

Book review of:

Mavelli, Luca, and Erin K. Wilson, eds. 2017. *The Refugee Crisis and Religion. Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield International

Author:

Sabina Barone

Luca Mavelli and Erin Wilson present a thought-provoking collection of articles exploring the multiple entanglements between religion and humanitarian discourse and practice from a post-secularist perspective. The contributors, who are both academics and humanitarian practitioners, partake of the assumption that a Western-centric secularist perspective fails to come to terms with refugees' and local communities' experience of humanitarian crises, which entails a religious dimension. The secularist prejudice against religion as backward and illiberal, which persists in the religion/secularism divide and is mainstream in international humanitarian organizations, frames religion as problematic and/or as a cause of persecution. Yet, the book argues, it neglects religion's potential to promote refugees' resilience and to mitigate humanitarian emergencies. Thus, the adequacy of secularism, as the ultimate explicatory standpoint on social reality, is questioned and new, post-secular, categories are invoked to understand humanitarian crises from below.

The secularist distrust of religion is particularly exacerbated in the context of the current so-called European "refugee crisis", whereby many public discourses conflate religion with Islam and with violence. The book contends that a reductionist association of Islam with the triad 'violence/conflict/terror' is shaping social representations of refugees as potential threats. This results in exclusionary policies, prioritizing security over humanitarianism. In

fact, all of the authors agree that the unfolding crisis is self-inflicted by virtue of European States' lack of political will to implement a coordinated and far-reaching humanitarian response.

Against this backdrop, the book has the twofold goal of, on the one side, exposing how religion is at play in social representations of refugees and in humanitarian responses, and on the other, pointing to alternative ways to conceive of and deal with refugees crises. Contributions mainly refer to the ongoing refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, touching upon cases as diverse as a migrant's account of his journey to Lampedusa (Italy), to reception programmes in France and Canada, to community-led responses in the Middle East. However, different humanitarian crises across time and space are also discussed, including the long-standing Palestinian refugee crisis, the 1999 Kosovo refugee emergency and the case for protection of LGTBI forced migrants.

The articles are arranged as a journey which begins by questioning the secular/religious divide, moves on to de-constructing representations of the Muslim refugee, then proceeds to an exploration of Christian and Muslim religious traditions of hospitality, and ends by examining the intersection of faith, gender, sexuality and asylum. However, the collection offers other analytical and argumentative axes as well, thereby allowing for plural readings that yield further insights.

One significant theme that runs across the essays is the faith-based agency of individuals and communities. While a secular perspective has long considered religious faith as a fatalist surrender of agency, the reality in the field shows that spiritual experience can sustain migrants' rational autonomy and risk assessment along the route (Squire), as well as provide an interpretative framework that facilitates personal and collective healing, as observed with Kosovar Albanian refugees during the US resettlement programme, Operation Refuge (Goździak). In this case, the practitioners' professional response, oriented towards

medicalizing the suffering, was at odds with refugees' own healing process which integrated spiritual and political dimensions. Not only is faith a powerful coping mechanism for the individual, in the Islamic tradition it also motivates community-based humanitarian responses (Kidwai). In fact, as religion is the defining feature underpinning both displaced and host communities, local faith communities (LFC) are being recognised as key actors in promoting refugees' wellbeing (Ager and Ager). LFCs' role has also been increasingly acknowledged by international humanitarian agencies, as shown by the UNHCR-led *Dialogue on Faith and Protection* (2012) and the interreligious document *Welcoming the Stranger* (UNHCR, 2013). As a result, agencies are urged to be more faith-literate.

Giving due attention to religion sheds light on the spiritual rationale of different practices of hospitality. The duty to welcome or protect the stranger is shared by the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It relies on a worldview which differs from the 'cosmopolitan individualism' underlying the human rights agenda (Barbato). It is based on understanding reciprocity as inherent to the human condition and on the spiritual meaning of mobility, exemplified by the prophet Abraham, beyond a state-centric perspective or sedentarist metaphysics (Barbato; Carrière; Zaman). This imaginary inspires grassroots initiatives as diverse as Jesuit Refugee Service's Welcome Project in France (Carrière), Islamic Relief Worldwide's community-led approach (Kidwai), Rabbis for Human Rights in Israel (Baumgart-Ochse) and the church-based support program, LGBTI Asylum Welcome (McGuirk and Niedwiecki).

Overall, the practices and theoretical perspectives presented in the book not only call into question the religion/secularism divide, but also certain understandings within the religious traditions themselves. Though they may still amount to minority approaches, their value lies in their prophetic function (Brueggeman, 2001), as they inspire alternative futures,

beyond one-dimensional, Islamophobic or agency-less representations of Muslim refugees (Wagenvoorde; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh). All this makes the book a compelling and necessary read.