The role of religion in the formation of cross-community relationships

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Spiritual life is a priority in many conflict-affected communities, perhaps especially in situations of displacement. It is rarely prioritised by aid agencies, yet may be central to the formation and maintaining of strong and effective cross-community relationships.

Questions around migration, the treatment of forced migrants and cross-community relationships between host and forced migrant groups are deeply embedded within Islamic history. From an Islamic perspective, cross-community relationships are facilitated by a mutual recognition of the dignity and honour that God bestows on forced migrants for their fortitude in escaping persecution or deprivation, and on their hosts for their generosity of spirit.[1] A crucial aspect of maintaining this dignity is in ensuring that neither the vulnerability of the migrants nor the generosity of the hosts is exploited.

When the first community of Muslims in Mecca, including the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH[2]) himself, migrated to the nearby city of Medina to escape religious persecution, the Prophet established a unique system of protection whereby local families would each take responsibility for one migrant family, sharing with them their wealth, food, home and tribal protection.[3] Such a system facilitated the integration of the migrants into the host society, providing them with a sense of belonging and a source of spiritual support, leading to the establishment of healthy and mutually beneficial relationships between hosts and migrants.

While there is a rich tradition within Islam of hosting migrants this tradition is not often invoked by Muslim faith-based organisations (FBOs) in their work. Calls for action and support for forced migrants tend rather to be based on general Islamic obligations to give charity, while the individual religious motivations of staff within Islamic Relief (IR) focus on the need to care for the vulnerable, rather than invoking the Islamic history of care for migrants.

Forming cross-community relationships

IR's experience indicates that religious **identity**, rather than religious **values**, tends to play a more prominent role in its work with migrant and host communities. Our research concludes that in many cases, although not all, IR finds itself at an advantage over non-Muslim agencies when working with displaced and host communities that are Muslim.[4] The nature of this advantage and the reasons for it are as varied as the contexts in which we operate; however, they are often ascribed to IR's ability to build relationships of trust with those communities.

Staff interviewed across multiple locations commented that a sense of trust was based on the agency's clear connection to its religious identity, visible through its name and logo. This identity is nurtured through sensitivity to the spiritual and religious needs of the community, for example in the provision of food parcels during Islamic religious celebrations such as Ramadan and facilitating the *qurbani* (distribution of meat) for *Eid ul-Adha*. Beneficiaries in camps of internally displaced people (IDPs) from Darfur to Kabul point to this provision as evidence of a shared religious understanding, while IR's policy of recruiting local staff (who are therefore from the same religious community in many cases) undoubtedly plays a key role in supporting this sense of shared religious identity. While most international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) hire local staff, the expectation is often for staff to leave behind references to their religion and behave with a secular outlook; this tendency

is less emphasised where the organisation identifies with the employee's faith.

Spiritual life, not often recognised by aid agencies, is a priority for many conflict-affected communities, perhaps especially in situations of displacement. Although IR's policy is not to build specifically religious buildings, we are frequently approached with requests for assistance in building mosques and religious schools, partly because our religious identification makes beneficiaries comfortable in doing so. However in the context of working with forced migrants, we provide temporary spaces for religious and spiritual use equitably to all communities (both Muslim and non-Muslim). IR's role in camp management has required a recognition that space for worship and religious education be considered a basic need in some cases as this is a priority of the camp residents themselves.

However, the faith 'label' of an NGO can also act as a barrier rather than a bridge. In contexts where religious identity has been conflated with political position, being identified as a 'Muslim organisation' has made it more complicated to build trust with communities. When IR began working in El Geneina in Darfur, the organisation was

initially viewed with suspicion; beneficiaries assumed that as a religious organisation IR was representing the Sudanese government, and other NGOs suspected IR of having pre-existing relationships with either the government or other local militias. Similarly, in Al Saloum Camp in Egypt, Sudanese refugees from Darfur expressed unease about being in a camp managed by IR because they perceived this as a potential barrier to applying for entry to northern Europe or North America. Where there are multiple factions organised around a politicised religious identity, as in Afghanistan or Iraq, there are additional risks for Muslim NGO staff. Staff from Kabul, for example, expressed fears that they were unable to work in some of the more remote areas because their less conservative appearance (interestingly referred to in terms of their "lack of beards") would lead to them being at risk of attack.

In contexts of forced migration, faith has always played a role in directing migration patterns. This is seen most recently in the case of Syrian refugees, particularly in Lebanon, where Syrians are most likely to move to a location inhabited by those from similar religious backgrounds. These connections may allow greater potential for tolerance and

Malian refugees get ready to break the fast during Ramadan in Goudoubo refugee camp, Burkina Faso.

hospitality by host communities for migrants from similar ethnic or religious backgrounds and aid may be more easily distributed when done through existing religious structures. Conversely, reduced opportunities for different communities to interact can exacerbate a sense of division, difference and competition. The positive role of shared faith identity is also tainted where this results in discrimination vis-à-vis other communities. In Lebanon there have been government restrictions on the number of Syrian refugee families in any settlement. However, the majority of settlements in the Beka'a region, for example, contain substantially higher numbers of Syrian families and popular opinion attributes this to authorities turning a blind eye where settlements house refugees from the same sect as local power brokers.

Secularisation of humanitarian discourse
The humanitarian sector has a strong secular bias, with FBOs often feeling that there is an actively anti-religious feeling within the international sector. This can be overt, for example where funding is withdrawn or unavailable for work in northern Mali due to fears of falling foul of anti-terrorism legislation; or it can be systemic, for example when project staff working on cross-community peacebuilding with IDPs in Sudan feel uncomfortable including training on Islamic approaches to conflict transformation in the project proposal. In Lebanon, initial questions to IR staff and partners about how their faith inspires their work were immediately met with strong pronouncements on the importance of non-discrimination, with any discussion of faith being first understood in terms of its potential risk to humanitarian principles.

