

Articles

INTRODUCTION

“IN GOD HAVE I PUT MY TRUST”: REFUGEES AND RELIGION

Jean-François Mayer
Relioscope, Fribourg, Switzerland

In a special issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* on “Religion and Forced Migration”, which was published a few years ago, the editors remarked on the dearth of research on this topic, despite the role that spirituality obviously plays at various stages of the process for many people who are forced to leave their home countries and to seek asylum in other countries.¹ Much still remains to be done. Through a variety of cases and approaches, this issue of *RSQ* attempts to shed light on various aspects of the relation between religion and refugees.

One wonders if this relationship really should be considered separately from the wider issue of religion and migration. While both frequently overlap, there are specific dimensions to the issue. Refugees are the products of tense circumstances (war, persecution) and, accordingly, bring with them anxieties, problems and questions that may in part differ from those of the usual migrants: Behloul shows in his article in this volume the changes Bosnian refugees brought in the life of the previously existing Muslim Bosnian diaspora in Switzerland.

Some of the observations and issues that rise throughout the following articles will be briefly listed below in an attempt to show some of the possible paths for current and future research.

Religious factors may play a role in convincing or forcing people to leave their home country and to seek refuge. It is true that there are currently few conflicts and tensions that can be described as purely religious ones, although a religious element sometimes plays a role, especially in those places where nationalism is reinforced by religion, and these factors combine to create an even clearer dividing line between two groups. Moreover, there may be bitter oppositions between people belonging to the same religious traditions: when the genocide took place in Rwanda in 1994, there were Christians on both sides; in Darfur, there are Muslims opposing other Muslims. This creates considerable problems for the respective religious communities involved.

Even taking the complexity of particular situations into account, religion is not absent from issues generating new waves of refugees and displaced persons. In Iraq, we have seen how groups play a game of intensifying the Shi’a/Sunni divide. In her article in this issue, Chaillot makes clear that, while there are also economic

factors driving Oriental Christians to leave the countries of their ancestors, in several cases their status as a religious minority adds a crucial element, and they leave in part because they no longer feel safe as Christians in environments where Islamist activism creates uncertainties about their future as non-Muslims.

The concept of “mixed migration” is increasingly applied to situations in which not just one factor plays a role, and other elements overlap with serious human rights violations or armed conflict:² it seems that this concept could rightly be applied here. Maybe some of those migrants do not always find themselves under immediate threat, but their perception is that there is little future for them where they live – even if they are not economically deprived – and that the years to come might bring harsh experiences, even though they do not know this for sure. Indeed, while we would all hope such fears will not materialize, often current developments make it impossible for the international community to assure such people that they will be safe and should rather stay where they are.

Religion often plays a role during the journey of a refugee to what may become his or her host country. In some cases, such journeys are fraught with dangers, as witnesses quoted by Dorais in his article on Vietnamese refugees vividly report. Escaping from perils is interpreted according to a religious world view: religion becomes a “source of hope”. Although one should not reduce the process to this dimension, it is obvious that religious beliefs may inspire strength and hope in times of despair.³

Once refugees arrive in their new country, religion may again determine some of the decisions they will make. “Religion is, in fact, the primary variable affecting Russian migration decision making and settlement patterns”, Hardwick remarks about Russians settling in North America up to the early 1990s.⁴ Religious non-conformists who had fled czarist Russia were joined in exile after the revolution by mainline Orthodox believers persecuted by the new communist power. Obviously, post-Soviet Russians who now emigrate to other countries come for different reasons and with a quite different mindset from earlier waves of Russians seeking refuge.

Going into exile may be accompanied by reinforced religious fervour. While religion is salient in the lives of many migrants – voluntary or not – there is research suggesting that many immigrants become more religious once they have arrived at their destination.⁵ There is nothing surprising about this, since religion and identity are so closely connected, but also because of the fact that settling in a new country goes along with new challenges, and, as a result, places of worship belonging to immigrants’ traditions often provide a link with the home countries they have left. Behloul reminds us in his article that immigrants in general often tend to be more religious, since religion plays such an important role in identity-building, and leaving one’s familiar environment definitely raises such issues. But the role of religion in the lives of refugees can certainly not be reduced to strategies for maintaining or adjusting one’s identity: some of the refugees might have been as religious at home as they are in exile.

