

The role of Christian religious groups among Syrian refugees and Haitian asylum seekers

Executive Summary

by Frédéric Dejean

June 2020

Executive Summary



Frédéric Dejean is a professor in the Department of Sciences of Religion at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM). His work, rooted in urban realities, focuses particularly on the role played by religious groups in working with immigrants, evangelical Protestantism in the Quebec context and religious zoning in urban space.



UQAM



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Preamble

A discussion of the role played by faith groups with newcomers, whether economic immigrants, refugees or asylum-seekers, implies considering the effects of the context in each host society. In fact, the place granted to religion in the public space has an impact on the role collectively acknowledged to faith groups in their interventions with newcomers. For example, the involvement of local faith groups¹ will not be perceived in the same way in the United States or Quebec. In the first case, faith groups, particularly Protestant congregations, have historically played (and still play) a predominant role in the making of the social fabric, while in the second case, the Quiet Revolution brought a reassessment of the place of religious institutions, starting with the Catholic Church, in the public space. Therefore, any intervention by faith groups in an area as sensitive as integration could be perceived as suspicious and arouse fears of proselytism or communitarianism. In the following pages, while reference is largely made to research from the rest of Canada or from abroad, we will not lose sight of Quebec and its specific relationship with religion.

Discussing the interventions of faith groups with immigrants means addressing sensitive and complex questions like laicity, secularization and the rightful place of religion in the public space. It should be recalled that laicity is a legal and political provision which aims to guarantee the strict separation between the State and faith groups. It rests on a base of four principles: freedom of conscience, equality, the neutrality of the State with regard to religions and cults and the separation of religion and the State.

While laicity is part of a planned political project, secularization is rather the culmination of societal evolution removing religious institutions from areas for which they were traditionally responsible. In Quebec, this resulted in a vast movement of deconfessionalization of the systems of health care and education.

It is with these facts in mind that I have formulated a question which will be implicit throughout this document: in a secular and secularized society like Quebec, are faith groups legitimate actors in the process of integration and inclusion of newcomers? In fact, is it not paradoxical to rely on groups which are built around a strong feeling of belonging to a community for helping individuals towards full participation in society? This type of

¹ “Local faith group” designates a group of persons sharing the same religion and which meets regularly in a place of worship.

question is not absent from the literature and there are researchers who wonder whether faith groups constitute a brake or an accelerator for integration².

It is difficult to answer such questions by a definitive “yes” or “no” and this document does not have the ambition to decide, but rather to offer a panorama of the major issues which surround the integration of newcomers, particularly refugees and asylum-seekers, through the mobilization of the existing scientific literature but also recent personal research.

My objective is twofold:

- To elucidate the role of faith groups with newcomers, it is necessary to consider the social and psychosociological dimensions. These will be articulated around notions of social capital, resilience and coping. These three notions bring to light the importance of the social ties bringing individuals together and the positive effects which flow from these. One of the hypotheses which is found throughout the document is that faith groups, particularly the Christian churches which will be our main focus, are spaces of production of social links.
- To describe the role of Christian churches (Catholic, Eastern Christian and Evangelical Protestants) with Syrian refugees and Haitian asylum-seekers. This second objective builds on the first for its theoretical foundation. At the empirical level, it is based on research carried out among religious leaders, Syrian refugees and Haitian asylum-seekers.
- Describing the contemporary Quebec religious landscape means addressing the question of immigration since the observable religious diversity results in part from the different phases of immigration. As far as Christianity is concerned, the rather simple system structured by the Catholic church and the major established Protestant churches gave way to a complex system fuelled by forms of Christianity which for a long time were unheard of in Quebec, particularly Eastern Christian churches and certain forms of evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, the so-called traditional churches are experiencing an internal pluralism which is especially ethnocultural.
- The support provided by faith groups to refugees is of three types: (1) material (2) social and (3) spiritual/emotional. Material support is the most obvious and is found at different stages of the process of integration. It can take different forms: (money, clothing, food, furniture...). Sociological support corresponds to the sociability networks that newcomers establish once they are in Quebec. Finally,

² Foner N et Alba R (2008) Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe : Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion? *International Migration Review* 42(2): p. 360-392.

spiritual/emotional support refers to interventions which help refugees and asylum-seekers confront the traumas linked to their experience of displacement.

- The notions of **social capital**, **resilience** and **religious coping** allow local religious groups to go beyond simply providing material or administrative support to refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Religious groups work with refugees and asylum-seekers in ways that cover multiple areas, so that we can speak of a **comprehensive approach** towards persons and their needs, whether material, social, emotional, psychological or spiritual. In an article on Syrian refugees, researchers refer to a “holistic integration model” and emphasize the fact that integration is not just the sum of a set of indicators of certain areas (employment, housing, education...) but much more than that: harmonious links between these different areas and an awareness of the social context, life path and social identity of individuals. The double subject of research (Syrian refugees and Haitian asylum-seekers) brought out similarities in the types of intervention provided by faith groups to newcomers and in the important role played by religion for the development of resilience and coping among newcomers. However, differences also emerged. These are linked to two variables: (1) **The contexts of the arrival** of the two groups, which are very different. The Syrian refugees arrived in Quebec by air and were sponsored for a large part by faith groups, giving them certain guarantees regarding their settlement. The asylum-seekers, on the other hand, entered the country by land. They were not expected and therefore had to confront a great deal of uncertainty concerning their short-term settlement. (2) **The special legal status** of asylum-seekers who are hoping to obtain refugee status. In fact, asylum-seekers experience a form of uncertainty about just their presence on Canadian soil.
- The available scientific literature and the research carried out among religious groups which assisted Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers leads us to address their interventions from the perspective of complementarity and not competition vis-à-vis other institutional actors, particularly community organizations. If there exists an “intervention ecosystem” for refugees and asylum-seekers, it is important to determine the place which can be occupied by faith groups.

When dealing with the role played by religious groups with refugees and asylum-seekers it is indispensable to keep an open mind and not prejudge the legitimacy of these institutional actors in the ecosystem of immigrant assistance. Nevertheless, it is indispensable to avoid falling into the trap of naïve optimism and to remain vigilant. In fact, if religious groups can be efficient transmission belts with the other institutional actors involved and if they are able to meet certain needs, it is important not to forget that deviations are always possible. Some religious groups can exploit the psychological weakness and the distress of certain persons, create a phenomenon of domination and thus create forms of dependence which take away the individual’s capacity for judgement.