Introduction: Faith-Based Humanitarianism in Contexts of Forced Displacement

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Despite an overall paucity of literature, the relationship between religious identity, belief and practice on the one hand, and processes of forced migration on the other, has received increasing attention in the 2000s. Over the past decade, a number of journals have convened Special Issues which focus on particular dimensions of this relationship. The introductions and contributions to such volumes note the extent to which religion may play a significant role as a potential cause of forced migration (i.e. examining asylum claims based on the grounds of religious persecution, see Mayer’s 2007 Special Issue of Refugee Survey Quarterly (RSQ)), and within forced migrants’ experiences of internal and international displacement, asylum-seeking, protracted refugeedom, and the quest for effective durable solutions. With reference to the focus on faith and experiences, Gozdziak and Shandy’s 2002 Special Issue of the Journal of Refugee Studies, entitled ‘Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration,’ is a particularly noteworthy collection, whose articles engage with diverse ways of negotiating and coping with displacement which variously draw on, and/or result in changes in, personal, familial and collective religious beliefs and practices. While the above-mentioned collections draw together case-studies from a diversity of religious traditions, other Special Issues have more concretely explored the history of asylum and contemporary experiences of seeking refuge and protection in relation to specific monotheistic religions, such as TüRK’s 2008 Special Issue of RSQ on ‘Asylum and Islam’.

The multiplicity of causal and experience-based linkages between forced migration and religion, faith and spirituality have therefore been explored through a variety of lenses to date, and yet the extent to which religious identity, belief and practice may provide the underpinnings for humanitarian responses to forced migration, has largely remained under-studied. Whilst mentioned in passing in both Gozdziak and Shandy’s (2002) and Mayer’s (2007) introductions, it is notable that no contributions in either of these Special Issues focus on faith-based humanitarian responses to displacement, with only one reference to religious humanitarian organizations—Nawyn
2005—included in the ‘Select Bibliography’ of the 2007 RSQ Special Issue. A year later, the collection on ‘Asylum and Islam’ featured a brief reflection on Islamic Relief’s faith-based motivations and modes of engagement with refugees and internally displaced people (Kirmani and Khan 2008). The present Special Issue both complements these earlier studies, and specifically aims to expand our understandings of the history, motivations, nature and implications of a diversity of faith-based humanitarian responses to forced migration around the world.

Eight of the ten contributions included in this Special Issue were initially presented at an international workshop entitled ‘Faith-Based Humanitarianism: The Response of Faith Communities and Faith-based Organizations in Contexts of Forced Migration,’ which was held at the Refugee Studies Centre (University of Oxford) in September 2010. Although the two remaining authors were unable to attend the workshop, one was involved in the development of its thematic focus (see Snyder’s background paper 2009), while the second (Orji) made an earlier draft of his paper available to the contributors. Indeed, in addition to receiving detailed comments from the Guest Editor, most papers were informally shared with one or more of the other authors before being submitted to blind peer review. This process was introduced in order to facilitate the identification of commonalities across a number of papers and case-studies, and to encourage the continuation of the dialogue which emerged throughout the workshop.

Faith Communities and Faith-Based Organizations

As demonstrated in the contributions to this Special Issue, a variety of definitions and typologies exist vis-à-vis the two key terms included in the second part of the workshop’s title: ‘faith communities’ and ‘faith-based organizations’. The term ‘faith communities’ broadly refers to ‘formally-recognized groups or bodies which profess a belief in a superhuman reality and/or god(s) and which worship this reality and/or god(s)’ (Snyder 2009: 5); the term ‘community of believers’ may also be appropriate in this regard. In contrast, a ‘faith-based organization’ (FBO) can be defined as ‘any organization that derives inspiration from and guidance for its activities from the teachings and principles of faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within a faith’ (Clarke and Jennings 2008: 6).

In the context of this Special Issue, FBOs are understood to derive their ‘organizational identity and mission from a particular religion or spiritual tradition’ (Palmer 2011: 97), but are distinct from the faith community whose ethos guides their work, in so far as their programmes and projects are guided to fulfil a particular function, such as responding to humanitarian needs arising from forced migration. Importantly, just as ‘secular’ humanitarian organizations are highly heterogeneous in nature, so too are FBOs involved in humanitarian responses to forced migration. Hence, FBOs
range from small-scale local-level religious congregations, to national inter-denominational coalitions and networks, to international humanitarian agencies associated with a particular religion; equally, they have highly diverse histories, underlying motivations, fund-raising mechanisms, and modes of operation. This heterogeneity is both reflected in, and critically examined through the following articles.

