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Introduction

Refugees and Religion

Peter van der Veer

The image of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian-Kurdish refugee, washed ashore on a Turkish beach in 2015 was spread widely by global media and shocked its viewers. It gave a human face to the “refugee crisis” that emerged from the war in Syria, a war that is still going on in 2020. In 2015, Europe was confronted with more than a million asylum seekers who took the land route from Turkey and walked in the direction of Germany. The majority came from war-torn Syria and Iraq, but there were also large numbers from other sites of violent conflict, such as Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia, as well as asylum seekers from relatively nearby Albania and Kosovo, from several countries in Africa, from Pakistan, and from other countries. They were not welcome in Eastern Europe, but they themselves had set their eyes on Germany, the economic powerhouse of the European Union. The ruling political parties in Germany, Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, initially welcomed these asylum seekers. A phrase by Chancellor Merkel “We can do it” (*Wir schaffen das*), perhaps inspired by Barack Obama’s “Yes we can,” captured a moment of national pride in what was optimistically called a German “culture of welcoming” (*Willkommenskultur*).

The period of empathy and welcome was short-lived. Germany witnessed the ascent of a right-wing, anti-immigrant party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD), which won 13.5 percent of the national vote in the 2018 general elections, and has a very strong presence in Eastern Germany, the former communist German Democratic Republic. France saw the rise of Marie Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (the National Rally Party). In Italy, the Lega Nord adopted a fiercely anti-immigrant political stance. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders’s party and the more recent one led by Thierry Baudet are also strongly anti-immigrant parties. Anti-immigrant sentiments dominated the anti-Brexit referendum and its aftermath in Britain. Eastern European countries have shown themselves to be staunchly anti-immigrant, and the previously tolerant

Scandinavian countries have also moved in that direction. Since many refugees are Muslim, the anti-immigrant positions are often combined with anti-Islam rhetoric that, for instance, has resulted in anti-burqa policies in the Netherlands and elsewhere, following the earlier anti-headscarf policies in France.

These European developments form the backdrop against which this volume was brought together. It proposes that the refugee issue today is of central significance not only in past and present Europe but also in politics globally. The refugee problematic continues to dominate politics not only in Europe and the Middle East but also in the rest of the world. For instance, anti-immigration policies also form the core of the nationalist politics of the Republican Party in the United States. However, while much global media attention is given to what happens in the United States and Europe, the majority of the refugees actually flee from one country in the Global South to another. In a number of cases in the Global South, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) plays a role in the setting up and maintaining of refugee camps, while this supranational body does not play a role in the Global North, where national authorities handle refugee matters. Far from being an isolated crisis, the 2015 movement of refugees toward Western Europe should be considered as merely a moment in a long history of forced, partly forced, and relatively unforced movement of people in Europe and the rest of the world (Gattrell 2019). Moreover, it cannot be considered as completely different from other forms of mobility, such as labor migration. Refugees are looking not only for safety but also for a future for themselves and their children. This volume places the 2015 moment in a longer history of the creation of nation-states and borders that produce and stop spatial mobility.

While it is clear that refugee politics relate to the formation of nation-states with territorial sovereignty, the connection between religion and refugees is seldom analyzed (recent exceptions being: Horstmann and Jung 2015b; Mavelli and Wilson 2017; Schmiedel and Smith 2018). It is the purpose of this volume to draw attention to the importance of ritual purification and ethnic cleansing in the historical formation of nation-states, as well as to the problematic of conversion and assimilation in dealing with refugees. This volume presents a collection of historical and ethnographic case studies of refugees and religion in Germany, Britain, the Netherlands, the United States, Vietnam, India, Uganda, and Morocco in order to highlight both the diversity of human predicaments and their shared problematics. These studies also represent two different moments in recent history: the Cold War and its aftermath and the 2015 refugee moment, while being prefaced by a deep historical perspective on Europe's experiences with religion and refugees.

