Religions and migrations – old and new

James A. Beckford
James A. Beckford

Religions and migrations – old and new

A growing number of countries have experienced the rising popularity of political parties, political ideologies and political movements which regard immigration as a serious threat to their self-identity, integrity and prosperity. For example, a YouGov opinion poll in April 2018 found that 11,288 adult respondents in a sample of eleven EU countries regarded immigration as the most important issue facing the EU. Support for this opinion ranged from 53 per cent in Denmark and Finland to 26 per cent in Spain. The average for all eleven countries was 41 per cent. By comparison, the second most important issue was terrorism, but it was chosen by only 30 per cent of voters on average.

Not only is public opinion regarding immigration in Europe significant in itself, but political mobilisation is also increasingly centred on immigration policies. At the same time, and more importantly, governments pursuing policies hostile to immigrants have already taken power in several countries. It is no exaggeration, then, to claim that a migration crisis is confronting Europe and that many of the most contentious issues centre on religions and identities. Sociological research on these issues has already generated valuable insights into the complex intersections between religions and migrations, but this article will suggest that some aspects of the topic deserve more careful investigation than they have received so far.

The main arguments are presented in three sections. The article begins with a discussion of the ways in which research on religion and migration has made important contributions to the broad field of the sociology of religion. Second, two of the less frequently studied questions about the intertwining of religions and migrations, primarily in the UK, are examined in depth. And the third section raises two of the ethical and policy-related issues that arise in connection with religions and migrations.

1 https://yougov.co.uk/news/2018/05/11/yougov-data-reveals-what-europeans-think-are-most/. The countries were Great Britain, France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Poland, Lithuania, Greece, Italy and Spain. Accessed 20 June 2018.
1. Migrations, Religions and the sociology of religion

The scale and forms of migration have undergone massive changes over millennia, but migration remains a phenomenon that is intricately bound up with religions. In some cases migration has religious motivations and causes. In many more cases it has implications not only for how migrants and their descendants practise religion but also for the societies in which they settle. It would be an exaggeration to claim that religion was invariably an important aspect of migration – except in cases such as migration in response to religious persecution or migration in pursuit of religious objectives – but there can be no doubt that the religious dimensions of migration and settlement in new locations can be significant. Indeed, international flows of migrants are contributing to the redistribution of «world religions» across regions of the globe (Pew Research Center, 2015, 12-13).

The early twenty-first century has therefore witnessed a growth of sensitivity among social scientists, politicians, religious authorities and policy makers to the importance of religion’s multi-stranded interweaving with migration. This is reflected in the proliferation of publications and other research activities which focus on this topic. They all indicate that basic concepts and theoretical ideas about religion and migration are not only interesting in themselves but also imbricated with broader concerns about, for example, gender, globalisation, transnational networks, securitisation, virtual communication, multiculturalism, mobilities, processes of exclusion, human rights and secularism.

Some of the earliest studies of religion and immigration to the USA highlighted the assimilation of immigrants into American institutions and ways of life through identification and affiliation with religions (Herberg, 1955; Hammond, 1963). In Europe, the focus was more on political questions about integration and exclusion, especially of the growing number of Muslim immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia (Bastenier and Dasetto, 1979). But it was only towards the end of the twentieth century that the frequency and volume of research relating to other parts of the world began to accelerate. Since 2000, the following overviews of research on religion and migration have all appeared: Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Haddad, Smith and Esposito, 2003; Leonard et al., 2005; Cadge and Ecklund, 2007; Bramadat and Koenig, 2009; Bonifacio and Angeles, 2010; Garnett and Harris, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2012, 2013; Connor, 2014; DeMarinis, 2014; Gallo, 2014; Kivisto, 2014; Vilaça et al., 2014; Pace, 2014; Beckford, 2015b. In addition, religion and migration has been the focus of special issues in academic journals as diverse as: «Journal of Refugee Studies» (15, 2, 2002; 24, 3, 2011); «American Behavioral Scientist» (49, 11, 2006); «African Studies» (68, 2, 2009); «Ethnic and Racial Studies» (33, 3, 2010); «International Migration» (51, 3, 2013); «Religion & Gender» (3, 1, 2013); «Forced Mi-
meanwhile, the number of websites, databases, research projects, conferences, seminars, university modules, and research centres active in promoting the study of interactions between religion and migration has also grown steadily since 2000.