**Historical and Theoretical Contributions**

The Issue opens with a detailed overview of the development of historical and contemporary conceptualizations and practices of granting sanctuary and asylum. Philip Marfleet explores changes and continuities in the religion-sanctuary nexus, ranging from the sanctity of Pharaonic temples and the ancient Greek state institution of *asylon*, to twenty-first century initiatives such as Cities of Sanctuary. Focusing in particular on Judaeo-Christian traditions, he considers the historical shift from the protection available to individuals and groups within sacred spaces such as churches and other places of worship, to the state’s appropriation of the right to protect exiles (who were often fleeing religious persecution), ultimately noting the faith-based foundations of contemporary sanctuary movements led by civil society organizations and networks in countries such as the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). Marfleet’s contribution resonates with a number of articles within the Special Issue, including Parsitau’s discussion of contemporary cases which have directly challenged assumptions about the inviolability of sacred spaces, and Wilson’s analysis of ‘faith-based hospitality’ towards asylum seekers and refugees in Australia.

In light of the historical influence of religious traditions in the development of humanitarian policy and practice, Alastair Ager and Joey Ager explore how, why and to what effect practitioners and scholars from the global North have effectively ‘secularized’ humanitarianism, ostensibly to uphold the institutionalized humanitarian norms of ‘neutrality’ and ‘impartiality.’ Drawing on a range of examples from across Sub-Saharan Africa, Ager and Ager examine the ways in which secular humanitarianism effectively negates the significance which religious belief, practice and experience may hold for displaced people themselves. In turn, they argue that, far from being value-neutral, ‘functional secularism’ ‘serves to privilege certain liberal materialist assumptions implicit within the discourse of western elites, representing a form of neo-colonialism’ (p. 457). Overall, their contribution engages with broader debates within social theory which not only question long-standing assumptions that modernization and modernity would invariably be characterized by the entrenchment of rationality and secularization, but which in effect hold that we are living in a ‘post-secular’ age in which religious belief and practice are becoming increasingly, if differently, important for individuals and communities around the world.
Following the historical and theoretical reflections offered by Marfleet and Ager and Ager, the remaining contributions are divided into two groups. The articles by Orji, Parsitau, Horstmann and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh present case-studies from Nigeria, Kenya, the Thai–Burma border, and Algeria to examine the multiple roles played by organizations and individuals motivated by faith throughout different phases and scenarios of displacement across the global South. The second group of articles by Wilson, Snyder and Eby et al. in turn focus on the support provided by FBOs throughout processes of asylum-seeking, resettlement and local integration in Australia, the UK and the US. All of these contributions draw on primary research with displaced populations and/or FBOs, and provide invaluable insights into key questions including: 1) what, if anything, distinguishes the motivations, actions and impacts of faith-based and secular organizations? and 2) how do displaced people relate to local, national and international faith-based aid providers, given the power inequalities which characterize such encounters?

Faith-Based Humanitarian Responses to Internal and International Displacement in the Global South

Through case-studies of Nigeria and Kenya, Nkwachukwu Orji and Damaris Parsitau (respectively) examine the ways in which diverse local and national-level FBOs provide humanitarian assistance to internally displaced populations (IDPs). With reference to conflict-induced displacement in Jos (Plateau State, Nigeria), Orji draws on primary research conducted with members of five Nigerian Christian and Muslim organizations to examine the structure of their relief operations, their sources of funding, how they select aid recipients, and the nature of the services they offer to IDPs. Representing a variety of denominations, these organizations range from national level ecumenical and inter-faith coalitions to initiatives funded and managed directly by local congregations. Given the extent to which IDPs in Jos have been affected by a conflict which itself had clear religious dimensions, Orji explores the advantages and challenges which arise when many of these organizations adopt a faith-centred approach to the selection of aid beneficiaries, a mechanism which directly contravenes the universalist approach upheld by the international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality.

