



Religion Resettles Refugees: Religion's Role in Integration in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

Drocella Mugorewera, who had originally fled Rwanda as a persecuted Hutu, arrived in Knoxville, Tennessee as a refugee in 2009. When she fled, “[her] weapons were always [her] rosary and [her] Bible.”¹ These sacred objects helped her focus during troubled times and fueled her resilience. In fear for her safety, she went into hiding for nine months and could not attend church, which she said was the most difficult part of her

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journey. When she initially fled, she had no destination. She said, “I just prayed every day and trusted God. The people helping me along the way could have hurt me in any number of ways, but God took care of me.” While reflecting on her journey to the United States, Drocella admitted, “I didn’t choose to be in the U.S., but I am grateful to be here. The U.S. saved my life. I give thanks to my parents every day for giving me my faith.” Drocella’s first American friends nicknamed her “woman of faith.”

One of the first things Drocella pursued upon her arrival was a connection to a local church; “I went, did confession, communion, and felt refreshed.” A reporter once asked her what three things she would not want to live without. She replied, “The Eucharist, shelter, and friends. I cannot live without these.” Her involvement with the local church helped to shape her early experiences in the United States; the benefit of this engagement was not merely of a spiritual nature, but it also brought with it tangible benefits.

A practical advantage of her involvement pertained to her children, who came to the United States sometime after her arrival. “They kept asking me when and where they would go to school,” Drocella recalled. “I told them to pray. Back home they had gone to Christian schools, but here they are very expensive.” She told the priest about her children’s wish, so he created a scholarship fund and members of the congregation funded their high school tuition. When her husband applied for asylum in the United States, a fellow congregant in her church helped him through the process.

The church community invited Drocella’s family to picnics, BBQs, and other events and “always made [them] feel welcome.” The church community helped her and other refugees with housing, job searches, document translation, youth summer camps, English and other life skills, ridesharing to appointments, and co-signing for loans to build their credit. She added that places of worship can also provide a platform for refugees “to go and speak and raise awareness.” The benefits accrued by Drocella and her family were reciprocated in time. Being able to speak several languages “gave [her] many opportunities to connect [with] and help” other foreign-born congregants and provided a paying job as a translator for the church. With other members of her church, she now volunteers for Habitat for Humanity, building houses for refugee families. Drocella also serves as the executive director of a local refugee resettlement agency.

Drocella originally shared her story in 2019 during a symposium organized at Princeton University's Office of Religious Life (ORL) for a national audience of refugee resettlement agencies. It was convened with the purpose of better understanding the important and often overlooked role that religion plays in the social, moral, psychological, spiritual, and civic lives of refugees after resettling in the United States and while integrating into local communities. The role that religion plays in the lives of forced migrants during their displacement, following their resettlement in the destination country, and as a support or possible hindrance to their integration has been inadequately studied among scholars, practitioners, and government agencies (see Goździak & Main, this volume). Significant numbers of refugees understand their experiences in religious and spiritual terms; many have a relationship with a church, mosque, or temple that shapes their social and civic experience in the host country. Experiences are diverse, but as Drocella's story exemplifies, for many whose lives have been disrupted, religion is often an important resource of meaning making and resilience.

Complementing this reality, the U.S. refugee resettlement system includes six faith-based voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), representing different Christian and Jewish congregations, as well as three secular VOLAGs. The central role that faith-based institutions have played in this process extends back to the origins of the program. Following the widespread displacement of individuals in Europe during and after the Second World War, religious organizations played a critical role in securing the passage of the Displaced Persons Act and in responding to the needs of displaced persons in need of resettlement. For example, from 1945 to 1951, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) sponsored and assisted a total of 167,450 immigrants and the National Catholic Welfare Conference, in coordination with local Catholic agencies across the country, helped to resettle approximately 190,275 displaced persons between 1948 and 1952 (Bazarov, 2010; Norris, 1958).

In the following decades, the United States became proactive in responding to the refugee crises that emerged in Cuba, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. During this period, refugee admissions were conducted on an ad hoc basis. The passage of the Refugee Act of 1980 standardized the refugee admissions process, clarified the objectives of the resettlement program, authorized assistance programs that would be used to achieve these objectives, and delineated the roles and responsibilities of the various federal and private agencies involved in the process.

