

## **Reference Paper for the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention**

# **Religious Actors and the Global Compact on Refugees: Charting a Way Forward**

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### Abstract:

The Global Compact on Refugees identifies faith-based organizations as relevant stakeholders for delivering on its plan of action. This research paper surveys the effects, both positive and negative, of faith-based responses to forced migration; reviews the history of engagement by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies with religious actors over the past 70 years; identifies barriers to partnership between religious and secular humanitarian actors; and provides recommendations for chartering a path forward. An overarching trend shaping engagement with faith-based organizations has been the secularization of the humanitarian sector. This paper argues that addressing secular biases against faith-based responses to forced displacement is one essential way to seizing opportunities for innovative approaches to humanitarian response that draw upon both secular and religious ethical foundations and best practices.

## 1. Introduction

Faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders around the world have and continue to play a critical role in humanitarian responses to forced migration. They provide refuge and assistance, both material and spiritual, to refugees and internally displaced persons, and advocate for policies that address root causes of crises that lead to mass displacement and that improve reception conditions for asylum seekers. Faith-based responses, however, are not always positive and religion sometimes is a negative contributing factor to conflict and displacement-inducing persecution and violence. The involvement of faith-based actors in humanitarian responses to forced migration, therefore, is a complicated matter (Ferris 2011; Hollenbach 2020).

As long-time actors in humanitarian assistance, faith-based actors have been involved in partnerships and coordination efforts with UNHCR since the agency's inception. In recent years, however, UNHCR has become more active in engaging with religious actors and strengthening partnerships to respond to the protection needs of forced migrants. In 2012, for example, the High Commissioner António Guterres convened the *Dialogue on Faith and Protection* (UNHCR 2012) an outcome of which was the publication *Welcoming the Stranger* (UNHCR 2013) highlighting various religious teachings on providing hospitality to displaced populations and a Partnership Note laying out guiding principles to strengthen collaboration with faith actors (UNHCR 2014).

Engagement with faith-based actors also reflects larger trends in the international humanitarian assistance sector. In recognition of the fact that despite best efforts to increase efficiency in response, the international humanitarian system is stretched thin, underfunded, and struggling to respond to simultaneous crises around the world (Bennett *et al.* 2016). To address these deficiencies, the humanitarian sector has promoted a localization agenda that seeks to shift the role of international humanitarian agencies away from direct service providers to supporters of local communities, including faith communities, as first responders to emergency situations (Wilkinson & Ager 2017). Part of this agenda is also an intention to shift decision-making power and resources to actors in closer proximity to humanitarian crises.

The international community has also been engaged in global processes to address challenges facing the global refugee regime to respond to protracted conflicts and massive influxes of forced migration on multiple fronts. The international refugee regime is under severe strain as protracted

conflicts, economic collapse, and failed governance continue to lead to mass displacement of people. As of the end of 2019, there are about 79.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world, the most since the creation of the refugee regime after World War II (UNHCR 2020). The Global South hosts 85% of the world's refugees and receives about half of all migration, a reality that highlights gross inequities in responsibility-sharing (Edmond 2017). On September 19, 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants which seeks to renew the commitment of Member States to strengthen and enhance mechanisms to protect forcibly displaced people and international cooperation in responsibility-sharing. The Declaration laid the groundwork for the adoption of two new global compacts in 2018: one on refugees and the other on migration. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) takes a whole of society approach by enlisting the help of a wide range of stakeholders, including religious actors, committed to protecting the rights and dignity of displaced people.

At this juncture—70 years since the establishment of the 1951 Refugee Convention—the contributions of faith-based responses to forced migration and the important role religious actors can play in delivering on the aims of the Global Compact on Refugees warrants continued examination on the part of scholars and practitioners alike. This background paper surveys the effects, both positive and negative, of faith-based responses to forced migration; examines the history of engagement by UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies with faith-based actors over the past 70 years; and reviews emerging literature at the nexus of religion and forced migration to identify barriers to partnership and provide recommendations for chartering a path forward on how engagement with faith-based actors can aid in delivering on the aims of the Global Compact on Refugees. The main questions this paper seeks to address are as follows:

*How have religious actors responded to forced migration over the past 70 years?*

*What is the constructive role religious actors play in assisting people driven from their homes, and what challenges does faith-based engagement with forced displacement pose?*

*What is the way forward for how religious actors can deliver on the program of action of the Global Compact on Refugees?*

The main argument of this paper is that strengthening partnerships between secular humanitarian organizations and religious actors—among them, faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders—requires identifying the barriers and challenges to

partnership. Secular and faith-based humanitarian agencies work alongside one another and together in contexts of complex humanitarian crises marked by massive displacement, both across borders and internally. Understanding the religious approaches of faith-based organizations and their unique offerings will help to strengthen partnership (Hollenbach 2020: 10), especially as it relates to the objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees. An overarching trend that shapes engagement with faith-based organizations has been the increasing secularization of the humanitarian sector (Barnett 2012; Ager & Ager 2017; Hollenbach 2020; Wurtz & Wilkinson 2020). Addressing the ways that secular biases against religion's role in both responding to and causing displacement will be essential to seizing opportunities for innovative partnerships and approaches to humanitarian response that draw upon both secular and religious ethical foundations and best practices.

## **2. Defining Terms and Concepts**

With growing recognition of the important role religion plays in humanitarian assistance, it is critical to note that religion is not a monolithic entity and scholars and policy makers have made important contributions to gaining greater clarity regarding what terminology to use when discussing organizations, institutions, communities, and other actors affiliated with or motivated by a religious or faith tradition. Gerard Clarke (2005, 2006, 2007) provides some of the earliest work specifically on religiously oriented humanitarian organizations and notes that the term 'faith-based' first originated in the 1990s in the United States in part because the secular development regime was perceived as more at ease with it than the term 'religion-based'. 'Religion', though a generic term, refers to beliefs, practices and values originating from a belief in a transcendent or divine reality that is codified in sacred texts and lived out in a shared community or organization whereas 'faith', an equally amorphous term, seems to extend beyond any major or established religion (Bano and Nair 2007). While this distinction is not entirely satisfactory, it indicates that labeling and identifying faith-based organizations that serve forced migrants is not a clear-cut exercise.

Goodall (2015) contributes to the debate by offering a rough typology of organizations, institutions, communities, or movements that fall under the broad category of 'faith-based':

“Places of worship and their congregations; more formal projects and services delivered through places of worship (by paid workers, volunteers or a combination of these); the institutional structures of organized religions, including their local, national and trans-national networks; small local community groups and larger regional, national and international charities” (6).

Recognition that faith-based organizations represent a unique, important, and diverse segment of civil society engaged in responses to forced migration has led to further development of categories to define such groups and actors (*Ibid.*). A partnership note published by UNHCR in 2014 on their partnership with various faith-based organizations developed three distinct categories to guide better its understanding of religion and faith in the lives of refugees and how to improve upon existing partnerships. The partnership note divides religious entities into three categories: Faith-based organizations (FBOs), local faith communities (LFCs), and faith leaders (FLs) (See Table 1 for their respective definitions).

Table 1. Definitions of Faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders

<b>Faith-based organizations (FBOs)</b>	<b>Local Faith communities (LFCs)</b>	<b>Faith Leaders (FLs)</b>
<p>FBOs represent “broad range of organizations influenced by faith. They include religious and religion-based organizations/groups/networks; communities belonging to a place of religious worship; specialized religious institutions and religious social service agencies; and registered or unregistered non-profit institutions that have a religious character or mission.”</p>	<p>LFCs “consist of people who share common religious beliefs and values, and draw upon these to carry out activities in their respective communities. They are often providers of first resort in humanitarian emergencies, mobilizing and providing support through their membership and faith networks. Their members are often unpaid volunteers who act because their faith calls upon them to do so. They may or may not be aware of basic humanitarian principles.”</p>	<p>FLs “are believers who play influential roles within their faith communities and the broader local community. They benefit from trust and exercise moral authority over members of their local faith community, and shape public opinion in the broader community and even at the national or international level.”</p>

(Source: UNHCR 2014: 8)

These categories are useful for drawing similarities and distinctions among the various organizations, institutions, communities, and individuals engaged in humanitarian responses to forced migration that self-identify in religious or spiritual terms. While these definitions serve the academic necessity for conceptual clarity, it is also important to note that some of the very entities placed in any one of the above categories may not use these definitions to describe themselves. Any work related to humanitarian response and partnering among agencies must be grounded in

the lived experiences of all involved and allow for space for mutual understanding on one another's terms.