This is not the place to dwell on questions about the definition of “religion” or “migration”. Both terms are contested. But for present purposes religion refers to the wide range of emotions, actions, relationships, organisations, artefacts, roles, values, symbols and beliefs that are associated with faith in powers, beings and levels of reality that are believed to transcend the purely human. The meaning of migration refers to changes in human residence that involve crossing regional, national or international boundaries. Migration is both a reversible process and an outcome that can vary from temporary to permanent, from voluntary to forced, and from individual to collective on a massive scale. It can also be associated with the formation of diasporas, with asylum-seeking, with internally displaced persons and with refugees. In this context it does not include nomadism, transhumance or pilgrimage.

What is not in doubt is that examining migration with a particular focus on religion has now become essential for various reasons. These reasons have to do with the effect of transnational and global forces on the capacity of religious ideas, networks and organisations to influence the lives and the life-chances of growing numbers of people around the world. Taking full advantage of new electronic media of communication, information technology and mobilisation, it is now possible for religious agents, movements and organisations to extend their influence over both migrant and settled populations in ways that were almost inconceivable before the twenty-first century (Cowan, 2007).

At the same time, of course, critical and hostile responses to the global reach of even relatively modest religious activities have also intensified, especially in places where claims to religious freedom clash with doctrines of secularism and various forms of opposition to particular – or all – religions. In short, globalisation has boosted processes of religious outreach and, in doing so, has also aggravated controversies and conflicts which can be particularly acute in relation to migrants even long after settlement in their new locations (Juergensmeyer, 2003; Robertson, 2003).

In addition, the lived religion of migrants is shaped not only by their life before and after migration but also by the contexts in which they settle and the translocal social networks in which they participate (Connor, 2010). Migration may provide opportunities for developing new or hybrid religious beliefs, identities, practices and ways of integrating into society. Change in the gendering of religious identities and practices is especially controversial for migrants to western liberal democracies. But adapting to new circumstances after migration can also give rise to tensions and divisions within previously solidary religious collectivities. This
means that the balance between continuity and change in migrants’ engagement with religion is dynamic. Generational differences in migrants’ engagement with religion are striking although not necessarily correlated in any simple way with changes in their socio-economic circumstances.

Another aspect of the nexus between religion and migration is the extent to which critical thinking about migration is a focus for theological and pastoral authorities within religious institutions (Hagan, 2013). The sacred wisdom of most faith traditions contains reflections on the experience of being a «stranger in a strange land» and on religious obligations to be hospitable to travellers and migrants. In addition, theologians and philosophers of religion have written extensively about migration; and religious organisations have established institutions and agencies for the welfare of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. For example, groups of Christians have been particularly active in offering sanctuary to undocumented migrants crossing the border from Mexico to the USA. And numerous Muslim associations provide humanitarian assistance to displaced populations in, for example, Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia (Benthall and Bellion-Jourdan, 2009).

The fact that informal social networks and social movements as well as formal organisations claiming to represent the interests of migrants as members of particular religions are now active in the public spheres of many societies is another reason to regard religion and migration as an important focus of research. The translocal and transnational reach of some of these overlapping groupings makes them all the more significant (Allievi and Nielsen, 2003; Adogame, 2010; Cherry and Ebaugh, 2014). Some of them are affiliates or branches of would-be global organisations claiming to represent entire faith traditions. In addition to providing support and resources for migrants long after initial settlement, these groupings aim to shape public opinion and to influence policy-makers and legislators in relation to such potentially contentious issues as education, family law, health, welfare services, ritual slaughter of animals and disposal of the dead. The changing landscape of urban areas is also testimony to the increasing number of religious buildings and monuments erected by migrants as symbols of their presence and as investments in the material, social and cultural fabric of the societies where their descendants are expected to continue practising their faith (Knott, 2005; Oosterbaan, 2014). Controversies surrounding the religious buildings erected by immigrants are often intense in the public sphere even in countries as peaceful as Switzerland. The proliferation of print and digital media, broadcasting channels, films, websites and social networking services designed specifically for migrant members of particular religions is further evidence of their institutional consolidation and their potential to exercise influence in wider public spheres (Lövheim and Axner, 2011).

