



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

Interfaith Approaches to Migration

Reverend Kyoichi Sugino, Religions of Peace (Moderator)
Imam Shamsi Ali, Nusantara Foundation
Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, HIAS
Daniel O'Neill, Christian Journal for Global Health
Adjoa Mante, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

After introducing the panelists, Rev. Sugino discussed the various arguments against accepting refugees, including the absence of responsibility or benefits to receptor nations and threats to the host country in terms of security or scarcity. Each of the panelists followed with a discussion of theological approaches to migrants from their faith tradition in addition to modern interfaith initiatives.

Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, HIAS

Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer spoke about the importance of welcoming the stranger in the Jewish faith in light of the teachings of the Torah and the historical oppression lived by the Jewish people. Noting that the word “stranger” is repeated more than anything else in the Torah, Rabbi Grant Meyer stated “The Torah is unambiguous and unequivocal about how one is to treat the stranger....we are to welcome and protect the stranger - more than that...we are to love the stranger. [further reference: Leviticus 19:34]” Moreover she argued that the textual justification for this commandment stems from the historical experience of the Jews as strangers themselves in Egypt; they are to ensure that no other peoples experience the same oppression they suffered in Egypt. Further linking the Jewish faith to the theme of migration, Rabbi Grant Meyer reasoned that the Jewish experience as refugees was in fact “foundational to becoming a...people guided by law.” Given the importance of the stranger in the Torah and the historical experience of the Jewish people themselves as refugees, the Rabbi asserted, welcoming and loving the stranger and the refugee is a critical part of the Jewish faith.

Rabbi Grant Meyer continued with a discussion of the work done by [HIAS](#), an organization that draws from this Judaic tradition to engage in service and advocacy in support of refugees. Through reference to a variety of internal and collaborative initiatives in which HIAS participates - including advocacy, education, volunteering, charitable giving, coalitions with local churches etc. - she highlighted the potential for faith-based action. Indeed, Rabbi Grant Meyer argued, “Religious communities uniquely positioned to address fear against welcoming refugees” since the Torah urges individuals to act in spite of fear.



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Imam Shamsi Ali, Nusantara Foundation

Imam Shamsi Ali discussed migration in the Islamic tradition, through reference to the experience of The Prophet and core tenets of the religion. Imam Ali stated that the Prophet himself was a migrant three times, his most famous migration being when he fled Mecca to enter Medina. In addition to this historical relationship with migration, Imam Ali asserted that the Islamic tradition supports migrants based upon the following moral grounds and beliefs: God is merciful to those who show mercy; the highest level of faith is demonstrated through an indiscriminate kindness; service and hospitality to others are seen as signs of faith; a harm to any individual is a harm to all of us; since the future is unknown, one ought to serve in the present; and lastly, easing the difficulties of others leads to God easing your difficulties in the time of judgments.

In further reflection, Imam Ali argued that the nation must discuss the root causes of forced migration, which include the lack of opportunities in countries due to oppressive regimes and wars influenced by the West. Ultimately, Imam Ali claims the policy of solely aiding refugees when they get to the US (and not addressing the root issues of migration) is akin to “providing Advil for cancer patients.”

Daniel O’Neill, MD, MA(Th), Christian Journal for Global Health

Dr. O’Neill engaged in a brief survey and application of key biblical texts for a theological approach to migration as a moral imperative in the Christian tradition. Dr. O’Neill underlined the equality between foreigners and the Jewish people in the Bible, citing the belief that all people are made in the image of God and deserve respect. Furthermore, Dr. O’Neill asserted that foreigners (*ger*) were included under the same laws in the *Torah* because of God’s love for them. Dr. O’Neill also noted that equality and unity in worship were enshrined values; inclusiveness was written into the structure of the temple. Referencing the New Testament, Dr. O’Neill argued that this equality was present in John’s eschatological vision of the inclusive society - “the leaves from the tree of life are for the healing of all peoples.” (Rev 22)

In further support of the biblical case for supporting migrants, Dr. O’Neill argued that the six Levitical cities of refuge show a pattern of transcultural permanency in God’s intention for humanity. As highlighted by Dr. O’Neill, these six cities of refuge were for Jews *and foreigners* and were forms of divine justice and provision. Dr. O’Neill argued that these “6 cities of refuge with significant Hebrew names (“set apart” “to carry a burden”, “fellowship, collaborative”, “protected”, “lifted up”, and “enfolding joy”), express[ed] the heart of God and call to his people.”

