

The State of the Evidence in Religions and Development

Accessible Summaries

Religions and Forced Migration (summary written by Susanna Trotta)

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What have the main debates on religions and forced migration been in the last 20 or so years?

In the last 20 years, there has been an increasing focus on the intersections between religions and forced migration. Religion has been discussed as one of the main causes of displacement, and in 2004 the UNHCR published [guidelines for refugee claims related to religion](#). However, there has been growing evidence from several countries of the lack of religious literacy when examining these claims. Indeed, decisions on these matters are often based on assumptions about "credible" religious beliefs and practices. For instance, there are documented cases of LGBTIQ+ claimants whose claims were rejected on grounds of incompatibility between their sexual orientation and religious affiliation. To this day, in countries of origin, transit and settlement, religion is still one of the key causes of discrimination and persecution of forcibly displaced people.

Researchers and practitioners have also documented and studied the [religious dimension of the migrants' experiences](#) across different stages of displacement. Religion is mobilised through prayer and other practices by migrants before, during and after their journey. For example, it is often a key element in migration-related decisions, and in processes of home-making in the country of settlement. It also constitutes a coping resource when the journey is interrupted by detention or forced immobility, or ended by death during transit. Forced migrants also often resort to religious practices as part of their negotiation to access protection and support, or to affirm their presence and gain visibility within host communities.

An important aspect of the intersection between religion and forced migration are the roles played by faith actors, including faith-based NGOs, religious leaders, and local faith communities, in providing support to displaced people through material and immaterial resources. There is a long history of religious groups using their networks, trust and reach to respond to forced migrants' needs, for instance by offering sanctuary, spiritual and psychosocial support, or by fostering social cohesion, often through interreligious work. For example, since the 1970s, faith actors in Canada have provided safe and legal routes to refuge through private sponsorship resettlement programs. More recently, [faith-based humanitarian corridors](#) have been set up in some European countries. There is also increasing evidence of the dynamics of [religion and forced migration in the Global South](#). These engagements have been partly acknowledged by governmental and intergovernmental actors too. For instance, faith actors

have been included as stakeholders in the [UNHCR 2018 Global Compacts on Refugees](#) and for [Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#).

What have been key trends in the last 1-5 years?

The last 5 years have seen a growth in awareness among academics and practitioners of the roles played by displaced communities in responding to forced migration, including through their religious networks. For example, there is evidence of religious leaders who experienced forced displacement offering sanctuary and spiritual support to members of their own or of other displaced communities. Rituals such as [burials of migrants in refugee camps](#) are also often carried out by displaced communities themselves.

As documented by recent literature, faith actors often contribute to forced migrants' social struggles. They are part of pro-refugee movements and of campaigns to demand better working conditions for migrants. Religious organisations are also involved in [responses to human trafficking and modern slavery](#), both in the Global North and in the Global South. These activities range from awareness-raising and prevention initiatives, including with religious leaders, to collaboration with governmental actors. At the same time, there are also documented instances of faith actors' complicity with deportation, discriminatory policies and practices, and xenophobic narratives.

While the literature on religions and forced migration has traditionally mostly focused on Christian and Muslim communities (and on Buddhist and Jewish groups to a lesser extent), there is a growing effort to broaden the scope of religion to include other traditions and communities, including indigenous people and beliefs related to witchcraft. For example, scholars have pointed out that the lack of knowledge on [juju](#) and other traditional beliefs can seriously hamper the ability of Refugee Status Determination officers to make informed decisions on claims by women who might be victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Another significant trend is that of applying an [intersectional lens](#) to the study of religions and forced migration. This means that scholars and practitioners are developing more nuanced analyses that take into account the intersections between religion, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and other dimensions of forced migrants' identities and experiences.

What are key takeaway points from these debates for practitioners, policymakers, researchers and civil society groups, including faith actors, who work on religions and forced migration?

Religions and forced migration is a rapidly growing field. In the last 20 years, it has become a key focus in humanitarian and development literature. Among many complex and nuanced debates that have taken place and are constantly evolving, the main takeaway points are:

- Religion is often a key dimension of migratory processes.
- Faith actors, including transnational networks and refugee and migrant communities, are often involved in responses to displacement.

- There is a need to further explore the nuances of religion-related power dynamics, including in terms of gender relations and social justice.
- Research and policy on religions and forced migration need to have a broader focus which includes non-mainstream religious groups and traditional beliefs.