

Between Despair and Hope:

Religious Actors and the Challenges of Forced Migration

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The world is at a critical juncture regarding how we respond to people on the move. Two contradictory trends contribute to apparent intractability. On the one hand, more people than at any other time in recorded history are presently displaced.¹ On the other, there is a growing trend towards exclusionary, deterrence-driven policies and attitudes whose primary aim is not only to keep displaced people out, but to dissuade them from moving in the first place. In some contexts, notably Australia, this approach has been fixed as the only possible policy response.² Often justified as “saving lives” by deterring people from undertaking dangerous journeys, this ‘compassionate bordering’³ is little more than a paltry fig leaf for the real message of these policies: “Go die somewhere else.”⁴

The result of these developments is millions of people are stuck in-between where they have fled from and where they hope to find safety; in a constant state of

¹ UNHCR. 2018. *Global Trends 2017*. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/> Accessed 4 October 2018, p2

² Manne, R. 2018. ‘This pains me, but it’s time to compromise on Australia’s cruel asylum seeker policy’ *The Guardian Australia* 22 September 2018. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/sep/23/this-pains-me-but-its-time-to-compromise-on-australias-cruel-asylum-seeker-policy?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other Accessed 4 October 2018

³ Little, A. and N. Vaughan-Williams. 2017. ‘Stopping boats, saving lives, securing subjects: Humanitarian borders in Europe and Australia’ *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 23, no. 3, pp535

⁴ Maley, W. 2013. ‘Die somewhere else’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Available at <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/die-somewhere-else-20130726-2qg3s.html> Accessed 12 November 2018.

temporariness between two forms of permanence. If they return to the life they have known, they face violence, poverty, human rights abuses and deprivations, and, in many cases, death. Yet, constrained by the laws of state-based politics, where the only legitimate form of belonging is citizenship and the only sanctioned mode of movement is through meager refugee resettlement programs, the transient are unable to move forward to establish permanent lives for themselves elsewhere. As such, these in-between people are either incarcerated indefinitely in offshore detention centers, in the case of the abandoned souls on Manus Island and Nauru, or they endure camp life in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey that was framed as temporary but becomes a new form of permanence, as camps evolve into make-shift cities with their own economies, governance, industries and social organization.

We are in desperate need of alternatives. We need new policy responses to the immediate, medium- and long-term challenges of mass displacement and alternative narratives about forced migration and its relationship with the status quo of state-centric politics. Religious actors have a crucial part to play opening up those alternatives, in partnership with others committed to upholding the value and dignity of all people, everywhere, regardless of their migration and citizenship status. Religious actors have tremendous resources for influence at their disposal that they can utilize as part of a broader movement to develop alternatives. This is not to say that secular actors do not have resources and influence, simply that theirs are different. And right now, we need to deploy all the resources we have to change the conversation and transform the political reality of forced migration.

Who are ‘religious actors’?

Identifying religious actors, like defining “religion” and “secular,” can be challenging. It can depend on cultural, political, historical, geographic and economic

context. Further, designating someone a ‘religious actor’ does not mean they are not also a political, economic, humanitarian, environmental, cultural actor—and in some cases also secular. It depends on who they engage and how they present themselves. Broadly speaking, when I refer to “religious actors,” I mean organizations, institutions, individuals, and communities that self-identify as ‘religious’ and draw on traditions, narratives, texts, and practices that—even if definitional debates arise—are widely accepted as “religious” within broader public discourse, for example, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. It is important to bear in mind gender differences as well. In the popular imaginary, especially in Euro-American contexts, ‘religious’ actors are often male, frequently white, heterosexual and usually hold some kind of formal official position within an existing institutional religious hierarchy. Yet at the grassroots level within religious communities and for local support initiatives, women are often more influential, and carry out the bulk of the practical labour required in programs that support and welcome people on the move. In fact, shared experiences of exclusion and marginalization often strengthen partnerships among women, LGBTQI+ and communities of displaced people.⁵

Crises, Not Crisis

In recent years it has become commonplace to speak about the so-called “refugee crisis.” This phrase has been criticized for numerous reasons.⁶ For one, the it suggests that the problem is those who have been displaced, ignoring the multiple actors, decisions, and events that have forced them to flee their homes. Second, the problem is not a lack of resource capacity but a lack of political will to provide

⁵ McGuirk, S. and M. Niedzwiecki. 2016. ‘Loving God vs Wrathful God: Religion and LGBT Forced Migration’ in Mavelli, L. and E.K. Wilson (eds). *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp223-240.

