

## INTERVENTION III: GLOBAL REFUGEES IN AN AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

Alex Alvarez

The presentations and discussions of the symposium *Strangers or Neighbors? Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Perspectives on Refugees* provided much food for thought and challenged me to confront issues that I usually view exclusively or primarily as criminological, sociological, or political concerns, but which, as this symposium has taught me, are also profoundly religious ones as well. During the course of the sessions, I was gratified to hear various participants acknowledge the complexity of their religious belief systems; both good and bad. Rather than one-dimensional portrayals of the three religious traditions, I found honest discussion of not only the affirmative facets of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but the more problematical components as well. As someone who studies various forms of violence, especially mass atrocity crimes such as communal violence and genocide, it is the latter face of religion that I am most commonly confronted with. Throughout history, intolerance, prejudice, discrimination, persecution, war, terrorism, and genocide have sometimes received religious validation and support.

In our symposium, much of the focus was on exploring and discussing the aspirational ideals around religious conceptualizations of the “other” as revealed in various holy texts, sermons, sacred laws, and religious pronouncements. Questions such as “Where does ‘community’

begin and end?” “Where do our obligations come from and what are they?” “How do we understand and navigate the reciprocal relationship between strangers and natives?” and “How do we include newcomers into our moral universe?” were all addressed and discussed. These dialogues, however, for all of their liveliness and insight, were largely philosophical and abstract. Consequently, I wanted to challenge the participants to think about how the Abrahamic religions will respond to the large numbers of people on the move because of the direct and indirect effects of climate change. As the numbers of displaced people increase dramatically due to the consequences of climate change, will we see the humanitarian values and obligations articulated in our academic discussions guide reaction, outreach, and policy? Or, instead, will the exclusionary and destructive facets of these faiths be emphasized and highlighted to sanction and even sanctify scapegoating, exclusion, and persecution? Will ethnic nationalism, in other words, find religious justification for actions perpetrated to ostensibly protect the community of believers from the polluting presence of the “other?” These questions are not quickly or easily answered. What is known, however, is that the “refugee crisis,” as it is often labeled, is going to get considerably worse.

### **Climate change and displacement**

Climate change is expected to dramatically accelerate the issue of forced displacement and increase the number of refugee and internally displaced populations (McAdam 2010). Even though population movement has always been a part of the human experience, predictions suggest an unprecedented number of people will be on the move due to the direct and indirect effects of a changing climate. Estimates suggest that by the year 2050 anywhere from 200 million people to 700 million may be on the move as a consequence of climate change (Christian Aid 2007; Brown 2008). Lest we think that such large numbers can be absorbed relatively easily or that such a population transfer can be peaceful, we should consider previous examples of large-scale population disruption. The aftermath of World War II, for example, resulted in the largest single dislocation of people in the modern era and involved anywhere from 40 to 66 million people (Castles and Miller 2003). This mass displacement resulted in years of subsequent social unrest and large amounts of violence, including pogroms, civil war, and revolution (Lowe 2012; Buruma

2013). More recent events also illustrate the risks. In Europe, a backlash has emerged in the wake of the refugee crisis that began in 2015 (Zucchini 2016; Mohdin 2016). Because of the dramatic increase in refugees seeking asylum, many Western European countries have seen a marked increase in anti-immigrant rhetoric, violence, and legislation, while nationalist parties have made significant electoral gains in a number of countries on explicitly xenophobic political platforms.<sup>2</sup> This should not be surprising since research reveals that increased levels of immigration and diversity usually result in lower levels of trust, altruism, and community cooperation (Putnam 2007). Clearly, the projected levels of population displacement as a consequence of climate change are cause for concern, but how exactly will a changing climate displace people?

Classic theories of migration rely on simple push-pull models, suggesting that economic, environmental, and demographic conditions *push* people out of an area, while available land, economic opportunity, and peace *pull* people into an area (Castles *et al.* 2014). Adding climate change into the mix forces us to consider other factors. Issues such as the adaptive capacity and resources of a particular area must also be factored in (Raleigh and Jordan 2010). Population displacement is not solely determined by the type, amount, and severity of disasters and climate-induced changes, but also by individual and communal capability. How well, in other words, can communities cope with, adapt, and recover from climate-related impacts (Mearns and Norton 2010)? Such capacity can involve not only economic resources, but also human, social, and religious capital. The fewer such resources and skills available, the less ability to cope with altered climatic conditions. This simple reality also strongly suggests that climate change will hit hardest in the poorest nations since they will be least able to adapt and cope due to limited economic, social, and political resources.