From the start, we have to make clear that the definitional distinction between refugee and migrant is hugely important in both a political and a legal sense, but that we need to analyze the definitional process in a dynamic and contextual manner. Refugee stands for “a person who is forcibly displaced.” This sounds straightforward, but it is not. There are differences in the use of “force” and differences in kinds of displacement, all to be understood contextually. Forced displacements happen everywhere on a daily basis, but migrant workers who are kicked out of their dwellings in “slum-clearings” in India or China are not regarded as refugees, because they are forcibly displaced *within* a nation-state. On the other hand, some people, like the Uyghur in China are, on the contrary, forcibly kept in their place, while their passports are taken away as well as their means of communication with the outside world. Many would be refugees if they could only move out. Legally, the distinction between migrant and refugee is pertinent, but the boundaries between these categories are arbitrary and dynamic. One notices, for instance, an increase in asylum requests when immigration becomes more and more difficult. In one’s lifetime, one can move between the status of refugee and migrant, of resident and citizen. Nevertheless, asylum is a protection of a foreigner under threat (Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012: 444), and it is the legibility and truthfulness of this threat that is being assessed in juridical procedures in nation-states. Fassin and Kobelinsky show that in these procedures a shift from trust to suspicion has occurred, and that in France the acceptance rate has fallen from nine in ten to one in ten from 1980 to 2010.

In his writings on the Postcolony, Achille Mbembe (2003: 1) has argued that “the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.” Mbembe’s concern is “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but *the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*” (2003: 14; emphasis in original). Mbembe takes his cue from Foucault’s notion of biopower and Agamben’s notion of “the state of exception.” This perspective on sovereignty leads us away from exceptionalist understandings of communist states as authoritarian and therefore radically different from the ideal nation-state, which is conceptualized in liberal political theory as founded not on authoritarian rule but on the rational deliberations of citizens (Rawls 1971). It understands the nature of sovereignty itself as rooted in violence rather than in rational choice that leads to a collective will. That violence is based on religious notions of purity and danger (Douglas 1966).

It is primarily the nation-state that defines subjects and citizens through law and law enforcement, but one needs to realize that a wide range of political formations take the nation-form, despite being far less formalized and centralized than is assumed in political theory. Social actors deal with what one could call the legal fiction of the nation-state and its bounded territory. When one flees from Syria, for instance, one does not flee from a nation-state but from a Hobbesian War of All against All. Syrian refugees go over land and cross seas that are only partly under the control of nation-states with arbitrary, shifting borders. They come to what promises to be the iron cage of European bureaucracy but what is in fact a shifting configuration of arbitrary rules and overwhelmed bureaucrats. The chaos of all of this under the semblance of order cannot be overestimated. The idea that a citizen is protected by the state she belongs to is part of the legal fiction of the nation-state. Some citizens are, and some are not. Muslims in India, Uyghurs in China, and Jews in Europe's recent past, all are unprotected citizens. The language of racial and religious purity is pervasive in all these cases.

The boundary between those who belong and those who do not, is determined, largely, by shifting state discourses about the religious and ethnic foundations of the nation. The Spanish word *nacion* of course refers to birth, but, in turn, birth refers to religion. One is only truly born when baptized. In 1492, Columbus records in his logbook that he sees the boats of Muslims and Jews leaving the shores of Spain while he goes out to discover the New World. This is a major epistemic shift in the history of the modern world, in which the religious purification of the nation and the expansion of that nation's religion over the world is combined. It is precisely the unending work of purification that gives ample scope to the Inquisition spreading to areas like the Philippines and Mexico, where Spanish or Portuguese power is established. The ruling elites in China and Japan, where Iberian power was not established, successfully resisted Christian salvation. At the same time, they themselves were perfectly capable to follow the Iberian example by purifying their nations from Christianity.

Purity and danger are the main elements of a symbolic repertoire that one finds in a wide range of ritual purifications at the individual and group level. They are crucial symbols in the campaigns of ethnic and religious cleansing that accompany the formation of nations in Europe. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has defined impurity as "matter out of place." I propose to extend that to "people out of place," displaced persons. Migrants who "do not belong" are not merely regarded as "outsiders," but also as dirty and dangerous, threatening

the purity of those “who belong.” Migrants themselves may have similar notions about the host society as threatening their cultural and religious purity.

The Reformation stands out as the first period in European and possibly global history in which the religious refugee becomes a mass phenomenon. The Jewish and Muslim refugees of fifteenth-century Spain were followed by the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, who settled everywhere, including Russia, the seventeenth-century Puritan Pilgrim Fathers, who settled in the United States, and the Huguenots, who settled in Holland and elsewhere, and, basically, everyone else in the several wars of religion that followed the Reformation. The Reformation was not just a movement of intellectual and religious change. It was also Europe’s first grand project in social purification. It was deeply about exile, expulsion, and refugees. Forced religious migration was a normal, familiar, and expected feature of public policy that was oriented to build a cohesive society. The formula of *cuius regio, eius religio* (people have to follow the religion of their rulers) was a principle meant to stop warfare between Protestants and Catholics by expelling religious minorities, and thus making religiously homogenous regions. At the end of the Thirty Years War, in 1648, the Peace of Westphalia, meant to deal with religious minorities, was the origin of the modern system of nation-states (see te Brake in this volume). According to Jose Casanova (2019a: 14–15) the confessionalization of nation-states resulted in a split between Northern Europe that became homogeneously Protestant, Southern Europe that became homogeneously Catholic, with Holland, Germany, and Switzerland as nonconfessional societies.