Complementing Orji’s study, Damaris Parsitau draws on ethnographic research with four Christian churches in Nakuru and Nairobi (Kenya), and with female IDPs based in Mai Mahiu IDP camp, to examine three main dimensions of faith-based responses to the mass internal displacement caused by Kenya’s 2007/2008 post-election violence. Firstly, she documents the practical, emotional and spiritual support provided by the congregations and leadership of these four churches. Despite being readily identifiable as aid providers, however, these churches were neither immune from conflict-induced displacement nor from the violence itself, drawing attention
to the second dimension: not only were church ministers and pastors displaced by violence alongside their congregants, but religious spaces and buildings themselves were directly threatened and attacked whilst providing refuge to IDPs. Recognizing both the supportive roles and potential vulnerability of FBOs in contexts of conflict-induced displacement, the third dimension explored by Parsitau is that of faith as a mode of personal and collective support amongst IDPs, as evidenced by the faith-based systems developed in Mai Mahiu camp by and for female IDP survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Displaced people’s agency to negotiate and mobilize faith in order to enhance their own and other displaced people’s human welfare and to develop systems of spiritual, material and political self-sufficiency is also centralized in Alexander Horstmann’s examination of Christian Karen refugees’ engagement with evangelical networks on the Thai–Burmese border. Drawing on social network theory, Horstmann presents a number of ethnographic vignettes to explore the multiple ways in which religious organizations engage with displaced peoples’ nationalist projects, in effect privileging certain ethno-religious groups over others (in this case, Christian Baptist Karens over Buddhist, Muslim or Animist refugees). On the one hand, he argues that Christian Karen gain access to extensive social, spiritual and educational services through these missionary networks. On the other hand, Horstmann argues that ‘(f)ar from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, refugees make a career in the Christian church and emphasize their aspirations by actively participating in evangelical efforts’ (p. 530) which are intimately related to Karen Baptist networks both within Thailand and Burma, and further afield.

While Horstmann’s case-study examines the ways in which Christian Karen refugees actively engage with evangelical organizations of the same faith, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh explores how and why (Sunni Muslim) Sahrawi refugees’ political representatives (Polisario Front) have actively encouraged the continued presence and activism of American evangelical-humanitarians in the Sahrawi refugee camps and beyond. In the context of international and localized concerns pertaining to ‘Islamism’ and ‘terrorism’, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that evangelical-humanitarians are welcomed to the Algerian-based Sahrawi refugee camps in order to ‘demonstrate the “ideal” nature of the camps as spaces of “religious tolerance” and “inter-faith dialogue”’ (p. 533). While Polisario gain access to evangelical organizations’ humanitarian supplies and powerful international advocacy networks, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh subsequently examines the extent to which this strategy may create an irreconcilable rupture both with non-evangelical Western donors, and also between Polisario and Sahrawi refugees themselves. This contribution thereby substantiates Horstmann’s analysis of the ways in which evangelical organizations may become involved in supporting refugees’ nationalist projects, and yet concludes by analysing the (explicit and latent) tensions which may equally exist between faith-based and secular humanitarian organizations,
refugees’ political representatives and different cohorts within the displaced population itself.

Overall, the articles by Orji, Parsitau, Horstmann and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh explore a diverse set of linkages between Southern-led faith-based humanitarian initiatives and Southern beneficiaries (i.e. Nigerian/Kenyan FBOs supporting Nigerian/Kenyan IDPs) in addition to highlighting a diversity of opportunities and challenges arising in relation to Northern FBOs’ responses to forced displacement in the global South (i.e. on the Thai/Burmese border, and in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria). Together, these contributions enhance our understandings of faith-based humanitarian activities undertaken in diverse phases and contexts of internal and international displacement, ranging from responses designed to address the immediate needs of individuals and communities as they experience the first stages of conflict-induced displacement, to the provision of humanitarian services and political support to protracted IDPs and refugees in cities, villages and IDP/refugee camps. Whilst focusing primarily on Christian and Muslim aid providers and recipients, these articles lay the foundations for further in-depth, and potentially comparative, research with and about forced migrants and aid providers of a wider variety of faiths.

Faith-based Humanitarianism in Northern Countries of First Asylum and Resettlement

Complementing these analyses, the second group of articles highlights the multiple roles of different types of FBOs in resettlement contexts and countries of first asylum in the global North. As such, the contributions by Wilson, Snyder and Eby et al. not only examine the motivations, nature and implications of Christian-led programmes in Australia, the UK and the US respectively, but also consider the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees may, or may not, welcome faith-based versus ‘secular’ humanitarianism.

Through a case-study of Christian individuals’ and organizations’ responses to asylum seekers and refugees in Australia, Erin Wilson examines the nature of ‘faith-based hospitality,’ whose roots she traces to the three monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). In line with Marfleet’s earlier overview, Wilson argues that ‘(h)ospitality has a long association with asylum and sanctuary practices in various religious and secular traditions’ (p. 555), subsequently exploring the ways in which Australian FBOs raise funds, develop programmes, and attempt to influence the development of more humane and hospitality-based state policies and practices.

