



# Religion and the Ethics of Forced Migration

A symposium co-sponsored by:

Institute for the Study of International Migration  
Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs  
Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity

9 October 2015  
Georgetown University  
Washington, DC

Symposium Report



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

*Religion and the ethics of forced migration* was the topic of a symposium co-hosted by the Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM) and the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, both at Georgetown University, together with the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), a non-profit organization working in collaboration with the Bahá'í International Community. Against the backdrop of a growing appreciation of the need to better understand the role that religion plays in motivating people to protect and advocate for forced migrants, this day-long symposium permitted a number of scholars and practitioners to explore two interrelated themes: (1) the distinct ethical perspectives that religion can contribute to ongoing discussions of forced migration and (2) the conditions that enable this unique ethical potential to be effectively channeled into the field of action.

The symposium was an open conversation guided by a series of preselected questions. Several participants were asked beforehand to help stimulate the discussion of these questions by offering a short description of their own research and professional experiences. No presentations or papers were given. Those present observed that the conversation gained strength from the diversity of participants present. The conversation uniquely engaged profound conceptual themes while remaining attentive to the interests and perspectives of practitioners, policymakers, and social scientists.

This symposium was a continuation of a conversation which began at the *Faith and the Asylum Crisis* conferences, held respectively at Georgetown University and the Brussels School of International Studies.<sup>1</sup> One goal of this symposium was to reframe the dialogue on religion and forced migration in terms of the constructive potential that can and ought to flow from religious actors into spaces of forced migration.

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<sup>1</sup> Key insights from these conferences are published in a recent policy paper, *Faith and the Asylum Crisis: The role of religion in responding to displacement*.

## Questions for Discussion

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Before directly exploring the ethical discourse on forced migration, participants considered the need to specify what is meant by “forced migration.” All agreed that terminological clarity was important in the context of a discussion on religion and forced migration, as many religious definitions are broader than those adopted by international law.

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*How do ethical discussions of forced migration normally proceed?*

*What are the main concepts and frameworks that are used?*

*How do religious-ethical concepts provide us with different insights into relevant issues?*

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Participants noted how forced migration is distinguished by the fact that people have been forced to move against their will. At the same time, it was mentioned how overemphasizing the “forced” quality of displacement can obscure the agency that asylum-seekers, refugees, and internally displaced peoples possess. For example, undocumented students in the United States may be encouraged to claim that their parents brought them against their will in order to win legal recognition.

The role that suffering plays in forced migration was also explored. It was suggested that, beyond the question of whether someone consented to migrate, the extent to which that person has suffered is important to consider.

Participants considered how public discussions of forced migration display a constant tension between the “impartial” standards of human rights and the “partial” considerations of states. The discussion addressed the potential of religious-ethics to bridge the partialist—impartialist divide. In this regard, participants noted that many religious actors neither put the interests of their bounded community first nor focus on legally championing abstract ethical

ideals, but instead seek to welcome displaced persons into their own intimate moral and political communities. There was a reflection on how religious-ethical language and ideas “ground” and “personalize” the framework of human rights through visions of hospitality and solidarity. Discussants also highlighted how religious-ethical language can help us think about moral and political communities that nevertheless remain open to the “other.”

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*How do the religious-ethical concepts of hospitality and solidarity re-frame our understanding of the ethical responsibilities we have towards displaced peoples?*

*To what extent do these concepts depend upon a more fundamental recognition of the moral and spiritual oneness of humankind?*

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This discussion also examined the concept of religion. How is the concept of religion defined? What does a religious perspective on the ethics of forced migration entail? Who is a religious actor? Participants acknowledged the difficulty of answering these questions, noting both how religion always intertwines with other factors and how religious communities and traditions constantly evolve. Indeed, the need to respond to contemporary dynamics of forced migration can often push religious communities to either expand their ethical understanding of forced migration or to retreat into xenophobia and narrow self-regard.

Several participants observed how political visions of hospitality are often conditional and temporary. Many states only accept forced migrants from certain backgrounds or with certain skills and even then only grant refuge and asylum-for a limited period of time. Participants also noted how the political discourse on hospitality can overemphasize the unidirectional flow of benefit from the host to the hosted. In response, some scholars are now studying the contributions that refugees and asylum-seekers make to their new communities. Nevertheless, several participants cautioned against what they see as the growing tendency to emphasize the benefits of hosting forced migrants in order to justify granting them refuge and protection.

One strand of discussion explored the link between hospitality and the idea of “welcoming the stranger.” Participants noted that viewing forced migrants as “strangers” often evokes strong negative stereotypes, as we tend to associate strangers with danger, violent crime, and a host of other social ills. The language of strangers can additionally reinforce the idea that there is a clear division between “us” and “them.” The challenge, then, is to either communicate a different sense of “the stranger” or to frame the concept of hospitality in a different way. In this regard, participants considered how religious-ethical concepts of solidarity can help overcoming the “othering” tendency of the language of hospitality. The framework of solidarity can then encourage people to identify with others and to sacrificially work to establish more just and universal communal bonds.

