

What role does spirituality and religion play in refugees' flights from their home country and during their resettlement in host countries?

The research question What role does spirituality and religion play in refugees' flights from their home country and during their resettlement in host countries? was explored through a mostly qualitative study that used a grounded theory approach. The research did this by allowing the voices of nineteen (in total) Melbourne-based adult refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Iraq to be heard. These refugees were of Christian, Muslim and Animist backgrounds of varying religiosities. They fled, mostly between the 1990s and early 2000s, to settle in Australia. These voices are complemented by observations of Melbourne-based refugee settlement practitioners, religious leaders and academics.

The study found that for nearly all refugees their religiosity assisted or greatly assisted them during the refugee experience and during initial settlement in Melbourne. Further, half of the refugees reported a shift in their religiosity from home country chaos to settlement in Melbourne. Also, refugees' religiosity generally increased in the place of asylum, then weakened in Australia, but this level was still higher than that during the events which caused civil chaos in their home countries. Refugee support personnel also observed that refugees' religiosity increased in Melbourne.

In order to answer how different refugees were impacted the grounded study presents A Model

of Religiosity and the Refugee Experience: Shifting Typologies at Each Stage of the Refugee Journey for the nineteen refugee participants. The study poses five variable constellations that affected the refugee's religiosity with these being: 1) Home-External, 2) Home-National, 3) Individual, 4) Flight and Asylum, and 5) Host Country. Each constellation has several factors. This study found three main religious responses (with variations within) to the refugee experience: 1) Refugee religious maintainers: (a) Intensified religious shifters; (b) Religious switchers, (c) Religious questioners; and 3) Non-religious refugees.

As presented in the study and summarised in the description of the model, most religious refugees (religious maintainers, refugee switchers and refugee intensifiers - the majority in this study), both Christian and Muslim, appear to understand the refugee experience through their particular collective/individual religious meaning system (often unconsciously formed). The study found the refugees' particular religious meaning system often framed their experience: earth is temporary, heaven is permanent, the devil is present, it's God's/Allah's will. It also prescribed ways of coping via the extensive use of religious rituals at all stages of the refugee experience. Even refugee religious questioners used religious coping methods in times of need.

Several other theoretical findings emerged. For example, those religious refugees and some religious leaders who were interviewed appear to acculturate in multi-faith, secular Australia through their particular religious meaning systems. Findings also suggest collective and individual experience with the 'other' in their home country and asylum can be both positively and in some instances negatively transferred to Australia.

The study's conclusion and an appendix present various practical implications and recommendations for the immigration department, educational programs, and health and psychological support agencies in Australia and possibly beyond.

You can read more about this study here (and download a copy, PDF, 2MB)