The settlement of migrants who are identified (or self-identified) as minorities on the basis of their ethnicity, “race”, religion or nationality
commonly gives rise to political debates about the merits and scale of immigration and to policy-oriented discussions about their entitlements. Their rights to residence, work opportunities, housing, health and welfare programmes, education and citizenship are high on the political agenda of many countries. Philosophical doctrines of pluralism, secularism and multiculturalism are often employed to interpret, criticise or justify a wide range of public responses to immigration. In recent decades, however, questions about the religious aspects of migrants’ ways of life have also come to dominate many of these political, policy-oriented and philosophical debates (Modood, 1998; Bader, 2009; Kymlicka, 2009). Controversies are especially intense around claims that the practice of some forms of religion can be detrimental to the status of women, incompatible with western ideas of citizenship, resistant to the ideals of universal education, and so on. Indeed, some migrants distance themselves from their religious backgrounds for these reasons, although relatively little research has been conducted on these contentious issues.

In spite of these controversies, the settlement of immigrants from a wide variety of faith backgrounds is viewed positively in many quarters for the diversity that they bring to religious, cultural, political, civic and social life. The willingness of migrants to engage in inter-faith and ecumenical activities is also an important part of the argument that religions of all kinds can make positive contributions to the vitality of civil society.

2. Two less well known entanglements between religions and migrations

This section examines in detail two particular ways in which religions and migrations are mutually entangled. The primary focus is on the UK, but comparisons with other countries are mentioned where appropriate.

2.1 “Forced” migration and child migrants

Coercion has been one of the important drivers of cross-national migration in the past and the present. People displaced by violent conflicts, war and persecution – as well as by natural disasters such as severe droughts, floods, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions – have been forced to cross borders to save their lives and to protect their families. The place of women in these forced migrations has received a growing amount of scholarly attention in recent decades, including books by Chant (1992), Willis and Yeoh (2000), Griffith and Savage (2006), and Bonifacio and Angeles (2010). And the children who are invariably caught up in these movements, usually with other members of their families, have also been the object of intense research.

Indeed, a particular form of induced or coerced migration in which children have been the intended victims deserves special consideration.
Moreover, evidence is growing of the active involvement of religious organisations in stimulating and facilitating the forced migration of children on the pretence that they were orphans or living in destitution. Many of these children were forcibly sent to places thousands of miles away without the knowledge or permission of their parents. Many of them were also subjected to physical and sexual abuse at the hands of religious personnel such as the Catholic Church’s lay congregation of Christian Brothers. Few of them had passports. Very few were legally adopted overseas. Instead, they spent their pre-adult lives in large residential institutions with poor standards of nutrition, education and medical care.

One of the legacies of British imperialism is the network of relations between the 53 countries which currently form the British Commonwealth of Nations. It emerged slowly from its roots in the Empire, finally taking legal shape in 1949. Almost one third of the world’s population now live in these countries. Cooperation between them in educational, cultural, political, economic, legal, sporting and military matters has survived into the twenty-first century. There are also links between Christian churches in many Commonwealth countries; and some of these links played an important role in the forced migration of children. For example, the Commonwealth country of Malta participated in a scheme to send young children to Catholic institutions in Western Australia between 1947 and 1965 (Plowman, 2010). This is one of the relatively unexplored dimensions of the nexus between religions and migrations.

British churches and charitable organisations were not the only organisations involved in the forcible migration of children but they played a prominent role in inducing, forcing or facilitating the migration of destitute or supposedly orphaned children to individual households or institutional “homes” in parts of the Empire and then the Commonwealth such as Australia and Canada. The first batch of 100 children were sent from London, as early as 1618, to the English colony in what is now the American state of Virginia. But child migration was at its height in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Parker, 2008; Lynch, 2016). Among the main religious organisations for child migration, dating from the 1880s, were the Liverpool Catholic Children’s Protection Society, the Catholic Emigration Association, the Church of England’s Waifs and Strays Society and the Salvation Army – all mainstream Christian bodies.

Similar schemes for child migration operated in other countries as well, notably the USA where the New York Children’s Aid Society and others transported many children across the country on so-called “orphan trains”. The religious orientations of the organisations responsible for child migration and settlement ranged from Unitarian, through Liberal Protestant to Evangelical and Catholic. This is where the line separating inducement and coercion begins to get blurred. Indeed, the religiously inspired schemes for sending child migrants from Britain to Canada, Australia and the former territory of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe)
tried to retain children within the faith community of their families or guardians – or, as Gordon Lynch (2016, 47) put it with reference to Catholic schemes, «“safeguarding faith” from the evils of assimilation into Protestantism or the descent into religious indifference». There were specific fears about the «leakage from the faith» (Parker, 2008, 91) of Catholic children who had been consigned to Poor Law institutions and other «such Protestant-dominated environments» (Parker, 2008, 94).