The Global Compact on Refugees refers to faith-based organizations as essential partners in advancing the document's agenda. However, the GCR does not seem to take full advantage of the previous work done in the 2014 UNHCR *Partnership Note* to develop different categories of religious entities. The GCR uses almost exclusively the term 'faith-based organizations' and refers once to the term 'faith-based actors.' The document does not name explicitly 'faith leaders' and 'local faith communities' as relevant stakeholders—and, for the latter, the assumption is that local faith communities are folded under the even more general reference to 'local actors.'

On the inclusion of faith-based organizations and local actors in the GCR, Wurtz and Wilkinson (2020), whose research focuses on the role of local faith communities in the global South, applaud the GCR for its "greater recognition of this diversity of actors", but note that "analysis of the way in which these actors [local actors and faith-based actors] are described in the GCR demonstrates power imbalances" (149). They argue that while the GCR recognizes the critical role of local actors (local faith communities, included) as first responders to large-scale refugee situations, the document frames them as in need of support to "strengthen institutional capacities" through funding and capacity building, where appropriate. Wurtz and Wilkinson argue that the framing of local (faith) actors as lacking capacity and in need of support (while also being seen—and charged—as the most appropriate to respond due to their proximity to crises and possession of local knowledge) perpetuates the assumption that international actors are the principal agents to build the capacity of limited resource and under-trained local actors. To counter this framing, they propose that international actors engage in "capacity sharing" (149) instead of *capacity-building* as a more equitable way forward as both international and local actors can engage in mutual learning about best practices.

This background paper uses the terms faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders when appropriate based on the definitions in the 2014 UNHCR *Partnership Note* and uses terms such as religious actors or faith-based actors when speaking in more general terms. It is important to remember that the term 'secular,' like religion, is a complex concept with multiple meanings. Secular is simply not another word for 'not religious.' This paper refers to secular humanitarian actors, organizations, or agencies as those that do not explicitly define their work in

religious terms, but rather in terms of humanitarian principles. Additionally, cognizant of the unequal power dynamics within the humanitarian sector, particularly between international secular humanitarian actors and local faith communities, this paper will also address current scholarly work on how secular bias against religious actors has shaped how secular actors, including UNHCR, have engaged with religious actors and the barriers that such bias can throw up against partnership.

The following section examines both the positive and negative effects of religion in contexts of forced displacement and recent historical trends shaping engagement with faith-based approaches to forced migration.

### **3. Historical trends shaping engagement with faith-based approaches to forced migration**

Most of the world's religions and affiliated humanitarian agencies are significantly involved in responding to crises caused by mass displacement. Narratives of flight and exile feature prominently in nearly all major religions. These traditions of forced migration within the world's major religions provide a normative foundation for the moral duty to care for the stranger. Examples of scriptural sources from the world's religions that inspire faith-based responses to forced migration can also be found in the UNHCR 2014 *Partnership Note*. To set up an analysis of recent historical trends, this section provides a brief survey of the normative traditions of the world's major religions to show that a duty-driven concern for the well-being of foreigners is common to all of them and has inspired charitable and compassionate acts towards uprooted peoples.

#### *a. Religious belief and spiritual practice: Inspiration for protecting the forcibly displaced as well as for persecuting the 'other'*

The Hebrew Bible holds numerous compelling accounts of exile and exhortations to protect the oppressed, especially the foreigner. The patriarch Abraham, from whom believers of all three monotheistic traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—consider themselves descendants, was called by God to leave the home of his people in Haran (in present-day Iraq) and migrate to the

land of Canaan (in present-day Israel) (Hollenbach 2020). The Exodus story, another foundational narrative to the Jewish tradition, tells of the migration of the Israelites out of slavery into liberation. Each year, Jews perform the two-day ritual of the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:17) to commemorate and teach younger generations about the hasty escape from bondage (Hein & Niazi 2016). The primordial experience of being a migrant and a refugee is central to the identity of Jews, as well as Christians and Muslims who also revere these stories. Throughout recent modern history, there are examples of Jewish organizations actively assisting Jewish and non-Jewish refugees alike. For example, the Canadian Conference of Reform Rabbis participates in Canada's private sponsorship program and has sponsored the resettlement of Syrian refugees (Moscovitch 2016).

In Christianity, motifs of seeking refuge feature prominently in the New Testament, most notably in the flight narrative of the Holy Family from Jerusalem to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15). For many Christians, Jesus' infancy was marked by the experience of forced migration. Today, Christian organizations count among many of the faith-based organizations committed to aiding and advocating on behalf of refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants.

In Islam, the Prophet Mohammed's flight from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution and preserve his message of monotheism in 622 CE is referred to as *hijra*. Under Hijrah law, asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to protection, and this duty to care for them extends to non-Muslims, as noted in Surat At-Tawbah: "And if any one of the polytheists seeks your protection, then grant him protection so that he may hear the words of Allah. Then deliver him to his place of safety. That is because they are a people who do not know" (Q 9:6). Respect for all migrants and those seeking refuge inspires the work today of large-scale organizations such as Islamic Relief Worldwide and local mosques in communities receiving forced migrants. In many Muslim countries hosting refugees, humanitarian assistance is provided mainly by religious communities (Hein & Niazi 2016).

Beyond the monotheistic traditions, the religions of Asia, in particular Hinduism and Buddhism, both have traditions of extending compassion and hospitality to the displaced. Themes of exile are central to many Hindu sacred texts. Notable is the story of the god Vishnu secretly shuttling Krishna to safety upon learning that his life was in danger (*Ibid.*). Central to the belief of nearly all Hindus is the multi-faceted concept of *dharma* or moral duty. According to one of the



foundational sacred texts, the *Mahabharata*, *dharma* requires that one should never do to another that which would be hurtful to oneself. This guidance is foundational to the moral duty of treating everyone with respect and care (Hollenbach 2020). There are many ways that followers of Hinduism have translated their religious traditions into concrete responses to forced migration. Most notable was the reception of the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetan Buddhist refugees who fled Chinese repression in 1959. India has been hosting Tibetan refugees ever since.

In Buddhism, the motif of flight is also central to the life story of the historical Buddha, who fled worldly trappings for a life of renunciation in pursuit of enlightenment. Seeking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings), and the Sangha (the community of followers) is a central practice of Buddhists. The practice of seeking refuge has translated into Buddhist efforts to provide protection to those seeking refuge from conflict and oppression. Thich Nhat Hanh, the renowned Vietnamese monk, himself a refugee, represents a Buddhist religious leader committed to transcending sectarian violence and promoting human rights grounded in his Buddhist practice (*Ibid.*).

Faith-based responses to forced migration can also be interreligious in character. For example, Religions for Peace, the largest international coalition of representatives of the world's religious communities who are committed to peace, partnered with UNHCR on the campaign #WithRefugees to encourage interfaith organizations to lend their moral authority, expertise, and resources to the protection of refugees and asylum seekers (Religions for Peace 2018).

For all of religion's significant contributions to humanitarian responses to forced migration and advocacy on behalf of refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants, religion has not always been a force for good. Religion can be considered an ambivalent force in international affairs (Appleby 2000), and no less in the context of migration and displacement. In some cases, it can animate individuals and communities to engage in acts of solidarity with forced migrants (Hein & Niazi 2016) and can be a wellspring of perseverance for migrants along the journey. However, religion can also reinforce individual and group identity, at times creating an in-group and out-group dynamic that fosters animosity toward foreigners (Hollenbach 2014, 2020).

While scholars acknowledge the positive role religion plays in helping people cope with the experience of forced displacement and in providing spiritual and psychological reservoirs of resilience, religion can also be a significant factor in causing displacement. In recent years, there

has been an increase in violent sectarian and religious conflict (Theodorou 2014), and in many cases, perpetrators of displacement-inducing ethnic and political armed conflict justify violence in religious terms. In some contexts, ultra-nationalist rhetoric has enjoyed the authoritative backing of religious leaders, lending legitimacy to rhetoric and policies that result in fomenting resentments, even violence, toward minority and immigrant communities. In the case of Myanmar, some efforts on the part of Buddhists to exclude Muslim Rohingya from the country has resulted in massive human rights violations and mass displacement across the border into Bangladesh.