It is hard to imagine the development of the U.S. refugee resettlement program without the ongoing engagement of religious organizations in this process. At each turn—the passage of the 1948 Refugee Act, the policy and programmatic response to Cuban, Southeast Asian, and other refugee populations, the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, and more recent developments in refugee law—churches, synagogues, and mosques have been of critical importance in the ongoing evolution of the resettlement program. They have engaged in advocacy efforts to shape legislation and executive action in a way that is consistent with a moral and religious vision and have simultaneously expanded the network of institutions that collaborate with the government in this public–private partnership.

Though we are not writing as scholars of religion, but rather as key staff members of the Religion and Resettlement Project (RRP), it is our contention that gaining a better understanding of religious ideas and images across the spectrum of refugee resettlement—from the role that organizations play in this process to the place religion has in the lives of refugees themselves—is an important area of research that deserves further exploration. This dynamic serves as an important example of public religion. The Religion and Resettlement Project, based at Princeton, is a key avenue through which these types of investigations are currently taking place.

THE RELIGION AND RESETTLEMENT PROJECT

In 2017, the Office of Religious Life launched the Religion and Forced Migration Initiative as a response to an unprecedented human crisis of our time: the largest forced movement of people the world had faced since the Second World War. The initiative was a result of the Interfaith Policy Forum on Refugee Integration and Religious Life, convened on October 24–25, 2017 by the ORL and co-chaired by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Department of Migration and Refugee Services and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The forum grew out of an earlier interdisciplinary conference, *Seeking Refuge: Faith-Based Approaches to Forced Migration*, which took place on March 3–4, 2017 and which was also hosted at Princeton.

Seeking Refuge convened scholars, international agencies, grassroots organizers, religious leaders, students, and refugees and provided a forum to reflect on the intersection of faith and forced migration. As an Office of Religious Life located in a secular university with local, national, and

international partners, we understand our work on forced migration as a form of public religion, public scholarship, and public engagement. In this way, we hope to guide the ORL toward compassionate service while recognizing religion as a critical and complex factor in the lives of refugees and those serving them.

These early efforts provided a fertile ground out of which the more comprehensive RRP bloomed. Largely funded by the Henry Luce Foundation and co-led by Princeton University's ORL and the USCCB, the RRP is a four-year project that focuses on religion in the resettlement and integration of refugees in the United States. Drocella's story was one of many at that symposium which focused on the lacuna between religion, resettlement, and integration. It addressed gaps in practical and theoretical knowledge through conversation and community building, rather than a more formalized research-based form of scholarship. Speakers included refugees, religious leaders of refugee communities, representatives of resettlement agencies, and experts wishing to share and learn more.

Given its focus, the initiative functions as a model of how religion operates in the public sphere and is itself a partnership between secular and faith-based entities. Religion and secularity are never so simple, though, and in this case the partnership is between an ORL at a secular university and a faith-based agency that works closely with a secular government and the wider secular public. The project thus investigates, highlights, and engages communities that are both secular and religious, but is also a model of how religion operates in relationship to resettlement. Our institutional partnership is an example of how religious and secular entities can effectively cooperate to better understand the way in which religion engages the public and can further a social good. The role of the university as a social force and the role of public religion on a secular campus are of deep interest to us as organizers reflecting on the permutations of chaplaincy and engaged scholarship.

What follows is firstly a descriptive overview of our programmatic efforts; secondly, a reflection on how to approach an understanding of religion in terms of both refugee resettlement and the way our faith-based project is conceived and responds to resettlement; and thirdly, ways forward and lessons learned, in terms of both the understanding of "religion and resettlement" and institutional partnerships that respond to refugees.

SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

A central premise of the Religion and Resettlement Project is that religion matters for refugees' mental health and civic lives, for fostering civil society, and for the secular and religious partners that engage in the phenomenon of forced migration. It also provides a broad set of tools that help refugees cope with the dramatic changes resulting from their long-term displacement, resettlement, and integration into new communities. Religion in this respect does not function in isolation. Instead, it works within and across countries, communities, and institutions. Salient figures in the public sphere and faith leaders are crucial to building communities that strengthen civil society. Studying, amplifying, and engaging the intersection of religion and resettlement is, to us, a form of public religion.

The project advances the field of migration and refugee services by using religious traditions in public theology to elevate words and stories and by exploring the religious lives of refugees and their important place in and contributions to our society. Our methodology demonstrates an effort to do in real time what historians do in retrospect, that is, to broaden our understanding of, sensitivity to, and appreciation for the role of religion in the lives of forced migrants in the United States here and now. In this way, we strive to capture and formalize religion's impact on present-day resettlement, which expedites the impact of this project.