In addition, one of the early motives for the enforced migration of children was to preserve the so-called racial purity of the British Empire. As a result, black children and children with handicaps were excluded from the schemes. This was unquestionably a form of racist social policy masquerading as child care under the aegis of religious (and secular) organisations.

The scale of this enforced migration of children from Britain was extensive. It is estimated that as many as 130,000 children were sent from Britain to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and what is now Zimbabwe. Between 1867 and 1915, approximately 80,000 children were shipped from the UK to Canada alone (Parker, 2008). The final scheme, which was closed down as late as 1970, trafficked approximately 3,300 children from Britain to Australia.

The scandal of child migration from Britain under the aegis of religious organisations, among other voluntary associations, did not develop into a public controversy until late in the twentieth century. Former child migrants and some of their parents struggled for decades to gain a public hearing for their protest against the inhumane treatment that they had received from both religious and secular agencies. But eventually the Child Migrant Trust² was launched in 1987; and the International Association of Former Child Migrants and their Families³ followed in 1997. Together they have been able to mobilise support for their campaigns to secure official inquiries into the abuse and to obtain legal redress for the suffering of so many children. The former Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, delivered a «National Apology» in November 2009 for Australia’s role in “all the injustices” perpetrated by child migration schemes⁴. And in February 2010 the UK Prime Minister issued a formal apology to former child migrants for what he called «this disgraceful set of events»⁵. The grievances of former child migrants have more recently been investigated, as a special Case Study, by the UK’s ongoing Independent Inquiry

³ https://www.childmigrantstrust.com/iafcmf/.
⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MEXAdmEmlM.
into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA). The report that it published in March 2018 on «Child migration programmes» (IICSA, 2018) primarily blamed the UK government for failing to respond properly to allegations of abuse in child migrant schemes; but the report also exposed serious wrongdoings in a variety of religious organisations.

Controversies concerning child migrants continue to attract public attention in the UK and Australia. They arise partly in connection with the highly sensitive issue of locating the families of former migrants and the graves of those who have died.

2.2 Prisons and detention centres

Global flows of illegal narcotics, weapons, criminal individuals, gang members and migrants lacking official documentation have all helped to make the populations of prisons in many countries more diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language – and religion. Politicians have also favoured the development of neo-liberal policies designed to «crack down on crime» (Sudbury, 2005). It is impossible to know with certainty how many migrants are detained in the prisons of England & Wales, but information is publicly available about the roughly 3,000 people who are detained in special Immigration Removal Centres while they wait to be deported or removed from the UK.7

Prisons are therefore one of the difficult points of intersection between religions and migration, although this particular area has not been sociologically investigated as intensively as it should have been. Nevertheless, research has revealed the wide variety of ways in which this intertwining takes place in different countries. For example, in England and Wales the extensive provision of prison chaplaincies has enabled the religions of many Muslim, Hindu and Sikh migrants to gain formal recognition and resourcing (Beckford and Gilliat, 1998; Beckford, Khosrokhavar and Joly, 2005). By contrast, French prisons, which have historically made relatively little provision for prison chaplains, have struggled to accommodate the religious needs of prisoners from Muslim backgrounds (Khosrokhavar, 2004; 2015; Béraud, de Galember and Rostaing, 2016). Different again is the case of the German Länder which were formerly part of the German Democratic Republic (Becci, 2012). Control over prison chaplaincy in these areas is still affected by the historical legacy of

---


tensions between the socialist state and Christian churches. And surprising differences are also apparent between some Scandinavian countries in terms of how their prison chaplaincies are organised (Furseth and van der Aa Kühlke, 2011). In short, prisons are sites of widely varying interactions between migrants and religions in a globalising world.

There are strong historical influences on how different prison systems frame the interactions between migrants and religions. This is because, in countries such as those of the British Commonwealth and the USA, Protestant denominations in particular played a major role in shaping the notions of punishment and rehabilitation which still underlie current regimes of incarceration. The idea that law-breakers could be “corrected” and “rehabilitated” rather than being merely subjected to public humiliation, physical punishment, transportation to penal colonies in Australia or execution owed much to thinkers and activists associated with the Quakers and the Evangelical movements of the late 18th century and early 19th century. The imposition of solitude, silence and hard labour was common in the earliest forms of penitentiaries and was regarded as essential for the cultivation of self-discipline as well as spirituality. Even the architecture of establishments such as the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia (with its “separate system”) and Auburn Prison in New York State (with its “silent system”) reflected these religious ideals (Grabber, 2011).