In refugee receiving countries, there can be considerable daylight between religious edicts to care for strangers and the daily practice of faith on the part of religious groups and political leaders. As Bhabha (2018) observes, proponents of humanitarian response as well as those calling for restricting migration and closing borders to asylum seekers often both evoke religion. When religious calls for hospitality clash with the practices of sovereignty and border control, the latter tends to win out. For example, in October 2017, millions of Polish Catholics gathered along the country's 2,000-mile border for a mass demonstration called "Rosary at the Borders." While it coincided with the Feast of Our Lady of the Rosary, it also fell on the anniversary of the 1571 naval Battle of Lepanto between Christian fighters and the Ottoman Empire. Many participants described the demonstration as against secularization and the spread of Islam in Europe and one clergyman said during his sermon that people should pray for "Europe to remain Europe" (Berendt and Specia: 2017).

Religion, therefore, can have negative impacts in the context of forced migration by being a cause of displacement and a force for inhospitality, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment in receiving countries. When examining the consequences of the activities of faith communities and religious actors in contexts of humanitarian crises, Hollenbach argues that it is important to ask the question "what *kind* of faith and faith-based tenets motivate religious communities" (2020: 52). The principle of humanity, whether argued on religious or secular philosophical grounds, can challenge narrow interpretations of religion that promulgate an *us vs them* mentality and politicized claims of religious identity and fundamentalism.

Therefore, it is important, in addition to the necessary work of fostering inter-faith dialogue to promote peace and mutual understanding across diverse faith traditions, to also promote *intra*-faith dialogue and work within religious traditions as a way of engaging with religious leaders and

communities that hold interpretations of their normative teachings that lead to negative attitudes and behaviors toward refugees and migrants. Pursuing an intra-faith dimension in the context of faith-based responses to migration can be a powerful way for faith leaders and communities to communicate and live out their faith in ways that foster the values and practices of solidarity and hospitality amidst the co-optation of religion to justify or bolster an ultra-nationalist agenda. Persistent, patient, and principled engagement and dialogue can be an effective way of pushing back against ultra-nationalist governments that co-opt religion to justify xenophobic rhetoric and policies (Sulewski, *unpublished presentation*). In the United States, President Trump's executive order, signed in January 2017, that suspended the US refugee program and barred Syrian refugees from entry into the United States, provoked an ecumenical backlash from leaders of nearly every Christian denomination. Hundreds of prominent members of clergy, across denominations, both progressive and conservative, along with Christian relief organizations, spoke out against the decision, although a small number of Christian leaders supported it (Green 2017).

Another negative impact of faith-based responses to forced migration is proselytization. Religious freedom, including the right to public religious witness and to choose one's religious beliefs, are enshrined in international covenants<sup>1</sup>. However, proselytism in contexts of forced displacement (as well as in the humanitarian and development sectors more broadly) has been debated. Under the pretext of impartiality, secular humanitarian agencies can be suspicious of the activities of faith-based organizations. Some argue that using humanitarian aid or programs (e.g. healthcare, trauma healing, education, etc.) as a vehicle to proselytize can heighten tensions within fragile social contexts and lead to further incitement of violence (Marshall 2016). As an example, Christian aid organizations sought the conversion of Muslim beneficiaries after the tsunami in Indonesia (Ferris 2005). This concern, however, may be exaggerated (May 2004) and may reflect a secular bias against faith-based organizations as taking advantage of vulnerable individuals by making aid conditional on conversion when in fact evidence shows that many religious actors and refugees have conversations about religion or engage in religious programming without it turning into proselytism (Wurtz & Wilkinson 2020). The concern over proselytizing also speaks to the

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<sup>1</sup> See the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18), the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18), the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religious Belief, the 1986 Establishment of the Special Rapporteur to identify existing and emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief, and the 1993 Human Rights Committee's General Comment Number 22 on Article 18 of the Civil and Political Covenant.

larger issue that in contexts of displacement multiple actors representing various sectors of society may be present and working without any clear code of conduct among them (Marshall 2016). Lacking shared norms concerning proper practices, mutual suspicion may arise and foster perceptions that faith actors provide aid conditionally (Ager & Ager 2017).

It is evident that nearly all the major religious traditions contain deep spiritual resources from which to draw to respond to humanitarian crises and forced displacement in positive ways. For millennia, they have responded to the needs and suffering of countless persons and communities displaced by conflict and disaster. The history of religions, however, also reveals moments when religion has had less than admirable responses to the needs of those beyond the scope of their religious community or itself has been a cause of conflict leading to displacement. How religion responds to forced displacement depends upon how it understands its own normative traditions in light of the urgent needs of others (Hollenbach 2020). In recent decades, faith-based responses to forced migration have grown. New Evangelical Christian NGOs have formed, such as Samaritan's Purse and the International Justice Mission, and so too have Islamic humanitarian agencies, among them Islamic Relief (Hollenbach 2020: 47-48). And more recently, the Global Compact on Refugees champions a partnership approach with multiple stakeholders, including faith-based organizations, to advance its agenda. To chart a path forward for strengthening partnerships with faith-based organizations, it is important to take stock of the recent history, just a few decades in the making, of how secular and faith-based engagement is developing.

*b. The role of faith-based actors in responding to forced displacement: a look back at 70 years*

A look back over the past 70 years reveals that despite the religious roots of the humanitarian movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the humanitarian sector underwent a process of secularization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which became most pronounced in the post-WWII era. As humanitarian and relief agencies with no religious affiliation began to shape the contours of the humanitarian sector, engagement with religious communities and faith actors decreased. In recent decades, however, the humanitarian sector has begun to re-engage with religious communities and faith actors out of recognition of their important contributions and advantages.

In the area of forced migration, UNHCR has embarked on a journey of mutual understanding and strengthened partnership with faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders.

Throughout history, communities and individuals of faith have been inspired by their respective religious and spiritual teachings and practices to alleviate the suffering not only of their co-religionists, but of all people irrespective of their religious or ethnic identity. As discussed in the previous section, the moral obligation to respect human dignity, alleviate suffering, and correct injustices, is present in nearly all major religious traditions. This moral obligation, then, arises from distinct religious traditions throughout the world, but is also rooted in reasoned, philosophical understanding that all people require respect, defense from harm and the means necessary to live a good life by virtue of their humanity. Appreciation of religious traditions as wellsprings of charitable response to those forced from home by violence and disaster throughout much of human history highlights that religious norms served as the basis for the values and principles that animated humanitarian movements throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, particularly the founding of the Red Cross and anti-slavery movements (Ferris 2005; Barnett 2011; Hollenbach 2020).

Historical evidence of religious communities' involvement in humanitarian work and advocacy points to how religious teachings that espouse a moral duty to all people underpins the principles that guide humanitarian work. Religion and humanitarianism are deeply linked, as Barnett remarks, "It is impossible to study humanitarianism without being impressed by the importance of religion" (2011: 17). Notably, religious communities, in particular churches, advocated for the creation of the United Nations after the horrors of World War II and the inclusion of references to human rights in the United Nations Charter—and the Federal Council of Churches even wrote language for US members of the drafting committee to put into the charter (Ferris 2005).

Scholars note that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century "a notable secularization of humanitarian action seemed to occur as a number of new relief agencies with no explicit religious connection were created" as a result, in part, of the "growing institutionalization of the humanitarian effort" (Hollenbach 2020: 47). These processes of secularization and institutionalization of the humanitarian sector during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which increased after the end of World War II with the creation of the United Nations system, led to a decrease in engagement with faith-based

organizations (Hollenbach 2014), though the activities of faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders in the humanitarian field in response to forced displacement continued.

The factors contributing to the increasingly secular character of humanitarian action are complex. Barnett (2012) observes that for most of history humanitarian responses to emergencies were not nearly as institutionally organized as the largely bureaucratic governmental, non-governmental and intragovernmental agencies of today, staffed with trained professionals, that dominate the humanitarian sector. This is not to say that humanitarian efforts before the bureaucratization and professionalization of the field that occurred after World War II were not organized; rather they tended to be animated by volunteers and missionaries. And while volunteers and missionaries remain active in humanitarian efforts today, Barnett argues that “informality has been replaced by formality” and “a growing number of rules, standards, codes of conduct, systems of accountability, and other attributes befitting a modern professional sector” (Barnett 2012: 189) now dictate the humanitarian sector.

