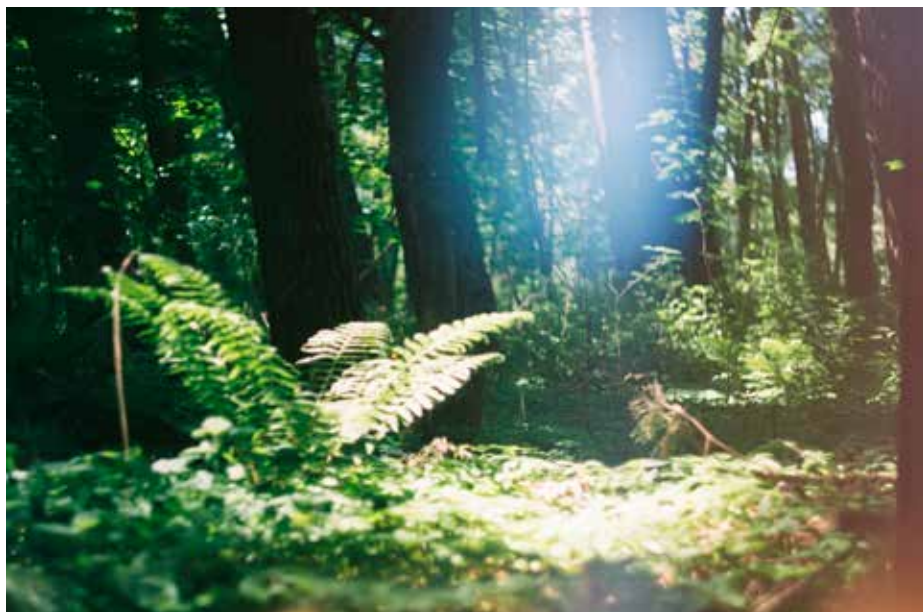


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People on the Move: Religious Pluralism on Pandemic Scene

Book review – essay

Refugees and Religion. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories. 2021. Edited by Birgit Meyer and Peter van der Veer. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 334. ISBN-13: 9781350167131, DOI 10.5040/9781350167162

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This book places the current trajectories of people who flee from conditions of oppression and conflict, and who are seeking refuge in Europe in a broader historical and comparative perspective. The authors address past experiences in Europe with the role of religion in both producing and accommodating refugees, in the context of the period of the Peace of Westphalia, World War II, and Cold War. As a reviewer, I try to emphasize how past experiences with mass migration help us the overcoming of the lure of exceptionalism conveyed by the crisis framing, which in the fact contributes to the obliteration of the memory of refugees in Europe. This book offered a transdisciplinary approach connecting borders, ethnographic, religious studies in the context of the global political and social reality. At the same time, this book presents a collection of historical and ethnographic case studies of refugees and religion in Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands, United States of America, Vietnam, India, Uganda, and Morocco. It opens the possibility to highlight both the diversity of human religious predicaments and a common ground of these problems. The different narratives point to the ongoing interplay between flows and border closures in which general actors are not only refugees but also the societies from where they flee and those they reach out to. The stories about historical migration events help us overcome historical amnesia about that the refugee issue was a recent phenomenon in the of globalization and make visible its trajectory.

Keywords: border, memory, mobilizing theory, pandemic scene, refugees, religion, secularization.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted every domain of life: borders, migration, human mobility, and situation of religious pluralism. The events of last year show

us that the pandemic is not simply a biological threat but and also a social disease, which put such human values as tolerance, democracy, empathy, and freedom of conscience to the test. The editors of this book propose that the refugee issue is of

central significance not only in past and present Europe but also in politics globally. The goal of this book to locates the last mass migration in a long history of the creation of nation-states and borders, which produce and stop eternal human mobility. This book presents a collection of historical and ethnographic case studies of refugees and religion in Germany, Great Britain, Netherlands, United States of America, Vietnam, India, Uganda, and Morocco. It opens the possibility to highlight both the diversity of human religious predicaments and a common ground of these problems.

If we try to sum the general idea of this book it will be, first, the overcoming of the lure of exceptionalism conveyed by the crisis framing, which in the fact contributes to the obliteration of the memory of past experiences with refugees in Europe. Second, the book demonstrates the explicit links between ongoing research on recent migrations by people from the Global South and the history of refugees and religious plurality in Europe. Third, that European states have accommodated religious refugees during the past 500 years. Considering this, Europe was and is “religiously plural” by default.