One of the legacies of historical associations between religions and prisons in Europe and the USA is that prison chaplains still occupy important positions as volunteers or professionals in most jurisdictions. Even countries with a constitutional separation of religions from the state, such as France, make some provision for prison chaplains. The precise contribution of prison chaplaincies varies from central to peripheral in terms of their authority and opportunity to cultivate the religious life of prisoners and prison staff. But one of the interesting questions about prison chaplaincies is how well they have responded to the recent influx of migrants in detention. Whereas many migrants who are not incarcerated would have to make an effort to make contact with religious organisations or personnel, prisoners find themselves in the unusual situation of encountering chaplains on a daily basis. In other words, prisons bring migrants into contact with chaplains and their religious organisations.

The very presence of chaplains in prisons means that migrants who are incarcerated have the opportunity to talk to religious specialists who may be able to offer not only spiritual and religious care but also access to information and resources of a practical character. Indeed, these interactions with chaplains may create or revive personal identification with religions among migrants who had not previously participated in many religious activities.

In the case of England & Wales, the settlement of migrants mainly from South Asia and the Caribbean region, which began on a large
scale in the 1950s, has had the effect of forcing all public institutions to take religious, cultural and ethnic differences into account. The struggle against discrimination in all areas of life has been difficult – and still has a long way to go (Prison Reform Trust, 2017) – but prisons have been in the vanguard of efforts to identify and to respond effectively to problems of racism, prejudice, discrimination and inequality. Indeed, agitation for public recognition and accommodation of the distinctive features of all officially recognised religious traditions has been intense for the past few decades in British prisons (Beckford and Gilliat, 1998; Beckford, 2015a).

Taking advantage of the fact that the Christian religion had been central to the running of British prisons for centuries, leading representatives of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs were able to reach agreement with prison authorities on what was needed to enable prisoners to observe the basic requirements of their respective faiths. In effect, these leaders “leveraged” the presence of Christian chaplains and activities in prisons in order to make space for their own. At the same time, some Christian chaplains acted as “brokers” in the negotiations between prison authorities and the representatives of the faith communities with which many migrants identified themselves. It could be argued, ironically, that prisons in England & Wales have played a significant role in helping to consolidate the standing of various minority religions in British public life. Migrants from previous generations and their descendants form the majority of people who identify with religions other than Christianity. In addition, Christian migrants from Africa and the Caribbean region have helped to diversify the types of Christianity that are now widely practised in the UK. The current population of prisoners in England and Wales reflects the religious diversity that can be largely – but not entirely – attributed to migrants.

Public pressure to combat discrimination, racism and inequality in prisons has had the effect of formalising the understanding of the religious traditions with which many migrants to the UK associate themselves. For example, the Prison Service of England & Wales has tried to create authoritative lists or inventories of the beliefs and practices to which members of all major religious traditions subscribe. The most comprehensive inventory was the Prison Manual (first issued in 2000 as Prison Service Order 4550) which was revised several times and supplemented by «Performance Standard 51. Religion» before eventually being replaced in 2016 by «Faith and pastoral care for prisoners» (NOMS, 2016).

Further formalisation of the responses of prison authorities to migrants in custody and their religious traditions has taken place at the European level. The Council of Europe’s non-legally binding document entitled European Prison Rules, for example, includes three basic stipulations under the heading of «Freedom of thought, conscience and religion»: «29.1 Prisoners’ freedom of thought, conscience and religion shall be respected». «29.2 The prison regime shall be organised so far as is practicable to
allow prisoners to practise their religion and follow their beliefs, to attend services or meetings led by approved representatives of such religion or beliefs, to receive visits in private from such representatives of their religion or beliefs and to have in their possession books or literature relating to their religion or beliefs». And «29.3 Prisoners may not be compelled to practise a religion or belief, to attend religious services or meetings, to take part in religious practices or to accept a visit from a representative of any religion or belief» (Council of Europe, 2006, 16).