The international aid community accelerated these processes of rationalizing, professionalizing, and bureaucratizing the humanitarian sector after the collective failure to stop the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, a tragedy that led many in the humanitarian field to question if they were doing more harm than good. To avoid making the same mistakes and to ensure that no further harm be done, humanitarian agencies began to develop methodologies, rules, and procedures to improve humanitarian responses in ways that were measurable and accountable; generate expert knowledge and best practices; and provide specialized training for staff. As a result, Barnett (2012) observes that:

What is striking is that agencies of all shapes and sizes, and all secular and religious orientations, have embraced this rationalization process. In general, over the last two decades humanitarian organizations have gravitated toward similar organizational characteristics, suggesting that there is not a religious or secular way to run an organization; instead, there is a modern way that is superior to the premodern way of doing things (192).

Because of the secular character of the humanitarian agencies shaping the humanitarian sector in recent decades, the overall field appears overwhelmingly secular (Hollenbach 2020: 47). In turn, many faith-based groups finding it necessary to collaborate with secular humanitarian agencies of

considerable scope and capacity and seek funding to sustain their efforts began to articulate their principles and mission in increasingly secular terms (Ager & Ager 2017).

That faith-based organizations and their secular counterparts share a great deal in common in terms of mission, guiding principles, operational structure, funding sources, and selection criteria, among other characteristics, because of the recent processes of rationalization, bureaucratization, and professionalization shaping the humanitarian sector, many of the explanatory factors that account for the expansion of secular non-governmental organizations and international organizations over the past 70 years apply also to faith-based organizations. The creation of new international institutions in the postwar era created new political opportunities and incentives for public interest groups to organize. In the decades to follow, the democratization of national political systems and the end of the Cold War, globalization and innovations in communication technology and transportation, opened even more political space for civil society to organize and participate in matters of governance (Karns et al. 2015). Faith-based organizations and religious communities also benefited from these trends to grow in numbers and influence (Berger 2003).

The historical trends shaping the expansion of NGOs and international organizations over the past 70 years have also been studied by academics in mainly secular terms, which may account for why little attention has been paid to faith-based organizations and especially to local faith communities in the global South that are often less renowned than well-established international faith-based organizations. Predominant theories of secularization emerging in the post-war era purported that the march of modernity would eventually relegate religion to the private sector. Various academic fields caught up in the predominant theories of secularization largely ignored the role of religion as an influential actor in multiple facets of global issues, including forced migration (Fox & Sandler 2004). Real-world events, most notably the terrorist attack on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, thrust religion into the spotlight and demanded the attention of academics and policy makers alike. Furthermore, with theories of secularization unable to account for the global resurgence of religion, scholars have recently begun to argue that the world finds itself in a post-secular age where religion continues to hold meaning and import for many the world over.

Over the last few decades, there has been significant developments in terms of meaningful dialogue about religion's role in humanitarian responses to forced displacement and how to support their work. This is due, in part, to the recognition of religion's importance in humanitarian spaces,

in the lives of many who respond to crises (often putting their own lives at risk) and those who suffer from displacement, as well as in recognition of the extensive knowledge and expertise faith-based groups have in assisting individuals and communities suffering displacement. Many intergovernmental agencies, such as UNHCR, have embarked on a journey of dialogue and mutual understanding with faith-based organizations, faith leaders, and local faith communities.

In 2012, UNHCR High Commissioner António Guterres convened the *Dialogue on Faith and Protection*, which gathered faith leaders, faith-based humanitarian agencies, and secular humanitarian actors to discuss historical and current contributions of religious actors in humanitarian responses and seek ways to strengthen partnerships. An outcome of the dialogue was the publication *Welcoming the Stranger* (UNHCR 2013) highlighting various religious teachings on providing hospitality to displaced populations. Then, in 2014, UNHCR produced a partnership note putting forth three fundamental principles to guide partnerships between UNHCR and faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders: hospitality, respect, and equality (UNHCR 2014). These three principles serve as a foundation for UNHCR and faith-inspired actors to develop minimum standards to guide their partnerships. The Global Compact on Refugees also takes a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach, further underscoring a recognition of faith-based contributions to humanitarian responses to forced migration and the need to partner.

This recent engagement with faith-based actors in humanitarian spaces is part of a larger move by international agencies to mark a distinct path for engaging with religion in a wide range of sectors, from sustainable development to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In 2015, the World Bank held a conference *Religion and Sustainable Development* and in 2017 the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect put forth a *Plan of Action* for religious leaders to prevent the incitement of violence and atrocity crimes. The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit featured a special event on the topic of religious engagement.

Additionally, the localization agenda in the humanitarian sector also explains recent engagement with local faith communities in contexts of displacement. Many international humanitarian agencies recognize that despite best efforts to increase efficiency in response, local actors are often well-positioned and well-suited to act as first responders to a crisis. Localizing humanitarian efforts can also address the challenge of power imbalances in the humanitarian sector



between predominantly western agencies and local communities and organizations, especially in the global South (Wilkinson & Ager 2017: 14).

How faith factors into humanitarian responses and in the lives of forced migrants has also drawn the attention of academia. Over the past two decades, various academic research has focused on the religion and forced migration nexus. The 2002 Special Issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* entitled “Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration” examines the various ways that forced migrants draw from religious and spiritual resources to cope with displacement and how displacement can impact individual and collective religious beliefs and practices. Contributions to the 2007 Special Issue of *Refugee Survey Quarterly* note how religion can be a cause of displacement by contributing to conflict. The 2008 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* Special Issue explores humanitarian responses motivated by Islam. The 2011 Special Issue of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* entitled “Faith-Based Humanitarian in Contexts of Forced Displacement” focuses on how faith motivates humanitarian action and examines the variety of rationales and modes of engagement.

Much of the literature focuses on Christian and Islamic responses—understandable given their significant contribution in the area—and on well-established faith-based organizations, but more recently academic literature is trying to fill empirical gaps in the variety of ways that local faith communities in the global South respond to forced migration, analyzing the many informal ways that local faith communities—often regarded in the literature and by humanitarian actors—as first responders are contributing to the protection of displaced persons. This more recent focus on local responses reflects an increasing commitment on the part of the international community to supporting local responses to displacement, especially at a time when the international humanitarian system is stretched thin, underfunded, and struggling to respond to simultaneous crises around the world.

The emerging body of academic literature and policy reports on religiously motivated humanitarian responses to forced migrants indicates that a two-way theoretical and practical discussion on partnerships between secular and religious humanitarian organizations, particularly faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders, is still quite nascent. Work in this area is needed given that religion continues to play an important role today as evidenced by their growth over the past several decades.

#### **4. Areas recognized in the Global Compact on Refugees where faith-based actors play a significant role in addressing forced displacement**

##### *a. Faith-based organizations as relevant stakeholders for achieving the GCR's four main goals*

On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). Through global consultations, stakeholders found common cause in the compact, which aims to strengthen international efforts to meet the needs of the world's refugees and address the root causes of the crises that cause their displacement. The adoption of the GCR, together with the various regional declarations<sup>2</sup>, the 2016 UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants, and the 2016 US Presidential Summit, which led to the Compact, represent an important act of political will to reform the international refugee regime and take the needed steps toward redressing the inadequacies of the humanitarian system (Betts & Collier 2017; Wilkinson & Wurtz 2020). The four objectives of the GCR are to: (1) relieve burdens on countries that host refugees; (2) enhance refugee self-reliance; (3) expand access to third countries; and (4) support conditions in countries of origin that will allow for refugees to return home safely (UNGA 2018). The Compact is a nonbinding document, however; achieving these four ambitious goals will require the voluntary commitment of States. The GCR calls upon nations to share in the burden of protecting the world's refugees in more equitable and predictable ways at a time when many nations are turning inward. Unfortunately, the United States, a major political actor, voted against the Compact, along with Hungary.

The GCR espouses a whole of society approach by partnership with a diversity of stakeholders, not just States and international organizations with a protection mandate. This approach is critical to achieving coordinated action on the GCR (Domicelj & Gottardo 2019) and recognizes that a wide range of actors have been engaged in responding to forced migration. The GCR enumerates the relevant stakeholders:

International organizations within and outside the United Nations system, including those forming part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement; other humanitarian

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<sup>2</sup> See the San Pedro Sula Declaration, the Nairobi Declaration on Somalia, and the Arab League declaration.

and development actors; international and regional financial institutions; regional organizations; local authorities; civil society, including faith-based organizations; academics and other experts; the private sector; media; host community members and refugees themselves (hereinafter "relevant stakeholders") (UNGA 2018: 1).

