CHAPTER 35

RELIGION AND FORCED MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

The nexus between religion and forced migration is highly complex, in part because religious communities have diverse self-understandings and act in different ways. Analysis of religion’s multifaceted influences on conflict, humanitarian crises, and forced migration can shed useful light on the important role played by religious communities in assisting people driven from their homes and how religious faith helps sustain the displaced in the face of their losses. Such study can also lead to a better understanding of how religion sometimes contributes to conflicts that lead to forced migration. This chapter examines the religion-forced migration nexus, discussing the normative traditions of several monotheistic and Asian religious communities on the needs and rights of forced migrants. While such normative traditions are not always adopted in practice by these communities or their individual members, the analysis shows how different faiths understand their responsibilities to aid displaced populations. The chapter also explores several of the distinctive strengths and special challenges faced by faith-based agencies in their efforts to aid the displaced today.

THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY

Throughout most of pre-modern history, religious traditions were the principal fonts of the charity and compassion that led people to assist those forced from their homes by war, natural disaster, or extreme poverty. Well into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the humanitarian movement had strongly religious roots, particularly the anti-slavery movement, the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the expansion of Christian missionary engagement with poverty (Barnett 2011: 57–94). In contrast,
after the Second World War humanitarian action appeared to undergo a notable secularization and the engagement of religious agencies seemed to decline. However, over the past decade much of the expansion in responses to humanitarian crises and displacement has been faith-based, leading to an increasing interest in faith-based humanitarianism by academics and practitioners alike (see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011).

Particularly notable has been the establishment of new Christian NGOs with an evangelical orientation and of several Islamic humanitarian agencies. Indeed, religiously inspired responses to forced migration continue to be strong today. Although estimates of the revenues of some religious organizations cannot be very precise, the revenue expended in international assistance work by the major United States-based religiously affiliated groups in 2004 was approximately equal to the expenditures by secular agencies (McCleary and Barro 2008). The operating budgets of some major secular and religious humanitarian NGOs, drawn from their 2012 annual reports, are presented in Tables 35.1 and 35.2.

Thus, as Barnett comments, 'It is impossible to study humanitarianism without being impressed by the importance of religion' (2011:17).

This continuing importance of faith-based organizations runs counter to the secularization hypothesis held until recently by many sociologists (see Luckmann 1967; for reassessment, see Berger 1999). Secularization can refer either to a decline of religion, with fewer believers than in earlier days, or to the privatization of religion, with less influence in public domains such as the state or economy. Neither of these phenomena

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has been occurring in most parts of the world in recent decades. Indeed, Casanova argues that ‘religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them’ (1994: 5). The continuing public influence of religion seems particularly notable in international politics (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011).

Faith communities’ international activity can, of course, have both positive and negative effects on forced migrants. Religion’s negative face is evident in the politicized assertions of religious identity and self-defensive fundamentalisms involved in several of the world’s conflicts today. On the other hand, religious communities and religious leaders such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have played significant roles in the pursuit of human rights, peace, and reconciliation. Appleby (2000) has thus argued that religion plays an ‘ambivalent’ role in international politics.

A key question, therefore, is what kind of faith and faith-based tenets motivate activities influencing forced migration. If faith leads to respect for the dignity and rights of all persons, including people of other faiths, and sees the state as a secular guarantor of the rights of all, the believing community can make positive contributions to peace and to the protection of those forced from home. Appleby (2000) and Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011) have shown that many religious communities today possess these characteristics. On the other hand, they have also shown that if a religious community holds that only its own members possess full dignity and rights, or that the state should protect only those holding the true faith, conflict will likely result, making the creation of refugees likely. Thus the way a religious community understands the values within its own tradition and how these values shape the community’s relations with other communities will have very important effects for forced migration. The following section will therefore provide an overview of several major religious traditions’ key normative ideas relevant to displacement.

Normative Stances of Religious Communities

Migration and exile play central roles in the founding narratives of many world religions. Followers of three major monotheistic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—all see themselves as descendants of the Patriarch Abraham, whose experience of God’s call led him to migrate from his home in present-day Iraq to the land of Canaan, in present-day Israel. This section presents an overview of the normative perspectives shaping the response of these monotheistic faiths to forced migrants, followed by a brief discussion of the normative stances underpinning Asian religious traditions. It is important to note that the ways faith communities’ normative values promote protection of displaced people are dynamic realities and are sometimes violated in notable ways, just as normative political ideas, such as democracy or the rule of law, are evolving.
and sometimes violated by their adherents. Despite this caveat, the way a faith community interprets its normative traditions helps shape the community's role in relation to forced migration.

