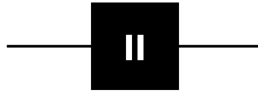

SPECIAL SECTION 2: RELIGION AND REFUGEES

Sacred Welcomes

How Religious Reasons, Structures, and Interactions Shape Refugee Advocacy and Settlement

Guest edited by Benjamin Boudou, Hans Leaman, Maximilian Miguel Scholz

Introduction

Benjamin Boudou, Hans Leaman, Maximilian Miguel Scholz

ABSTRACT: This special section explores the role of religious ideas and religious associations in shaping the response of states and non-state actors to asylum-seekers and refugees. It brings together insights from anthropology, law, history, and political theory to enrich our understanding of how religious values and resources are mobilized to respond to refugees and to circumvent usual narratives of secularization. Examining these questions within multicultural African, European, and North American contexts, the special section argues that religion provides moral reasons and structural support to welcome and resettle refugees, and constitutes a framework of analysis to better understand the social, legal, and political dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in contexts of migration.

KEYWORDS: faith-based organizations, Jewish law, refugee resettlement, religion, religious justifications, theologies of migration, Christianity

Through five interdisciplinary case studies from different contexts in Africa, Europe, and North America, and with a particular focus on Christianity and Judaism, this special section of *Migration and Society* explores how religious institutions and religious claims have shaped the ways societies have responded to refugees, especially at the local level. Noting that scholars, advocates, and policy makers alike have paid substantial attention to the ways religion can be related to discriminatory impulses influencing interactions with refugees and opposition to refugee aid (Adida et al. 2013; Helbling and Traunmüller 2016; Traynor 2015), the articles in this special section offer an important scholarly contribution by exploring two distinct but interrelated influences of religion on societal reactions to refugees today and in history: religion as a moral reason for welcoming refugees and religion as structural support for displaced people.

Religion plays a central role in current debates over refugees, both as a motivation to oppose nations' legal admission and financial support of asylum-seekers and other refugees, and as a justification to expand such protection and assistance. The former situation was visible in the

posture of the administration of US President Trump (both rhetorical and legal) toward refugees from Muslim-majority countries (Greenberg et al. 2019; Meakem 2020). The latter made headlines in Germany as the country's Protestant and Catholic episcopacies advocated for the welcome and protection of refugees traversing the Mediterranean Sea (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2019). Beyond policy advocacy, faith-based organizations continue to provide material and psychological support for refugees (Ferris 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto 2020), from urban settings like Kampala, Uganda (see Karen Lauterbach's article in this special section), to camps like those in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Moreover, as refugees make sense of their displacement, they often call upon the spiritual guidance of religious leaders, as is the case among Pentecostal refugees in South Africa (see Tinashe Chimbidizkai's article in this issue).

Stepping back from contemporary examples, it is possible to trace the United Nations' earliest refugee initiatives back to Jewish law. The term refugee itself emerged in 1572, when Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle, Archbishop of Mechelen and chief minister to the Habsburgs, used it to describe persecuted Catholics deserving of refuge because of their faith. Religious law, religious institutions, and personal spirituality have been intertwined with refugee protection and assistance for centuries (Janssen 2014; Leaman 2014; Scholz 2019).

The articles in this special section examine these questions within multicultural African, European, and North American contexts where Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish political and legal thought inform the politics and institutions that come to bear upon refugee law and policy.[1] Christian and Jewish religious rationales have influenced normative and practical responses to refugees for centuries, and these two religious traditions shaped the legal and moral frameworks of the prime drafters of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Today, nonreligious rationales both for and against accepting refugees are gaining precedence in Europe and North America. Against this background, scholarship on Christian and Jewish religious traditions' bearing on popular responses to refugees needs further amplification and reassessment to enrich our understanding of how religious values and resources are mobilized to respond to refugees. The articles that follow model several disciplinary approaches to address this task. The focus on Christian and Jewish contexts facilitates comparison among geographically distant cases in which the Biblical religious traditions have influenced the welcome of refugees.