The relegation of religion to 'culture' by parts of the international aid community[5] undermines the potential for understanding the economic, political and social role of faith and faith communities in situations of forced migration, and how this can have a positive impact on the design of response. At the root of humanitarian agencies' concern is the potential difficulty of separating out

FBOs' humanitarian role from their pastoral role. This has the potential to deny important pastoral services such as the comforting of the sick, traumatised and bereaved. Secular institutions have often dealt with this in the Global North by integrating multi-faith chaplaincy into front-line services, with highly developed ethical and practice-based guidelines. Professionalising the provision of such services within refugee settings could enable secular agencies and FBOs to address the dilemma of reconciling the need for pastoral care in line with humanitarian ethics, whilst also addressing the need to include elements of faith counselling in psychosocial services for forced migrants (which, in the case of issues such as pregnancy arising from rape, is often essential for closure).

Because of this bias it is therefore difficult to measure the role faith plays in the formation of cross-community relationships; it is easier to measure activities by faith leaders and communities as aid distributors than to understand the role that values play in those actions. Historically many FBOs visibly align themselves with standard practices and international values and are hesitant to focus on their faith credentials (or may feel discouraged from doing so) when communicating outside their communities. This is a direct result of donor expectations and can encourage a 'dual mentality' within organisations.[6]

Shared values or shared identity?
A further question that is posed by a critical examination of the role that faith plays is whether these connections are based around an **identity** label or an understanding of shared **values**. A critical examination of IR's experience indicates that while faith often acts as the inspiration for those providing support to forced migrants, in most cases there is little discussion of shared values.

Our experience is that where a common faith is evoked as a shared values system it can have a powerful impact. In Darfur, a Peace and Community Conflict Resolution project brought IDP, host, nomad and

pastoralist communities together; through discussion of religious principles and teachings, the importance of neighbourliness in Islam and good treatment of others was acknowledged as central in restoring trust between communities. Connections through values provide greater opportunities for behavioural change; shared identity opens up access for dialogue on sensitive issues, while shared values enable harmful practices to be challenged from within the religious framework, helping people learn more about their holy texts and the positive impact they can have on community well-being.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Islamic faith is not often being drawn upon to its full depth for the protection of forced migrants. Examples from the time of the Prophet offer a model of practice where migrants are immediately given support to enable them to provide for themselves through work, and long-term émigrés are integrated fully into the community. While this does take place in some contexts (the Turkish policy of integrating Syrian refugees is one such example), this is not typical of the treatment of forced migrants in many Muslim-majority countries today; IDP camps in both Kabul and Darfur, for example, have existed for over ten years through a persistent 'state of emergency'.

The secular nature of the humanitarian and development sectors has made it challenging to see the role that faith plays in the sector, and only in recent years are we seeing a renewed interest in how faith can be a positive agent of change, rather than focusing on concerns of proselytisation or religion as divisive. Consequently, there has not yet been the full opportunity to examine the positive and negative roles that faith can play in the aid sector, and it will not be possible to do this fully unless FBOs and faith communities are able to feel comfortable in vocalising and enacting the teachings of their faith in their relationships with those in need.

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1. See box. See also FMR supplement (2012) 'Islam, human rights and displacement' www.fmreview.org/human-rights

2. PBUH – Peace Be Upon Him. Prophets of God are honoured by Muslims with this saying when their name is mentioned.

3. Ramadan, T (2008) *The Messenger: The meanings of the life of Muhammad*, Penguin Books, London.

4. Kirmani N, Ahmed Khan A and Palmer V (2009) *Does Faith Matter?: An Examination of Islamic Relief's work with Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons*, Islamic Relief Worldwide, UK. http://tinyurl.com/IslamicRelief-and-refugees

5. See, for example, *Culture and Risk: World Disasters Report 2014*, International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. http://tinyurl.com/WorldDisastersReport2014

6. See for example James R (2009) *What is Distinctive About FBOs?: How European FBOs define and operationalise their faith*, Praxis Paper 22, INTRAC. http://tinyurl.com/JamesFBOs-distinctiveness

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Islamic Relief resources on faith-based approaches to forced migration and conflict transformation

• Kidwai S (2014) *The Rights of Forced Migrants in Islam*
http://policy.islamic-relief.com/portfolio/the-rights-of-forced-migrants-in-islam/

Islam has a strong heritage of protection of forced migrants. It is a tradition which provides a robust and generous framework for the protection of and provision for forced migrants, enshrining rights such as the rights to dignity, *non-refoulement*, equal treatment, shelter, health care, family reunification and protection of property. This paper provides an overview of the Islamic teachings related to the rights of forced migrants, and is a resource for any agency dealing with Muslim forced migrant or host communities.

• *Working in Conflict: A Faith Based Toolkit for Islamic Relief*
http://policy.islamic-relief.com/portfolio/working-in-conflict-a-faith-based-toolkit/

The toolkit outlines Islamic Relief policy founded on Islamic principles. From this foundation, and drawing on good practice from across the peacebuilding sector, the kit outlines practical tools and approaches to aid and development projects in contexts of conflict and fragility. While written for Islamic Relief staff, the toolkit may be equally useful for other agencies working with Muslim communities experiencing conflict and violence and includes an introductory section for non-Muslim agencies who wish to draw on the toolkit for their own activities.