⁶ Wilson, E.K. and L. Mavelli. 2016. ‘The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Beyond Conceptual and Physical Boundaries’ in L. Mavelli and E. K. Wilson (eds). *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, p3

protection.⁷ Third, the phrase uses the singular, glossing over the multiplicity and diversity of challenges around the world connected with forced migration. Arguably, each country, each region, each continent, is facing its own form of ‘crisis’ related, directly or indirectly, to forced migration, whether that means a question of capacity, of welcome, of politics, of identity, of morality, or all of the above. Finally, and perhaps most important, the term ‘crisis’ implies a finite temporal span. A crisis is something that occurs rapidly, almost unpredictably, is short-lived and then resolved. Used in the context of forced migration, it suggests that mass displacement cannot be foreseen, a view many commentators would challenge. It also suggests that forced migration is a problem to be addressed and resolved. The reality is that forced migration, rather than being an exception, is a fact of state-based politics.⁸ Unless and until we are able to shift the view of forced migration from being an exceptional state to being an inevitable reality of the states-system, there will continue to be ‘refugee crises’ of varying scales and dimensions.

It is these last two points—the multiplicity and diversity of the challenges—that require more attention, and religious actors have the capacity to help shift current policy and, as important, shift mindsets and narratives, to open up space for more effective longer-term responses.

Multiple challenges are lumped together under the catchall phrase “refugee crisis.” I refer to immediate short-term, medium-term and long-term challenges, though these could be divided up in other ways. I suggest there are also three types of actions for actors, religious and non-religious alike, to take as they work to uphold the rights

⁷ OECD. 2015. *Migration Policy Debates, No 7 September 2015*. <http://www.oecd.org/migration/Is-this-refugee-crisis-different.pdf> (accessed 6 January 2016)

⁸ C. Higgins. 2017. *Asylum by Boat: Origins of Australia’s Refugee Policy*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, p202

of displaced people: Actors can offer practical responses through policies and programs, advocacy and campaigning, and then, more broadly, try to change the narrative and discourse about how we speak about forced migration in general.

Protection Now

The first sub-category concerns situations of urgency—people who are in immediate danger and need to find safety. This refers mainly to people fleeing violence and persecution. Let's be clear, however: this also involves those held indefinitely in detention centers and camps, such as the men on Manus Island and the families, particularly children, held on Nauru, children so traumatized that they have lost the will to live.⁹ Religious actors are often first responders in these emergency situations, for multiple reasons. Religious leaders and organizations often remain in violent situations when other organizations have made the difficult decision to leave. In contexts and communities where religion is stitched into the social fabric, it is often religious leaders and organizations that the displaced turn to first for assistance.¹⁰

Even in so-called “secularized” contexts, such as Europe, North America, and Australia, many expect that religious leaders and communities will address immediate suffering. Religious leaders and communities, especially Christian and Jewish in these