Other religious traditions' precepts and practices of welcome toward strangers also demand scholarly attention. An understanding of Islamic precepts and practices of hospitality and charity is crucial for developing aid solutions that earn the trust of many refugees today. The majority of the world's 26 million refugees come from Muslim-majority countries, and the majority of them find refuge in Muslim-majority countries; five of the ten nations hosting the largest refugee populations within their borders maintain strong Muslim national identities (UNHCR 2019). Scholars have recently been expanding the English-language research literature on Islamic approaches to asylum and hospitality to strangers, tracing historic practices from *istijara* (territorial asylum) among the nomadic tribes and early Muslims in the Arabian peninsula to contemporary expressions of local and transnational religious solidarity through Islamic relief organizations (Agha 2008; Elmadmad 2008; Fábos and Isotalo 2014; Jureidini and Hassan 2019; Zaman 2016). Research into Bangladesh's response to Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, for instance, indicates that funding from wealthier governments with Muslim identities helps to build institutional and infrastructural capacities around the refugee camps that the Bangladeshi government could not provide. Moreover, the spontaneous charity of Bangladeshis living near the camps—even from those whose land has been rendered economically useless due to the camps—and the mediation work of local imams have given Rohingya refugees a sense of self-esteem and optimism about the possibility of forging social bonds in their places of refuge. This

charity has been conceived and received in religious terms (Mim 2020; Palmer 2011). In turn, it is our hope that the articles in this special section will contribute to a productive conversation about Christian, Jewish, and Muslim conceptions of migration and refuge in contemporary national and transnational contexts.

Religious justifications for refugee policies and religious organizational support for refugees—especially local support—overlap extensively with nonreligious efforts. The articles in this special section therefore challenge a longstanding historical paradigm that distinguishes between pre-Kantian "partisan" responses to refugees by Christians and post-Kantian "universalistic" or "cosmopolitan" responses (Zolberg et al. 1989). While many governments today frame their support for refugees in Kantian, secular terms—typically supplying rationales that appeal to human rights or national strategic and economic interests—governmental efforts to limit refugees' admission or length of stay still include overtones of religious partisanship. For example, several Eastern European countries refuse to fulfill their obligations under the European Union's Dublin Regulation in 2016 to non-Christian refugees (Kissová 2018). More subtle discriminatory moves, such as Denmark's 2018 law that young children in low-income neighborhoods—neighborhoods with high residency rates of Muslim refugees—attend preschools with mandatory instruction in "Danish values," reveal how largely secular societies can be quite partisan about their national identities (Barry and Sorensen 2018). At the same time, in such societies, religious advocates for refugees often draw on a longer history of their nations' pasts, when religion was a more prominent political force, and thereby more firmly anchor histories of migration, provision of refuge, and tolerance of religious diversity in the "national identity" that anti-migrant politicians claim to defend.

Religious Bonds and Refugee Resettlement

Transnational alliances and ideological affinities have helped motivate nations to admit asylum-seekers and resettle refugees. Recently, historians of international law and diplomacy have become attentive to the role that religious institutions and popular sentiments of international religious solidarity have played in nations' application of the various post-World War II human rights conventions (Duranti 2017; Inboden 2010; Moyn 2015; Turek 2020). Their findings, tracing Catholic and Protestant religious groups' ecumenical mobilization against the threat of "atheistic communism" during the Cold War, confirm the validity of migration scholar Charles Keely's prediction twenty years ago—that the end of the Cold War would matter for host nations' approach to refugee policy in the decades to come (Keely 2001). With the end of the Cold War, refugee admissions programs in Western Europe and North America lost one of the strategic rationales that led religious conservatives as well as cosmopolitan-minded liberals to appreciate them.

The 1951 Refugee Convention, like the 1946 Constitution of the International Refugee Organization (the precursor to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), offered legal protection on the basis of qualifications that were individualist—based on an individual's fear of persecution. However, as recent work by historians like Gilad Ben-Nun (2015a) and Claudena Skran (1995, 2011) has clarified, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had to operate according to a pre-World War II norm in which protection services were rendered on an ad hoc basis, typically identifying specific ethnic and religious groups to be aided by limited treaties and fundraising campaigns for humanitarian relief. Support for UNHCR refugee protection and resettlement plans needed to be raised from national contributions and public charity, not unlike the early refugee resettlement projects of the Reformation

and Westphalian eras. When early modern European religious minorities migrated, they sought to negotiate toleration from a foreign city council or prince, securing housing, workspace, and the right to worship according to their faith (Janssen 2020; Scholz 2019; Spohnholz 2020; Terpstra 2015). And just as those negotiations depended on hosting rulers' comfort with the refugees' religious identities, so the ad hoc programs for refugee resettlement in the post-World War II era were most successful when host nations' leaders perceived prospective refugees to be their ideological "soul-mates" for their systems of government and alignment in the Cold War (Leaman 2021).

