

David Hollenbach, SJ, *Humanity in Crisis: Ethical and Religious Response to Refugees*

Moral Traditions series (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019). x + 197 pp. £29.00. ISBN 978-1-62616-718-6 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Barnabas Aspray, University of Oxford, UK

barnabas.aspray@pmb.ox.ac.uk

With more people forcibly displaced than ever before in world history, we are living in the time of a massive humanitarian crisis that undermines the wellbeing and dignity of millions across the globe. To respond to this, the UN General Assembly produced a Global Compact on Refugees (2018), which contained four goals relating to the international protection and care of the displaced. But why should anyone try to achieve these goals? Why should we care about refugees, if we did not cause their suffering and do not share their nationality, ethnicity, or religion? What could motivate us to do anything for the needs of others who are not our kin? The goal of David Hollenbach's *Humanity in Crisis* is to answer such questions by giving 'ethical and religious support' for the Compact's four goals (p. 9), and to show how religion can be of practical help in achieving these goals.

Chapter 2 answers the above questions about why we should care for refugees from an ethical standpoint, by establishing a common duty to respond to anyone in need, regardless of race, class or creed, a duty based on the humanity that we all share. Hollenbach draws on two overlapping ethical traditions to make his case. The first he calls the 'humanitarian movement', which bases its ethics on the 'principle of humanity': that 'there is a responsibility to provide care whenever members of the human family are gravely threatened', a responsibility towards 'all members of the human family based on their need, not because of their nationality, race, religion, class, or political opinion' (p. 15). The second is the human rights movement, which is based on the intrinsic dignity and rights of every human being simply because they are human. To take human rights as a standard means insisting on the 'universal and equal worth of every person', and to affirm that 'all human persons deserve equal protection from grave threats to their worth as persons. Each person threatened by crisis should count equally, and protection should be extended to all who need it' (p. 19).

Next, Hollenbach points to the role of religion, both as a crucial factor in the birth of the humanitarian and human rights movements (chapter 3), and as a major player in the implementation of their demands today (chapter 4). Challenging the view that

humanitarianism is ‘the triumph of a secularist worldview [and] the victory of science, technology, and reason over religion, the supernatural, and superstition’ (p. 24), he argues instead that religion, especially Christianity, ‘played a formative role in shaping the emergence of the humanitarian movement’ (p. 31). He finds the seeds of humanitarian discourse in the words of sixteenth-century Dominican friars who spoke out against the injustices perpetrated by Spanish colonial powers against indigenous populations in South America and the Caribbean. Figures like Antonio Montesino (1475-1540), Francisco de Vitoria (1483-1546), and Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) appealed to Christian principles, such as the command to love one’s neighbour, as a reason for the colonialists to stop the exploitation and slavery of the natives. But for Hollenbach it is crucial to note that these friars also appealed to universal principles independent of Christianity. Montesino’s cry – ‘with what right, with what justice do you hold these Indians in such cruel and horrible slavery? . . . Are they not men?’ (p. 28) – had only the common humanity of the indigenous people as its basis. This shows their belief that ‘Christian faith is neither necessary for knowledge of moral duties nor for the capacity to live in accord with these duties’ (p. 29). The appeal to universal human reason is why these arguments later flourished, and, in the twentieth century, fed into documents like the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet while human rights do not depend on any religious position for their validity, they are supported by all the major religious traditions, Hollenbach claims. To show this, he briefly surveys the humanitarian principles in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 4 argues against the perception that humanitarian aid became predominantly secular in the twentieth century. Hollenbach admits that the role of religion in humanitarian crises is ‘ambivalent’ because it has often caused them through war and conflict. But he insists that at the same time, ‘faith-based organizations continue to play an important role in the overall humanitarian effort today’ (p. 47). Including by way of tables and charts, Hollenbach supplies evidence that religious communities are making ‘positive contributions to alleviating the suffering caused by conflict, displacement, and other harmful effects of humanitarian crisis’ (p. 52). Moreover, religion not only provides practical help but can be valuable for those who are suffering because it helps them to see their lives as meaningful in spite of what they are going through. For the displaced, ‘transcendent meaning may become a precondition of hope’ (p. 55).

Chapter 5 wrestles with the difficult issue of ‘proximity ethics’ or the *ordo amoris*, as Augustine named it. Although duty to our own ‘families, ethnic groups, or even nations’ (p. 63) comes first, it does not abolish our duty to other peoples and nations, according to the humanitarian ethic. The world has not always been organised into nation-states and may be organised otherwise in the future (p. 66), so we should not put too much weight on national duties at the expense of global ones. We face a continual tension between

universal and particular demands, and prudence or practical wisdom is needed to discern the right balance.

Chapter 6 outlines ‘negative duties’, such as the duty to protect (although I would class this as a positive duty) and the duty not to harm. Hollenbach shows how such duties apply to just warfare (*jus ad bellum*) by making force legitimate only as a means to defend the rights of individuals or nations. If everyone were to abide only by these negative duties, he observes, it would ‘be an important step toward alleviating the crises faced by humanity today’ (p. 95). Chapter 7 turns to consider ‘positive duties’ such as the duty to act in situations of need, including the obligation to accept refugees fleeing from a crisis. Chapter 8 extends these positive duties to cover action across borders, intervening to help in other nations even when one’s own nation is not affected. Attention to the latter is the only way Internally Displaced People (IDPs) will receive international aid. IDPs do not count as refugees because they have crossed no national border, yet their situation is analogous to refugees in every other way and they are desperately in need of help. Chapter 9 concludes the book with a discussion of the responsibility to go upstream and prevent future crises by transforming the structures of society. The deeper ‘root causes’ of violations of human rights must be addressed, including action against poverty, reconciliation efforts in conflict zones, and action to prevent climate breakdown which threatens to displace millions in the coming decades.

This book is addressed to a non-religious audience. It should not be mistaken for a theological treatise, i.e. a work targeting a particular religious community (e.g. Christian) and expounding the doctrines and norms of that community. To read it as theology would be to find it rather superficial, containing no discussion either of sin as the root cause of humanitarian crises and human rights violations, or of the way the gospel transforms not only our moral standards but also our ability to live up to them. In the absence of any theological narrative of sin and redemption, it offers no explanation for why, if human rights and humanitarian duties are universally recognisable, so many people fail to respect them, or, for that matter, why any book-length argument needs to be made in favour of them. As a result, it has little to offer by way of hope for a solution, except to point out that, rather self-evidently, if everyone were to act in accordance with their humanitarian duties, the world would be a better place. Still, whatever the importance of such questions, Hollenbach never intended to answer them in this book, having instead a much narrower focus.

At the same time, it is not an ethically or religiously neutral book. Both the appeal to universal ethical standards that can be grasped through reason regardless of nationality, ethnicity or creed, and the placing of all ethics in the frame of ‘duty’, are distinctively Kantian moves. Hollenbach takes these secular Enlightenment ethical standards as his foundation, and defends religion by arguing that religious people live up to these standards,

at least in theory and often also in practice. And within the scope of this carefully defined aim, he is largely successful.