Drawing on research with members of eight FBOs, Wilson explores the ways in which Christian organizations negotiate their interactions with asylum seekers and refugees of different faiths, recognizing both the advantages of ‘having] an openness to and experience with spirituality and faith that enable them to relate to asylum seekers of [any] faith’ (p. 555), and, simultaneously,
the dangers of being perceived to be proselytizing in a context characterized by significant power inequalities.

Attempts to influence state policy and practice, whilst recognizing the dangers of co-optation by the state, are explored by Wilson in relation to Australia, and by Susanna Snyder vis-à-vis diverse Christian-led activities in the UK. Drawing on research with a range of Christian congregations, local religious projects and ecumenical groups, Snyder examines the ways in which FBOs engage with the British state and civil society to promote systemic change (which she classifies as ‘unsettling’ activities), in addition to examining the nature of social and religious practices which are designed to ‘settle’ asylum seekers and refugees. Paralleling the studies by Parsitau, Horstmann and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, which centralize the agency of displaced people in diverse phases and scenarios of displacement in the global South, Snyder also recognizes the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees in the UK may themselves emerge as religious actors challenging British churches to be more active, or even engaging in attempts to convert members of the established population. Framing her analysis around three ‘central features of religious bodies…transcendent motivation, organizational nature and strategies, and resource mobilization’ (p. 574), Snyder outlines the potential advantages and challenges faced by Christian organizations aiming to ‘settle’ and ‘unsettle’ different actors in the UK; she concludes by arguing in favour of the development of further comparative research to identify and explore the work of non-Christian faith-based humanitarian groups.

With both Wilson and Snyder primarily addressing the role of FBOs in Northern countries of first asylum, Jessica Eby, Erika Iverson, Jenifer Smyers and Erol Kekic explore the long-standing contributions made by FBOs in the development and implementation of the US resettlement programme. Drawing on structured interviews and surveys, Eby et al. present a detailed case-study of Church World Service to explore ‘the historic significance of faith communities’ and FBOs, ‘their unique contribution to refugees’ local integration’, and the ways in which they ‘respond to meet the needs of refugees in a changing social and economic context’ (p. 586). In line with the contributions by Orji, Parsitau, Wilson and Snyder, the analysis presented by Eby et al. notes the significant role played not only by faith-based organizations, but also by communities of faith, who provide invaluable resources and support to both secular and faith-based projects. Exploring the multifaceted relationship between Christian aid organizations and resettled refugees of non-Christian backgrounds (including Somali, Iraqi and Bhutanese refugees), Eby et al. argue that faith-based models enhance prospects for local integration, including through the promotion of cross-cultural and inter-faith understanding between host and resettled refugee populations.

The three case-studies presented by Wilson, Snyder and Eby et al therefore demonstrate the variety of faith-based humanitarian models in place across the global North, ranging from public–private resettlement partnerships which receive significant funding from the US government, to small-scale
congregations and local-level organizations providing spiritual and material support to forced migrants as they apply for asylum, await decisions on their cases, or attempt to integrate locally in Australia and the UK. These papers also illustrate the ways in which Northern FBOs not only provide humanitarian services, but also engage in advocacy and awareness-raising in order to encourage the development of more humane and ‘hospitable’ state and civil society responses to forced migrants. The (overt or implied) political nature of their interventions in favour of forced migrants, attempting to prompt a change in societal and state attitudes and policies towards asylum seekers and refugees, is to be contrasted with many FBOs’ acute awareness of the dangers of being perceived to be attempting to convert their beneficiaries (a challenge which many FBOs face when implementing humanitarian projects across the global South, whether in IDP and refugee camps or in contexts of urban and rural displacement).