With the end of the Cold War, theologians have been grappling with how to reconstruct a rationale for "welcoming the stranger" that maps paradigms of hospitality from their sacred texts appropriately onto the national polities of modern democracies (Boudou 2020). The Hebrew Scriptures, with their stories of the desert hospitality both received and provided by Abraham, that "wandering Aramean," and his descendants, have provided a rich basis for Christians, Jews, and Muslims to interpret the obligations of individuals to "the other" (Allard 2013; Groody and Campese 2008; Padilla and Phan 2013). The ancient Israelites' Levitical instructions to treat the foreign-born as their equals and avoid exploitation of migrant laborers—remembering that they had been brought out of slavery—set out the paradigmatic challenge for nations to balance values of cosmopolitan fairness against values of cohesive group identity. The article by Gilad Ben-Nun in this special section demonstrates contemporary Jewish applications of this theological tradition.

Meanwhile, for the past two centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has been attuned to its members' families being divided long-term by national borders and denizen restrictions in the course of labor migration—for example, Irish, Italian, and Polish diasporas in North America and Britain in the nineteenth century and Filipino diasporas around the world in the twenty-first century (Groody 2009; Kerwin and Gerschutz 2009; Polak 2017). Aurélia Bardon's article in this issue analyzes the pope's appeals not just to national leaders but also to his own church members as empowered voters in democracies.

Protestant Christians have also been reassessing their ecclesiastical histories and ecclesiological traditions to develop theologies making sense of forced migration and the search for refuge (Carroll R. and Sanchez 2015; Horstmann and Jung 2015; Saunders et al. 2016). Even white evangelicals in the United States, the demographic most likely to align with Republican Party policies (Schwadel and Smith 2019), have no shortage of theological reflections available to them from para-church organizations encouraging them to identify with the plight of refugees from the Middle East and Central America and to think critically about whether Christian values of family and fairness are reflected in their nation's immigration laws (Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt 2019).[2] This has given rise to new alliances and forms of advocacy. For instance, the "church sanctuary movement" protects failed asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants from deportation enforcement (see also the Stakes of Sanctuary section in this issue). It has been a major phenomenon among theologically liberal Protestants, whose clergy are comfortable speaking of their moral concerns in secular terms of "human rights" and joining arms with nonreligious leaders of social movements to criticize their government's administration of justice (Munson 2017; Rabben 2016). Theologically conservative Protestants, in contrast, might be reluctant to speak in terms of refugee "rights" or call for larger government expenditures for refugees. Yet in the meanwhile they fund several of the largest international refugee relief organizations and show strong interest in volunteering for church-affiliated refugee resettlement services in their communities (Fausset and Blinder 2016; Hollenbach 2014: 448).

"Theologies of Migration" and Social Integration of Refugees

The contributions here reflect a trend among migration studies scholars to locate agency in refugee aid and social integration less in the nation-state and more among voluntary associations and informal, relational networks. The literature on religious groups' participation in the distribution of humanitarian aid to migrants is rapidly growing (Ager and Ager 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Hollenbach 2014; Mavelli and Wilson 2017). But far outside the context of North Atlantic states' bureaucratized resettlement programs or the operation centers of the large European- and American-based humanitarian relief charities, Protestants are also developing distinct "theologies of migration" in African countries hosting some of the largest refugee populations, both inside and outside camp settings. The articles in this section by Karen Lauterbach and Tinashe Chimbidzikai provide insight into this development. These might not be theologies that make reference to canonical theologians and academic thinkers, but they are more readily lived theologies in which forced migrants have forged customs of charity, hospitality, and emotional encouragement for newcomers based on their own prior experiences of migrating and finding ecclesiastical community. As humanitarian aid organizations, religious leaders, and scholars in economically-developed host countries seek to develop what religious traditions have to say about forced migration and refuge, there is much they can learn from individual congregations and members in host countries in the global South who act locally to provide aid, knowing they cannot rely on state infrastructures for refugee accommodation. Attentiveness to these actors' religious interpretations of flight and foreignness will help large humanitarian organizations partner more effectively with small ones to assist urban- and rural-based refugees alike at the local level.

