

Faith, Secularism and Humanitarian Engagement

finding the place of religion in the support of displaced communities

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New York: Palgrave. Scheduled for publication in 2015

Strengthening local humanitarian engagement requires stronger partnership with faith groups and communities. This demands not only rethinking dominant understandings of religion but also revisiting the principles and practices of humanitarianism. This book articulates key aspects of the 'transborder discourse' necessary for the dialogue that must characterize in 21st century humanitarianism.

Chapter 1: Why humanitarianism doesn't get religion... and why it needs to

A brief recent history of religion and humanitarianism

Reappraising the relationship with religion

Understanding secularism

Refugee communities and secular humanitarianism

The humanitarian presumption of modernity

The humanitarian presumption of neutrality

21st century humanitarianism: rethinking the secular frame

Chapter 2: The place of faith in humanitarian engagement with displaced communities

Religion in humanitarian programming: the case of mental health & psychosocial support

Religion in local humanitarian engagement: the case of refugee assistance in Irbid, Jordan

Religion in humanitarian strategy: the World Humanitarian Summit and the WDR 2014

Chapter 3: Engaging with theological reflection to strengthen humanitarian response

The relevance of theological reflection for humanitarian response to displacement

The construction of religion in humanitarian discourse

Towards decolonial engagement

Context and knowledge

The relation of opposites

Identity theories: the individual and the group

Chapter 4: Towards more effective dialogical engagement between humanitarianism and religion

Scoping the challenge

Engaging religion in the public sphere

Reimagining humanitarian engagement in a post-secular world

Dealing with differences

Practicing dialogue



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Responding to the growing numbers of migrants forced to leave their homes as a result of conflict, political upheaval and disaster is a major challenge to the international humanitarian community. Not only are numbers increasing, but so is the complexity of situations faced. An increasing number of refugees are in conditions of protracted displacement. The numbers of internally displaced persons now exceed those crossing international borders. An increasing proportion of forced migrants settle in urban areas rather than archetypal camp settlements. Strategies to address these challenges are many, but efforts to more effectively connect with the agendas, capacities and institutions of displaced communities – and the host communities within which they seek refuge – are at the heart of most.

This trend is one of a number of the factors that appears to have contributed to recent debate regarding a more strategic engagement on the part of humanitarian actors with the religious experience and institutions of displacement-affected communities to which this book contributes. In the paper 'Faith and the discourse of secular humanitarianism' (Ager & Ager, 2011) we argued that religious language, sentiment and practice is marginalized within humanitarian response by a largely secular discourse. While this has helped to avoid some challenges in the implementation of humanitarian assistance with communities impacted by crisis and displacement (notably around issues of impartiality), it has done so at the expense of creating two major problems. First, the assumption of the neutrality of secularism is increasingly acknowledged as intellectually untenable by many social theorists and other writers (Taylor, Casanova, Shackman Hurd, Torpey Vasquez and Marquardt etc.). Second, marginalizing religion from humanitarian response creates a barrier between humanitarian agencies and the communities – for whom faith is often a significant dynamic in resilience and recovery – that they seek to serve. *Faith, Secularism and Humanitarian Engagement* elaborates on elements of this thesis – drawing from writings on the sociology and psychology of religion, migration and development studies, political science and theology – in the specific context of humanitarian engagement with religion in internally displaced and refugee communities.

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Joey Ager is an independent researcher working in San Diego, who writes and conducts research on the relationship between religion and public affairs. He studied theology at Oxford University, with a focus on African theologies of liberation. He has worked with religious leaders at the Janani Luwum Theological College in Gulu, Uganda on the establishment of an Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to promote awareness of Acholi traditions of peace and reconciliation; with Sojourners, a faith-based social justice organization in Washington DC; with Ember Arts, promoting women's livelihoods in Uganda through fair trade; and as a researcher for the Joint Learning Initiative Hub on Resilience in Local Faith Communities. He has written and blogged on issues of religion and development for Insight on Conflict, Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa, the Peace and Collaborative Development Network and the World Economic Forum. He is currently working as a Community Organizer with PICO, a national network of faith communities organizing around justice issues confronting faith communities across the USA. Recent work has focused on reforming US immigration legislation.