The GCR identifies faith-based organizations as relevant stakeholders for achieving the Compact's four main goals. Additionally, the document cites specific areas where faith-based organizations are well-positioned to assist:

- “Faith-based actors could support the planning and delivery of arrangements to assist refugees and host communities, including in the areas of conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, as well as other relevant areas” (UNGA 2018: 8).
- The “power and positive impact of...faith-based organizations” can be “harnessed” to “combat all forms of discrimination and promote peaceful coexistence between refugee and host communities” (*Ibid.*: 16).
- Faith-based organizations can play a pivotal role in establishing or enlarging the “scope, size, and quality of, resettlement programmes” (*Ibid.*: 18).
- In addition to supporting refugee resettlement programmes, faith-based groups also have a critical role to play in expanding complementary pathways for admission, such as family reunification, private or community sponsorship, humanitarian visas, humanitarian corridors, humanitarian admission programmes; educational opportunities through student visas and grants; and labour mobility opportunities (*Ibid.*: 19).

The multi-stakeholder and whole-of-society approach of the GCR is a very important step forward in recognizing the critical role played by a diversity of actors, including religious actors, in responding to forced migration. Additionally, the specific areas where faith-based organizations are recognized for making positive contributions is also an important acknowledgement of faith-based contributions to responding to forced migration. The following sub-sections provide a few examples of faith-based contributions in the areas identified by the GCR.

*b. Reflections on recognition of the role faith actors can play in conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding*

Religious actors can be promoters of meaningful dialogue and peaceful coexistence among host and refugee communities through initiatives within their respective faith communities or

through interfaith, or multi-religious, initiatives (Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities 2018b). Drawing from a deep well of scriptural teachings, faith leaders and communities can provide spaces of reconciliation in situations of conflict and repair ruptures within and between communities.

As one example, in resolving conflicts between refugee and host communities, evidence from Ecuador, the largest host of refugees in the Americas, shows that the presence of nonstate actors at the grassroots level, including local faith communities, provides a relative advantage for community mediation when compared to centralized state institutions, making it easier for the parties involved to trust and access NGOs and churches for mediation (Pugh et al. 2016). Additionally, the Catholic Church has had a long-term presence in the border region with Colombia that has historically lacked a strong state presence and has promoted mediation programs designed to foster coexistence between Ecuadorians and Colombians (Dumas & Frank 2008). Such programs, often because they are provided in spaces, such as churches and local NGOs, that are inclusive and trusted by forced migrants, they are well-positioned to respond quickly and effectively to host-migrant conflicts. And, with an orientation toward maintaining a long-term presence and building relationships with the local and refugee communities, local faith communities and grassroots NGOs can invest resources into projects aimed at transformational change.

*c. The role in advocacy to combat stigma and discrimination*

Local faith communities and faith leaders, not just faith-based organizations, play an important role in advocacy and initiatives to combat stigma and discrimination. Deeply rooted within their communities, the long-term and trusted presence of faith leaders who espouse values of peaceful co-existence, dialogue, and respect for human dignity can help to create opportunities to influence attitudes and behaviors towards refugees and migrants in a positive way. With moral authority, faith leaders can speak out against injustices suffered by refugees and migrants in the form of stigma and discrimination and advocate policymakers, government officials, and authorities to implement rights-based policies that combat stigma and discrimination (Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities 2018a).

As an example of one best practice, the program *Io non discrimino* (trans. *I do not discriminate*) organized by Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo educates young people in Italy to counter the false news stories about refugees and migrants and sensitizes them to the daunting risks people face when trying to reach Europe. The program not only operates in Italy, a country of destination, but also in countries of origin, such as Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia by providing vocational training and education opportunities to at-risk youth. The pedagogy for youth at both ends of the migration route is based on Don Bosco's pedagogy and preventive method: raising the awareness of youth in destination countries about migration can serve to combat discriminatory attitudes and behaviors while providing needed vocational training and employment opportunities to youth in countries of origin can reduce the likelihood of youth embarking on perilous journeys.<sup>3</sup>

Religious actors also make significant contributions to addressing stigma related to gender, sexual identity and sexual orientation of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. Gender, faith, and forced migration intersect in complex ways that have resulted in framings of and responses to LGBTIQ+ people on the move in ways that undermine their agency along all stages of the migration journey and compound their vulnerabilities (Fidian-Qasmiyeh 2017). Based on a global survey of refugee-serving NGOs examining their attitudes towards persons fleeing persecution based on sexual orientation or gender non-conformity, it appears that religious NGOs are no more or less likely to provide adequate and appropriate support to LGBTIQ+ refugees and migrants than secular ones (ORAM 2012; Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities 2018b). The survey reveals that many NGOs, secular and religious alike, were unaware of the existence of LGBTIQ+ refugees in their work, were not adequately equipped to inquire about their identities and circumstances, and some displayed discomfort on the topic. The silence or discomfort about realities facing LGBTIQ+ refugees likely reflect pervasive religious, social, and cultural taboos and biases (ORAM 2012).

In Canada, a LGBTIQ+ Refugee Digital Storytelling Project carried out in 2016 with the Metropolitan Community Church provided an inclusive, safe space for refugees to narrate their own stories as well as help guide a community-based reflection on how religious beliefs inform

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see <http://stoptratta.org/campaign/> and <http://www.ionondiscrimino.it/>

both pro- and anti-LGBTIQ+ transnational social movements (McGuire 2018). This example points to the importance of evaluating stigma-combatting projects based on whether they facilitate inclusionary or exclusionary processes. As way of another example, also discussed in more detail later in this paper, La 72, a refugee and migrant shelter in Mexico, provides programming to LGBTIQ+ individuals that is inclusive and affirming as well as appropriate psychosocial and medical support (Wurtz & Wilkinson 2020).

*d. The role of faith-based organizations in resettlement and complementary pathways*

Faith-based organizations are essential partners in national refugee resettlement programs by providing services and assisting with the integration of refugees in host communities. Even before the creation of UNHCR, faith-based and secular humanitarian groups identified and assisted the resettlement of refugees during and after WWII (Slaughter 2017). In the United States, once the leading nation in resettling refugees, six of the nine resettlement agencies are faith-based. Faith-based organizations provide services and develop strategies and programs for integration. With close ties to networks of local faith communities, faith-based organizations are often able to leverage the resources and volunteer-time of churches, congregations, synagogues, temples, and mosques to assist in welcoming and integrating resettled refugees (Nawyn 2005).

Faith-based organizations and local faith communities have also been major proponents of complementary pathways, often creating innovative models for expanding refugee protection. From the Canadian private sponsorship program to the more recent Humanitarian Corridors (see Box 1), religious actors connect motivated citizens with resettled refugees by facilitating appropriate connections with sensitivity to the religious and spiritual needs of the refugees between host communities and refugees. By committing to the principle of additionality, faith-based proponents of complementary pathways have played an important role in expanding refugee protection spaces while keeping governments committed to their international obligations to burden-sharing (Hyndman et al. 2017).

**Box 1. Humanitarian Corridors: Religious actors opening safe pathways to Europe for refugees**

In 2015, the Catholic lay Community of Sant’Egidio, together with the Italian Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian Church, approached the Italian government with a proposal to implement a project called Humanitarian Corridors. This ecumenical collaboration was successful in convincing the Italian government to build a bridge to welcome Syrian refugees from Lebanon who were living in conditions of extreme vulnerability and in some cases even contemplating making the treacherous journey to Europe.

The project is fully funded by the co-sponsoring religious organizations. The government facilitates legal admission by issuing humanitarian visas. And, once the refugees arrive, they are welcomed at the airport, and communities of volunteers and service agencies help to settle and assist them with applying for asylum, accessing medical care, housing, language study, and enrolling children in school. Also, relationships built up over years with local churches and mosques, as well as with political figures, in Lebanon (mainly through Sant’Egidio’s annual international interreligious prayer for peace) was a crucial factor in opening Humanitarian Corridors so quickly. Sant’Egidio was able to activate this extensive network in Lebanon to identify refugees for whom Humanitarian Corridors would be an appropriate option to respond to their needs and uphold their human rights and dignity.

Since launching in Italy, Humanitarian Corridors have opened in France, Belgium, Andorra and the Republic of San Marino, showing that this model of safe passage is replicable throughout Europe. And, about 2,500 refugees have arrived so far. This may seem like a drop in the bucket when compared to the millions displaced throughout the world, but Humanitarian Corridors serve as a powerful counter narrative to ultra-nationalist rhetoric and restrictive migration and asylum policies.