A focus on non-state actors in the protection of refugees makes it easier to notice how religious studies can be part of scholars' toolkit to understanding migration politics today. But we can also use migration politics as a lens through which to analyze the category of religion itself (Nagel 2018; Tweed 2006), as Elizabeth Shakman Hurd does in this section in discussing the problems of discerning refugee status through US refugee law's ambiguous category of "religion." The articles in this section engage questions around the dynamic that religions create moral communities that transcend national boundaries—communities of belonging, of allegiance, of ethical obligation—and yet their members live today in societies structured by national citizenship and the moral community it entails. The question of the role of religions in welcoming and advocating for refugees is in large part a question of how religiously motivated citizens have negotiated that tension.

Outline of the Special Section

The articles in this special section pursue methodologically distinct approaches to the intricate relations between refugeehood and religion. Still, several common threads run throughout, developing the questions we raise in the introduction. First, the articles by Karen Lauterbach and Tinashe Chimbidzikai participate in the growing scholarship on faith-based and southern-led forms of welcome (Ager et al. 2015; Ferris 2005; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Pacitto 2020; Goodall 2015). Their articles examine the religious structures for welcoming—the role of churches, faith-based organizations, and religious networks. Second, the interactions in welcoming—either hostile or hospitable, inquisitorial or brotherly, institutional or informal—constitute the core of the articles by Elisabeth Shakman Hurd, Chimbidzikai, and

Lauterbach as each sheds light on how religious membership facilitates social relations (hierarchies as well as solidarities) and is often structured by the act of migrating (e.g., expectations of conversion, reassessment of religious beliefs). Finally, all the articles highlight different religious reasons for welcoming. Gilad Ben-Nun's and Aurélia Bardon's articles in particular demonstrate how religious, political, and legal reasonings complement each other. The values of justice and hospitality for refugees radically blur the secular line between religious and political reasons, as all of the articles show.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd complicates the place of religious reasons in adjudicating the claims of asylum-seekers in the United States. While the typically secular narrative insists on the separation of legal, political, and religious logics, asylum courts both reenact and redesign such partitions. Demonstrating a well-founded fear of persecution on religious grounds remains an essential component of the claim to asylum for reasons of religion. It forces immigration judges, trained in a secular environment and in a predominantly Christian culture, to assess the validity, genuineness, and truthfulness of an asylum-seeker's professed religious identification, without the tools necessary to do so in a non-threatening or judgmental way. The very definitions of religion and fear, essential for understanding an asylum-seeker's identity, appear unstable and uncertain. *Cui bono?* asks Shakman Hurd. She shows how this process of judging the religious sincerity of migrants has a broader purpose of reaffirming an ideology of modern secularism. This ideology pretends that distinctions such as religion and non-religion, authentic and simulated religious belief, true conversion and deception, exist independently of the judicial process. In fact, adjudicating a claim to asylum artificially produces these neat categories, however blurred they actually are, and, in the US context, reconstructs the boundary between progressive modern secular religion and "backward religions." In other words, the religious factor of asylum proceedings is a border-making device. It both secures a Western (US) identity as the land of freedom of religion, which guarantees a sincere adherence to religion, and selects migrants who should be grateful for the freedom they were missing at home.

Gilad Ben-Nun asks whether we should distinguish between "man-made" causes (such as war) and "natural" (such as climate-related disasters, drought, etc.) ones. What appears as a novel question due to climate change emerges here as question that, in fact, has deep historical roots, as Ben-Nun discusses through a meticulous reading of the Hebrew Bible, in which the questions of migration, claims to be welcomed, and conditional and unconditional duties of hospitality are pervasive. Ben-Nun uncovers the different meanings and interpretations of "migrant foreigners" and "refugees" and compares Jewish and Roman legal traditions regarding the distinction between citizens and strangers. In turn, building upon his previous work (Ben-Nun 2015b), Ben-Nun demonstrates the historical influence of the Jewish legal tradition upon the 1951 Refugee Convention. Doing so, he reconstructs a Mediterranean history of refugee protection "along the very same maritime routes sailed nowadays by sea-faring refugees attempting to reach European shores."