Religion may contribute to maintaining a link with one’s original country and culture, but the nexus between religious affiliation and national/ethnic identity is more complicated than this. Refugees are rarely affluent. Nevertheless,

it is amazing to see how they often manage quite quickly to raise funds for building places of worship. Those places provide a role that goes beyond religion: as Schalk describes it in his article on Tamil refugees, the weekly visit to the temple is like a “mental return to the homeland” or “an expansion of the homeland to the hosting country”. Parishes are similarly like a piece of their homeland for Oriental Christians resettled in the West, places where they feel at home, explains Chaillot. It may also be a message sent to the host society: Armenians regrouping in France from the 1930s made it a priority to build churches as a way to maintain their collective memory and to express a collective identity to the citizens of the host country.⁶

Obviously, similar points could be made about migrants who are not refugees; however, while we do not have available research data to prove it, and it is only an hypothesis, it is not certain that migrants who move on their own primarily for economic reasons and not as the result of an emergency are as motivated to engage in religious activities when they arrive in their host countries as people who have fled in haste and need to find an explanation for their sudden change of circumstances.

Despite the place sometimes occupied by religion, this in no way means that national or ethnic differences can be dissolved by faith: both function alongside each other, and we know from many examples that the *same* religion can even inspire competing groups. In many cases, places of worship are not only linked to one’s religion, but also to one’s identity: Dorais remarks that Vietnamese in Quebec would rather go to Vietnamese Buddhist temples and Vietnamese Catholic churches if given a choice to do so. Schalk reports that Hindu Tamils in exile do not want to “merge” with other Hindus, since their wish is to preserve a specific Tamil identity, in the hope of returning one day to their home country.

Exile may exacerbate or ameliorate religious differences. One wonders if, in some cases, exile does not encourage separatist tendencies, if only due to political disagreements among émigrés, such as in the case of the Ethiopian diaspora, which has a separate group with its own bishops in North America, as Chaillot points out. Tibetan refugees in India have also experienced strong controversies regarding the Shugden cult, which is considered as heretical, but which is also seen as challenging to the power of the Dalai Lama, as Routray shows. But politics rather than religion itself may play that role: regarding the Tamil exiles from Sri Lanka, Schalk shows how, on the one hand, Catholics and Hindus tend to cooperate and, on the other hand, Hindu Tamils tend to downplay their internal, caste-based divisions, although not always with complete success. And there are cases of Christian and Muslim Sudanese refugees in the United States inviting each other to their respective major festivals.⁷

Religious beliefs may infuse tragedy with meaning. There are cases in which refugees make sense of their exile through their religion. For example, some Russian intellectuals who had fled to the West after the revolution came to believe they had also to discern a providential sign in the scattering of so many Russians: they could bear witness to the West regarding the spiritual riches of the Orthodox legacy. More recently, followers of the Vietnamese Caodai religion have come

to reinterpret the trauma of flight “as a triumph of God’s plan to globalize his message”.⁸

Exile may also be associated with switching religious affiliations for spiritual or practical reasons. Changing religion may be a part of passage to a place of refuge. Sometimes, such conversions originate during the journey, as in the case of Vietnamese refugees interviewed by Dorais, who had a spiritual experience at sea and consequently switched their religious affiliations. Conversion to another religion can also take place in a refugee camp, where it sometimes works together with the hope that the adopted religious faith will provide support for resettlement in a new place. A striking example is provided by Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey, who convert from Shi’a Islam to Christianity “both as a migration strategy and as sociocultural adaptation tool”.⁹ Finally, the religious change may take place after the migration has been completed: Borda explains in her articles that *desplazados* in Colombia, when deprived of their social networks by migration, find a new environment in Pentecostal congregations, where they get accepted as brothers and sisters, regardless of where they come from.