*e. Continuing the role of faith-based actors in emergency response*

When a crisis erupts, local communities and organizations, particularly local faith communities are often the most effective first responders, mobilizing their local knowledge, resources, and networks to provide needed support to the displaced (Refugee Studies Centre 2013; Bennett *et al.* 2016). In addition to needed material support, local faith communities can provide spiritual support through counseling, religious services, and other rituals that help to promote resilience and provide meaning and continuity—even a sense of belonging—for communities for whose lives have been disrupted abruptly (Ager *et al.* 2015; Ager & Ager 2017). Local communities also may have access to populations that international actors may have difficulty accessing, especially in situations of internal displacement. In Syria, for example, Jesuits remained in the country during the conflict to provide assistance in places international humanitarian actors were not allowed or able to enter.

To support the continuing role of local faith communities in emergency response, Wilkinson and Ager (2017: 58-60) recommend the following: humanitarian coordination must engage with local actors; “cultural brokers” who understand both the international humanitarian system and local faith structures can help facilitate partnerships and break down barriers; integrate secular

psychology and spiritual support of local faith communities to provide culturally relevant psychosocial support; and conduct further research into how local faith communities mobilize to respond to emergencies and translate that research for decision-makers in the international humanitarian system to promote awareness of local faith communities' responses to refugee situations.

*5. Additional areas and advantages where faith-based actors may play a significant role in addressing forced displacement*

There are additional areas where religious actors play a significant role in addressing forced displacement. Religious actors provide physical protection and accompaniment to vulnerable populations in settings of conflict and displacement, deter violence through their presence, and facilitate humanitarian access. In Kenya, during and after the 2007-2008 election violence, local faith communities worked with UNHCR and the Kenyan Red Cross, among other actors, to provide safe spaces, shelter, and material assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs 2015: 34). In Colombia, which has one of the largest populations of IDPs in the world, Christian Peacemaker Teams, comprised of both international and national staff, accompany community processes and grassroots organizations that embrace nonviolent resistance as a strategy to protect their communities and resist violence and oppression. By being physically present in communities caught up in conflict, they provide physical protection to at-risk communities and their leaders and draw international attention to human rights violations perpetrated by state and non-state actors alike with impunity.<sup>4</sup>

Religious actors work to improve reception conditions, accompany the detained, and advocate for legislative changes. Wilson (2011) spotlights the work of faith-based organizations in Australia motivated by an ethic of hospitality to advocate for changes to harsh asylum policies. FBOs were able to exert influence on changes to asylum policy, most notably the expansion of community detention, which helped to improve conditions for asylum seekers. Furthermore, local churches and FBOs played a role in implementing the policy by providing housing, a service many were well-equipped to provide because of extensive experience providing shelter to Australia's

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<sup>4</sup> To learn more about Christian Peacemaker Teams visit: <http://www.ecapcolombia.org/en/>



homeless population. Wilson observes that local FBOs had developed the community detention model that the government adopted. Rather than turn to those FBOs, the government tapped the Australian Red Cross to implement the new policy. The reasoning behind this decision may be pragmatic: The Red Cross is a national organization with greater capacity than the FBOs who had initially formulated the policy. Additionally, committed to neutrality, the Red Cross would not criticize the government as had been done by the FBOs when advocating the government to soften its asylum policy and extend community-based detention to asylum seekers. One FBO, Hotham Mission ASP, declined to partner with the government on implementation of the policy when approached because they were concerned that entering into a formal agreement would restrain its freedom to criticize government policy. This example highlights tensions that may arise between faith actors and governments that may also pose challenges to partnership. It also reveals the strategic choices faith-based actors make to advance their agenda: Hotham Mission ASP may have calculated that using its moral authority as a faith-based organization to criticize the government may have been more effective in moving the needle on asylum policy than entering a formal agreement to be a service provider and, as a result, curtailing its critical voice.

Religious actors support local integration. In contexts of displacement, the religious edict in many traditions to provide welcome and hospitality to the stranger is especially important. After the initial first response to an emergency, local faith communities do the long-term work of fostering the development of forced migrants by providing vocational training, especially if return home is not an option for the foreseeable future. For example, in Kenya, where protracted conflicts in surrounding countries make voluntary return challenging, many local faith communities and other faith-based organizations that have traditionally aided refugees have also implemented programs in host communities, such as training and conflict resolution programs, to encourage integration (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs 2015).

As all these examples show, the contributions made by religious actors in response to forced migration far exceed the activities identified in the GCR. Ongoing research into the role of religious actors in response to forced migration around the world will continue to be critical for informing best practices for partnerships between UNHCR, international humanitarian organizations, and religious actors. The following section explores existing literature and policy papers addressing the challenges and opportunities for partnership and lays out recommendations

for charting a way forward on how partnerships with faith-based actors can deliver on the goals of the GCR.

## **6. The way forward for delivering on the GCR**

Partnership with a wide array of relevant stakeholders will be essential to advancing the agenda of the GCR. As noted above, the GCR espouses a whole of society approach by partnering with diverse stakeholders, not just States and international organizations with a protection mandate. This approach is critical to achieving coordinated action on the GCR (Domicelj & Gottardo 2019) and recognizes that a wide range of actors have been engaged in responding to forced migration. Among the many stakeholders identified in the GCR, faith-based organizations are among them.

Engagement on the part of UNHCR with faith-based organizations and other religious actors is not new, as UNHCR has been collaborating with religious actors since its creation. In recent years, however, UNHCR has become more active in engaging with religious actors and strengthening partnerships to respond to the protection needs of forced migrants. In 2012, UNHCR High Commissioner António Guterres convened a *Dialogue on Faith and Protection*, which gathered governmental, intergovernmental, and non-governmental stakeholders together with religious leaders and academics to set an agenda for addressing the religious and spiritual needs of refugees and engaging more effectively with local faith communities in refugee-hosting contexts. At the *Dialogue*, Guterres acknowledged that UNHCR had tended to view their faith-based partners with the same lens as secular partners, which resulted in underutilizing the unique capacity of religious actors to provide spiritual care and hospitality to forcibly displaced individuals and communities (Ager & Ager 2017).

Following the 2012 *Dialogue*, UNHCR published the document *Welcoming the Stranger* (UNHCR 2013), which gathers a variety of religious teachings from the world's religions on welcoming and protecting the forcibly displaced. The following year, UNHCR, in consultation with faith-based stakeholders, produced a *Partnership Note on Faith-Based Organizations, Local Faith Communities and Faith Leaders* (UNHCR 2014). The document advances the important steps made at the 2012 Dialogue of recognizing the indispensable role of religious actors in

responding to forced migration by acknowledging challenges to partnership, articulating guiding principles for partnership, and identifying best practices.

The *Partnership Note* identifies some of the most difficult challenges to partnership posed by the behaviors and attitudes of some faith actors in contexts of forced migration (UNHCR 2014: 9):

- Antagonism towards or exclusion of members of other faith backgrounds;
- Hate speech or incitement to violence directed against individuals or communities of another faith;
- Proselytization and pressure to convert as a pre-condition for continued support;
- Early marriage or other harmful traditional practices;
- Gender stereotypes and disregard for the specific rights of women, boys and girls and vulnerabilities in contexts where sexual and gender-based violence and negative coping mechanisms are widespread;
- Stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS;
- Stigma and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals and networks.

These behaviors, as noted above, represent examples of negative effects of the activities of faith communities in international affairs and contexts of humanitarian crisis. However, as acknowledged by UNHCR, scholars, and practitioners of faith-based responses to forced migration, most of the world's religious traditions espouse strong moral and ethical commitments to protecting refugees' rights and providing them with needed assistance and hospitality. Those who hold to such teachings tend to act on them and therefore respond with compassion and respect for human dignity to those who have been displaced (Hollenbach 2020: 52).

Challenges to partnership, however, are not exclusively religious in nature. In the *Partnership Note*, UNHCR staff report a lack of coordination with local faith actors in complex emergency situations as the number one challenge. UNHCR staff also registered a lack of familiarity with UNHCR procedures and the existence of power inequalities in the interactions between faith-based service staff and refugees as additional challenges.

The *Partnership Note* rightfully recognizes that partnership is a two-way street. Staff of UNHCR and other secular humanitarian agencies may lack 'faith literacy' and be unaware of the depth and breadth of religious actors' contributions in humanitarian spaces. The imbalance of

power between a large institution like UNHCR and small local faith communities and the processes and procedures of humanitarian bureaucracies can render some religious actors unable or unwilling to engage.

Faith actors may also experience a bias against them on the part of secular humanitarian actors. Scholars examining the intersection of religion and forced migration note the secular character of the humanitarian sector may not always be value-neutral toward religion's role in contexts of forced migration. Secular discourses and practices of secular humanitarian actors impact how they engage with religious actors—particularly local faith communities and especially those located in the global South—in ways that seek to control and disempower expressions and practices of faith in humanitarian contexts.