⁹ Doherty, Ben. 2018. 'Nauru self-harm “contagion” as 12-year-old refugee tries to set herself alight' *The Guardian Australia* 22 August 2018. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/aug/23/nauru-self-harm-contagion-as-12-year-old-refugee-tries-to-set-herself-alight?CMP=share_btn_fb Accessed 4 October 2018. As a result of court orders and community pressure, as of 12 November, less than 30 children and their families remain on Nauru, down from approximately 100 children at the beginning of October 2018. The government has committed to bringing all children to Australia from Nauru by the end of 2018. Families, however, remain separated. Vasefi, Saba and Helen Davidson. 2018. 'Many families remain separated amid ongoing Nauru medical transfers' *The Guardian Australia* 10 November 2018. Available at <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/nov/10/many-families-remain-separated-amid-ongoing-nauru-medical-transfers&sa=U&ved=0ahUKEwiZnNrA1M7eAhUBC8AKHW6GACKQFggMMAM&client=internal-uds-cse&cx=007466294097402385199:m2ealvuxh1i&usg=AOvVaw1UyPPyulEti-uU3g6nae43> Accessed 12 November 2018.

¹⁰ Mushtaq, H. and M.A Margoob. 2006. 'Pir, Faqir and Psychotherapist: Their role in psychosocial intervention of trauma' *JK-Practitioner* vol. 13, no. 1, ps92

contexts, carry a kind of ‘moral authority’ that remains potent, despite a decline in the societal relevance of and adherence to traditional religion.¹¹ The Love Makes A Way campaign in Australia is an example of religious actors and organizations drawing on long traditions of non-violent activism and operationalizing this moral authority to press for an immediate end to situations of harm, like the conditions on Nauru and Manus.¹² There is potential for religious actors to do far more advocacy and campaigning, especially in developed countries where the resources and capacity to assist more people exists, but the most severe problem is the lack of political will,¹³ a stance justified by the perception that constituencies either don’t know about these emergency situations or don’t care.¹⁴

Religious actors in these contexts have more power than they realize. Through public statements, ecumenical events, lobbying politicians, and partnering with other faith and non-faith communities and organizations, religious actors have the capacity to wield pressure on policymakers to address immediate challenges of life-threatening emergencies, as well as to change mindsets in their own communities and the broader society. Often this power functions in different forms and at different levels, according to frequently gendered roles of power and influence. This is not to say that some roles or positions are more powerful and influential than others, but that there are different kinds of power that are more effective in some contexts than others.

Consider a story I was told by Sister Brigid Arthur from the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project, a Melbourne-based asylum seeker support agency run by the Sisters of

¹¹ Davie, G. and E. K. Wilson. 2019. ‘Religion in European Society: The Factors to Take Into Account’ in B. Schewel and E. K. Wilson (eds). *Religion and European Society*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, in press;
Wilson, E. K. 2011. ‘Much to be Proud of, Much to be done: Faith-based organizations and the politics of asylum in Australia’ *Journal of Refugee Studies* vol. 24, no. 3, p560

¹² L. Mavelli and E. K. Wilson. 2016. ‘Postsecularism and International Relations’ in Haynes, J. (ed). *The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. London: Routledge, p268

¹³ Wilson and Mavelli, *op cit*, pp2-4

¹⁴ Manne, R. *op cit*

Brigid. Sister Brigid related her attempt to visit asylum seekers in detention in Australia and noted how the guard on duty repeatedly denied her entry. Sister Brigid was wearing ‘civies,’ with no visible sign of her membership of a religious order. At a certain point, out of sheer frustration, Sister Brigid revealed her identity as a nun. The guard’s attitude toward her visibly altered, she said. And she was almost immediately permitted entry to the detention facility.¹⁵ As in this example, the power embodied by religious actors and institutions can offer effective resistance to the authority of the state, even if that means only allowing one visitor to connect with those being held in detention.

Protection When?

The second sub-category involves intermediate challenges, including people in situations of protracted displacement, who have been living in camps for much or all of their lives. In these contexts the displaced are no longer in immediate physical danger from war. Yet their ability to move on with their lives is impeded as a result of uncertainty over how long they will be in camps before being permanently resettled elsewhere or being returned to their home country or region. They begin to establish routines for themselves, develop friendships with others in the camps, all the while with a sense of uncertainty regarding how long they will be there. Camps themselves can also be sites of violence, particularly gender-based violence. A similar form of uncertainty exists for people on temporary protection visas and safe haven enterprise visas in Australia, who are often unable to work or access social services. This underlying sense of temporariness creates continual anxiety and additional stress for those who have already experienced significant trauma.¹⁶

¹⁵ Arthur, Sr B. Member of the Brigidine Sisters and founder of the Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project. Interview concerning FBOs and asylum seekers in Australia. Friday, 10 September 2010.