**Judaism**

The story of the Exodus—a migration from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land of God's promise—forms the identity of Judaism. In this narrative, the Israelites had been forced to migrate to Egypt by famine in their homeland. After a period in which they had been welcomed in Egypt, the Egyptians came to fear them and laid on them 'the whole cruel fate of slaves' (Exodus 1: 11–14). God saw their misery, liberated them through Moses' leadership, formed them into a people through bonds of a covenant, and led them into the land that became their home (Exodus 3: 7–8). Because of the way God freed the Jewish people from oppression and exile, a special duty to respect the strangers and migrants they encountered in the land of Israel itself came to form a core tenet of Judaism: 'You shall not oppress an alien; you well know how it feels to be an alien, since you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt' (Exodus 23: 9). Thus this normative identity, as presented in the law and prophets of the Hebrew Bible, calls the Jewish people to exercise special responsibilities towards displaced persons. Judaism, like other religious communities, may not always live up to these normative standards, for example in some members' stance toward displaced Palestinians. Nonetheless, the foundational texts show why Judaism ought to support a vigorous humanitarian response to the needs of forced migrants (Wechsler 2003).

In a biblical perspective, God's covenant with the Jewish people is also seen as the basis of a special relation to the land of Israel. Importantly, this perceived special relation to the land of Zion is an underlying source of unresolved conflict today between Israel and the Palestinians. In much Jewish self-understanding, however, the place of the land of Israel in God's covenant does not justify the denial of the fundamental rights of non-Jews, including Palestinians. Indeed, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, Jonathan Sacks, has argued that Jewish particularism should give Jews a special sensitivity to the duty to protect the distinctive identities of peoples different from themselves (2003: 45–66). Further, the narrative of the particularistic covenant with Israel is accompanied by the book of Genesis's story of the universal creation of every human being in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 27). This universalist orientation is reinforced by the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9: 1–17), which sees God's care extending to all persons and to the entire earth, giving the Jewish people strict duties to respect the common humanity of all people.

Judaism, therefore, is a blend of particularist values that require special support for members of the Jewish community, and universalist values that call for respect for all people. These values, in different ways, point toward strong obligations toward forced migrants, both Jews and non-Jews. They energize vigorous efforts by members of the Jewish community to work on behalf of refugees, and can challenge some of the practices of the Israeli state and its citizens today.
Christianity

The New Testament portrays Jesus as a second Moses who is the leader of a new Israel. Therefore most of the perspectives that shape Jewish response to forced migrants are also normative within Christianity. There are also several distinctive themes that are important for the Christian stance.

The Gospel of Matthew explicates how just after his birth in Bethlehem, Jesus' 'flight into Egypt' with Mary and Joseph was due to King Herod's effort to destroy the infant Jesus as a threat to his regime. This can be seen as a form of persecution, and since it involved flight across a border, anachronistically we could say that Jesus met the contemporary international Convention's definition of a refugee. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, when Christians adhere to central tenets of their religion they should have special sensitivity to the needs of forced migrants. Also, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus teaches that on the Day of judgement one of the criteria that will determine an individual's salvation or damnation will be whether one has welcomed the stranger. As Jesus puts it in Matthew's account, 'just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me' (Matt. 25:40). In following this teaching, Christians will see aiding the 'stranger' as offering assistance to Jesus himself. Thus response to the forced migrant is closely linked with the way Christians understand their relation with Jesus and with God.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is used to illustrate the meaning of love of neighbour. When a man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho falls among thieves and is left half-dead by the roadside, it is neither the priest nor the Levite who comes to his aid, but rather a Samaritan—someone whom the Jews of Jesus' time regarded as a religious outsider. However, it is just this outsider that Jesus holds up as an example of the love of neighbour that is one of the two great commandments. When the parable ends with the words 'go and do likewise,' it challenges Christians to see in-group/out-group boundaries of religion, ethnicity, or nationality as irrelevant to their response to humanitarian crises and forced migrants (Christiansen 1996; Dulles 2003).

