertaking to conduct themselves in accordance with identical rules. These rules or principles are four in number: centralization, foresight, mutuality and solidarity*".² Moynier defined them as follows:

- the principle of centralization means that there can be *only one Red Cross Society* per country (centralized control), and that its activities must embrace *the whole country*;
- the principle of foresight requires the Societies to be *ready at all times*, and to make *preparations* in peacetime for humanitarian activities in time of war;
- the principle of mutuality means willingness to assist all wounded and sick people, *regardless of their nationality*;
- the principle of solidarity requires the Societies *to help each other*.

Moynier said that the ICRC should act as "*the voluntary guardian of these Principles so crucial to our work*" and called on it to use "*its influence, if need be, to ensure that they are adhered to*".

In addition, to be admitted into the Movement, new Societies had to respect and undertake to respect at all times the following conditions: foresight, solidarity, centralized control, activity throughout the national territory.³

and embody the great principles of universal charity and judicious foresight that are the very essence and the beauty of our work".

² Moynier G., "*Ce que c'est que la Croix-Rouge*", *Bulletin international*, No. 21, January 1875, pp. 1-8.

³ "*Essential conditions to be met by all Red Cross Societies (in accordance with decisions adopted by the International Committee)*:"

1. *Belong to a country where the Geneva Convention is in force.*
2. *Belong to a country where no other such society has been recognized by the International Committee.*
3. *Be recognized by the government of its country as auxiliary to the army medical services.*
4. *Bear the name "Red Cross Society".*
5. *Adopt the symbol of a red cross on a white ground.*
6. *Be headed by a central committee, which alone represents it in dealings with other Societies.*

When the ICRC drew up its first Statutes in 1915, it set itself the task of “safeguarding the fundamental and universal Principles on which the Institution is based” (Article 3), without being more specific. It was only when its Statutes were revised in 1921 that the ICRC set forth those Fundamental Principles, namely “impartiality, action independent of any political, religious or economic consideration, the universality of the Red Cross and the equality of its constituent members”.

At the same time, the 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, held in Geneva in April 1921, adopted a resolution reading: “The Conference approves the activity of the International Committee in peacetime. It recognizes the Committee as the guardian and propagator of the institution’s fundamental moral and legal Principles and assigns it the responsibility of ensuring that those Principles are respected and that knowledge of them is spread throughout the world”.⁴

Following the Second World War, the XIXth session (Oxford, 1946) of the Board of Governors of the League of Red Cross Societies accepted the proposal of a Commission of National Society representatives and issued a long declaration on the Principles which was later included in the *International Red Cross Handbook*.⁵ These “new” Principles, which were explicitly added to the four Principles set forth by the ICRC, are thirteen in number, and there are also six rules for their application; the principles and the rules for application take up the following points:

The “Oxford Principles”

- 1) National Societies as voluntary, autonomous organizations, open to all;

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7. *Extend its activities to the entire territory of the country and its dependencies.*
 8. *Be open to all citizens, without distinction based on sex, religion or political opinion.*
 9. *If possible extend its programme to all branches of army medical services.*
 10. *Undertake to prepare itself in peacetime to be able to provide aid in wartime.*
 11. *Adhere to the principle of moral solidarity which binds all National Societies.*
 12. *Undertake to maintain close relations with other National Societies and with the International Committee.”*

Published in *Organisation générale et programme de la Croix-Rouge, d’après les décisions prises dans les Conférences internationales*, ICRC, 2nd edition, Geneva, 1898, pp. 25-26.

⁴ 10th International Conference of the Red Cross, Geneva 1921, Resolution XVI (“International Organization of the Red Cross”), para. 3. *Records*, p. 221.

⁵ *International Red Cross Handbook*, Twelfth edition, 1983, pp. 549-551.

- 2) their recognition by the Government, the Society's auxiliary character;
- 3) protection of the emblem;
- 4) the National Societies must spread knowledge of the principles;
- 5) promoting peace;
- 6) the principle of humanity in time of war (general activities);
- 7) alleviating the consequences of natural disasters;
- 8) the fight against epidemics; public health concerns;
- 9) democratic organization;
- 10) financing (membership fees, donations);
- 11) instructing youth in the Red Cross ideals;
- 12) independence;
- 13) membership of the League.

Application of the principles:

- 1) the fight against abuses of the emblem;
- 2) training personnel;
- 3) preparing for services in wartime (acting as auxiliaries to army medical services, assisting prisoners of war, forwarding information and Red Cross messages, tracing the missing and reporting on the wounded);
- 4) independence and voluntary service;
- 5) promoting Youth Red Cross activities;
- 6) training first-aid workers.