¹⁶ Markus, A. and Taylor, J. (2006) ‘No Work, No Income, No Medicare: The Bridging Visa E Regime’, *People and Place* vol. 14, no. 1, pp43–52

Religious actors and religious narratives are again important in these contexts. They provide assistance within the camps and contexts of prolonged displacement as well as develop and implement programs that expand possibilities for people to be resettled. Within the camps, religious actors frequently implement activities that provide structure and routine for the inhabitants. These activities include religious services, but also language literacy classes, sporting activities, counseling, and education about sanitation, healthcare, nutrition and gender equality, which may also be done in partnership with other non-religious organizations.¹⁷ Researchers have found that religious belief systems often provide a form of certainty and structure for people experiencing displacement.¹⁸ The transcendent values and overarching narrative of religious traditions provide a framework in which the itinerant can situate their lives and experiences and can suggest that it is all somehow part of a larger plan with a purpose.¹⁹ Yet this overarching narrative can also be a cause of stress and trauma in its own right, if the experiences of displacement challenge an individual's beliefs.²⁰ Secular agencies are often reluctant to engage with religion and spirituality in the context of displacement, especially around issues of mental health.²¹ Yet religion and spirituality are part of human experience. Religious actors consequently have an

¹⁷ Matthies-Boon, V. and E. K. Wilson. 2018. 'A Crisis of God? Rethinking the Role of Religion, Spirituality and the Transcendent in Trauma Interventions amongst Syrian Refugees in Jordan' paper presented at the Pluralism in Emergenc(ies) conference, Tunis, 19-20 October, hosted by the Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life, Columbia University.

¹⁸ Eppsteiner, Holly Straut and Jacqueline Hagan. 2016. 'Religion as Psychological, Spiritual, and Social Support in the Migration Undertaking' in Saunders, Jennifer B., Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Susanna Snyder (eds). *Intersections of Religion and Migration: Issues at the Global Crossroads*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp49-70

¹⁹ Shaw, A., S. Joseph and P.A. Linley. (2005). 'Religion, spirituality, and posttraumatic growth: a systematic review' *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* vol. 8, no. 1, p2; Koslander, T., A. Barbosa da Silva and A. Roxberg. 2009. 'Existential and Spiritual Needs in Mental Health Care: An Ethical and Holistic Perspective' *Journal of Holistic Nursing* vol. 27, no. 1, p35

²⁰ Matthies-Boon and Wilson, *op cit*

²¹ Ager, A. and Ager, J. (2015). *Faith, Secularism and Humanitarian Engagement: Finding the Place of Religion in the Support of Displaced Communities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave

important role to play in providing space for people to talk about these dimensions of the displacement experience, though this needs to be sensitively done. It needs to be done on the terms of the person experiencing displacement, not the organization providing support.²²

Religious actors have also been central to opening up alternative pathways for refugees to be resettled and modeling alternatives to mandatory detention for asylum seekers. For example, the community of Sant'Egidio pioneered the Humanitarian Corridors program, in cooperation with the Federation of Evangelical Churches, the Waldensian and Methodist churches, and the Italian and French governments.²³ The programs are funded by the organizations that established them. The organizations arrange temporary protection visas through the Italian and French governments for displaced people in camps in Lebanon and bring them safely to those countries, where they then go through the normal asylum application procedure. The churches and religious communities also provide them with accommodation, language classes, healthcare, as well as giving advice about the asylum application process and aid in finding work (if allowed under the terms of their visa).

