



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

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

Religious Experience: Testimonies from Refugees and Workers

Margarita Mooney, Princeton Theological Seminary (Moderator)
Reverend Chris Antal, Rock Tavern Unitarian Universalists
Ashar Hafeez Ghumman, Interfaith-RISE
David Sulewski, Community of Sant'Egidio
Andie Ayala, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

During this discussion, the panelists, as well as other participants, reflected on their experiences with, or as, refugees and workers. In these notes, I report the stories of the main panelists and include bits and pieces from participant members of the panel discussion who shared their stories as well. While these stories were far too detailed and rich to be fully recorded, the quotes below paint a broad picture of what was said in the space.

Reverend Chris Antal of the Rock Tavern Unitarian Universalists spoke about how his tradition had a rich heritage of working with refugees. He also explained that he was a US citizen who had been an army chaplain in Afghanistan from 2012 to 2013. Antal used the example of Tareek, who had been one of the interpreters serving with the U.S military in 2012, to demonstrate an integrity breach. According to Antal, Tareek had been promised a visa to the United States, verified by the 2009 Afghan Allies Protection Act, for putting his life at risk as an interpreter. However, as Antal noted, the U.S government did not follow through with this promise to Tareek and many others like him. “This is a breach of trust, and from the perspective of a military soldier, we were abandoning our comrades on the battlefield,” commented Antal. In light of all this, he suggested an honest self-examination.

In his words, Antal said, “Who are we, as U.S citizens? What kind of people are we becoming? Which consequences are we seeing that is a result of direct, or indirect action by the United States? What can we do to help these refugees? What have we done that has helped cause forced migration? What have we done in Iraq, Afghanistan and what are the consequences that we can attribute to those actions? Equally, important to these questions is: What have we failed to do as people of conscience who call ourselves religious, living in the US, to enable our US military to almost run amuck in the world?” In religious language he called for a moral reckoning, “let us confess our sins before God and neighbor.”



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Ashar Hafeez Ghumman of Interfaith-RISE told the story of when he first arrived in the US, on July 14, 2016. He said that as an Ahmadi Muslim, he was in danger in Pakistan. He mentioned that he had worked with an American NGO for 18 years. According to Ghumman, when he arrived in the JFK airport and said that he was seeking asylum, he was immediately handcuffed. “I wanted to cry. I wanted to go to a place where I could cry out loud. When I arrived in the detention center, they gave me a blanket, and I put it over my head and cried. For two months I cried,” he shared.

When Ghumman was at the detention center, people from different faith groups would visit him, especially Jews and Christians. He said that all of the people who would visit would tell him to pray to God, although none of them asked him to pray to their God. When he was able to call his parents, they told him “there is a wisdom of everything that God does, so there must be something that is good from this.”

During his time in the detention center he started reading the bible in Urdu, in Q’aran, and would ask himself why religion was so important. And then, as Ghumman explained, “I cried again. The first time I was crying out of my humiliation, the second time I was crying for all those prayers that David made, and Jesus made, and Mohammed made. And then I got out. After 8 months of detention I was released.”

According to Ghumman, there was a group from Highland Park who used to visit him, so he went to the church in Highland Park when he was released from the detention center. He said that the people from this church helped resettle him; “they provided me everything I needed.” At that moment, he felt as though “I could practice my faith the way I wanted to. I could tell everyone who I am.” While in Pakistan, Ghumman’s faith was a crime, in Highland Park, he was welcomed into the community by people of different faiths—who, because of their faiths, were inclined to help the marginalized.

At the end of his speech, Ghumman stated, “we always talk about how to help and receive immigrants, but we never talk about why people are becoming immigrants? What are the root causes? Are we helping those countries to stop people from becoming refugees? Pakistan to reconcile their laws? Are we really helping Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, really? We are just trying to cut the branches on the trees, we are not looking at root causes.”

David Sulewski of the Community of Sant’Egidio talked about how he had recently been living in Quito, Ecuador for two years, coordinating a refugee welcome center in a church that was ministering predominately to people fleeing Colombia. Sulewski said that in this center they had offered basic humanitarian assistance, including mattresses, blankets, and food. However, he said at the same time, they also opened the church doors to be a healing space, where people could begin to re-knit a sense of community, reconnect with friends, and process their traumas and experiences in the context of their faith.