According to the 1930 Hague Convention on Nationality Laws, “it is for each State to determine under its own law who are its nationals.” Michael Walzer (1983), a prominent political theorist, argues that political sovereignty is the absolute right of territorial bounded states to determine who belongs to the nation and who is an alien. Two principles, often in combination, are applied to determine citizenship: *ius soli* (where are you born?) and *ius sanguinis* (who are your parents?). In German: *Blut und Boden* (blood and land). Bureaucracies of identification are built around the accident of birth, showing the continuity between ethnicity and modern nationhood. It is therefore not surprising that the term “naturalization” is used for the process of acquiring citizenship. The worldwide inequalities in which children are born are, obviously, among the main causes for spatial mobility of those who aspire to social mobility or just want to escape poverty. In the endless debates about nature or nurture, it is never mentioned how much the simple fact of one’s birth in a particular society determines one’s life chances (Shachar 2009). Nevertheless, at first sight,

the principles of *Blut und Boden* appear to be unavoidable. It seems perfectly reasonable to deny access to intruders whether this concerns your own house or the nation's territory. The problem, however, is not that one wants to keep outsiders out, but that one may also want to kick out those who are inside, as if they are not genuine members of the household or of the nation. These two desires are in fact connected. Borders are conceptualized as located at the edge of territory, but as an institutional practice of boundary making, they are located everywhere within and outside of the territory, sometimes occasioning ethnic and religious cleansing.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948. According to Article 14, everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution. In 1951 the Geneva Convention, restricting itself to European refugees of the Second World War, codified the rights of refugees. In 1967 a protocol was added which removed this geographical and historical restriction and made the convention universally applicable.

The universality of the convention raises the intricate question of what is a human being. A human as a natural being needs to be distinguished from what is a citizen. A citizen has rights that are guaranteed by the sovereign nation-state that has made him or her a citizen. The individual who is the bearer of rights and obligations is produced at the same time as "we, the people" who are the subject of the nation-state. In that way the state is totalizing and individualizing at the same time. If indeed the idea of the sovereign individual goes together with that of the sovereign state, we need to determine what the appeal to "the international community" and its protection of human values means. Is there an "international community" that guarantees human rights in the same way as the nation-state guarantees the rights of citizens? We do not think so. There are different understandings in different traditions in the world about what constitutes a human, and thus there are different communities carrying these divergent traditions. Even in the liberal tradition there are distinctions made between combatants and civilians, allies and enemies, children and adults. So, the question is which international community is envisaged in relation to which tradition of human rights. Is it the Muslim Umma or the Pax Christiana, or the Western democratic world? Moreover, who or what is the guarantor of these rights? The fact is that even if there would be an international community (a "family of man" so to say), it is the national sovereign state only that has the power to guarantee rights. This also implies that there has to be a narrative that authorizes particular claims and rejects others. That narrative needs to be in some way related to the narration of the nation.

For example, in the United States, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 says the following:

The right to freedom of religion undergirds the very origin and existence of the United States. Many of our Nation's founders fled religious persecution abroad, cherishing in their hearts and minds the ideal of religious freedom. They established in law, as a fundamental right and as a pillar of our Nation, the right to freedom of religion. From its birth to this day, the United States has prized this legacy and honored this heritage by standing for religious freedom and offering refuge to those suffering religious persecution.

This act requires that the United States enforces religious freedom everywhere in the world. It is striking how the narrative of the emergence of the United States as a place of refuge to those who fled religious persecution is tied to the narrative of the United States as a guarantor of religious freedom globally. At the same time it is striking that this act has been implemented, for example, by requiring the State Department to report annually on religious persecution globally with an almost exclusive focus on the persecution of Christians, and not, for example, Muslims. This is just one example of the way the narration of the nation is tied to the narrative of who can be recognized by the state as a refugee. Different nations obviously have different narrations that need to be unpacked.

