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Respecting faiths, avoiding harm: psychosocial assistance in Jordan and the United States

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Both faith-based and secular organisations need to recognise the ways in which religion can provide healing and support but can also cause harm for refugees and asylum seekers.

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have historically provided a variety of services to refugees and asylum seekers, regardless of individuals' religious or spiritual affiliation, and this assistance may be indistinguishable from that provided by secular counterparts. However, FBOs are guided by their religious values and may reach out to wider religious institutions for resources that secular organisations may not be able to access. In addition, many refugees and asylum seekers use religion and spirituality as a source of coping, recovery and resilience.¹

This article compares psychosocial work with refugee and asylum seekers by two FBOs: the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA) in Amman, Jordan, and Seafarers International House (SIH) in New York City, US. CNEWA provides assistance to Iraqi, Syrian, Palestinian and Jordanian populations and help with medical issues, food, housing and education, regardless of a person's religious background; in addition, CNEWA provides funding to the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary (FMM) in Jordan for catechetical programmes (exclusively for Christian families). SIH is a Lutheran social ministry organisation affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which mainly provides temporary housing for asylum seekers and immigrants originating from countries in Central and South America, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.

Benefits of FBOs providing psychosocial assistance

Many of the refugees and asylum seekers with whom I worked in Jordan and the US speak about the importance of faith and their integration into faith communities as a source of spiritual, emotional and social

support. FBOs through their activities can help asylum seekers and refugees feel a sense of belonging and provide them with some sense of familiarity. For example, the FMM taught a weekly group Bible study course at their convent. Many of the female participants said how they looked forward to this since it provided them with both a spiritual and a social activity in a context where refugees have limited resources to spend on recreational activities. Weekly Bible study provided refugees with a space to learn about their faith, interact with the community, and discover resources and services available to them from other organisations; it also helped them cope with the stress of their situation.

SIH provides temporary housing to asylum seekers and immigrants recently released from detention centres; in addition, SIH staff and volunteers visit asylum seekers and immigrant detainees in detention centres throughout New Jersey to provide them with emotional and social support.² Many of SIH's volunteers come from Lutheran congregations in New York City and participate in this programme as a way to act on their religious faith. SIH trains volunteers before they visit a detention centre so that they know that the purpose of the visit is not to proselytise but to provide emotional and social support. However, if the detainee brings up faith as something important to them, then volunteers can engage with detainees on this topic. For example, one immigrant detainee told SIH's volunteers that reading the Bible helped him stay positive during his stay in detention; he felt comfortable enough to share this information after meeting with a volunteer for an hour and they then shared Bible passages they liked to read, and the detainee said this conversation brought him comfort. Staff at

secular agencies may not feel comfortable engaging in discussions about faith.

Asylum seekers who stay at SIH's guesthouse also speak about the importance of faith. One asylum-seeking client who self-identified as Christian said that staying in a Christian place helped him feel secure and safe. Helping create an environment where refugees and asylum seekers feel safe, accepted and secure is extremely important for their mental and emotional well-being. Religious symbols and images can help create spaces which appear familiar and are reassuring to asylum seekers and refugees. Furthermore, staff partaking in and respecting religious rituals – whether of their own faith or another – can help establish trust with clients and a meaningful connection to both the agency and broader community. Secular organisations providing similar services may not be able to create a nurturing environment for clients who cite religion and spirituality as important aspects of their emotional well-being; indeed, they may over-utilise Western therapeutic interventions that may be very different from the client's own forms of coping and which may cause the client distress.

In addition to providing spiritual, emotional and social support, FBOs have connections to other social networks, such as places of worship, and can attract resources and volunteers through these networks. For example, SIH works with Lutheran congregations to recruit volunteers to visit detention centres while CNEWA and FMM use their church networks to locate and distribute resources such as housing, furniture and clothing for their refugee clients. Staff can connect asylum seekers and refugees who share the same faith as the FBO to places of worship that may provide them with additional spiritual assistance. Secular agencies may not have connections to places of worship.

Limitations and pitfalls

FBOs also have limitations and may cause distress to some individuals who practise a different faith from the agency, were persecuted because of their faith, question

their faith or feel a higher power abandoned them in their time of distress. Some may be afraid to seek assistance from FBOs because they fear being converted. FBO staff need to be mindful of these issues and if asylum seekers and refugees express such concerns, practitioners must help them discover other beneficial methods of coping and if necessary refer them to other organisations.

Asylum seekers and refugees may feel discomfort at receiving assistance from an FBO not aligned with their own faith. Some clients may think these agencies only assist individuals of the same faith, or clients of the same faith may think they will receive preferential treatment. Clients with the same faith might also feel pressurised to outwardly display their faith when receiving assistance from faith-based agencies.

Religious symbols and images may make clients who practise a different faith feel distanced from the agency. One SIH volunteer was wearing a cross when speaking with an immigrant detainee in a detention centre who identified as Muslim; the detainee was made uncomfortable by the cross, stating that he was Muslim and did not want to be converted. Faith-based agency staff need to send clear messages to the community that they provide assistance to all individuals regardless of their faith; if possible, they should avoid displaying religious symbols.

It is extremely important for both secular and faith-based agency staff to be versed in the basic tenets of the faiths that their clients follow. Agencies need to be mindful and respectful of certain practices and obligations, such as dietary restrictions and holy days. Staff should also, if possible, try to incorporate clients' spiritual traditions into the activities of the agency, or hold cultural celebrations if clients cite this as something meaningful to their community and path to psychosocial well-being, and if it is appropriate in the local context. At the request of a Muslim and Christian asylum-seeker couple, SIH's pastor provided a blessing for their newborn child, incorporating both traditions.

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Agencies must be prepared to engage in a discussion of faith and spirituality with their clients since many displaced populations cite faith as an important factor for coping and healing, and both secular and faith-based agencies should therefore train staff in the basic tenets of their clients' faiths. More interdisciplinary research needs to be done and additional practice frameworks need to be created by social workers, mental-health practitioners and humanitarian aid workers to ensure that faith and spirituality are seen as something valuable to discuss with asylum seekers and refugees, and to

ensure that their own practices do not cause additional psychosocial or emotional harm.

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1. Gozdzia E and Shandy D (2002) 'Editorial Introduction: Religion and Spirituality in Forced Migration', *Journal of Refugee Studies* Vol 15, No 2.
2. For information about the impact of detention, see FMR issue 44 on 'Detention, alternatives to detention, and deportation'. www.fmreview.org/detention