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*How and in what ways do religious perspectives motivate people to protect, assist, and advocate for forced migrants?*

*To what extent can religious practices and/or institutional structures play a part in responses to displacement?*

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Conversation during this session was enriched by several examples drawn from practitioner experiences. One participant from a faith-based organization noted the challenge of encouraging Christian congregations to become more involved in helping Syrian refugees. The organization in question sought to overcome the tensions between those who justify their fears of Islam with Christian theology and those who are motivated to help by a Christian-ethical framework by emphasizing the personal stories of everyday displaced Syrians.

Another participant explained how one faith-based organization responded to the arrival of displaced Central American children in Murrieta, California. Faith groups and voluntary agencies quickly condemned the xenophobia accompanying the arrival of these children. However, most of these organizations did not present a clear counter-narrative. This organization in question

sought to remedy the situation by creating a “toolkit” manual that would enable people to hear the voices and understand the experiences of these displaced Central American children. The toolkit focused on the Biblical passage, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). This quotation was widely used by faith groups and other organizations throughout the region to address the crisis.

A third participant described how U.S. refugee resettlement programs employed Western mental health professionals to assist traumatized Albanians fleeing Kosovo. Yet it soon became clear that these refugees were more interested in reestablishing their everyday religious practices and in speaking with religious leaders who could help them frame their suffering in the relevant religious terms. This experience demonstrated that religion is a powerful tool for cultivating resilience in the face of great suffering and trauma.

Finally, a fourth participant described an experience from the Bahá’í refugee resettlement program in Canada. One of the resettled refugees had recently recounted the great suffering she underwent when fleeing from Tehran to Turkey. She then explained how the Canadian Bahá’ís who later met her in Turkey to facilitate her resettlement described her and the other displaced Iranian Bahá’ís as “gems” who would be “scattered across our country.” She was deeply touched by the nobility this perspective bestowed upon her situation and noted how it presented an entirely different framework for understanding refugees and resettlement.

After these practical examples were shared, some participants shared the difficulties they faced in navigating the diverse attitudes toward faith-based organizations that exist in spaces of forced migration today. For example, one participant explained how his organization distributes two kinds of reports, one for religious and faith-based organizations and another for more secular audiences in order to describe the relevant activities in different terms. This led to an interesting discussion of the difference between the efforts of religious communities and faith-based organizations in the context of forced migration.

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*How can religious language and ideas be effectively employed in spaces of forced migration?*

*Can we identify broader ethical and political norms that should shape religious actors' efforts to protect, assist, and advocate for forced migrants?*

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Participants noted how most forced migrants believe in a transcendent reality and use religious language and ideas to make sense of their suffering. Indeed, numerous experiences in refugee camps suggest that religious language and ideas are not only acceptable for most refugees but even explicitly desired by them. Nevertheless, some Catholic organizations found it important to downplay their connections with the Catholic Church in order to work more effectively in Middle Eastern countries like Turkey. Certain communities have also found it important to ensure that their advocacy work does not draw retribution against their own members in other countries. Several participants additionally explained their struggles with using religious language in political spaces within the United States, where political-ideological fault lines are often stronger than religious identities and religious-ethical ideals.

One participant suggested that religious imagery may be equally, if not more, effective than religious language. Mention was made of a 2014 example when several bishops led a mass at the U.S.-Mexico border, during which communion was offered through a fence to people on the Mexican side.

Another participant highlighted the importance of gender by sharing that many displaced women are very spiritual but do not wish to associate with religious institutions that are dominated by men. These women have often left situations where male-led institutions exercised too much control over their lives, so practitioners should be careful not to force them back into similar situations out of a naïve desire to connect them with “their own” religious community.

## Next Steps

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The participants were all enthused by the mutual learning and exchange which took place. The importance of having academics and practitioners speaking with one another was mentioned. Practitioners were able to learn about current academic debates, while academics advanced their understanding of realities and challenges on the ground. In this regard, beyond expanding the pool of academics and practitioners involved in the conversation, one suggestion was to try to incorporate interested policymakers in any future events.

Another suggestion was to engage further with secular ethical traditions, as well as with academics, policymakers, and practitioners who are not directly involved in questions concerning *religion* and forced migration. Nevertheless, it was also mentioned that the conversation should not become so diffuse as to lose its focus. The topic of religion and forced migration is very significant today, particularly in the United States, and it needs to receive concentrated attention. Still, another suggestion was to include actors and thinkers from a wider range of religious settings.

Many participants mentioned the possibility of publishing something, perhaps an edited volume or a special journal issue. Others suggested connecting the conversation to other relevant conferences on forced migration or religion, such as the International Association for Studies in Forced Migration or the American Academy of Religion.

## Themes for Reflection

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Although numerous topics arose throughout the day that warrant further reflection, several were particularly worthy of mention: It became clear that any subsequent conversation would need to engage more directly the concept of “religion.” There is a very rich academic discourse on this theme, and these perspectives can provide further insight into the ideas of religious-ethics, faith-based organizations, and secular and religious actors.