The game with notions on Pandemic scene

The motto “*Migrant inclusion matters*” for Manuel Orozco, Director of Creative’s Center for Migration Economic Stabilization means that “migration is not just a development challenge, but also a resource that can be part of developing solutions, it is definitely a reality that is at the intersection between the industrialized world and the

developed world, and it captures all of the imperfections of these worlds¹”.

People on the move, whether they are economic migrants or forcibly displaced persons such as asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons, are among the more vulnerable population for who pandemic opens the real face of the extent of their marginalization. If to look at migration through a pandemic scene we find a whole junction of negative trends: lockdown, travel bans, and social distancing, the risk of contagion, and also the possible loss of employment and wages. The list of the potential troubles includes such new problems as the stopping migrant remittances provide which so necessary their families in many countries and possibly reduce their access to health services.

The book abounds with innovative and important definitions such as the *vernacular theologies of mobility*, *boundary-transgressing force*, *an emblem of a deterritorialized imagined community*, *the religious vector of mobility*, and others. One of the important tasks of the book is to make clear the notional distinction between refugees what is very fruitful in both a political and a legal sense, recovering the definitional process with a dynamic approach. For authors, a refugee is “a person who is forcibly displaced.” This sounds straightforward, but all to be understood contextually. Legally, the distinction between migrant

1 Rupert, Evelyn. Covid-19 and Migration: current impacts and future trends. <https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/stories/migration-stories/covid-19-and-migration-current-impacts-and-future-trends/>

and refugee is pertinent, but the boundaries between these categories are arbitrary and dynamic. During the same lifetime, one can move between the status of refugee and migrant, resident and citizen. For Peter van der Veer, most of the refugees fleeing from Syria do not form a nation-state but from a *Hobbesian War of All against All*. He questions “the idea that a citizen is protected by the state she belongs to is part of the legal fiction of the nation-state. Some citizens are, and some are not. Muslims in India, Uyghurs in China, and Jews in Europe’s recent past, all are unprotected citizens. The language of racial and religious purity is pervasive in all these cases.”²

The introduction of such a key term as *purification* is the crucial symbol in the campaigns of ethnic and religious cleansing that in different historical periods was produced mass migration. Seventy years ago, anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) defined it as “matter out of place” or as we speak today “people out of place,” displaced persons. The purification as such raises another important for refugees’ issue of religious conversion and cultural assimilation that is not often discussed in a migration context. Such authors as Heleen Murre van den Berg, William Wheeler, and Thien-Huong Ninh described that refugee has to flee to avoid being either killed or converted, but in the receiving countries sometimes again confronted with discourses and practices which push them to change the particular parts of their own culture. Nevertheless, often if they convert

or assimilate that change is often considered “not sincere and doubtful”.³

European religious plurality

The structure of the book includes four chapters: *Politics of Religious Plurality in Europe*, *People on the Move from Vietnam*, *People on the Move in and from Africa*, and *Political Spaces of Reception*. First, such structure gives the possibility to connect the theory of the subject with descriptive cases of studies, second, it unites different historical periods and important political events such as the time of World War II, Cold War, the collapse of the USSR and Arab Spring.

The chapter *Politics of Religious Plurality in Europe* re-opens such important issues as war, migration, and the politics of religious diversity. Wayne P. te Brake underlines that policy of religious diversity has a very fragile environment and status. From the Balkan Wars in the 1990s until the “terrorist” attacks on New York the agents of violent political conflict have invoked religious identities to mark their enemies and their allies, underscoring the entangling forced migrations in the religious diversity and war conflicts. He reexamines European history religious wars and forced migration, focusing on three recurrent developments: the dislocation of refugees in the context of religious conflict, the accommodation of newcomers in their places of refuge, and the survival of dissidents in the place

2 *Refugees and Religion. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*. 2021. Edited by Birgit Meyer and Peter van der Veer. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 4.

3 Wheeler, William. *Conversion through Destitution. Religion, Law, and Doubt in the UK Asylum System*. In *Refugees and Religion. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*. 2021, p. 245.

of born. Altogether, they create a varied image of vulnerable religious populations. He questioned “how can this history of religious war and forced migration help us to think about the troubled relationship between refugees and religion today?”⁴ The author understands that the history of post-Reformation Europe will not simply be repeated today in the Middle East, Africa or South Asia.