Aurélia Bardon tackles religion and refugee protection and assistance from the perspective of political theory, asking whether the use of religious arguments justifying duties toward refugees is compatible with liberal public reason. Considering the case of Pope Francis's various calls for justice, solidarity, and hospitality toward migrants, Bardon analyzes the content of religious arguments to identify their degree of compatibility with shared political values embedded in modern conceptions of justice. She demonstrates how the category of religious reasons is too broadly construed by liberal theorists to be fruitful. Instead, she argues, the category must be disaggregated, otherwise, a strict separation between secular and religious discourses blinds us

to many narratives and values brought up by religious citizens and representatives. Some reasons do appear inaudible in a liberal democracy when their content is fundamentally religious and "cannot make sense as a reason outside of a very specific religious doctrine," while others appeal to shared understandings.

Karen Lauterbach discusses hospitality practices toward Congolese refugees in Congolese churches in Kampala, Uganda. Her anthropological lens helps her deconstruct the usual oppositions between religious and secular vocabulary, material and spiritual help, host and guest, familiarity and strangerhood, hospitality and hostility. Building upon pioneering work on refugee-refugee hosting (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016), Lauterbach examines four types of welcome in the Congolese diasporic churches and networks: (1) refugee churches hosting refugees, where the duty to welcome is strongly linked to a diasporic relationship whereby the guests are already "brothers"; (2) refugee pastors hosting refugees, with hospitality being a Christian obligation, and in this type of welcome, hosting implies sacrifice, relating the pastor to God; (3) refugee church members hosting new refugees—the guest appears here both as a brother, sharing nationality and religious habits and beliefs to the point of reproducing hierarchical structures of the original community, and as a stranger when the relation of hosting moves beyond the church; and finally (4) refugee church members hosting refugee pastors—the higher status of pastor blurs the lower status attributed to someone in need. As Lauterbach argues, the common assumptions and expectations regarding hosting practices are displaced and redistributed along other already existing hierarchical lines. The humanitarian picture of help provided to someone in need is insufficient to make sense of the intertwined relations of dependence, honor, respect, and awe when it comes to refugees in a religious setting.

Finally, Tinashe Chimbidzikai's study of the relationship between Pentecostalism and refugee integration across several African countries refutes the framing of refugees as either passive victims or threats to host societies. The first trope may create a sense of empathy toward innocent victims, yet it denies any agency to refugees, which limits their ability to reappropriate their stories and cope with their experiences. The second trope, largely staged by host governments, makes refugees easy scapegoats for domestic problems. Discrimination and harassment follow. Analyzing Pentecostal theology, church practices, and individual beliefs in several countries (Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa) and drawing in particular on his fieldwork in Johannesburg (South Africa), Chimbidzikai argues that Pentecostalism plays a significant role in activating networks of solidarity in many African contexts of asylum. It also helps Pentecostal refugees make sense of their fate from a theological perspective that readily embraces sudden cleavages and transformations in personal experience. Shared notions of healing and deliverance, which stem from a worldview shared in several African countries and Pentecostal theology, help refugees reclaim agency and challenge their status and representation as helpless victims. Migration through the help of, or conversion to, Pentecostalism becomes a transformative and resilient process that cuts ties with the traumatic past and empowers individuals for settling in their new life.

By bringing together insights from anthropology, law, history, and political theory, this special section seeks to bring an interdisciplinary perspective on the religious values and resources that are mobilized in refugee contexts. Following Joey Ager and Alistair Ager (2016), who rightly warned against a threefold exclusion of religion in such contexts—privatization (of religious beliefs), marginalization (of religious actors), and instrumentalization (of religious resources for secular agendas)—this special section aims to circumvent these features of methodological secularism by looking at the religious reasons, structures, and interactions that shape welcome and advocacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This special section emerged from an academic conference supported by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity and the Alexander von Humboldt Professorship in Comparative Constitutionalism. We are grateful to the director of the department of Ethics, Law, and Politics, Ayelet Shachar who made it possible. We thank the contributors, the editors of the journal, and the anonymous reviewers for their hard work.

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NOTES

1. These essays emerged from an academic conference in 2018 that explored the role of religion in legal, moral, and political justifications for (and against) refugee admissions and resettlement. Titled "Welcoming Refugees: The Role of Religion," the conference was convened and funded by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Göttingen.
2. See also essays on divergences between European church responses to migrants in 2015 and popular responses in Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith (2018) and European survey data in Alexander Unser and Hans-Georg Ziebertz (2020).

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