The partnership between the ORL and the USCCB serves as a model for bringing together different institutions in order to pursue a shared goal. Due to Princeton's active undergraduate population and scholarly community and USCCB's strong connection to resettlement sites across the country and policy engagement in Washington D.C., we have been able to enrich our research, extend our reach, and gather diverse stakeholders. We have focused on several key areas that have functioned as focal points throughout the life of the project.

Firstly, since 2018 we have organized four in-person symposia and several virtual consultations that bring together refugees, religious leaders, scholars, representatives of resettlement agencies, and others who support refugees in the United States. With panels that featured refugees, faith leaders, academics, and resettlement agency directors, we examined religion's social, structural, and spiritual role in resettlement, discussed religious pluralism and diversity in the United States, and brainstormed ways to improve the U.S. resettlement system.

Secondly, our project seeks to collect oral histories of resettled refugees whose religious and spiritual lives have been consequential in their journey, resettlement, and integration. Our project is based on the premise that in order to appreciate their experiences, it is important to understand the religious and spiritual lives of refugees and refugee communities and that open-ended interviews on their own terms and in their own words are a way for them to share and for everyone to learn about this issue. As part of this oral history project, we will create an open archive that can be accessed by refugees, scholars, and refugee resettlement agencies, preserving refugees' stories amid a weakening resettlement system in the United States and around the world, providing an opportunity for civic participation with and for refugees, and enhancing spaces of dialogue, listening, and chaplaincy within communities along intercultural and interfaith lines across the country.

As a part of this effort, we have trained more than 70 undergraduate students in oral history methods and so far, have interviewed more than 170 refugees living in the United States. We have interviewed a wide range of refugees in terms of religious identities, year and place of resettlement, gender, and ethnicity. These include Holocaust survivors, Vietnamese boat people, Bosnian Muslims, and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa holders. We also hope to conduct more oral histories with resettlement directors, social workers, and others engaged in refugee-related work. Doing so will provide a variety of perspectives that can be used to interpret the role of religion in this field.

Thirdly, to activate this archive, we are developing a curriculum based on oral history that features excerpts from interviews alongside information about refugees and the U.S. refugee resettlement system and historical contexts. This curriculum will be made available to secondary schools, places of worship, educational non-profit organizations, senior centers, and others who would like to better understand the experiences of the resettled in their own words. Because refugee narrators living across the United States have participated in this project, we are creating localized versions that showcase different narrators depending on the theme and region of the school using the curriculum. Depending on the needs of the educators we partner with, we are developing lesson plans ranging from one day to two weeks.

An example of this effort in action was the 2021 World Refugee Day. We prepared a 90-minute lesson plan that educators used alongside interfaith prayer services to extend the intention to welcome refugees with

information about them. This lesson included an explanation of who refugees are and how they arrive in the United States, an interactive role-playing exercise, and first-person excerpts from our oral history project about refugees' religious identities. We are also working with educators from the Cristo Rey School, Quaker School, and Jesuit School Networks to develop lesson plans drawing from our archive for classes pertaining to theology, world religion, race, history, and literature; we hope it will also appeal to other religious and secular schools across the country.

With USCCB's national network of schools, churches, and other educational centers, we can share this curriculum far and wide. Using the Catholic Charities networks, we can connect to and learn from local resettlement offices and can include them in our symposia and interfaith prayer services. Princeton's undergraduates are part of and often central to each of RRP's programs. In addition to their work on the oral history project, during two-month summer internships students researched and mapped the resources offered by religious and secular organizations that assist refugees and supported faith-based resettlement agencies. This kind of work encourages self-reflection, relationship-building, and deep listening, which offers students valuable opportunities to hone their vocational skills alongside their desire to make a positive impact in their communities.

UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE AND REFUGEE-RELATED RELIGION

As this project is partly an outgrowth of a university community, a theoretical understanding of this dynamic is important and, as such, there is an ongoing effort to inform the project with a more theoretical framework developed by an array of scholars from different disciplines (see, for example, Asad, 2003; Casanova, 1994; Marty, 1981; Neuhaus, 1984; Tracy, 1992). Nevertheless, as important as this is, the emphasis throughout the symposia was praxis-oriented and focused more on the "lived religious experience" of those from whom we were learning (Bender, 2003; Orsi, 1997; see also Primiano, 1995). The symposia began with a somewhat standard approach to what is called religious literacy when applied to a particular issue, including curated panel discussions consisting of religiously diverse refugees and religious leaders who work with refugees, but the discussions rather quickly became more personal.