Ager and Ager (2017) observe three processes through which engagement with religion is controlled and disempowered in humanitarian contexts: privatization, marginalization, and instrumentalization. On the grounds of maintaining impartiality, some humanitarian agencies may restrict religious discourse and practice in public and in workspaces, preferring that it remain in the private lives of aid workers and the people they serve. They cite the example of an international agency's office in Uganda that prohibits open prayer at the start of staff meetings—a common cultural practice—on the grounds that the principle of neutrality translated in the workspace means avoiding the appearance of privileging one religion over another.

Deneulin and Bano (2009) describe Muslim workers in humanitarian agencies in the Middle East adopting a secular script when describing their work, although their Islamic faith is what motivates their work. To find a way forward, Ager and Ager (2017) suggest finding a common understanding between secular and religious actors to avoid biases and address structural practices within agencies that may result in privatizing religion. They suggest a nuanced distinction between *espousing* and *furthering* religious beliefs (and the same could be said for political and philosophical beliefs) and an incorporation of religious (and political and philosophical) plurality in both the office and field rather than denying or silencing voices. Managing a diversity of political and philosophical views is a common challenge for any organization. Religion can and should be treated as one of many views, rather than as a distinct category best eschewed for the sake of neutrality. Many agencies make accommodations for religious expressions and practices, though as the aforementioned examples continue to suggest, more progress is required. Specialized

training for staff tasked with setting agency policy (i.e., human resources) could be one pathway for fostering religious literacy within both secular humanitarian agencies and faith-based organizations.

The second process, *marginalization*, has manifested in the form of excluding, either intentionally or unintentionally, local faith communities from coordination efforts to respond to displaced communities. Ager and Ager (*Ibid.*) cite reports that conclude opportunities were missed because of the lack of coordination between international humanitarian organizations and local faith communities in responding to Syrians displaced to northern Jordan (Action Aid, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund 2013). The *Partnership Note*, citing coordination as a challenge faced by secular and faith-based actors alike, recommends active and intentional identification of religious actors responding in emergency settings and involving them in coordination efforts (UNHCR 2014).

The marginalization of religious activity from humanitarian spaces extends beyond coordination efforts to faith-informed expertise and insight. The rationalization, professionalization, and bureaucratization of the humanitarian sector overall, as observed by Barnett (2012), has meant that many faith-based actors have become nearly indistinguishable from their secular counterparts (a process called isomorphism) and have muted religious insights from their programming choices and omitted religious language from reports. As an example, at the local level, Ager and Ager (2017) share the experience of a Muslim aid worker who serves Muslim migrants experiencing intimate partner violence. She draws upon teachings from the Qur'an and sees them as compatible with the formal Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. However, she perceives that her colleagues dismiss Qur'anic teachings as inherently contrary to women's rights advocacy.

Secular humanitarian agencies may privatize or marginalize religious expressions and practices when perceived as incongruent to humanitarian principles; however, when viewed as aligned with the humanitarian agenda, they may instrumentalize them. Ager and Ager (*Ibid.*) regard this process of instrumentalization as the "utilization or, arguably, exploitation of religious resources seen to be relevant to a secular agenda, while ignoring the religious commitments, principles and dynamics that gave rise to such resources" (*Ibid.* 44). The concern the authors raise is that when a large international organization engages with a local faith community as an

implementing partner, it funds, designs, manages and evaluates its activities, and that may undermine the local actor's role in setting the agenda in a way that is responsive to the needs of the beneficiaries. They cite an example from a staff person at an international aid organization who requested funding for the reconstruction of a mosque destroyed by a natural disaster, as this was deemed an appropriate response to the expressed needs of the local community. However, the staff person received a response that the request would be granted as long as the word 'community center' was substituted for 'mosque' (*Ibid.* 44).

The *Partnership Note* considers these challenges of partnership and establishes three principles—hospitality, respect, and equality—to guide their recommendations to secular humanitarian actors for building effective partnerships with faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders (UNHCR 2014: 14):

- Map out potential partners in local faith communities
- Identify supportive religious leaders in the local area
- Become familiar with the activities undertaken by faith actors
- Understand the activities and map the existing work of faith and/or interfaith groups and their relevance to the protection of persons of concern
- Use the Affirmation of Welcome as an entry point for dialogue (this refers to the statement signed by over 1,700 religious leaders, members of faith communities and faith-based organizations worldwide that affirms a commitment to welcoming the stranger)
- Establish a relationship of mutual understanding and trust to ensure that humanitarian principles are respected
- Mobilize local faith communities and faith leaders for the prevention of and response to protection threats

The *Partnership Note* also provides brief examples of best practices and examples of positive contributions by religious actors in response to forced migration. The recommendations appear to be almost exclusively addressed to UNHCR and other secular humanitarian actors, which very well may be the intended audience. The recommendations present an important step to creating the conditions for an exchange between UNHCR and faith actors, but run the risk that the terms, agenda, and initiative for partnership remain one-sided, with UNHCR in the position of power determining which religious actors are considered potential partners. Implementing the *Partnership Note's* recommendations within the framework of the GCR should include an

openness on the part of international humanitarian actors to understanding locally based interpretations of humanitarian principles and a willingness to adopt interventions accordingly, not a one-directional identification of partners, which risks sidelining important contributions and insights from other local actors.

As of yet, there does not appear to be a large body of literature examining issues related to implementation of the GCR in partnership with religious actors. The Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Communities (JLI 2018b) published a policy brief on faith actors and the implementation of the GCR. The brief provides concrete examples of contributions by religious actors in response to forced migration that go beyond the areas recognized by the GCR, namely assisting refugees and host communities with conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. The briefing, which follows the GCR's sections on Arrangements for Burden- and Responsibility-sharing and its three Areas in Need of Support (Reception and Admission, Meeting Needs and Supporting Communities, and Solutions) concludes with recommendations on how governments, humanitarian actors and other institutions can better engage with and support the work of religious actors. Additionally, UNHCR hosts a digital platform that catalogues good practices submitted by individuals, governments, organizations, businesses, and religious actors who implement initiatives to support refugees, host communities, and stateless people in accordance with the goals of the GCR.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of scholarly research on the implementation of the GCR in partnership with religious actors, a recent and important study by Wurtz and Wilkinson (2020) draws from empirical case studies of local faith communities in Mexico and Honduras to examine the role of local faith actors and communities in responding to refugees and other migrants in relation to policy guidelines and frameworks promoted by the GCR and the experiences and interpretations of policy concepts as related to their local contexts. The authors argue that their findings reveal that what local faith actors consider appropriate responses do not necessarily align with best practices as articulated by the GCR and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. They argue that the predominantly secular frameworks of international humanitarian organizations hamper meaningful collaboration with local faith actors despite calls to enhance partnerships.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information visit: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/channel/good-practices>

From the perspective of local faith actors, the authors examine the concepts of innovation and self-reliance, two themes of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, of which the GCR is a part, and proselytization, a concern for international actors. The case studies highlight the “crucial roles that local actors play [and] the need to recognize the value of alternative modalities to providing refugee assistance, the priorities that drive local practice, and the reasons why certain approaches work in particular contexts” (150).

As one example of a case study in their article, La 72 migrant and refugee shelter in Mexico, founded by the Franciscan Order in 2011 to provide hospitality to the overwhelming number of migrants fleeing violence and poverty in Central America, engages in innovative practices that draw from Franciscan spirituality and a critical outlook toward international humanitarian interventions. Whereas in the international humanitarian sector where innovation tends to refer to technologically driven interventions, La 72 describes their innovative work as practices that promote resilience and inclusivity among displaced peoples. Witnessing the increasing diversity of the displaced population—namely, an increase in the number of women, unaccompanied minors, and LGBTIQ+ individuals—La 72 developed specialized programming for LGBTIQ+ refugees and migrants. Among one of the few Catholic communities to address the needs of LGBTIQ+ refugees, the programming seeks to affirm their presence, promote their participation and representation in religious ceremonies and events, and provide appropriate healthcare and psychological support. With an inclusive, ecumenical approach to spirituality that centers on respect for human dignity, the staff and refugees have conversations about faith and spirituality—meaningful, relevant interactions that avoid proselytizing.