Additionally, Dr. O’Neill noted, “Jesus identifies himself with the foreigner, the oppressed - “If you support them, you’re supporting me,” drawn from Matthew 25. Furthermore, Dr. O’Neill argued that Paul calls for the practice of hospitality (*philoxenia*) “love to the stranger” in contrast to *xenophobia*- to incorporate refugees as family. Referencing the



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current tensions within the Christian community, Dr. O'Neill reiterated, "Though there is an existing disconnect between belief and practice, fear and over-commitment to safety, and conflation of political loyalty with the gospel; there is emerging interdenominational commitment – a call to return to the character of God, the words of the prophets, unity and the supreme example of Messiah."

Rev. Kyoichi Sugino, Religions for Peace

Rev. Sugino commented that Baha'i, Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist leaders have issued statements welcoming refugees and reaffirming commitment to accepting refugees. He then opened the discussion to consider how to use these rich religious traditions to counter the political arguments against accepting refugees.

During the roundtable discussion, participants and panelists discussed tactics to address arguments against accepting refugees within faith communities, reframing "religious freedom" and examples of interfaith collaboration. Rabbi Grant Meyer argued that the strength of faith-based organizations is their ability to correct misunderstandings through both information and moral imperatives. In response, one participant asked, "How do we respond to these questions in a political context in which facts no longer have traction?" Rabbi Grant Meyer and Rev. Sugino then discussed the potential to emphasize the moral aspect in faith-based traditions and the fact that since 9/11, none of the hundreds of thousands of refugees accepted by the US have been arrested on domestic terrorism charges. Imam Shamsi Ali reiterated the importance of interfaith collaboration in addressing misconceptions spurred by the actions of the Trump administration; he cited recent collaborations including the "today I'm a Muslim too" rally. Dr. O'Neill also referenced the importance of relying on evidence and research "to sharpen the product of service" amongst faith-based organizations. He further argued that the modern day idolatries of materialism, isolationism, security and safety must be addressed to emphasize the importance of service.

Further topics of discussion included the difficulty of "reach[ing] those (Trump supporters) who don't feel that there is plenty in America, those for whom this moral imperative is foreign." In response, Rabbi Grant Meyer argued that refugee work must be done in coalition with organizations working on poverty relief and education to comprehensively address the problems of scarcity.

The panelists closed by reiterating the importance of the unity demonstrated by interfaith collaborations, the need for cross-faith identification and solidarity, the importance of advocacy, and the necessity of stepping outside of our natural spheres of influence to expand our sphere.



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List of Participants

Rachel Steinberg, UNICEF USA
Emma Coley, Princeton University
Claire Denton-Spalding, Princeton University
Rhonda Maguire, Mobile Minds of NJ + Baha'i Faith
Somayeh Malekian, Columbia University
Dennis McAuliffe, Georgetown University
Brittany Smith, Princeton University
Thad Winkle, Princeton Theological Seminary & Reformed Church of
Highland Park
Andreas Hipple, GHR Foundation
Sana Malik, Wichita State University
Chan (Rukmin) Jamoona, Hindu Charities
Chelsea Langston Bombino, Center for Public Justice
Sam Speers, Vassar College
Jonathan Golden, Drew University

Further Reference: Initiatives in the Christian Tradition

<https://wewelcomerefugees.com/>
<http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com/>
<http://theimmigrationalliance.org/>
<http://actalliance.org/act-news/act-alliance-joins-unicef-refugees-welcome-programme/>