Drocella attended the symposium as a secular resettlement agency employee who was invited to share her story as both a refugee and

someone actively working in the resettlement of other refugees. Given her experience being displaced and resettled in the United States, what followed was not a dry discussion about moral principles or policy procedures, but personal experiences. The lack of academic distance in her talk affected the dialogue that ensued. It was less theoretical than what might have occurred in an academic seminar; others followed her example and shared intimate moments that might not have otherwise surfaced in a different setting. When we invited refugees to share their religious stories over dinner, it frequently triggered unintended, organic, and often unacknowledged interfaith conversations with professional interlocutors.

The oral histories collected through this initiative provide another example of how religion played out in a dynamic and more intimate fashion. The practice of oral histories is a common secular journalistic and academic exercise, applied in this case to learn about the religion of refugees. When a refugee tells their religious story to another person, it often takes on the character of a spiritual autobiography or religious confession. That said, someone listening to the interview after the fact can engage with it as a more neutral commentary on public religion. The person's point of view—whether it be the interviewer, narrator, or researcher—can dramatically influence the way, in which religion is perceived in each situation. For the narrator, the story told was often wrought with emotion, which in turn often affected the interviewer, whereas a researcher might be better situated to understand the totality of oral histories so as to provide insight into the role of religion in a more normative fashion.

When we turned to students to conduct oral histories, they were trained through standard secular methods, yet their reflections were often religious in nature, insofar as they identified with a narrator of the same faith, or another faith, or in terms of reflecting on ideas expressed by the narrator, such as gratitude. Their observations often shared what ethnographers have discussed in other contexts: the stress and transformative experience of hearing another's painful story. Our noticing, and reflecting with them, says something about what it might mean to do oral history through the lens of chaplaincy, and this too enters the larger picture of what we might think of when trying to see religion in refugee work. It is hoped that the practice also instilled in the student interviewers a greater sensitivity to the role of religion in the lives of people they encounter out in the world. In these ways, the effort to better understand the role that religion plays in the lives of refugees could impart lessons that are useful in a variety of other settings.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The practical focus of practitioners and the more rigorous, methodological approach of the academics—both of which are important for this project—bring with it practical benefits. For example, as we try to better understand the response to refugee resettlement from the local community, the network of practitioner contacts provides a significant population base to engage, while the ability to perform surveys, oral histories, and other quantitative and qualitative analyses that academics can bring could help provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play.

Another example in which a praxis-oriented approach could prove fruitful pertains to the project's mapping initiative, which is designed to develop a comprehensive and interactive list of organizations that engage with and support refugees following their resettlement in the United States. Such a map creates an opportunity for voluntary refugee resettlement organizations to better know and work with local community partners, while also allowing scholars to better understand the resources that local partners have to offer as a way of helping local networks better combine forces and more effectively advocate for needs in policy arenas. For example, is there a dearth of health-related support for refugees in certain parts of the country and can this deficiency be addressed through increased funding or other means? More broadly, this mapping exercise has the potential to identify "service deserts," provide a mechanism through which similar organizations in different parts of the country can connect with one another, and lead to other currently unidentified areas of collaboration. The different strengths of practitioners and academics could be leveraged for a wide range of purposes, including policy advocacy, service provision, or identification of gaps in a given region.

While religion is the central focus of the project, it is important to concede that religion is but one aspect of this engagement; there are complex moral, civic, and community elements that play off one another and affect the way in which religion interacts in the lives of refugees and in local communities. This is in some ways obvious, but is worth making explicit as a way to identify how a broader collaboration across disciplines might improve our understanding of this process. For example, more sociological and ethnographic projects could be undertaken to demonstrate through models of congregational studies and social capital the way in which a given refugee community's civic participation is tied

to its involvement in a religious community. The relationship between Christian communities that take in Muslim refugees and the interfaith dynamic that results from this engagement can have a significant impact on the impression of refugees whose country of origin is perhaps less amenable to interreligious engagement. A basic understanding of the religious pluralism of refugees in the United States would be a worthy project for those interested in understanding the diversity of refugee communities and scholars of American religious pluralism and interfaith interactions.