Jesus' radically inclusive understanding of neighbour-love reflects the Book of Genesis's affirmation that all persons have been created in the image of God and are brothers and sisters in a single human family no matter what their nationality or ethnicity. As St Paul declared, 'From one single stock [God]... created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth' (Acts 17:26). This challenges any understanding of the moral significance of borders that leads to denying refugees the kind of respect and care that are required by the commandment to love them as oneself. Sub specie aeternitatis there are no foreigners; all humans are equally brothers and sisters to one another. Extending care only to those who are 'like us' is thus religiously unacceptable in a Christian normative perspective. This does not mean, of course, that Christian communities and Christian-influenced societies always live up to these standards. There have been clear examples of Christian violation of such standards in the past, such as the Crusades and missionaries' support for colonialism, and they continue to occur today, for example in the former Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, the normative Christian approach helps explain the Christian inspiration and affiliation of many NGOs working with forced migrants today.
Islam

Within Islam, the Prophet Muhammad's *hijra* or migration from Mecca to Medina (622 CE) is considered the founding event of the Muslim religious community. The Prophet was fleeing persecution by the Quraysh, the dominant clan in Mecca. Once again anachronistically, we could say that the Prophet Muhammad met the contemporary definition of a refugee. The Prophet fled so he could preserve the integrity of the message of monotheism he had begun setting forth in the early suras (chapters) of the Qur'an. The Quraysh's continuing adherence to their culture's many gods led to a conflict with the Prophet Muhammad's central message of the oneness of God. The conflict was also rooted in the Quraysh's desire to retain their economic power and their control over the *ka'bah* as a central pilgrimage site of pre-Islamic traditions. Thus the Prophet Muhammad's migration was motivated both by the commitment to belief in the oneness of God in the face of religious persecution, and by threats he and his followers faced from those holding political and commercial power (Casewit 1998). The origins of Islam, therefore, are closely intertwined with an event of forced migration.

In continuity with this founding experience, the tenets of Islam include a core commitment to offer assistance and protection to 'needy travellers.' Being a traveller has been part of the Muslim experience from its beginning; one of the five pillars of Islam is that each Muslim's duty, if possible, to make the *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Both the founding *hijra* and the requirement of *hajj* call Muslims to appreciate the needs of people on the move, including refugees and other forced migrants. Thus the Qur'an sees emigrants (*muhajirin*) such as Abraham, the Jewish, and, above all, the Prophet Muhammad and his companions in the *hijra* as falling under the special care of Allah (Qur'an 9: 100). Those who welcomed the Prophet Muhammad and his fellow migrants to Medina are known as the *ansar* (the helpers) and they are held to be especially blessed. The Qur'an notes that forced migrants, in their flight from oppression, continue to face special vulnerabilities, and that Muslims have special responsibilities toward them (Qur'an 28: 4). These responsibilities include the duty to provide asylum, including for non-Muslims. Surah 9: 6 notes: 'If anyone of the disbelievers seeks your protection, then grant him protection so he may hear the word of Allah and then escort him to where he will be secure' (Qur'an 9: 6). These and other Islamic teachings have led the Organization of the Islamic Conference, working with UNHCR, to conclude that 'Respect for migrants and those seeking refuge has been a permanent feature of the Islamic faith' (UNHCR and OIC 2005; Guterres 2012).

A full picture of the Islamic tradition's response to forced migration also requires noting some less admirable components. The Prophet's flight from Mecca to Medina is seen as a form of struggle (*jihad*) against the adversaries of his monotheistic faith in the oneness of Allah. *Jihad*, of course, does not necessarily mean armed struggle; *jihad* on behalf of Islam can be undertaken through persuasive words and the witness of an exemplary life. Nonetheless, there are strands of Islamic tradition that have led some extremist groups to endorse armed *jihad* as appropriate in the struggle against Western colonialism and continuing Western influence in the Muslim world. This stance, however, is in only partial continuity with the broad Islamic tradition (Masud 1990). In the
larger tradition, struggle through word and example remains central, including through
care for refugees and 'needy travellers.' This has led to Muslim efforts to respond to the
displaced throughout the history of Islam and to the foundation of Muslim agencies that
respond to forced migrants with notable effectiveness today, such as Islamic Relief.

Hinduism and Buddhism

A relative paucity of literature published in European languages exists regarding the
normative stances of Asian religious traditions towards forced migrants. Nonetheless,
this section reflects on some of the core concepts underpinning responses to forced
migrants in the religions of Asia, specifically in Hinduism and Buddhism.

The Hindu concept of dharma ('duty' or 'justice') requires that 'One should never
do that to another which one regards as injurious to oneself' (Mahabharata XX: 113, 8,
cited in Sharma 2003: 5). Dharma, however, also refers to duties based on caste and to
citizens of one's own group (Mehta 2011). Dharma, therefore, can prompt and require
positive responses to the needs of forced migrants, such as India's welcome of millions
from Pakistan at the time of the India/Pakistan partition and of many from Tibet more
recently. It can also threaten to lead to conflict with India's non-Hindu neighbours and
thus threaten to cause displacement. Thus like the monotheistic religions, Hinduism has
ambivalent impact on forced migration.