Apart from a brief recapitulation, in the introduction, of the four Principles laid down by the ICRC, this declaration consists almost entirely of a statement of organic principles and matters of policy. The principle of neutrality is not mentioned, becoming merged with that of impartiality, but an important mention is the one stating that National Societies must be representative.

The 18th International Conference of the Red Cross (Toronto, 1952) reaffirmed the Oxford Principles, in order “*to maintain the tenets of impartiality, political, racial, religious and economic independence, universality of the Red Cross, and equal rights of National Societies, which are the cornerstones of the Red Cross Movement*” (Resolution X (a)).

There is thus a certain ambiguity as to which Principles, the “*Fundamental Principles*” or those constituting the “*cornerstones*”, are to be considered as paramount, as truly fundamental. Some doctrinal clarification seems to be necessary.

2. Elaboration of the Principles

We have seen that Gustave Moynier formulated the first Principles (centralization, foresight, mutuality and solidarity) very early on and that these were essentially practical (or organic) in nature.

Later, in 1920, **Edmond Boissier**, a member of the ICRC, wrote about Red Cross ideals as follows: “*The Principle which has always been recognized and proclaimed by all the Societies united under its banner is that of universal charity in the service of suffering humanity, without regard to religion, race or nationality. Charity and universality, along with independence and impartiality, are the essential and distinctive characteristics of the Red Cross*”.⁶ This statement of the Principles was not, however, accompanied by a commentary.

It was **Max Huber** who revived doctrinal discussion within the Red Cross. Although he did not write a detailed treatise on the subject, Huber nevertheless made a thorough study of the Principles.

Huber’s work on the subject was concerned mainly with the principles of humanity and neutrality (which had obviously not yet been exactly defined). His own spiritual convictions undoubtedly had a great influence on his legal thought and his conception of Red Cross work; this is especially evident in his definition of humanity—which calls for a feeling of compassion and sensitivity towards the suffering of *others*—as a principle close to the teaching of many religions and social philosophies. His personal convictions also led him to respect those of others and made him aware of the importance of philosophical, religious and, of course, political neutrality.⁷

In his writings on neutrality, Huber discusses the primary purpose of the Red Cross, which is reflected in the Principles: to bring relief without discrimination to victims of armed conflict and natural disasters. A natural consequence of this position is the refusal to become involved in political and ideological disputes which, sooner or later, would divert the Red Cross from its essential task. Politicization has always been the prime enemy of the Movement, which defends itself

⁶ Edmond Boissier, “L’avenir de la Croix-Rouge”, *Revue internationale de la Croix-Rouge*, No. 20, 15 August 1920, pp. 881-888; quotation p. 883.

⁷ “*The Red Cross realises that it is man’s conscience, his inmost sense of responsibility, which dictates his every action in favour of his fellow creatures. In order not to offend these sacred sentiments the Red Cross must adopt an attitude of neutrality to religious and philosophical conceptions. Such neutrality is an attitude not of indifference, but of respect*”. Excerpt from Max Huber’s address to the 15th International Conference of the Red Cross, Tokyo, 20 October 1934.

by recalling the essence of the Principles, namely, impartial assistance to alleviate human suffering.

It is to *Jean Pictet* that we owe the first, and so far the only, complete exploration of the Principles. In his *Red Cross Principles* (1956),⁸ he makes a detailed analysis of the basic reasons that motivate the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. He ends the book by listing, as a summary, 17 Principles which he divides into two categories:

- **Fundamental Principles:** Humanity, Equality, Due Proportion, Impartiality, Neutrality, Independence, and Universality.
- **Organic Principles:** Selflessness, Free Service, Voluntary Service, Auxiliarity, Autonomy, Multitudinism, Equality of the National Societies, Unity, Solidarity and Foresight.

Pictet's book on the Fundamental Principles, begun on his own initiative, eventually brought about a revision of the Fundamental Principles as set out in the 1946 Oxford Declaration. However, the move to revise the Principles came not from the ICRC, where Pictet was Director of General Affairs, but from the Japanese Red Cross, whose Director of Foreign Affairs, Masurato Inoue, had translated Pictet's book into Japanese. In 1958 the Japanese Red Cross formally requested that the Oxford Declaration be replaced by the summary appearing at the end of Pictet's book.

3. The definitive adoption of the Fundamental Principles

The League agreed to examine the question and proposed that a joint ICRC/League Commission be formed to make a detailed study. The ICRC appointed a small delegation (made up of Jean Pictet and Frédéric Siordet, ICRC Vice-President) which had eight meetings with the two League representatives (Henry Dunning and W. J. Phillips, respectively Secretary General and Deputy Secretary General).⁹ This working group drew up a text which, after consultation with the Chairman of the Standing Commission and the Presidents of the ICRC and the League, was sent to the Central Committees of the National Societies for their views (circular of 24 June 1959).