The forces propelling movement will be both direct and indirect, as well as both gradual and sudden. Sometimes, people will be forced from their homes by abrupt disruptions, such as storms, floods, and other natural disasters. At other times, protracted problems such as drought and less-reliable monsoon rains will progressively decrease the agricultural yield of a region and impair the ability of that area to sustain life. Agriculture is the source of survival for approximately 85% of rural people, and in some locations, such as Africa, over 80% of the population is rural,

90% of whom are subsistence-level farmers (Plowman 2014). Other problems that will increasingly force those in impacted areas to leave for better regions include environmental degradation, increased levels of soil salinity, and desertification.

Another important source of population displacement will be violent conflict as populations attempt to escape the violence through migration (The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2012). In fact, research has shown that political violence is the most significant cause of mass population dislocation (Schmeidl 1997). Sometimes, such movements of people are not only a consequence of conflict, but actually comprise a central strategy of the violence. In Bosnia, Bosnian Serb paramilitaries and army forces sought to ethnically cleanse territory through torture, sexual assault, and mass murder (Mojzes 2011), while in the Sudan, Janjaweed militia and government forces assaulted members of specific African tribes in order to provide more access to water and grazing lands (Tubiana 2007). In both cases, population displacement was not a byproduct of the violence, but a primary goal of the violence.

Additionally, forced displacement is not only an outcome or a goal of conflict, but also comprises one of the root causes. Analysis of conflict and migration have found that when conflicts create refugees who flee into neighboring regions and states, this mass movement of people often destabilizes those areas into which they have sought refuge and thus sparks more conflict and fighting (Weiner 1996; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). In such circumstances, refugees can easily become the focal point of hostility and prejudice, especially when newcomers are visibly different or believed to represent some type of danger.

### **Increasing intolerance and political violence**

History is full of situations in which politicians, bigots, religious leaders, and demagogues have manipulated and exploited xenophobia, fear, anger, and prejudice. During times of instability and threat, such beliefs gain a new potency. Why do such individuals stir up such virulent sentiments? At times, they have done so because they share the prejudicial beliefs and values they exploit, while in other instances, such tactics are cynical manipulations intended to gain, retain, or heighten power by heightening in-group solidarity and mobilizing a population against a manufactured common enemy. They also sometimes scapegoat groups

and hold them responsible for real or imagined threats and problems in efforts to divert attention away from failed policies. In locations where long-standing antipathies and prejudice exist, such processes of scapegoating are relatively easily accomplished since they build on ideas already in circulation.

In the same way that Hitler and the Nazis scapegoated the Jews for Germany's loss in World War I and for the breakdown of Germany's economy during the Great Depression, so too may leaders in an era of climate change seek to blame vulnerable groups for the problems of that particular place and time. Unfortunately, prejudice and intolerance are not easily eradicated and can be revitalized given the right circumstances and political, religious, and social leaders willing to exploit them. To further heighten the risk, we need to acknowledge that refugee groups are also incredibly vulnerable populations. Legal protections are limited, and what there is, is often ignored. Because they are stateless, they are highly dependent on international organizations and NGO's to protect and provide for them and such aid has often been lacking in the past (The Office of the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees 2012). Refugee populations also tend to be unorganized and fragmented which also heightens their vulnerability.

As societies around the world increasingly confront declining resources and increasing numbers of refugees, is it possible such recent arrivals may be defined as a threat or burden? Will they be seen as having no value because they are defined as being different and not being useful or necessary? If so, such a scenario paints a troubling picture of potential violence and genocide. We have seen such attitudes in the past. The genocidal impulse has often been fueled by prejudice and xenophobia that portrayed entire groups as being expendable, useless, and a drain on resources.