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He mentioned that the favorite part of his job was driving around the city, going to the least-visited parts of the city. According to Sulewski, he had once visited an elderly couple who had struggled to make ends meet and were both suffering from diseases. Back in Colombia, the wife had run her own restaurant, while the husband was a handyman and had had his own repair shop. In Ecuador, he was still trying to earn money here and there by repairing what he could in their single-room occupancy.

"Though they had little they poured us a generous cup of coffee," noted Sulewski. He added, "In that circumstance we were both foreigners, under completely different circumstances, and we were welcoming each other to a country that neither of us belonged to." Sulewski explained that the man had carried a silver cross with him from Colombia to Ecuador, which he had found from the trash, but that he was able to find meaning in what others had discarded.

After telling this story, Sulewski asked, "Do I perceive God in the flow of refugees all across the world? And also in the elderly who are often ignored in our societies, and are discarded? Am I walking alongside them? Just like this crucified God that watches over this elderly refugee couple?" He reflected, "It's been through my personal encounters with people who happen to be refugees that I hear most clearly this invitation to be another's keeper."

Sulewski also told the story of buying a one-way ticket to Rome, where he was hoping to study, at the age of 21 years old. He said that a few months after arriving in the country, he happened into the beautiful evening prayer of the community of Sant'Egidio. After prayer, he mentioned that a young Muslim refugee man from Afghanistan, who had been learning Italian at the church, put his arm around him and said, "if you want to make friends you have to learn Italian."

As Sulewski said, "Italian became the language of friendship and friendship became the language of peace." As he explained, "it was a Muslim who welcomed me back in the church, who set me back on the path back towards my faith." According to Sulewski, it is this sense of hospitality that has informed who he is, and what he does.

Therefore, Sulewski asks, "what are the habits we form that blind us to the consequences of our actions?" Moreover, "what the world would look like if we left our doors opened, if we allowed ourselves to interrupted by a stranger passing by the street who simply wanted a cup of tea?"



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Open Discussion

Margarita Mooney, the moderator, explained that her mother had fled from Cuba. “I don’t do what my mother did, which was take a station wagon and go to garage sales around town and bring items to people’s homes.” When she went into academia she was so focused on her next project, what she had to do. She said that her teaching changed when she started inviting her students over to her home. “How do you model hospitality?” she asked. We place our security in food, in shelter, in clothing, in the material—but these people put their hope in faith.

“I don’t believe in coincidences. This is a sacred space, because there is something about the testimonies people have that shape who we become.”

There was an Irish boy that she had befriended in high school who kept his bible in a ziploc bag in his locker. They had become friends when they started exchanging stories of religious tradition. He pushed her to learn about her own religion, while she did the same to him. When he died in his sleep, she was the only girl in his funeral with a headscarf. Now that he’s gone, she keeps in contact with his mother, because that is the only thing she can do to honor him.

When he was in a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan he noticed that one of the first things that had been built there was a mosque. The mothers there would say a short prayer for those who came. He remembered thinking that the prayer was immensely powerful, because there is no veil between the prayer of the oppressed and God.

He had once been asked to teach who refugees were in his daughter’s elementary schools. He explained that refugees contributed to this country as professors, engineers, entrepreneurs. He noted that refugees pay taxes to the country, in fact, he said, they pay more than that, because they must pay back the \$20,000 of resettlement.

Lines quoted from ‘The Guesthouse’ by Rumi: “The dark thought, the shame, the malice / meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. / Be grateful for whatever comes / because each has been sent / as a guide from beyond.”

Part of hospitality is paying attention the dark nights, the shame, and embracing all of it. We need self-examination.

He had been leading a student trip to Greece in late January when the immigration ban was first imposed. As he was reading about what was happening in the US, he was working with



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Elpida, which is a Greek word for 'hope.' A woman—who was precisely the person that was being targeted by them and labeled as a 'threat' by the immigration ban—served him food.

He was thinking about the necessity of the marriage of the head and the heart. He wonders what kinds of conversations happen within the walls of Princeton. He notes that it's easy for intellectual discussions to become somewhat bureaucratic and institutional, and deeply personal conversations like this one are marginal in the mainstream of academia. He asks, "How do we place a heart in places that are highly intellectual?"