It will also be important to examine in greater detail how religious notions of sacrifice and selfless service influence religious-ethical approaches to forced migration. If, as some prominent philosophers have argued, religious-ethical ideas are distinguished by the idea that there is an ethical good beyond human flourishing, how do such assumptions change the way we think about individual, communal, and institutional duties to displaced peoples?

Closely related, it is necessary to think further about how religious language and ideas help forced migrants draw upon inner sources of resilience. Does religion’s demonstrated power to stimulate resilience stem only from the fact that many forced migrants previously inhabited religiously-structured societies? Or, do religious approaches to suffering enable forced migrants to respond to their situations in transformative ways?

Finally, subsequent conversations will need to consider the connections between the transnational nature of contemporary forced migration and religion. Are religious-ethical frameworks uniquely suited to address forced migration because they are embedded in transnational religious communities? If so, how?

All of these topics can be beneficially explored from both ethical and empirical perspectives in future conversations.

## **Participants List**

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## Concept Paper

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*The concept paper was distributed to participants several weeks prior to the symposium*

In recent years, there has been a growing appreciation of the need to better understand the role that religion plays in motivating people to protect and advocate for forced migrants. This is part of a broader trend within the policy world and across the social sciences to reevaluate the role of religion in contemporary society. This trend has been largely motivated by a recognition of the fact that state-centered efforts to respond to many of the challenges that plague global affairs have struggled to achieve their stated goals, as well as an expanding awareness of the tremendous reserve of potential that religious communities possess to contribute to the advancement of many social goods.

Thus far, research on religion and forced migration has examined how religion causes displacement, how religion shapes the experience of displacement, and how religious actors are working to manage flows of forced migration in a more humane manner. Some attention has also been given to applying a Christian ethical framework to issues of forced migration, or migration more broadly. As significant as these developments have been, the conversation needs to advance much further still.

In this direction, the Institute for the Study of International Migration and the Berkley center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, along with the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, are co-sponsoring a symposium in which ethical questions about religion and forced migration can further explored. More specifically, the symposium will provide a space in which participants can consider the distinct ethical perspectives that religion can contribute to ongoing discussions of forced migration and the conditions under which such ethical perspectives can be effectively translated into reality and action in the field.<sup>2</sup> The goal of adopting this ap-

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<sup>2</sup> This symposium is a continuation and extension of the conversation that began at the *Faith and the Asylum Crisis* conferences, held respectively at Georgetown University and the Brussels School of International Stud-

proach is to help reframe the discussion of religion and forced migration in terms of the constructive potentialities that can and ought to flow from religious actors into spaces of forced migration. While the symposium will address certain philosophical and theological perspectives, the conversation will proceed in a way that is attentive to the interests and perspectives of policy-makers, practitioners, and social scientists.

On the theme of religious-ethical contributions to ongoing ethical discussions of forced migration, participants will be encouraged to discuss the following questions: How do ethical discussions of forced migration normally proceed? What are the main concepts and frameworks that are used? How do religious-ethical concepts provide us with different insights into the relevant issues? In particular, how do the concepts of hospitality and solidarity reframe our understanding of the ethical responsibilities we have towards displaced peoples? To what extent do these concepts depend upon a more fundamental recognition of the moral and spiritual oneness of humankind?

Having addressed this theme, we can begin considering a number of more empirically oriented questions about the conditions that should be present in order for the unique ethical potential of religion to be effectively deployed in the field: How and in what ways do religious perspectives motivate people to protect, assist, and advocate for forced migrants? How can religious language and ideas be effectively employed in spaces of forced migration? To what extent can religious practices and/or institutional structures play a part in responses to displacement? How can secular and religious actors engage in collaborative endeavors without falling into dynamics of instrumentalization? Can we identify broader ethical and political norms that should shape religious actors' efforts to protect, assist, and advocate for forced migrants?

The symposium will proceed in a largely conversational format by creating space in which participants can explore a series of questions and themes. One participant will help stimulate each discussion by offering a short description of their own involvement in relevant lines of practice and/or research.

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ies. Key insights that emerged from these conferences were recently published in a policy paper, entitled, *Faith and the Asylum Crisis: The role of religion in responding to displacement*

## **Symposium Agenda**

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9:30 - 10:00am – Welcome and introductory remarks

10:00-11:00 am – How do ethical discussions of forced migration normally proceed? What are the main concepts and frameworks that are used? How do religious-ethical concepts provide us with different insights into the relevant issues?

11:00-12:00pm – How do the concepts of hospitality and solidarity reframe our understanding of the ethical responsibilities we have towards displaced peoples? To what extent do these concepts depend upon a more fundamental recognition of the moral and spiritual oneness of humankind?

12:00-1:30pm – Lunch

1:30-2:30pm – How and in what ways do religious perspectives motivate people to protect, assist, and advocate for forced migrants? To what extent can religious practices and/or institutional structures play a part in responses to displacement?

2:30-3:30pm – How can religious language and ideas be effectively employed in spaces of forced migration? Can we identify broader ethical and political norms that should shape religious actors' efforts to protect, assist, and advocate for forced migrants?

3:30-3:45pm – Break

3:45-5:00 – Next steps and concluding remarks



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