



Recognizing the Divine in the Destitute: Religious Traditions Offer Migrant-Focused Mandates By Joy Brown

A common thread among organized religions throughout the world is the concept of hospitality, of welcoming the newly arrived with kindness and accommodation, and of seeing ourselves in others who are different, religious studies experts say. Far from singular to Christianity, this notion of inclusivity—including for those who have journeyed from afar to make often unfamiliar places their new home—is a faith-based imperative that explains why so many congregants within the United States, including in Findlay, Ohio, have committed to helping migrants.

“There is a shared ethos in many of the global religious traditions that we study in the Religious Studies Department at the University of Findlay regarding how humans should respond to migrants and immigrants and the challenges of mass immigration,” said Darcy Metcalfe, Ph.D., assistant professor of religious studies. “This shared ethos is especially true in situations in which people are coming into our communities because of abject need, poverty, oppression, or lack of safety. All of the major religious traditions of the world teach that we should welcome migrants and immigrants, take care of them, and respect and honor the human dignity of all people.”

Metcalfe references the Jewish Tanakh (or what Christians call the Old Testament), as an example of altruism. “The Torah and the prophets are adamant about ‘welcoming the stranger’ and caring for those who are oppressed or fleeing for safety,” she said. “In Exodus 22 and 23, God gives commands for how the Hebrew people should live after they had escaped slavery in Egypt. Exodus 23:9 says, ‘You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.’ This indiscriminate welcoming of the stranger is a repeated theme throughout the Tanakh,” she pointed out.

In the Christian New Testament, an emphasis is also placed on welcoming foreigners, especially those who have been ostracized and disenfranchised.

“Jesus’ entire ministry is spent tending to those who lived at the margins of society—those who were often poor, destitute, and hungry,” Metcalfe explained. “In Matthew 25, Jesus says he identifies the people who follow him by finding the folks that feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison.

He then goes a step further and says when we do these things for any human being, we are doing these things to him.”

Metcalfe interprets Matthew 25 as a mandate to treat all people as the human beings that they are. “I think this speaks specifically to the divinity he challenges us to identify in each person and the human dignity we are called to honor in every individual we meet,” she said.

“Within Hinduism, people often greet and say farewell to one another with the term ‘Namaste,’” Metcalfe continues. “This greeting comes from an ancient Sanskrit term and is often interpreted as ‘I bow to the divine in you,’ or ‘The light in me bows to the light in you.’ This is reserved not just for friends and family, but for every person one comes into contact with—including immigrants and migrants,” she said.

Likewise, “there are various African traditions that abide by the philosophy of Ubuntu, which directly speaks to the interconnected nature of our social and physical worlds,” said Metcalfe. “Ubuntu is often translated as, ‘I am because we are,’ and in the Xhosa language is understood as a philosophical term that highlights the universal bond and interconnectedness that all humans share. In this sense, what affects one, affects all, and caring for those in need takes urgent precedence.”

“The Quran similarly affirms that the human race was created by Allah as *ummah wahida*, ‘one community’ (2:213),” wrote David Hollenbach in *Norms in Religious Traditions for Response to the Displaced*, published in January 2023 by Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs. “Muslims therefore have the responsibility to work to maintain this human unity. For Hindus, dharma—justice or the moral order of the cosmos—extends to all people. Buddhists also affirm the preciousness of all human life, and the human capacity for enlightenment expresses the inherent dignity of the human person,” he elaborated.

Displacement of people, including mass dispersal from a homeland through diaspora, is not only thematic within many major monotheistic traditions but also a contemporarily relatable circumstance. Moreover, the divine characterizes the displaced, particularly people recognized as prophets and other spiritual leaders.

“Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are called the Abrahamic faiths because they each trace their origin back to the Patriarch Abraham who was himself a migrant,” Hollenbach maintained. “In fact, migration across borders is central to the founding experience of these three monotheistic faiths... In an analogous way, migration marks the beginning of the Christian tradition,” he continued. “Shortly after his birth, Jesus was compelled to flee Roman persecution, moving with Mary and Joseph to Egypt. Anachronistically, therefore, Jesus could be seen as a refugee.”

Metcalfe wonders, “What if, when we look into the eyes of immigrants or migrants, we could recognize that our existence is deeply interconnected with theirs and we could someday be in their shoes? I hope that in my own moment of desperate need, I would be met by people who could see me as human and honor my humanity,” she said.

Yet Metcalfe recognizes that, if put to the test, this hope may not be realized.

“At the heart of all the major religious traditions around the world can be found a seed of compassion that nurtures a genuine respect and honor of the dignity of all people with no exception,” she said. “Unfortunately, this is not what we see lived out with practitioners of a variety of religious traditions. What is most cruel and harmful is when the texts of the traditions are used for the exact opposite purpose—when they are used to degrade, vilify, or dehumanize any person.”