He named the principal actors connected with the migration crisis and religious refugees: “on the one hand, rulers, ranging from well-established authorities to rival claimants to political authority in revolutionary situations, who privileged one religious’ group over other alternatives in religiously diverse polities, and, on the other hand, “dissident” subjects – that is, people who chose religious beliefs, practices, or affiliations that were different from those privileged by their rulers”⁵. From the view of the most book’s authors historical thinking is the source for deeper understanding the problem of religious refugees. Wayne P. te Brake offers a vocabulary that allows us to compare the different patterns of religious coexistence: to polarize previously peaceful relations and to demonize their religious enemy.

The authors put attention to important part of the way that passed refugees: the ordinariness of their lives and of their experience in these transit countries. In the articles “Between Hope and Fear: Migrant

‘Illegality’ and Camp Life”, in Assam, India, “German Refugees and Refugees in Germany”, “People on the Move in and from Africa” described the notions of “crisis” and “emergency” as something extraordinary and describe conditions of people fleeing from wars and persecutions. Despite this, displaced people often live for extended periods in the country where they find refuge, waiting for resettlement to a third country, or to go back to their home country.

Arjun Appadurai named this book “the remarkably rich edited collection identifies and analyzes the ways in which refugees as well as the nation-states that either welcome or reject them draw on multiple religious traditions to make sense of their unsanctioned mobility”.

Birgit Meyer’s “mobilizing theory”

The purpose of the most theoretical construction or theory is to have a mobilizing influence on society. For me as a reviewer most important was Birgit Meyer’s chapter “Mobilizing Theory. Concluding Thoughts” because she started from the problem of exploring religious roles in ways that lead beyond well-trodden stereotypes about religion in modern, secular society. From her view, the neglect of religion in relation to the study of refugee issues is not simply an empirical problem, but also a conceptual one. It stems from the secularist approach according to which religion, understood in terms of private belief and marginal through the problem of mass migration and refugee crisis. In the paragraph “Beyond ‘Crisis”” she analyzed last year’s theoretical approach and calls into question the

4 Wayne P. te Brake. War, Forced Migration, and the Politics of Religious Diversity. In *the Refugees and Religion. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*. 2021, p. 18.

5 *Ibid*, p.20.

unprecedented popularity of direct connection between notions *crisis* and *migration*. For her, the migrant crisis does not refer primarily to the critical situation of these people as such, but above all, to the problem, Europe has with their presence. It is a European “crisis” in which politicians fail to offer refugees decent and fair treatment as required by international law.

Nevertheless, contemporary Europe as the presumed embodiment of human rights is in a crisis. Birgit Meyer evaluates the definition of crisis as “problematic” from the view of the conceptualization of the current situation. Far from being neutral, the term “crisis” has been employed as a long-standing rhetorical figure to diagnose a particular situation as dangerous. As part of the “structural signature of modernity,” the concept of crisis enshrines multiple, long-standing layers of meaning. The use of the term ‘crises’ involves a diagnostic act that may legitimate huge political consequences and evokes moods that are difficult to control”. In my view, a crisis as such mostly portrayed an extraordinary event, leading to every kind of instability and danger and affecting pre-existing normality. The notion of crisis also holds a performative potential regarding prescriptions on how to return to the past normality.

The notion of past normality seems to be the pure metaphor because the XXI century became with the cycle of the crisis: ecological, global warming, mass migration, financial and others. Nowadays crises have become a recurrent feature of the “second modernity” leading to the second metaphor – the “risk society” (U. Beck). However, the rejection from the lure of

exceptionalism provided by the crisis framing, which partly contributed to this book is that authors established explicit links between recent mass migration and the history of religious refugees in European past and present.

The narratives against forgetfulness

In the book every chapter has its own transmitted narratives in situations of displacement and migration, their stories challenge conceptualizations of religion as entirely bound within national conditions and templates, however real and taken for granted they may appear. The Syriac, Vietnam’s, Congolese narratives’ points to the ongoing interplay between flows and border’s closures in which general actors are not only refugees but also the societies from where they flee and those they reach out to. The stories about historical migration events, the personal pieces of refugee’s evidence helping us overcome historical amnesia about that the refugee issue is a recent phenomenon and exceptionally the contemporary product of globalization. The narratives about the conflict between indigenous groups and Muslims in the Indian state of Assam, the exodus of the Northern Vietnamese Catholics in the search of religious freedom, and many other stories have ethnographic and anthropologic importance, illustrate the idea that religion becomes palpable through people, their practice, and everyday activity.