But the European Prison Rules also recommend that «If a prison contains a sufficient number of prisoners of the same religion, an approved representative of that religion should be appointed» (Council of Europe, 2006, 58). Again, this creates a space where chaplains or volunteers representing, say, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims or Sikhs can try, with varying degrees of success, to gain official recognition for their religious and pastoral activities. Moreover, other rules require prison authorities to take account of religious preferences when deciding on prisoners’ diets and to provide «places of worship and assembly … at every prison for prisoners of all religious denominations and persuasions» (Council of Europe, 2006, 58). In this way, the religions of migrants and minorities are placed on an equal footing with those of majority populations – at least as far as policy is concerned.

Another indirect consequence of the growing religious diversity of prison populations, to which migrants have made the strongest contributions, is that prisons have provided settings in which multifaith arrangements have become common. Indeed, prison chaplaincies in the prisons of England & Wales are organised on the basis of multifaith teams. This requires the representatives of various faith traditions to cooperate with each other and to share facilities. In turn, this multifaith ethos exercises a certain amount of influence on relations between faith communities in the rest of British society.

It would be wrong, however, to overlook the fact that these developments in the institutionalisation and formalisation of religions introduced into Britain largely by migrants in the past and the present have been contentious and problematic at times. In this sense, prisons can be “hot spots” where tensions over religion can give rise to serious problems of order. The long list of potentially contentious issues begins with fundamental disputes about the exclusion of certain religions from all prisons – or the exclusion of leaders representing certain theological or legal schools of thought within wider faith traditions. Prisons are among the public institutions where the question of what counts as religion has been brought to a head – largely but not exclusively – by the growing number of inmates from migrant backgrounds.

A second issue of contention in the prisons of many countries these days arises from the real or putative links between the religions of some migrant groups and radicalism or violent extremism (Dawson, 2018).
Islamist Muslims are the best known case, but others include activists in quasi-military campaigns for the creation of a separate homeland for Sikhs in the Punjab. Prison authorities are particularly concerned about two allegations. The first is that these politically motivated activists may abuse the opportunities afforded to religious groups in order to form prison gangs which aim to control the daily life of entire wings of prisons. The second is that these activists may try to “convert” other inmates by exerting undue pressure on them to adopt radical or extremist ideas which might have serious consequences even after radicalised prisoners have been released. It is important to add that prisons are widely regarded as incubators not only of religiously motivated radicals and violent extremists but also of hostile reactions against them (Khosrokhavar, 2004; 2013). Prisons in many parts of the USA, for example, contain growing numbers of white supremacists and Christian Patriots who tend to regard members of minority faith communities as legitimate targets for their hatred and violence (Hamm, 2013).

Migrants are far from unique in being at the centre of controversies about their practice of religion in prisons. But there is no doubt that cross-national migration has helped to boost the number of such controversies and the severity of the threat that they are said to represent for the security and good order of prisons.

3. Ethics and Policy

Issues about migration are helping to force ethical and political debates about religion to the surface of public life in many countries. This is mainly because extensive flows of migrants around the world have not only increased levels of religious diversity in some countries but have also fed into long-standing ethical and political debates about the place of minorities in liberal regimes (Stoeckl, 2016) and about the appropriate ways of regulating public expressions of religion in more or less secular states (Richardson, 2014; Ferrari, 2019). Indeed, arguments about religion and migration have become at least as contentious as those about “race”, class, language, nationality and ethnicity in discussions of social cohesion, integration or assimilation (Beckford, 2011).

This is not the place to review these ethical and political controversies in detail. The important thing is to draw attention to some of the ways in which the intersections between migration and religion have become part of higher level theoretical debates. This is partly what Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015, 2) refers to as «the intense policy interest in religion that has taken hold in North American and European international public policy circles». Indeed, good empirical investigations are now needed to uncover routine struggles over how to determine what is either permitted or prohibited in the name of religions in families, schools, places of work.
or recreation, public buildings, public authorities, etc. – especially when immigrant groups are concerned. The findings of such investigations can throw light on taken-for-granted assumptions about “religious normality” in different societies. Two particular topics demand careful consideration because they both have to do with ideas about freedom. One concerns relations between migrant minorities and the rest of society; and the other concerns relations between members of migrant minorities. But both topics illustrate just how complex the intersections between religion, ethnicity and minority status can be in the case of migrants and their descendants.

