

Faith, Secularism and Humanitarian Engagement: finding the place of religion in the support of displaced communities

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The global population of 700 million forced migrants is a major focus of humanitarian concern. Engagement with the agendas and capacities of displaced communities is increasingly acknowledged as key to appropriate, effective and sustainable response on the part of the international humanitarian community. Religious institutions and groups – and the beliefs and practices they sustain – are widely recognized as relevant to community recovery and adjustment, but present major challenges for humanitarian engagement. While religion has long been a force within humanitarianism, its work is generally governed by a secular frame adopted to ensure neutrality and independence. Does this framing marginalize crucial religious resources within displaced communities, undermining local faith-based constructions of identity and bases for recovery and resilience? Or, rather, is a secular framing crucial to avoid compromise of core humanitarian principles? Are the roots of these concerns necessarily in conflict or can they be re-imagined for a post-secular age? This book seeks to identify the basis for humanitarian response with displaced communities that is strengthened, not weakened, through its engagement with religion. Although drawing upon relevant analysis of refugee resettlement in high income settings, the principal focus is the predominant context of contemporary forced migration: communities displaced within or across national boundaries, negotiating ‘durable solutions’ to their predicament with local host communities, national governments and representatives of the global humanitarian regime. Noting the diversity of interests, capacities and agendas across such stakeholders, the book articulates the need for, and terms of, more active dialogue on issues of religion between humanitarian actors, religious institutions and forced migrant communities for which faith frequently serves as a vital dynamic in their experience.



Alastair Ager is Professor of Population and Family Health at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. He has worked in the field of international development – with a focus on refugees and internally displaced communities - for twenty-five years, after originally training in psychology at the universities of Keele, Wales and Birmingham in the UK. He was head of the Department of Psychology at the University of Malawi from 1989-92, and has also held academic appointments at the universities of Leicester, Tulane and Queen Margaret, Edinburgh. He was a Research Associate with the Refugee Studies Centre in Oxford from 1998 to 2005. He has wide international experience across sub-Saharan Africa, south Asia, Europe and North America, having worked as a consultant for agencies including UNICEF, UNHCR, Save the Children, World Vision, Oxfam and Child Fund International. He is author of over one hundred scholarly publications, including papers in the *Journal of Refugee Studies* and the *Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care* and the edited volume *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration (Continuum)*.

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