Another area of research could focus on the diverse types of religious organizations, be they formal, national church structures, interfaith organizations, congregations, or local religiously motivated VOLAGs. Individuals working with and on behalf of refugees in these kinds of organizations often share their stories as faith journeys. There is a vast, untapped resource here that could help us better understand what motivates Americans to work with refugees, including the role of religion in advocacy on behalf of refugees. Finally, the development of new partnerships for the purpose of improved interdisciplinary connectivity for those working with refugees is also something that should be better accounted for and tracked. We have been struck by the lack of connectivity between scholars, grassroots actors—including religious leaders—agency representatives, refugees, and students. The outcome of projects should include the social capital built and the knowledge shared for a movement or advocacy base that is attempting to make structural changes to the existing system.

For future research, it is also important to better understand the constraints and obstacles. When efforts are dependent on government funding, there are inherent limitations as to what a faith-based organization can do, most obviously including restrictions on proselytizing. While faith-based organizations are inextricably connected to the resettlement effort nationally, they themselves are sometimes hesitant to explore the role that religion plays or to examine religious paradigms because of perceived constraints on the range of religious questions that are allowed in a secular setting or, perhaps more often unexpressed, concerns as to how policy-based criticism of a given administration might affect future funding.

This is not to say that, when it comes to federal funding, religion is excised from the work of service organizations assisting forced migrants. For example, Jesuit Refugee Services USA has managed the long-standing National Chaplaincy Program, which “provides pastoral and religious

assistance to meet the needs of non-citizens detained by the Department of Homeland Security in five U.S. federal detention centers in Florida, Texas, Arizona, and New York. The National Detention Chaplaincy Program enables people of all faiths and no faith to have access to pastoral and spiritual care within either their faith tradition or no faith tradition” (Jesuit Refugee Services, 2023). Nevertheless, throughout this project there have been concerns expressed by some religious organizations that federal funding, while a necessary source of income, can inhibit the ability of these organizations to be fully religious in their public-facing identity.

Along these lines, concerns were also expressed in some of our conversations regarding the extent to which being bound to federal funding can dilute the underlying religious impulse at play in faith-based organizations, instead of transforming this impulse into an expression of secular humanitarianism. To this end, to what extent do funding sources (e.g., government grants or contracts or private secular foundations) affect the willingness of religious organizations who accept this funding to speak out about their religious identity? To what extent does it prevent them from speaking out prophetically against injustices, even when such speaking out is deemed necessary, knowing that doing so might jeopardize further funding of established programs?

There have also been some, admittedly more anecdotal, concerns about the future place of faith-based organizations in this kind of work. As the United States seems to track in a more secular direction, with the pointed increase of religious “nones,” how will religious organizations be engaged in the public square, particularly those who do not conform to a more secular ethic that might diverge from traditional religious teaching? During one conversation, we were informed of a faith-based organization that was passed over for funding by a private donor because the donor expressed their decision not to fund a religiously affiliated institution. Whether this is an anomaly or something that will become more frequent is uncertain at this point.

Other factors outside of our control influenced the development of the project in ways that were not always anticipated. The emergence of a political climate related to the Trump presidency and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic led to adjustments in our programming that directly resulted from our hybrid partnership. The project took place during the Trump administration, which dramatically cut refugee admissions. These cuts in turn led to several closures of resettlement sites. In

the 2016 fiscal year, 84,994 refugees were resettled in the United States; by the end of the 2020 fiscal year, only 11,814 were resettled. Given that the resettlement program is based on a per capita funding mechanism, as fewer refugees were brought into the country, resettlement sites received less money, thus making it difficult for many of them to remain financially viable. According to a Refugee Council USA report, between the time that Donald Trump assumed the presidency through 2019, more than 100 local resettlement sites were forced to close due to these cuts, some permanently and others perhaps just temporarily (Refugee Council USA, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, no palpable sense of unease was expressed by the symposia participants about the future of the resettlement program, yet they continued to recognize the growing needs of populations served through the program. These sentiments were only exaggerated given the anti-immigrant rhetoric that had become increasingly pronounced at the time, often from people living in religious communities. Given the hardline approach that the Trump administration took on migration more generally, it became difficult for religious organizations involved in refugee resettlement to wrestle with the substantial support their coreligionists showed for these policies. For example, in 2016, 60% of white Catholics (52% of all Catholics) voted for Trump (Martinez & Smith, 2016). The juxtaposition between the support for an administration that was overtly restrictionist and the rhetoric of religious organizations that supported migration-related admissions refocused our attention away from the role of religion in the lives of refugees to how religiously informed communities are responding to refugee crises and resettlement efforts at the local level. As of this writing, we remain in the preliminary stages in trying to figure out how best to analyze and understand the response to refugee arrivals at the local level—both positive and negative—but see this exploration as an important area of further research.