The program of private sponsorship that exists in Canada has also made it possible for religious communities, along with ethnic, community or service organizations—either alone or working in partnership with each other and with businesses—to sponsor displaced people for permanent resettlement in Canada. Existing alongside the government's resettlement program, private sponsorship in Canada has enabled an estimated additional 28,0000 people to be resettled since the

²² Koslander et al, *op cit*, p39

²³ Lutheran World Federation. 2018. 'Churches in France Open "Humanitarian Corridors"' 20 March 2018. Available at <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/churches-france-open-humanitarian-corridors> Accessed 4 October 2018; Sant'Egidio. N.d. 'Humanitarian Corridors' Available at <http://www.santegidiousa.org/humanitarian-corridors/> Accessed 4 October 2018

program's inception in the 1970s.²⁴ In 2016, the maximum number of government-assisted refugees was set at 25,000, while the maximum number for privately sponsored refugees was 18,000.²⁵ So, private sponsorship represents a sizeable portion of the total number of protected persons resettled in Canada each year, expanding the capacity of the Canadian authorities to bring people to safety.

As in the case of the Humanitarian Corridors program, religious actors also play a significant role assisting people who have experienced displacement once they arrive in a host country. While this is often similar to the support provided by non-religious organizations in terms of meeting practical needs, there are several examples of religious actors providing additional support through shared living programs. Examples of such programs include the Welcome Project in Paris, Kinbrace in Canada, and First Home Project (FHP) in Australia. All three programs provide short- to medium-term accommodation for individuals and families newly arrived in the respective host countries. The Welcome Project in Paris, coordinated by Jesuit Refugee Services France, assists mainly individuals by offering them a room in a house with a local family. They live with the family, share meals, learn about the host culture, and receive assistance from the host family in navigating public transport, healthcare, education and the job market.²⁶

²⁴ Refugee Council of Australia. 2017. 'Canada's private sponsorship of refugees: Potential Lessons for Australia.' 24 August 2017. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/australia/canada-s-private-sponsorship-refugees-potential-lessons-australia>. Accessed 4 October 2018.

²⁵ Government of Canada. 2016. 'Notice – Supplementary Information 2016 Immigration Levels Plan' Available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/notice-supplementary-information-2016-immigration-levels-plan.html> Accessed 4 October 2018

²⁶ Carriere, Jean-Marie. 2016. 'The Refugee Experience as Existential Exile: Hospitality as a Spiritual and Political Response' in Mavelli, L. and E.K. Wilson (eds). *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp150-152; Jesuit Refugee Services France. 2014. 'Jesuit Refugee Service Welcome Project: the host family experience' Available at http://en.jrs.net/campaign_detail?PTN=promo-20140619092119&TN=PROJECT-20140624031928 Accessed 4 October 2018.

Kinbrace offers accommodation to newly arrived individuals, couples, and families in an apartment complex where established Canadian families also reside. The families share a meal together once a week, yet are also able to lead independent lives. There is a permanent support system available while the families establish themselves in Canada. Families stay at Kinbrace for between 3-9 months.²⁷ FHP follows a similar model, with newly arrived refugee families sharing a former church renovated into small apartments with a resident Australian family.²⁸

These programs show the crucial support that is offered by religious actors in the processes surrounding forced migration and resettlement. These programs go beyond usual models of assistance to “doing life together.” They bridge public and private, us and them, by creating a new kind of community. As such, they offer alternative approaches to resettlement. Rather than simply requesting that newly arrived individuals and families adapt, the community as a whole adapts and supports one another in this process. As Jarrod McKenna, founder of FHP, put it, “Our transformation is bound up with their transformation.”²⁹ Thus, the burden to “integrate” is shared.

These programs are not without their problems. Concerns have been raised about the potential for abuse through the private sponsorship program, for example.³⁰ Being dependent on private funding means that the operating budget of these organizations is often very short-term, and can endanger the program itself.