Buddhism is often regarded as a spirituality of meditation and withdrawal from
engagement with the struggles of social and political life. While Buddhists have often
followed this path, there are significant resources within the Buddhist tradition that
are increasingly being tapped to energize engaged efforts to alleviate the suffering of
the victims of humanitarian crises (Queen and King 1996). The first of the 'four noble
truths' taught by the Buddha after his enlightenment was the pervasiveness of suffer-
ing. Followers of the Buddha who are on the path to enlightenment should respond to
this suffering with compassion, even delaying their own enlightenment in order to help
others become free of suffering. Those on such a path of active compassion are called
bodhisattvas.

What the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1987) has called 'engaged
Buddhism' has led to several new forms of Buddhist engagement with forced migrants
and the causes that have driven them from home. Among such engaged Buddhists
are Maha Ghosananda, the Buddhist patriarch of Cambodia. Ghosananda began his
leadership of a series of 'pilgrimages for truth' in the refugee camps on the Thai border
to which many Cambodians had fled from the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. Other
Buddhists, such as Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand and the Dalai Lama of Tibet have also
led non-violent campaigns that seek to address some of the deep causes of forced migra-
tion (Queen and King 1996; Appleby 2000: 121–43). The Taiwanese Buddhist nun Cheng
Yen founded Tzu Chi, a Buddhist NGO with several million members in many coun-
tries engaged in international relief work, including work with the displaced. Cheng Yen
teaches this work is a way of following and applying the teachings of Buddha in our daily lives and transforming ourselves into living Bodhisattvas (Tzu Chi n.d.).

Buddhism, of course, like the other religions explored here, does not have an entirely positive record in relation to forced migration. It has been intertwined with the violent Sinhalese nationalism that contributed to the Sri Lankan civil war that displaced hundreds of thousands (Norwegian Refugee Council 2012). Nonetheless, also within Sri Lanka the Buddhist movement Sarvodaya Shramadana has sought a non-violent resolution of the conflict (King 2009: 83–90). Thus the key factor affecting the impact of Buddhism on forced migration in Sri Lanka as elsewhere is how its adherents understand and enact the normative principles of their tradition.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES

The contributions made by faith-based agencies responding to situations of displacement also raise challenges that need to be addressed with care.

Meaning in the Face of Suffering

Humanitarian emergencies fracture the taken-for-granted worlds of the displaced, shattering and reshaping the relationships that give meaning to the routines of ordinary life. Such crises also affect those seeking to help, who have to face the suffering of those they assist in a way that can lead to secondary trauma and burn-out. Thus humanitarian crises and forced migration often raise questions about ultimate meaning that are, in essence, religious. Is continuing to struggle pointless in the face of loss, or can one trust, however tentatively, that there is a deeper source of hope? Such trust is a form of faith that can enable the victims of crisis to carry on and to struggle actively for a better future.

Following a review of existing empirical literature, Walker et al. (2012) conclude that religion and spirituality help people cope with trauma in four ways: providing meaning in the face of grave loss, helping reduce anxiety, connecting victims to social support, and, in a more explicitly religious way, enabling them to attain communion with the sacred. Although the data on the ways in which these religious forms of support function in the midst of humanitarian crises are chiefly anecdotal, Walker and his co-authors believe that ‘there is a strong case to be made for the critical role supporting faith can have in improving survival and recovery from the trauma of major humanitarian crisis’ (2012: 132; also see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Ager 2013). Indeed, Goździałk notes how Islam helped Kosovar Albanians cope with the trauma of their displacement (2002), and Parsitau’s ethnographic research with internally displaced populations in Kenya (2011) concludes that the displaced have actively drawn on their own faith in grappling with the challenges of forced migration.
Further, Barnett and Stein note that secular humanitarianism itself possesses an orientation to meaning that transcends what is feasible politically, giving humanitarian work itself a kind of faith dimension (2012b). In their view, this blurs the lines between religious and secular humanitarianism, pointing to the fact that forced migrants' struggles call for a kind of meaning and hope that is either religious or analogous to that provided by religion as more traditionally understood. At the same time, faith-based organizations are convinced of the importance of their distinctive traditions for their effectiveness and such claims should not be overlooked.