Because of the COVID-19 lockdown, we were forced to cancel upcoming symposia that would have allowed us to continue our in-person work with service providers, advocates, educators, and others involved in this field. Like many other organizations, we were forced to convene small virtual gatherings to learn about COVID-19 responses within the resettlement world. The upside to this situation is that saving the costs of the canceled symposia allowed us to appropriate funds for activities that might have otherwise gone overlooked. For example, more time and effort were

given to the above-mentioned resource mapping program, which has so far mapped over 1,800 non-profit organizations working nationally with and for refugees. The reliance on remote learning and virtual engagements has also expedited the development of the oral history curriculum, the initial convening of small group sessions that are allowing us to better understand the role of religion at the local level, and similar initiatives.

While our project has important outcomes, we understand the kind of institutional partnership we have developed to be a model for further analysis and development. To be precise, we think that partnerships between universities and VOLAGs and similar organizations have immense potential. This is being done elsewhere, including a partnership between the USCCB and the University of Notre Dame that explored migration-related enforcement efforts in the United States, Germany, and Greece. The Center for New North Carolinians at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro is engaging local organizations to focus on welcoming different migrant populations into the state. Given diverse engagements of this sort, pulling together a meeting of groups already engaged in these kinds of partnerships might prove fruitful as we try to expand their reach to other organizations and to initiate new relationships between those already involved in this kind of engagement.

CONCLUSION

We describe our project as illustrating a collaborative and exploratory effort to leverage the strengths of a university and of an established non-governmental organization, and we point to ways in which the partners complement one another. As one of the federally funded VOLAGs, the USCCB is positioned to provide a national audience to a single university and to provide both local and national opportunities for service, research, and the distribution of materials, goods, projects, and ideas. Working with a faith-based VOLAG creates the opportunity for a secular university and its students to see the important role that religion plays in resettlement, to learn the history behind it, to understand the moral orientation that leads to it, and likewise to prompt students to share their own reasons for interest and involvement, either formally or informally as a kind of public religion interfaith practice. Religious identity and religious conflict as well as the religious nature of the resettlement agency and their local congregational partners play an undeniable role in the way resettlement

takes place; this is something for universities and those working within them to better understand.

As part of a university, the Office of Religious Life can coordinate the interdisciplinary expertise of scholars, the volunteerism and career and vocational development of students, and—in times of financial and political constraints—the ability to leverage student labor. The university's involvement in refugee advocacy stretches well beyond its faculty and research capacity and is instead better seen in terms of the university as a social and moral force, as a community of care that partners with other nonprofits to respond to situations as resentment. It would also prove fruitful to examine the potential in engaging alumni who might be in a position to support and participate in such initiatives. One possible limiting factor with the current efforts is that scholars are connected to one another through professional organizations, but often do not know of efforts at their own university, let alone university efforts themselves being connected topically in a way that could mobilize and educate.

There is also the consideration of what role ORLs have at secular universities, given what might be a prevailing assumption that such universities may not have a strong religious presence on campus. This is a mistaken understanding of university life. Many secular universities have substantial ORLs and partner with many religious institutions for public work. Beyond the various ORLs at many universities, one could also look at Newman Centers or other religiously based organizations that play an important role in the lives of students.

Offices of Religious Life are multifaceted in the services that they can provide, yet distinctive in that they tend to have the more organic and flexible nature of an office, in comparison with the more professionalized and narrowly drawn organizations on campuses; the insistence on including confessional, self-reflective, and vocational aspects of those working together—be they students, scholars, activists, or the refugees themselves—is a critical aspect of this work. The spaces created by these kinds of institutions also allow religious actors and leaders to engage in the research life of the university in a way that complements scholarship and secular advocacy, but in a way that reflects the situation of a practitioner rather than that of an academic.

Our understanding is admittedly anecdotal at this point, but what becomes clear is that the professional and vocational efforts taken up at universities are diverse, including the potential for structural partnerships at the local and national levels and the role that students can play.

How and why do universities care about refugees, even those without scholars or other professionals focused professionally on the topic? This is another area of research that is important for understanding and mobilizing support, and one that our partnership has drawn attention to, in ways that leads to inspiring stories.

NOTE

1. This and subsequent quotes come from her testimony shared during a symposium at Princeton in 2019.

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