Becoming a refugee may thus reinforce identification with the home country and cause a nostalgic cultivation of everything associated with it, but it also represents a liminal state allowing for new identities to be adopted and the writing a new chapter in a refugee’s life. Sometimes, however, attending the services of another religion may be a temporary attitude, as evidenced by cases of Khmer refugees in North America returning to Buddhism, while keeping some Christian elements in their practice.¹⁰

We should also pay attention to the role and activities of religious organizations supporting refugees in host countries. Doukhobors who left Russia in the late 19th century in order to live freely according to their faith and to avoid serving in the military were originally supported by English Quakers.¹¹ It is appropriate to remember that “[m]uch of the concern and care for refugees that has been marshaled by governments in the modern era has its roots in religious traditions that embody commitment to the stranger and the oppressed”.¹² But support of refugees is not just a consequence of possible religious affinities, and we find a variety of religious organizations – along with a variety of other, secular NGOs – in refugee assistance and advocacy.¹³ “The majority of organizations that resettle refugees in the United States are faith based”, either Christian or Jewish, although they may have supporters from other religions.¹⁴

Faith-based groups assisting refugees do not only provide support to refugees of the same religion; but while many of them help on a purely humanitarian basis inspired by their religious ideals, some feel called to proselytize. This sometimes leads to those religious changes mentioned above, but also raises difficult ethical issues and differences among aid agencies, some of whom feel that it is not acceptable to take advantage of the difficulties experienced by refugees in this way.

An issue for host countries is to know when alleged religious persecution becomes a legitimate ground for an asylum application. This is an issue that is less simple than it may seem at first sight.¹⁵ Musalo deals in her article with the

example of conscientious objection, which is accepted as grounds for refugee status by international organizations in specific circumstances, but which states approach with caution, since they do not want to undermine their own recognized right to maintain armed forces and require people to perform military service. Especially for those countries that may themselves send their own soldiers to war areas, much is potentially at stake, as shown in the case of those US citizens who have – unsuccessfully – applied for asylum in Canada in order to avoid going to Iraq. In cases of conscientious objection, it appears that religious considerations are only one factor among many in considering asylum applications: moral issues often take precedence, except in issues related to Jehovah's Witnesses. But conscientious objection is only one possible reason among many.

In summary, becoming a refugee involves negotiating between old and new identities in various ways. For people who are forced to give up their previous citizenship and accept a new one, retaining cultural identity through religious affiliation – despite the change of passport – provides a point of stability.¹⁶ The traumatic experience of flight and exile can also lead to a rediscovery of one's religion or the adoption of a new religion. Moreover, people who were already religious are likely to remain so once exiled. Reflecting on the religious intensity in the lives of many people who fled Russia after the revolution, Struve remarks that an exile becomes deprived of many venues for worldly achievements, but that the absence of social and political constraints opens an inner freedom and prospects for heavenly pursuits.¹⁷

Since religions are often transnational, some groups of refugees can hope for support from fellow believers in the land of exile, while sharing beliefs also creates potential networks of solidarity. Refugees, however, also come into contact with other religious groups, which provide help and sometimes encourage the refugees to switch religious allegiance; in some cases with success, if only because of a need to reciprocate for help received or as part of a search for new meanings in vastly different circumstances. On the other hand, the arrival of refugees contributes to bring new components into the religious landscape of host countries; for example, it is not certain that Tibetan Buddhism would have become as popular and respected as it is in some parts of the Western world without the influx of Tibetan refugees. Some religious groups globalize as a consequence of exile: Vietnamese Caoodaists are an obvious example of this. This may lead to changes in practices and theological reinterpretations: "As 'migrants', 'diasporas' and 'transnationals' cross the borders of contemporary nation-states, their cultural identities are unconsciously hybridised".¹⁸

There is a growing awareness of the need to take religion into account in research on migration, since it does sometimes play a much larger role at various stages of the migration process than many scholars had assumed, as evidenced in case studies such as Hagan and Ebaugh's research on Mayan migrants from Guatemala.¹⁹ Refugees represent one type of migration associated with distinctive experiences, and often more sudden migration, without a careful preparation. It is to be hoped that the varied articles gathered in this issue may contribute to understanding the role of faith among forced migrants.