Concluding Remarks

Drawing the Special Issue to a close, Elizabeth Ferris highlights the scale of faith-based financial contributions to humanitarian aid projects and programmes around the world, before exploring three key issues which emerge in the preceding case-studies. Firstly, Ferris contemplates what, if anything, makes faith-based humanitarian organizations different from secular organizations, noting that the internal heterogeneity of FBOs on the one hand and secular humanitarian organizations on the other, renders it difficult (and unproductive) to develop generalizations vis-à-vis either. A further challenge emerges when it is recognized that secular organizations often employ staff who are personally motivated to engage in humanitarian work by their religious beliefs (also stressed by Ager and Ager), while a given FBO may employ both secular staff and, indeed, individuals of a variety of faiths. Nonetheless, Ferris concludes that the differences between FBOs and secular organizations ‘appear to centre on the extent to which religious activities such as worship, prayer, and evangelical activities are integrated into these organizations’ humanitarian work’ (p. 616); this in turn raises significant questions vis-à-vis the dangers of proselytism and the potential disjunction between FBOs’ motivations and modes of operation, and international humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. Secondly, Ferris assesses how, why and to what effect FBOs have responded to the trend towards the increasing professionalization of humanitarian work; and, thirdly, she explores the potential for secular and faith-based organizations to work in partnership, noting the extent to which ‘it is arguably easier for Oxfam, Christian Aid and Islamic Relief to work together than it is for most large international NGOs to work with their local counterparts’ (p. 620). Ferris concludes by outlining a range of areas for further research, which echo and at times expand upon the suggestions offered in the preceding contributions.
Areas for Further Research

Given the primary focus on Christian and/or Muslim faith-based humanitarian aid providers and recipients throughout this Special Issue, Ferris and other contributors, including Marfleet, Wilson and Snyder, note the urgency of further research being conducted into the history, nature and impacts of humanitarian initiatives by organizations and communities associated with a wider range of religious traditions. It is hoped that the contributions in this Issue will therefore lay the foundations for the development of a more extensive and potentially comparative analysis of the similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages of, for instance, Buddhist, Hindu and Jewish faith-based humanitarian responses to forced migration across the global South and global North.

The need for more in-depth analysis of diverse inter-faith humanitarian responses is also prioritized by many of the contributors, including Eby et al., Orji and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh. Future investigations may explore Orji’s suggestion that inter-faith projects have the potential to contribute to peace-building in contexts of conflict-induced displacement, or might consider Fiddian-Qasmiyeh’s argument that ‘inter-faith’ programmes may in fact be characterized by the effective silencing of debate through what she conceptualizes as systems of ‘repress-entation’ and the ‘tyranny of tolerance’ (p. 535). Developing research into inter-faith projects will provide a prime opportunity to examine interactions not only between Christian and Muslim organizations and communities (as explored in this Issue), but also with a wider range of religious traditions, as outlined above.

A third overarching area for further research is highlighted by Ager and Ager and Ferris alike, and relates to the need for a more critical engagement with the multiple ways in which humanitarian policy and practice have been shaped by both religious traditions and evolving conceptualizations of secularism throughout different historical periods, and in different geo-political contexts.

As suggested by Parsitau, Horstmann, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Snyder, a further set of questions which require more extensive investigation refers to the ways in which displaced people variously negotiate interactions with faith-based aid providers in contexts of widespread power inequalities. Such research may lead to a better understanding of the ways in which displaced populations develop their own faith-based ‘humanitarian’ support systems, in addition to exploring IDPs’ and refugees’ active attempts to proselytise amongst other displaced and hosting populations alike, or the ways in which they may actively welcome, resist or contest the presence of humanitarian organizations and individuals motivated by faith.

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1. It is notable that this interest in exploring the connections between religion and forced migration has coincided with the increased attention given to the role of religion in international development studies (see World Faiths’ Development Dialogue 2002; Clarke 2006; Clarke and Jennings 2008; Deneulin with Bano 2009) and relief/humanitarian initiatives more broadly (see Ferris 2005; Benedetti 2006; De Cordier 2009; Hopgood 2006, Thaut 2009).

2. Lunn’s brief definition of the terms ‘religion’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘faith’ is useful at this stage. She defines ‘religion as an institutionalized system of beliefs and practices concerning the supernatural realm; spirituality as the personal beliefs by which an individual relates to and experiences the supernatural realm; and faith as the human trust or belief in a transcendent reality (although the word faith is also applied in non-religious contexts)’ (2009: 937–938).

3. Clarke identifies five main ‘focuses’ or ‘functions’ guiding the activities of FBOs, leading to the following typology: faith-based representative organizations; faith-based charitable or development organizations (including faith-based humanitarian organizations); faith-based socio-political organizations; faith-based missionary organizations; and faith-based radical, illegal or terrorist organizations (Clarke 2006: 840).

4. The term ‘ecumenical’ refers to coalitions formed by different Christian denominations (i.e. groups of the same faith), while ‘inter-faith’ denotes cooperation with members and groups of different faiths (e.g. Jewish, Christian and Muslim coalitions).