²⁷ Kinbrace, n.d. ‘Our Housing’ <https://kinbrace.ca/extend-hospitality/our-housing/> Accessed 4 October 2018

²⁸ Refugee Council of Australia. 2014. ‘Bright Ideas: First Home Project’ Available at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/publications/bright-ideas-first-home-project/> Accessed 4 October 2018

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ Beaman, L. G., J. A. Selby and A. Barras. 2016. ‘No Mosque, No Refugees: Some Reflections on Syrian Refugees and the Construction of Religion in Canada’ in Mavelli, L. and E.K. Wilson (eds). *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London: Rowman and Littlefield, pp80-1

A more significant question, however, is the extent to which these programs allow states to abdicate their responsibility to protection migrants. In providing these alternative programs of resettlement and support, are religious actors enabling states to forego meeting their duties under international law? Perhaps. In the current climate, however, states are seeking to abdicate their responsibility anyway. It is unlikely that these additional programs facilitate that. In some cases, such as Humanitarian Corridors, they actually have made it easier for states to meet their international protection obligations.

These programs are also, however, highly limited. The Welcome Project provides accommodation for up to five weeks. The Humanitarian Corridors program in France is only permitted to resettle five hundred people. Kinbrace is only able to house nine newly arrived families at a time. Again, however, these programs offer models that can be adapted and implemented elsewhere to increase capacity.

Perhaps the most important role of these programs, however, is not about the numbers, but about the possibilities they demonstrate. There are alternatives to the exclusionary, deterrence-driven approaches that dominate most developed countries rhetoric and policy on resettlement. Programs such as Kinbrace, Welcome and FHP clearly demonstrate how these alternatives work in practice.

The Norm, Not the Exception

This demonstration of alternatives is crucial when we consider the third sub-category of challenges – the long term seemingly intractable issues that continue to place lives at risk and force people to move, including conflict, poverty, under-development, and climate change. This is not simply a matter of throwing more money at these problems or implementing more development initiatives. Addressing these

issues requires a shift in how we think about forced migration and how we understand its connection with other global challenges.

Responses to forced migration tend to be short-term and reactionary. This is largely because forced migration is seen as something temporary, an aberration. Yet, while particular instances of a specific people being forced to flee may be temporary, forced migration itself is an enduring reality of global politics and the states-system. In the face of climate change, it is going to become even more commonplace. To effectively address the needs of displaced people, the narrative around forced migration must shift so that it is no longer viewed as an aberration engendering moral panic but seen as a reality of shared global political life.

A second shift required in our conceptualization of forced migration regards the reasons why people flee. Established international legal frameworks and policy approaches assume that a person is forced to flee because of persecution. Persecution and, to a lesser extent, mass indiscriminate violence are considered the only legitimate grounds for a person to seek asylum. Two key problems exist here. First, the definition of a refugee in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees is highly limited, ambiguous, and open to interpretation. Second, the nature and causes of flight have altered significantly since the drafting of the Convention in the aftermath of World War II. People flee not only because their rights are being abused, but also because their rights are being deprived.³¹ I am not at all suggesting that the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees needs to be redrafted and renegotiated. In the current political moment, such a move would be self-defeating. We would almost undoubtedly lose the commitments we have from states to protect the displaced. Rather, I am suggesting that

³¹ Betts, A. 2013. *Survival Migration: Failed Governance and the Crisis of Displacement*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

a shift is needed not only in our understanding of forced migration in general, but also in our understanding of the reasons why people are forced to migrate, and hence the ways in which we interpret the legal clauses of the Convention. Climate change makes this shift all the more urgent.

Religious actors are well placed to contribute to changing this narrative for a number of reasons. Almost all major religious traditions include oral or textual stories of migration. These stories can be utilized to reshape the collective imagination about forced migration, challenging the view that it is a temporary emergency that requires solving and reimagining it as an everyday reality. Thinking about forced migration in this way will encourage the development of systems, institutions, and processes that ready to be deployed in response to specific forced migration emergencies. These already exist in some forms, but the collective imagination and political will to support them does not. This is where religious actors can play a crucial role. Accepting forced migration as a reality of collective global life will also reduce the sense of panic that can be manipulated around the mass movement of people.