The other aspect of refugees and religion that this volume is dealing with is that of religious conversion and cultural assimilation. This is the flipside of ethnic cleansing and religious purification, since these are processes to force refugees to change their religion and culture into that of the host society or make it fit the secular framework of that society (Asad 2003). Many refugees are, in fact, already persecuted minorities in the countries of origin, like Jews in many countries in Europe, Syrian Christians, Muslim Burmese, and others. They had to flee to avoid being either killed or converted. In the receiving countries, they are again confronted with discourses and practices that are meant to make them change particular parts of their culture (see, for Syrian Orthodox, Heleen Murre-van den Berg in this volume). If they convert or assimilate that change is often considered "not sincere" and doubtful (see William Wheeler in this volume). One striking historical example is that of the Marranos in Spain, Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity in the sixteenth century but were suspected by the Inquisition to secretly continue to practice Judaism. In the twentieth century, race laws have replaced religious laws, but with similar effect. Jewish *Bildungsbürger*, totally assimilated in Germany and often converted to Christianity, were determined to be just hiding their essential Jewishness and

were stripped from their citizenship. In 1943, Hanna Arendt writes about Jewish refugees who fled from Germany to France, England, or the United States. Despite the fact that they were not any longer considered fellow-citizens in Germany and had fled the country, the French, British, and American authorities immediately treated them as German citizens and put them in camps as “enemy aliens.” Hanna Arendt describes with biting irony the absurd predicament of these Jewish refugees by quoting one Jewish leader who said: “We were good Germans in Germany, therefore we shall be good Frenchmen in France.”

Europe and Refugees

In the first two chapters of this volume, the focus is on European history. Wayne te Brake and Peter van der Veer deal with the long history of religious wars and nation-state formation in Europe. They show the connection between the history of mobility in early modern Europe with that of religious purification. The Reformation resulted in a number of religious wars and forced migrations. Te Brake focuses on three important developments: the dislocation of refugees in the context of religious strife, the accommodation of newcomers into their places of refuge, and the survival of dissidents who were not able or willing to seek refuge elsewhere. Altogether, these three developments provide insights into the relationship between religious conflict and the production and accommodation of vulnerable religious migrants.

Van der Veer examines in detail the interconnected history of refugees and nation building in Germany from the early modern period until today. His focus is on the situation of those who fled for the Red Army at the end of the Second World War. Around seventeen million Europeans were on the move which was the cause for drafting the 1951 Geneva Convention for refugees. He also addresses some theoretical issues that are central to this volume, such as the nature of humanitarianism and the role of history in shaping humanitarian motivations. He proposes that ultimately an ethical position has to be based on political analysis and choice.

People on the Move from Vietnam

One of the most significant flows of refugees after the Second World War was from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia after the victory of North Vietnam in 1975. Americans had fought on the side of South Vietnam in a civil war against North

Vietnam that was supported by the Soviet Union and China. South Vietnamese tried to flee to the West after the North Vietnamese victory, while Chinese-Vietnamese were expelled around the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979. Phi-Vân Nguyen brings us back to the 1954 exodus of Catholic refugees from North to South Vietnam after the communist victory against the French in the 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu, which resulted in the designation of the famous seventeenth parallel as the dividing line between the communist North and the capitalist South. In the 300 days that allowed civilians to opt for which zone they wanted to live in, more than 800,000 civilians, of which 80 percent were Catholics, left their home in the North for the South. Van Nguyen examines in detail the complexities and contradictions of Catholic politics that was involved in this first refugee crisis in Vietnam itself. In 1998, the French image of an apparition of the Virgin Mary in Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang, was replaced with a Vietnamese image that has become very popular among refugee communities all over the world. Thien-Huong Ninh shows how this image has captured the transnational imaginations of Catholic Vietnamese communities. Janet Hoskins examines the development of Caodai and of Dau Mau trance dance in diasporic communities. While transnational Caodai networks concentrate in “little Saigons” in the United States, Canada, Australia, and France, the transnational Dao Mau networks concentrate on “little Hanoi” in Eastern Europe. She shows the impact of forced migration on the theologies and ritual practices of these two forms of Vietnamese religion. She shows the interaction between experiences of mobility and their narrativization in ways that are comparable to what Alessandro Gusman finds in Kampala among Pentecostal Congolese refugees. Tam Ngo and Nga Mai explore yet another Vietnamese diasporic religious development, namely Buddhism in Berlin. They show that the opposition between North Vietnam and South Vietnam is a determining factor in the development of different kinds of Buddhism among the Vietnamese in Germany who were either boat refugees in former West Germany or contract laborers in former East Germany. These chapters on the Vietnamese show the different pathways of refugees and migrants that are intricately tied up with religious options.