Notes

- ¹ E. Gozdzia and D. Shandy, 'Editorial Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migrations', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2002), pp. 129–30.
- ² UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees: Human Displacement in the New Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 24.
- ³ Research conducted among depressive Afghan refugees in Pakistan suggests that those with a higher degree of religiosity are less vulnerable to considering suicide, but the strong religious prohibition of suicide may also play a role, i.e. the fear of committing a grave sin (F. Jahangir et al. 'Degree of Religiosity and Vulnerability to Suicidal Attempts/Plans in Depressive Patients among Afghan Refugees', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1998), pp. 265–69).
- ⁴ S. Hardwick, *Russian Refuge: Religion, Migration, and Settlement on the North American Pacific Rim* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 11.
- ⁵ P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, 'Religion and a Standpoint Theory of Immigrant Social Justice', in P. Hondagneu-Sotelo (ed.), *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 3–4.
- ⁶ M. Hovanessian, 'La diaspora arménienne en France: générations et transmission identitaire', *Les Annales de l'Autre Islam*, Vol. 3 (1995), p. 440.
- ⁷ R. Working, 'Congregation Unites Muslims, Christians', *Chicago Tribune* (8 April 2007).
- ⁸ J. Hoskins, 'Caodai Exile and Redemption: A New Vietnamese Religion's Struggle for Identity', in P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed., *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 192.
- ⁹ We should, however, be careful not to see religion merely as being instrumentalized in all cases here: while the conversion of an asylum seeker whose application has been rejected can be seen as dubious or highly problematic (e.g. conversion from Islam to Christianity makes repatriation of Iranian refugees impossible according to the standards of international organizations, since apostasy is a capital offence in Iran), there are also among asylum seekers people who had converted to Christianity earlier, and those who had falsely claimed conversion to facilitate migration may later become true believers (see S. Akcapar, 'Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey', *International Migration Review*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (2006), pp. 817–53).
- ¹⁰ C. Men, 'The Changing Religious Beliefs and Ritual Practices among Cambodians in the Diaspora', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2002), p. 228.
- ¹¹ Hardwick, *Russian Refuge*, p. 93.
- ¹² J. Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance: Religion, Refugee Work, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 5.
- ¹³ S. Nawyn, *Faithfully Providing Refuge: The Role of Religious Organizations in Refugee Assistance and Advocacy*. Working Paper No. 115 (San Diego: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, 2005).
- ¹⁴ S. Nawyn, 'Welcoming the Stranger: Constructing an Interfaith Ethic of Refugees', in P. Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed., *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 141.
- ¹⁵ K. Musalo, 'Claims for Protection Based on Religion or Belief', *International Journal of Refugee Law*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2004), pp. 165–226.
- ¹⁶ Hess has shown how many Tibetans in India are reluctant to apply for Indian citizenship for fear of symbolically giving up any hope of returning to their homeland by doing so. Those who accept Indian or US citizenship rationalize this (and, in the case of Tibetans in the United States, are encouraged to do so by the exile government) as a way of becoming ambassadors for and advocates of the Tibetan cause (J. Hess, 'Statelessness and the State: Tibetans, Citizenship, and Nationalist Activism in a Transnational World', *International Migration*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2006), pp. 79–103).
- ¹⁷ N. Struve, *Soixante-dix ans d'émigration russe, 1919–1989* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), p. 63.
- ¹⁸ S. McLoughlin, 'Migration, Diaspora and Transnationalism: Transformations of Religion and Culture in a Globalising Age', in J. Hinnells, ed., *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 534.
- ¹⁹ J. Hagan and H. Ebaugh, 'Calling upon the Sacred: Migrants' Use of Religion in the Migration Process', *International Migration Review*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2003), pp. 1145–62.