When we examine the risk of population displacement, one nation stands out in terms of predicted risk; and that is Bangladesh, the seventh most populated country in the world with more than 150 million people. Because of its geography, this low-lying and densely inhabited nation is particularly at risk from flooding and forced migration as a consequence of the former. Flooding is a way of life in Bangladesh whether through episodic events such as storms or through the normal annual floods resulting from high rainfall amounts during the monsoon season (Ninno *et al.* 2001). The history of Bangladesh is full of storms and floods with

widespread death and destruction typically resulting from these inundations. In the coming decades, this kind of situation can be expected to occur more frequently since one important consequence of climate change will be more frequent and more severe extreme weather events. Over time, such temporary flooding will be accompanied by permanent loss of land as rising sea levels make inroads into the low-lying terrain of this delta nation. In a cruel illustration of the ways in which climate change impacts will overlap and exacerbate each other, Bangladesh, when not experiencing floods, will also be dealing with the effects of drought. Projected changes to monsoonal patterns over the entire Indian subcontinent will result in less rain during the monsoon season and less snowfall in the Himalayas; both of which will mean that the many rivers that Indian and Bangladeshi farmers rely on will experience substantially decreased flows. These natural causes of drought will be compounded by dams in India that increasingly divert water to meet its own agricultural and living needs (Riaz 2011). Not surprisingly, water sharing issues have become a frequent source of tension between India and Bangladesh. The issue of drought has important consequences for Bangladesh since water scarcity results in less wheat and rice that can be grown. This is amplified by the fact that over half of all agriculture in Bangladesh depends on irrigation (Agrawala *et al.* 2003). With less inhabitable land and a diminished carrying capacity for the remainder, life in Bangladesh will become that much more unstable and insecure. Given such a situation, it is quite probable that many Bangladeshis will be forced to relocate because their land, homes, and communities have been flooded, because they have no food or jobs, and because they are hoping to escape the societal disorder, extremism, and violence that will surely crop up in the wake of such widespread devastation and dislocation. Many of these displaced people will likely seek refuge internationally. Some Bangladeshis may attempt a long, expensive, and potentially dangerous journey to nations in the developed world, but it is also extremely probable that many will look for shelter and safety in neighboring India.

### **Sectarian violence**

Already struggling to meet the challenges of climate change within its own borders, how will Indian society react to the influx of their Bangladeshi neighbors? Will increased levels of hostility develop in response to

this influx of destitute refugees, especially given the history of animosity between these groups? In recent years, India has already seen anti-immigrant riots resulting in hundreds of deaths (Perry 2008). We also should not forget that politics and nationalism, compounded by religious differences, resulted in a great deal of communal sectarian violence around the founding of Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) with periodic flare-ups continuing to the present day. More recently, competition over farmland in the 1980s in the Indian states of Assam and Tripura between immigrants from Bangladesh and Indians resulted in ethnic clashes and violence (Reuveny 2007). In this particular case, religious institutions and beliefs served to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the tensions.

Bangladesh is predominantly Muslim, while India is largely Hindu. Ethnic tensions and violence already abound throughout rural India, and in such a climate of fear, anxiety, and social disruption, these past and present antagonisms could be refocused and repurposed to deal with the new threat of Bangladeshi refugees (Perry 2008). Such a potential reaction is not that far-fetched when we consider that India has already begun construction of a 3,200-km fence on the Bangladeshi border (Human Rights Watch 2010). In India, members of the Hindu far right have also advocated for mass deportations of Bangladeshis presently living in India (Parenti 2011). If preexisting patterns of migration from Bangladesh into India have already exacerbated religious and political nationalism within both communities, what will happen when flooding and drought dramatically increase the pressures and numbers of refugees? If previous history is any indication, this is a situation fraught with tremendous risk for persecution, violence, and genocide.

### **Outlook**

All the indications strongly suggest that for the various reasons discussed above, climate change will displace many millions of people around the world. As entire populations migrate in search of stability, safety, and opportunity, they will face many dangers, not only in terms of the journeys they undertake, but also in terms of the reception many may find in the host countries within which they seek refuge and shelter. Will nations welcome and work to incorporate these newcomers into the social, political, and economic fabric of their societies, or will they instead greet the new arrivals with hostility, resentment, and rancor. What will the role of

religion be in such an era? Which face of the religious traditions will refugees see? Will it be the one that reflects the love of the “other,” or will it be the one that justifies violence against the “outsider?”

### Note

1. Large portions of this chapter appeared in an earlier version in Alex Alvarez, *Unstable Ground: Climate Change, Conflict, and Genocide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
2. “Europe’s Rising Far Right: A Guide to the Most Prominent Parties,” *The New York Times* (June 13, 2016). Accessed on September 19, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/world/europe/europe-far-right-political-parties-listy.html>

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