



**Refugees and Religious Tolerance in Europe:
Plurality of Perspectives
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Summary Report

by Jos Philips

(with many thanks to Izabella Main and Elżbieta M. Goździak)

This blog reports on an online workshop where researchers from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Center for Migration Studies) and from Utrecht University (Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies) discussed several perspectives on refugees and religious tolerance in Europe. After the presentation of case studies from Poland, Hungary and Turkey, the workshop offered further reflections that stressed the importance of appropriately welcoming refugees, as well as the ambiguous roles that religion can have in this regard. Furthermore, the contributors argued that theorists also have a task in welcoming refugees.

The workshop's context: Horizon-2020 project NoVAMIGRA

The workshop "Refugees and Religious Tolerance in Europe: Plurality of Perspectives" was part of the EU Horizon-2020 project 'Norms and Values in the European Migration and Refugee 'Crisis' (NOVAMIGRA, www.novamigra.eu). This project investigates the effects of the arrival in 2015 and beyond of a large number of refugees, mainly Muslims from Syria, on European norms and values, and also on the reception, treatment, and attitudes towards asylum seekers, refugees, and other migrants. When researching these issues, NOVAMIGRA considered 'realities on the ground' with regard to the European values, norms, and rights, including human rights. The project has explored European values, both actual and aspirational, by analyzing official documents, such as the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and political discourses and actions (top-down approach) and juxtaposed them with 'bottom-up' social realities such as discourses in the civil society, including both discourses that are more welcoming towards refugees and migrants and more populist discourses. NOVAMIGRA aim has been to develop a new cosmopolitan vision for the EU.

Religion plays a very important role in the reception of refugees and asylum seekers. In the online workshop discussed here, researchers from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan (Center for Migration Studies) and from Utrecht University (Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies) came together to report and reflect on the diverse and multi-faceted role of religion in facilitating refugee admission and integration in Europe.



This workshop was organized as part of the NOVAMIGRA project, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770330.

Three case studies

The Polish research team¹ summarized their key findings included in the NOVAMIGRA report '[The Refugee Crisis and Religious Tolerance in Europe: Plurality of Perspectives.](#)' [Izabella Main](#) discussed the situation in **Poland**, where the Catholic Church has a lot of influence. She presented a range of initiatives, including ecumenical and interfaith activities, undertaken by faith-based and secular organizations to **welcome refugees** and migrants. In addition, she discussed how some actors, including the national government, mobilized religion to convey a perceived incompatibility of 'European values' with values and cultural traits exhibited by mainly Muslim refugees.

In **Hungary**, explained [Elżbieta M. Goździak](#), the government was vehemently opposed to asylum seekers and refugees. The government amended the Constitution to limit religious freedom and curtail the activities of faith-based groups that have not received the government's imprimatur. On the other hand, some religious leaders and many volunteers, both those inspired by religious values and those motivated by secular principles, welcomed and assisted Muslim refugees who arrived in Hungary in the summer of 2015.

[Izabela Kujawa](#) discussed her research in **Turkey**, both among Syrian and other refugees awaiting the opportunity to enter the European Union. She reported that many non-Christian **refugees worry** that they may have to give up their religion and culture to be fully accepted into a new society. Some refugees work for NGOs and find this very empowering – they can leave behind the stereotype of 'passive and helpless' that is often associated with them.

Concluding the first part of the workshop, Elżbieta M. Goździak made three recommendations: (1) Many good policies and practices supporting religious tolerance exist, but they should be enforced more rigorously; (2) **Local communities** and local governments are especially important for refugee reception and integration and should be supported financially; (3) Meaningful participation of **refugees themselves**, also in devising and implementing policies, should be facilitated.

Welcoming refugees

From the three presentations made by the Polish team, it becomes clear that **welcoming** refugees (some agents would speak of 'tolerating refugees') could be regarded as very important; and that religion can facilitate **a more or less welcoming** reception of and attitudes towards refugees and migrants. This may, among others, give rise to the following concerns and themes, discussed in the workshop:

* Freedom of religion is one thing that liberal states pride themselves on. However, as [Christoph Baumgartner](#) argued, this is not the same as **political equality** in the sense of fully recognizing adherents of all religions as equals. However, such **moving beyond 'mere tolerance'** can be difficult if a cultural heritage conception of Christianity is prevalent in a society. Political equality may require recognizing all religions in the public sphere in some appropriate way.

* The ethnographic research makes it clear that many refugees worry about having to give up their religions and cultures in order to be (fully) accepted in their new societies. In her

¹ Izabella Main, Elżbieta M. Goździak, and Izabela Kujawa are affiliated with the Center for Migration Studies at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland.



presentation, [Annelise Reid](#) showed that Iranian and Afghan asylum seekers launching asylum applications in the Netherlands on the basis of persecution because of their conversion to Christianity, have to conform to a certain **construction** of what Christian religiosity entails. Although we are talking here about the admission of asylum seekers and not about attitudes and behavior towards those who have already been recognized as refugees, it is certainly questionable whether the asylum procedures mentioned are **appropriately welcoming**.

* [Birgit Meyer](#) presented the volume '[Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories](#),' edited by Peter van der Veer and herself, which has been published recently. She emphasizes the importance of '**nomadic rationalities**' of always questioning categories and conceptual and other boundaries. People on the move hail from different cultures and religions and embrace plural, dynamic, and transcending logics that challenge static categories and frames such as those often deployed by states (such as: 'crisis').

'Mobilizing theory', then, would be a task for theorists by which they can contribute to the discussion of **welcoming** refugees and other migrants. Moreover, it also remains vitally important, as the Polish group emphasized, to listen to the **actual voices of refugees** and migrants themselves.

The online workshop reported on here took place on 21 April 2021. A recording of the first part can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWyaLhxRx1U&t=10s>

This workshop, part of the NOVAMIGRA project (www.novamigra.eu), was co-organized by the [Center for Migration Studies](#) (CeBaM) in Poznan, Poland and Utrecht University's Focus Area '[Migration and Societal Change](#)'.

For further information on the NOVAMIGRA project please visit www.novamigra.eu, read from relevant disciplines on current issues and developments in the field of migration, asylum and European integration on our [NOVAMIGRA.Blog](#), or follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