The case studies about the role of Pentecostal religion in the everyday life of Congolese refugees stuck in Kampala focused not on the beliefs expressed during

church services but mostly on the everyday practices and ordinary lives people live as refugees. Alessandro Gusman speaking with Kampala refugees concluded that the refugees understand religion as lived experience, in which the main focus is on “what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds”⁶. In fact, Gusman’s conclusion has a universal character and gives an explanation of the many collective and personal “protracted refugee situations.” In his view, “in such circumstances, religion can provide a framework to explain the condition of being refugee, narratives that can serve as spiritual guides in daily practices, and also instruments to gain a reputation and to obtain a certain degree of social mobility”⁷.

Staying with the trouble: “secular sacred”

Today in the world, secularization is increasingly challenged the other models of religious relations as in daily practices as in its theoretical foundations. This problem the authors of the book try re-open and deconstruct. The presence of religion, especially in its more traditional forms, takes on significant characteristics precisely with

the migration phenomenon since for many immigrants belonging to a religion is by no means a secondary level dimension of their own identity. First of all, that we are living in a different epoch from the one defined as completely secularized, but we cannot ignore the possibility that the process of moving away from religious practices can progressively intensify. Second, we become witnesses of the more traditional expressions of the religious experience and the phenomenon of religious radicalization, which takes the form of fundamentalism. In its multi-faceted expressions fundamentalism partly contributes to an increase in the appearance of refugees and mass migration.

During the last 20 years among scholars exist invisible agreement or rejection of the conventional secularization thesis. For many decades secularization was the dominant analytical frame in the public debates and theoretical background for religious research in modern society. How do national “models” of secularization and practices interact with the religious or cultural claims in the condition of mass migration? The next question of how to comprehend the dynamics and plurality of contemporary religious environments in the context of secular formations in nation-states are one of the important issues as in empirical as in the conceptual sense that is faced by the study of religion today? These questions are not only relevant for the reason for the engagement with the largely Muslim communities in almost all Western countries, but also at the witnessed book for Jews, Buddhists, African Orthodox Christian, and Pentecostals in Europe. Nevertheless,

6 Orsi, Robert A. “Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live In?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42(2), pp. 169–174, p. 172.

7 Gusman, Allesandro. “Are We an Elected People?” *Religion and the Everyday Experience of Young Congolese Refugees in Kampala. In the Refugees and Religion. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories.* 2021, p. 142.

every case of modern, pluralist democracy is best conceived as an open project in which the political form of society should not be perceived as the realization of a transcendent vision or will. For this reason, if we have to deal with mass migration necessary to look at new religious plurality as a new circumstance that claims democracy project re-opening.

Birgit Meyer emphasizes that the fact of religion's neglect in the study of refugee issues is not simply an empirical problem, but also a conceptual one. The idea that belongs to the Van den Hemel, Van der Veer, and other researchers a the cleavage between constitutional and cultural secularism, in that certain rights, such as the freedom of religious expression, are challenged in the name of culturalized and exclusivist understandings of citizenship. At the same time, these authors note two mutually contradictory processes in European public opinion: first, the people come to be more secularist in orientation and are suspicious about the religiosity of refugees and migrants. Second, parallel with there is also a tendency to rediscover the Christian roots of national and European culture, in whose refugees and migrants with a non-Christian background are held to not belong. The current politics of belonging influenced growths a public mobilization that expressed in the conventional concept of a "secular sacred" or the "deepening ambivalence between sacred and profane".

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Conclusion

The authors of the book "Refugees and Religion. Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories" became a critical observer of the challenges related to refugees and religion and understand own mission as entrance to step outside of academic or cultural comfort zones in order to global and difficult problems. For them European societies have long become de facto postcolonial "frontier zones" in which religious and other differences are articulated and governed⁸. The both *settled* and *nomadic reasons* become the interconnected modes of knowledge production. Donna Haraway describing Anthropocene wrote: "I think our task is to make the Anthropocene as short / thin as possible and to cultivate in every possible way imaginary future era, in which the restoration of shelters is possible. <...> Right now, the Earth is full of refugees, people and animals who cannot find a home for themselves"⁹. This book is directly devoted to those who cannot find a home for themselves.

- 8 Chidester, Dawid. 1996. Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia; Mezzadra, Sandro. At the Borders of Europe. Discussing with Étienne Balibar. Europa, May 28, 2019 and We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton, 2004.
- 9 Haraway, Donna. 2016. Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene. Durham and London. Duke University Press, p.100.

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