Secondly, and perhaps more practically, through their global networks, religious actors are able to access information about potential “hotspots” and incidents of forced migration before they occur. They can use these networks to provide information to governments and NGOs so that responses to forced migration can be proactive rather than reactive and we might avoid the mass numbers of forcibly displaced people that we are presently seeing. This needs to be done alongside the shift in narrative, however. It is not that we did not know about the conflict in Syria, for example, and the potential for displacement. Rather, political leaders and institutions chose not to respond until people started arriving in mass numbers at their borders.

Without a shift from seeing forced migration as an aberration to seeing it as an everyday reality, political leaders will continue to ignore it for as long as possible.

Living in Tension between Despair and Hope

Finally, religious actors can also play a powerful role in providing encouragement for the displaced as well as those who work to secure rights and protection. We should not underestimate the need to be encouraged. It is a dark time for the politics of migration, for politics in general, and it is easy for people experiencing displacement and those who support them to be overwhelmed by the seeming impasse of the moment. The dominance of secular ontologies in contemporary global politics has muted the voice of religious actors, with regard to forced migration, and politics in general. Many commentators would say that this is a good thing, because it curbs the worst excesses of religious fervor that can lead to abuse, manipulation, and exploitation of the vulnerable. Yet such a view ignores two key points: first, “secular” actors are no less capable of abuse, manipulation, and exploitation. One need only look at the human rights abuses that are inflicted by the secular state in the name of “security” or by corporations in the name of profit. Secondly, constricting the freedom of religious actors in global politics also limits their disruptive potential, their prophetic and visionary capacity to imagine different, more inclusive and more expansive, ways to live together, imaginative capacities that are at present sadly lacking in the politics of migration.³² Religious actors and communities have powerful resources in their sacred scriptures, which offer stories of hope and encouragement. More than that, however, religious traditions have the capacity to teach us how to live with paradox and tension—how to celebrate the small victories of seeing one family permanently

³² I am grateful to Atalia Omer for her insightful questions and comments that prompted me to think more deeply about this dimension of the paper.

resettled, while at the same time acknowledging the vast numbers that still need to find safety. They can help us to know how to feast as well as fast, how to mourn and celebrate, how to hope in the midst of despair. Being able to live with these tensions, to celebrate small victories while acknowledging the work to be done, is crucial to maintaining the energy to continue.

To do this, religious actors, academics, and the media need to work in partnership to tell stories about these alternative possibilities. As scholars, we have the capacity to analyze the challenges that exist and the alternatives being offered. One of the most important things we can do is to research these alternatives, critically assess them, and then communicate that research to policymakers and the broader community, sharing stories of both successes and failures, challenges and triumphs. Newspapers, television, radio, and social media are powerful purveyors of stories and can do much more in challenging dominant narratives about forced migration.

Often religion is pointed to as something that divides us from one another and is marginalized in movements seeking to promote diversity and inclusion. Indeed, through the conjoining of the categories of ‘refugee’, ‘terrorist’ and ‘Muslim’ in public consciousness, religion has been deployed for just that purpose—to divide and marginalize.³³ The global justice movement, for example, is often characterized by a staunch secular bias, seeing religion in general and certain religions in particular as a key part of the problem of oppressive politics.³⁴ The media and academia have also been guilty of this so-called “secular bias.” Yet religious traditions are no more or less divisive than other elements of our shared human lives—social, political, cultural, economic, racial, ideological. The need to build coalitions for inclusion and equality

³³ Wilson and Mavelli, 2016, *op cit*, pp4-10

³⁴ Daulatzai, A. (2004). A leap of faith: Thoughts on secularistic practices and progressive politics. *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 182, pp565–576

against exclusion and oppression requires that we make use of all the available resources for solidarity, moving beyond simplistic binary divisions such as ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ to a broader commitment to human dignity and equality.