Inclusiveness, Accountability, and Accompaniment

Faith-based organizations vary considerably in the way their faith influences the style of their work. Some evangelical Christian agencies stress their explicitly religious mission, such as Samaritan's Purse, which states that it responds to the needs of victims of war and natural disasters in the name Jesus Christ: 'Our ministry is all about Jesus—first, last, and always' (Samaritan's Purse n.d.). In contrast, Catholic Relief Services is motivated by the gospel but also by seeing the gospel as supporting values such as human dignity and justice. CRS, like many other faith-based organizations, explicitly states that it works inclusively 'to assist people on the basis of need, not creed, race or nationality' (n.d., online). In a similar way, Islamic Relief 'provides support regardless of religion, ethnicity or gender and without expecting anything in return' (n.d., online). Such faith-based organizations thus share many of the commitments of secular humanitarian organizations, including their criticism of proselytization by evangelical groups in disaster situations (Ferris 2005).

Interestingly that their approaches overlap with those based on humanistic, reason-based values, faith-based organizations like CRS and Islamic Relief indicate that they are ready to be held accountable to the professional standards of effectiveness increasingly operative in the humanitarian world. Accountability to these standards is a precondition today for obtaining necessary financial support, including support from governments. One can ask, however, whether such standards may threaten the religious identity of faith-based organizations and perhaps even the secular humanitarian goal of providing care without calculating the cost (Stein 2008; Barnett 2012). For example, the Jesuit Refugee Service identifies 'accompaniment' of the displaced as one of its three objectives, along with service to and advocacy on behalf of the displaced. It describes accompaniment as a 'direct and personal approach of individual interaction and cooperation with refugees which mutually empowers refugees and JRS personnel alike' (n.d., online). Whether such a personalized approach can continue when organizations must administer the complex bureaucratic systems needed to assure they can be held accountable to donors is a serious question for the entire humanitarian enterprise, religious and secular alike. Religious NGOs may in effect be better situated to combine personalized care with the requirements of accountability because of their frequently well-organized efforts to retain their identity by training their staff in the practical implications of that identity (Paras and Stein 2011–12).
Tensions between Advocacy and Service

Similar questions about identity emerge when humanitarian organizations become involved in advocacy that addresses the political and social causes of the crises affecting those they serve. Even in natural disasters, destructive effects are often due to governmental failure to take preventive steps to reduce the risk. Thus advocacy can call into question an agency's commitment to the political neutrality often seen as a defining characteristic of humanitarianism. Addressing root causes and advocating long-term solutions can run the risk of entangling the humanitarian organization in politics. The commitment to justice that some faith-based groups see as an essential aspect of their identity has been moving an increasing number of them in this direction.

For example, Catholic Relief Services failed to take steps to help prevent the 1994 Rwanda genocide despite its presence in Rwanda for many years. This experience led CRS to examine its operating philosophy and to adopt a 'justice lens' that tries to identify and respond to deeper causes of crisis (1998). CRS now seeks to contribute to the prevention of crises through systemic, long-term action for both justice and peace. However, acting on this commitment could lead to CRS being denied access, for political reasons, to people who are suffering, and thus being unable to serve their urgent needs. Action that might be perceived as political could also risk having negative impact on the funding that makes CRS's work possible, especially the funding it receives from the US government.

It can be argued that avoiding these risks will be more likely if the faith-based organization retains a strong rootedness in the values that shape its identity. Clarity about an organization's identity will help it stay alert to when its values call for a categorical stand and when compromise is appropriate. Catholic and ecumenical Protestant organizations have dealt with how to link their explicit work for social justice with their Christian identity throughout much of the twentieth century. It is possible, therefore, that Christian agencies could share what they have learned from experience to help clarify ways of negotiating the relationship between neutrality and advocacy both with other faith-based bodies and with secular humanitarian organizations who serve forced migrants (Ferris 2011).

Conclusion

The role of religion in addressing the causes and experiences of forced migration and the responses to it, both by the displaced themselves and by organizations seeking to help them, is clearly a complex matter. While faith-based agencies continue to play important public roles in the humanitarian sector, religious contributions to the needs of the displaced vary both across and within religious traditions. These contributions have notable strengths and yet raise continuing challenges: faith often helps displaced
themselves to carry on in the face of their losses and may energize the response of the agencies that come to their assistance, and yet it can sometimes itself be a factor in causing displacement. This chapter shows that while much is known about these matters, further investigation and research is needed, for this area has received less academic and practitioner reflection that its importance warrants. Additional reflection could surely help both faith-based and secular agencies alike respond more effectively to the needs of displaced people, a goal shared by all in the humanitarian community.

REFERENCES