⁸ Jean Pictet, *Red Cross Principles* (Preface by Max Huber), ICRC, Geneva, 1956.

⁹ First meeting: 4 November 1958; second meeting: 14 April 1959.

Twenty-six Societies replied. Of these, fourteen simply approved the proposed text while twelve others made comments, some in considerable detail. The Standing Commission then instructed the study group to draw up a second draft of the Principles, incorporating such of the National Societies' proposals as the group might deem to be justified. The group submitted this second draft to the Standing Commission, which adopted it on 6 October 1960 with few alterations.

At its October 1960 meeting, however, the Standing Commission made the following addition, concerning peace, to the last sentence of the principle of humanity, at the request of Professor G. A. Miterev, Chairman of the Alliance of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies of the USSR: "*It promotes mutual understanding and friendship amongst all peoples, thus developing the spirit of peace, and contributing to the elimination of war*". The wording of this addition, considered by many to be out of place in such a declaration, was already the result of a compromise. Not satisfied, Professor Miterev raised the subject again when the Standing Commission met on 24 March 1961. He proposed adding a new fundamental principle stating the "*peace-loving*" character of the Red Cross. This was rejected.

The draft text adopted by the Standing Commission was submitted to the XXVIth meeting of the Council of Delegates, held in Prague in October 1961 and attended by 58 out of the then 82 recognized National Societies and by the League and the ICRC. At the very start of the debate the Soviet Alliance again proposed the inclusion in the Fundamental Principles of a peace principle, in fact the one already rejected by the Standing Commission. The Soviet proposal was supported by Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and—in a somewhat modified version—by Yugoslavia, while France, the United Kingdom, Brazil and the Philippines were against.

In the end, the American and the Soviet representatives agreed behind the scenes on a compromise text, worded as follows: "*The Red Cross promotes mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples*". This text replaced the last sentence of the draft submitted by the Standing Commission.

The only other change made by the Council of Delegates concerned the text of the principle of neutrality, in which the word "racial" was inserted between "political" and "religious" to draw a closer parallel with the principle of impartiality. The amended text was adopted unanimously.

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross were finally adopted at the 20th International Conference of the Red Cross, held in Vienna in 1965. The Prague draft was adopted unanimously and without

discussion. It was also decided that the Principles would be read aloud at the opening of each International Conference of the Red Cross.

In 1979, the Henry Dunant Institute published a *Commentary* by Jean Pictet on the Fundamental Principles. This authoritative and perceptive treatment of the subject has lost none of its relevance today.

4. Current tasks

Since 1965 many talks and seminars devoted to the Fundamental Principles have helped to promote knowledge and understanding thereof. The importance of the Principles was also underscored at the 25th International Conference in Geneva in October 1986, when they were incorporated into the preamble to the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, revised on that occasion.

At the Council of Delegates preceding the 25th International Conference, Dr. Janos Hantos, then President of the Executive Committee of the Hungarian Red Cross and member of the Standing Commission, invited the International Committee of the Red Cross to carry out an in-depth study on respect for and dissemination of the Fundamental Principles, intended to improve understanding of the Principles and demonstrate their relevance in the Movement's everyday work, thereby enhancing its unity and effectiveness. The study is currently under way: the ICRC submitted its first interim report to the Council of Delegates in October 1989 and the following year carried out a survey with the help and participation of National Societies; a second progress report will be submitted to the Council of Delegates in November 1991.

The study is first and foremost intended to define, in a clear and concise manner, the scope and significance of the Fundamental Principles, in view of new situations, questions and problems relating to their application which have arisen in recent years. In the wide range of cultural and geographical settings in which the various components of the Movement carry out their activities, the Fundamental Principles remain an essential point of reference for them all. The Principles are the only doctrinal text common to the whole Movement. They are an expression of its unity in time (*continuity*) and space (*universality*). This common identity and internal cohesion are what make the Movement unique and enhance the effectiveness of its work. The Principles are also important in that they embody the Movement's *fundamental concern*, which is to alleviate human suffering, without discrimination or prejudice of any kind.

The requirement that the Principles be respected and disseminated is hence an integral part of them. The Movement is therefore currently faced with a twofold task: to put over this statement of Red Cross and Red Crescent identity in its modern-day reality and make it better understood, both within and outside the Movement, and to strengthen its commitment to activities in the field so as to demonstrate in practice the importance and relevance of the Principles in the work of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

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