3.1 Freedom of religion

On the one hand, migrant groups often struggle to maintain the practice of their faith in destination societies which limit the public practice of religion to one or more “established” or recognised religions. In some circumstances it is difficult for migrants, even decades after settlement, to feel free from the controlling influence of majority religions in countries as different as, say, Saudi Arabia or Greece. But in fact, tensions and disputes are common in many countries in relation to the demands of minorities for the freedom to follow their religious convictions and practices in the face of opposition from majorities. Particularly contentious issues often take the form of demands, on religious grounds, for exemption from prevailing laws or regulations governing such things as: aspects of children’s education, construction of religious buildings, ritual slaughter of animals for food, polygamy, practices for the disposal of the dead, sex segregation in public institutions, and absence from work or education for religious holidays or prayer times. Attempts to resolve some of these issues by recognising the authority of specifically religious courts or tribunals, in a form of legal pluralism, are no less contentious (Giordan and Pace, 2014).

The heightened public policy interest in questions about migrants and religious freedom cannot be divorced from broader considerations of geopolitics and security. In the post-9/11 era, and in parallel with numerous armed conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, waves of displaced people, would-be fighters and ex-fighters, refugees and asylum seekers have boosted migratory flows into Europe and beyond. Muslim migrants in particular are subject to increasingly intrusive security surveillance in the wake of violent acts committed by self-proclaimed Jihadists and violent Islamist extremists. Security has become a catch-all reason for not only closely monitoring people displaying signs of extremism but also for trying to counteract any sympathy or support for radical ideas and the use of violence. In this context, the perceived significance of even minor concerns about the religious beliefs and practices of migrants has been raised to unprecedented levels.
3.2 Freedom from religion

On the other hand, members of some ethno-religious migrant groups find it hard to distance themselves from the religious norms of their own communities. This is most clearly the case with people who choose either to adopt a different religion from that of their family of origin or who try to live their lives independently from all religions. But it is also a common experience of migrants seeking to create new ways of reconciling their culturally inherited religious dispositions with the new circumstances in which they find themselves. The negotiation of these non-traditional identities can be particularly stressful for younger generations of migrants if they seek to find new or hybrid ways of combining elements of their original religious identity with elements drawn from other sources. Tensions within migrant kin groups can be especially acute in relation to issues such as: accusations of apostasy or blasphemy, disagreements over appropriate careers for women and marriage partners, pressure to conform to patterns of cross-cousin marriage, male circumcision or female genital mutilation, and acceptable forms of divorce.

4. Conclusion

The history of relations between migration and religion is long, complex and changing. Sociological research has thrown light on many of the different contributions that religions have made towards causing migration and responding to the consequences that it can produce. Particularly important investigations have highlighted the significance of factors such as gender and generation in shaping the ways in which migration and religion intersect each other. But this article has suggested that further research is needed on two relatively under-researched dimensions of this intersection. They are the (mis)treatment of children in schemes of “forced” migration sponsored, in part, by religious organisations and the contentious issues that arise in prisons when migration boosts the religious diversity of the inmate population. The forced migration of children and the accommodation of religious diversity in prisons are both topics which underline the need for clarity about ethical principles and public policies relating to religion and migration, namely, the freedom from religion and the limits of religious freedom.

At present, however, very few clear principles on which public policies relating to religion and migration could be securely founded have been agreed. For, although international conventions about the value of religious freedom have been in operation for decades in many countries – and although the promotion of religious freedom has become an official foreign policy objective of countries such as the USA (Hurd, 2015) and the UK – it remains the case that the national frameworks of policy
and law that define and protect the equality and freedom of religions display wide variations in their forms and their effectiveness (Loenen and Goldschmidt, 2007). Moreover, fundamental questions have been raised about the capacity of liberal regimes of separation between religions and European states to resolve the tensions that accompany the growth of religious diversity associated with large-scale immigration. In Silvio Ferrari’s view, «The secular state proved to be an effective tool for regulating religions when Europe was still a Christian continent. It succeeded by progressively pushing religion to the margins of the public sphere, which Christianity, at least in its Protestant and later Catholic streams, was able to accept better than did other religions» (Ferrari, 2019, 22). Now the challenge is, therefore, to identify policies and legal principles which could respond adequately to the religious diversity generated by immigration without necessarily being based exclusively on the Christian and/or secular roots of the prevailing systems of regulation.

Department of Sociology
University of Warwick

References

Allievi S. and Nielsen J. (eds.) (2003), Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe, Leiden, Brill.
Bader V. (2009), The governance of religious diversity: theory, research, and practice, in Bramadat P. e Koenig M. (eds.), International Migration and the Governance of Religious Diversity, Kingston, ON, School of Policy Studies, Queen’s University, pp. 43-72.


