

Religious space, humanitarian space

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The official Protestant church in Morocco, the Église Évangélique au Maroc or EEAM, has churches in several cities in Morocco. After a post-independence decline, in the 1990s the EEAM churches experienced an enormous increase in membership from the arrival of students from Sub-Saharan Africa but also a new challenge: the appearance of irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, usually aiming to pass through Morocco on their way to Europe but who inevitably end up in a semi-permanent settled state in the country. Faced with this, in 2003 EEAM began working with refugees and migrants in Morocco through its social arm, the Comité d'Entraide Internationale (CEI).

One of the CEI's main activities is an assistance and emergency aid programme, consisting of food and medical aid, clothing and blanket donations, and spiritual accompaniment for Christians who ask for it. This direct aid is usually given during regular 'drop-in' sessions in EEAM churches in several cities across Morocco. However, the reorientation of this arm of the church towards irregular Sub-Saharan African migrants in Morocco has not happened without some challenges. There is a continual tension that the CEI navigates between being a church organisation, with its emphasis on personalised and pastoral care, and being more like a non-governmental organisation, with an emphasis on efficiency and professionalism.

There is a fundamental ambiguity within the CEI between its evangelism and its humanitarianism that affects its mission, objectives and organisational

decisions. It is not a case of either/or but rather an unresolvable ambiguity intrinsic to the organisation and its history. These issues are the outcome of the organisation trying to interpret and negotiate the 'sacred' and the 'secular' in practice, and demonstrate how the role of religion in humanitarianism is marked by contradictions and tension, reflecting the wider ambivalence of religion's role in the public sphere.

A study of a Southern faith-based actor like the CEI contributes to a greater understanding of some of the smaller actors who engage in 'other' modes of humanitarian action that often go unrecognised, and hence enlarges our definition of humanitarianism. Through being at the same time a transnational space, a religious space and a humanitarian space, the CEI is an example of how such faith communities transform themselves into actors, particularly in the face of a lack of provision of services by the state and sometimes active aggression towards migrants.

To quote the President of the CEI, "we are inventing as we go along". Improvisation and invention have been the main ways that the CEI has attempted to manage the transition from a pastor-run operation to a growing organisation acting as a resource space for migrants in response to wider global processes that affect its own community.

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