People on the Move in and from Africa

The experiences of refugees in the spaces in which they are temporarily settled is immensely varied. Alessandro Gusman describes Urban Congolese refugees in the Ugandan capital Kampala. This is a mostly young population, because many

of the elders have been killed. They try to live an ordinary life while hoping for a way to return to the Congo or leave for Europe. It is not international relief organizations but Pentecostal churches that offer them support. Such support is mainly of a religious nature. Gusman shows how the biblical narratives provided by Pentecostalism make it possible for refugees to make sense of their experience.

Johara Berriane describes West African migrants who are on their way to Europe, but are held up in Morocco because of the hardening of Europe's external borders. They bring a new element in the religious landscape of Muslim Morocco by introducing Pentecostal house churches. Berriane did ethnographic research among two Congolese and three Ivorian house churches and describes ways of placemaking in the in-between space between the country of origin and the European destination. She shows how people whose lives are unmoored and who have an unclear sense of what the future may bring for them find new roles and functions in the churches, engaging them in a religiously active life while waiting for a "deliverance."

A quite different urban context is that of Berlin. Abdoulaye Sounaye describes the predicament of West African Muslims, many of whom came to Germany after the collapse of the Gadhafi regime in Libya. In the face of mounting discrimination against Africans—both from within and from outside of the larger Muslim community in Berlin—they seek to create spaces for worship and community in which they feel safe and supported. This is strikingly different from the Vietnamese Buddhists in Berlin described by Mai and Ngo whose placemaking is dependent on internal Vietnamese dynamics rather than a response to discrimination by outsiders.

Political Spaces of Reception

Heleen Murre-van den Berg brings us from African refugees to Syrian Christians who have settled in Europe. She describes the predicament of Syriac Orthodox in Europe not so much in terms of placemaking, but in terms of text making. It is the subtle transformation of textual traditions that are perhaps less a sign of secularization within the European context than a conscious choice to downplay ethnic differences in relation to a shared religious identity. It is precisely in textual practices that one can see how the church's leadership tries to find a place in diasporic circumstances.

When one thinks of refugees, one thinks of camps in which they are gathered for transitional living. Alexander-Kenneth Nagel describes such a

camp, Friedland near Göttingen in the German state of Lower Saxony, that has been a transit camp since the Second World War. Initially, the camp was meant for Germans from Eastern Europe, many of them fleeing for the Russian Red Army (see van der Veer in this volume). Even today, it is a transit camp for late emigrants (*Spätaussiedler*) as well as Jews from the former Soviet Union. Since the 1979s, however, other refugee groups, such as Chileans, Vietnamese, and recently many nationalities from the Middle East have come to stay in the camp. Nagel examines the religious configuration of the camp, materially built around Catholic and Protestant chapels, in the light of institutional secularism. The recent inflow of various kinds of Muslims and Christians from West and South Asia poses particular problems in both material and intentional sense for the officials of the camp who are Nagel's research subject.

A very different kind of camp is described in Salah Punathil's paper on the conflict between indigenous groups and Muslims in the Indian state of Assam. These are relief camps for Muslims who fled their villages during anti-Muslim pogroms. They were meant to be temporary but solidified into permanence to the extent that they themselves have become targets of large-scale violence. Punathil analyzes in detail the intricate history of Muslims in the area during colonialism, the Partition between India and Pakistan, and the 1971 emergence of Bangladesh. Within this tumultuous history, there is an often-neglected story of an indigenous group, the Bodos, who seek an independent homeland by attacking Muslim immigrants. Punathil shows that while the state is centrally involved in the refugee problematic, antagonist ethnic groups have their own agenda.

The role of the state in adjudicating citizenship, civil rights, refugee status, and religious rights is of central importance of much of the analysis in this volume. In the chapters by Nagel, and Wheeler, however, the state is disaggregated to the level of officials who have discretionary power. William Wheeler gives a detailed critical analysis of how British judges come to decisions about refugees who cite religious reasons for their claim to refugee status. He describes a secular culture of suspicion that leads judges to doubt the sincerity of religious conversion of the claimants. While Nagel's chapter deals with the ways in which the German state deals with religious diversity, Wheeler's chapter deals with some questions of authority and sincerity in the British judicial process that have always been central to religious conversion.