On the concept of self-reliance, another case study shows the ways that local faith communities engage in programs that exceed conventional conceptualizations by international actors of self-reliance. Wurtz and Wilkinson point out that while the GCR promotes the importance of refugee self-reliance, interventions by international actors tend to be narrow in scope and short-term, which undercut efforts to develop long-term solutions and empower refugees. Local faith communities, though challenged by limited resources and staff, rely on a strong base of committed volunteers, often motivated by religious belief, and strong ties to the local community to mobilize



resources and find creative solutions for assisting refugees with integration and economic well-being.

Based on empirical research of local faith communities in the global South, their research demonstrates how “Northern framings of policy processes such as the GCR and corresponding terminologies such as self-reliance and innovation are in tension with the experiences and relevant concepts used by local faith actors” (158). These tensions point to important opportunities to enhance partnership between international humanitarian actors and local faith communities in the global South. To that end, Wurtz and Wilkinson call for:

- Nuanced interventions by international actors shaped by locally based interpretations of humanitarian principles (147)
- Adjust the criteria for funding structures in ways that reflect the actual needs and desires of local communities affected by and responding to forced migration (147)
- Support local communities that engage in civic and political engagement in order to advocate for changes and address the root causes of conflict and displacement (147)

The GCR’s commitment to a partnership approach with multiple stakeholders, recent initiatives by UNHCR to strengthen partnerships with religious actors, and critiques of the ways that secular bias against religious actors hamper partnership, taken all together, signal that important progress is being made, but more work is required. The efforts and intentions of all actors involved are exemplary and well-meaning. However, the scholarly research on the predominant secular framings of international humanitarian organizations and the unequal power dynamics between large humanitarian agencies based in the global North and local communities in the global South point to larger, structural impediments to partnership.

Recommendations for enhancing partnership, especially the ones advanced in the 2014 UNHCR *Partnership Note*, focus on the dynamics and interactions among secular and religious actors in contexts of humanitarian emergencies. To address underlying secular biases and unequal power dynamics requires structural changes to the humanitarian sector itself. Efforts are needed to go beyond refining partnership among agencies of differing secular and religious persuasions to identifying underlying causes of inadequacies in the humanitarian sector.

In a report evaluating the state of the humanitarian sector entitled *Time to let go: Remaking humanitarian action for the modern era*, Bennett *et al.* (2016) observe that the humanitarian

system falls woefully short of responding adequately and effectively to humanitarian emergencies and protracted situations across the globe. Frontline aid workers are doing their best to respond, even putting their own lives at risk, and humanitarian agencies are caring for more people than ever before. The struggles to keep pace with the world's needs have more to do with “fundamental assumptions, power dynamics and incentives” created by the humanitarian sector itself than redoubling efforts to improve the “mechanics of response” (*Ibid.* 2).

The report identifies four main barriers to needed structural change to the humanitarian sector, which arguably also relate to barriers to enhanced partnership with faith-based actors. The first is money and power, both of which are concentrated in the global North. This has meant that “most engagement with local NGOs is in the form of sub-contracting arrangements, rather than genuine strategic engagement—technically and financially—to drive a response more ably and confidently” (*Ibid.* 7). As this relates to engagement with local faith communities, the concentration of power and money in the hands of international actors risks driving the agenda and sidelining the religious insights and experiences of local faith communities (Ager & Ager 2017). To address this barrier, Wurtz and Wilkinson (2020) recommend shifting the criteria of funding structures to create space for locally driven agendas, best practices derived from local interpretations of humanitarian principles, and insights and expertise drawn from religious beliefs and practices. As an example, evidence along the Colombia-Ecuador border supports the argument that long-term funding (as opposed to short-term funding dominant in the international aid community) of peacebuilding initiatives permits local communities, including faith-based ones, to engage in the trust- and relationship-building with refugee and host communities and institutions necessary to effect the transformational change needed to address root causes of host-migrant conflict (Pugh 2016). Paragraph 3 of the GCR recommends the provision of “predictable, flexible, unearmarked, and multi-year funding whenever possible”, an important step toward giving actors the tools necessary to respond to emergencies. Similar flexibility should also apply to longer-term interventions by local actors.

The second barrier is destructive competition: the humanitarian sector is a competitive market, which renders real and meaningful collaboration difficult. Competition for limited funding and pressure from financial uncertainty create a dynamic in which agencies and actors of all types compete among themselves. This problem of *chasing the money* means that funding dictates the types of humanitarian response as opposed to the expressed needs of communities in need. This

competitive dynamic underscores the reluctance of some local faith communities to accept funding from international donors, preferring local support as a way of maintaining institutional autonomy (Wurtz & Wilkinson 2020). A competitive funding market will make the multi-stakeholder partnership approach of the GCR challenging.

A third barrier is accountability to donors, not aid recipients, as the report notes: “Accountability to people affected by crises features prominently in aid rhetoric but is less in evidence in practice” (8). Affected people have little to no power or influence over how humanitarian aid works. A secular bias against faith-based actors concerned with power imbalances between religious service providers and beneficiaries, while valid in some cases, can however distract from the larger power imbalances in the whole humanitarian sector. Whether religious or secular, humanitarian entities need to understand what affected people think about the assistance they receive. Local faith communities, rooted within the communities they serve, may be better positioned as a trusting ear to receive the needs and desires of those they serve and to act as mediator to communicate those needs and desires to international actors leading humanitarian interventions.

The fourth barrier is humanitarian exceptionalism, the assumption that humanitarians, guided by principles of humanity, impartiality, independence, and neutrality, and grounded in International Humanitarian Law, are the principal purveyors of humanitarian assistance, distinct from all other political and security objectives. The belief is that humanitarian principles allow humanitarian organizations access to conflict and high-risk situations. However, a debate has been underway about the benefits and risks of seeking greater coherence between humanitarian and political objectives—even as Ogata said, “There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems” (Tan 2005). Religious actors who translate religious narratives about welcoming the stranger into political action by serving as counternarratives to the security logic and nationalistic rhetoric that frames asylum seekers and refugees as unknown threatening others, and who hold governments to account on their abandonment of responsibilities in relation to the care and protection of migrants, (Wilson & Mavelli 2016) have called for greater political will on the part of humanitarian agencies to address the political nature of root causes of displacement and inhospitality.

In light of these barriers, Bennet *et al.* (2016) conclude that it is time for the humanitarian sector *to let go*—that is, to let go of power and control, perverse incentives in the funding structure, and divisions among humanitarian actors that overlook the capacities, understandings, and expertise from those better placed to help. The recommendations offered are relevant to improving partnership with religious actors.

For example, to let go of power and money, UN agencies and INGOs should shift their activities away from direct implementation to taking on an enabling role. This shift would support national and local organizations to undertake crisis responses on their own, and this would require channeling funds to local organizations. Linking this recommendation with the recommendations in the 2014 UNHCR *Partnership Note* will help to shift power and money to religious actors, especially local faith communities with a demonstrated and proven commitment to providing appropriate responses to the expressed needs of displaced communities.

Additionally, the report recommends that the humanitarian system must “cast off the assumptions, power dynamics, biases and trade-offs that work against evolution and change” (11). Considering recent scholarship on engagement with faith-based responses to forced migration, this recommendation could be modified to include *secular* biases that inhibit the evolution of engagement with faith-based responses. Taken together, these assumptions and biases perpetuate power dynamics that maintain the notion of humanitarian exceptionalism. Research and policy briefs on the contributions of faith-based responses, particularly by local faith communities in the global South, provide evidence that local interpretations of humanitarian principles and faith-based reflection on ethical duties to refugees are contributing to a wide range of best practices and innovations that international actors can learn from.

## **7. Conclusion**

Practitioners and scholars of humanitarian responses to forced migration recognize the important contributions of faith-based actors. Considering the whole of society approach espoused by the Global Compact on Refugees to enhance partnerships with multiple stakeholders, including faith-based actors, a nuanced examination of the comprehensive role that faith-based actors play in humanitarian responses to forced migration and their efforts to advocate for policies that respect

and uphold the rights and dignity of displaced peoples will remain an important research agenda for scholars and policymakers in the years to come. A significant contribution by scholars at the intersection of religion and forced migration has been analyses of how the predominantly secular character of the humanitarian sector has resulted in biases against the role of religion and religious actors in contexts of humanitarian crises and thrown up barriers to meaningful partnerships, despite best efforts to the contrary. Best practices of partnership abound, but more work is required, especially in addressing underlying structural issues beleaguering the international humanitarian system that result in perpetuating unequal power dynamics between international humanitarian assistance agencies and faith-based actors, especially local faith communities situated in the global South.

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