CHAPTER 18

Cities of Sanctuary, Religion, and Justice

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Within the confines of a church... a person could avoid deportation. Even police were known to turn around at the threshold of churches housing 'illegal' migrants in tacit recognition of this historically 'sacred' authority (Bagelman 2016, p. xii).

Introduction

In the past 20 years, borders have hardened, and new forms of solidarity have grown up around cities and places of sanctuary. These initiatives have been taken to protect the undocumented from the exclusion imposed by ever-tighter government immigration policies. Most undocumented people in large cities keep a low profile. To self-organise can be risky, exposing individuals without residency rights to detection, detention, and deportation (Bauman and Lyon 2012; Fekete 2005). The guiding principles of a sanctuary city are to open up services for all residents within the city, without regard to their formal legal status, whilst keeping undocumented people safe (Long 2012). The problem is, that to campaign effectively, undocumented people need to overcome their isolation and extend networks of solidarity. Only in this way can faith-based or secular sanctuary movements hope to counteract locally the exclusionary effects of deterrence-based immigration and asylum policies at national level (Bagelman 2016; Farrier 2012). If not carefully organised, sanctuary cities can increase risks for undocumented people and local citizens. Yet the individual and collective acts of kindness and solidarity, faith-based and secular, that together make up sanctuary city initiatives, can also help mitigate undocumented people’s vulnerability, at least to some extent. City of sanctuary initiatives now extend across the world, from the United States, Canada,
the United Kingdom, and Germany to Lebanon, South Africa, and Brazil. All aim to ensure that specific spaces, entire cities and even wider regions, are able to protect undocumented people. Arguably, sanctuary cities have never been as important or under as much pressure as during the COVID-19 crisis (Caduff 2020 forthcoming).

This chapter’s focus is on sanctuary cities where faith-based communities have reasserted the basic rights of ‘unwanted humanity’ to services and a warm welcome (Bauman 2004; Duffield 2007). It details the experiences of specific cities and stories of undocumented people mobilising and being supported by others. Within sanctuary movements, faith-based communities have had to reconcile a general desire to respect the law with the moral and spiritual imperative to protect those persecuted. Beyond the widespread politics of fear, aggravated considerably by the ‘war on Corona,’ a politics of hope is vital for grassroots faith-based communities that underpin contemporary sanctuary movements. A politics of hope suggests that ‘one day’ vulnerable people will be welcomed and will enjoy what Henri Lefebvre called the ‘right to the city,’ where: ‘the interests... of the whole society and first of all of those who inhabit’ the city, are paramount in policy (Lefebvre 1996, p. 158).

Figure 18.1 ‘Sanctuary’, Body Art by Amy Hintjens.
Broad-based engagement and alliances are vital to the required political renewal of urban spaces. Given that:

Hope is an overwhelming concept... it can manifest as both a tremendous vision of what’s possible in this world as well as a last-ditch sensibility that keeps one from literally resigning oneself to death (Furness 2007).

Historically, the principle of sanctuary required faith communities to receive and shelter people in danger from ‘rough justice.’ Alongside new arrivals, slaves and criminals have been given protection in churches, in mosques, and in synagogues, for centuries, including those who faced mob justice or the death penalty (Bhogal 2010). Today, undocumented people are those Nigel Harris terms the ‘new untouchables’ (Harris 1997). Sanctuary initiatives tend to work better where local government institutions, as in the United States, have some room for cooperating with civic groups, including faith-based organisations. Collaboration across public-private divides can partially transform urban landscapes for the undocumented, opening up services of the city for all who live there as happened in Ontario during the COVID-19 crisis when health services became freely accessible for all, irrespective of status, for public health reasons (Hudson 2020). Faith-based groups, voluntary associations, left-wing activist groups, ordinary citizens, local government, and sometimes even local businesses and police join in local sanctuary initiatives to bridge differences of faith, political beliefs, and status and work together on making cities safer for all who live there.

Stories of Hope and Despair

Stories that inspire hope help us walk the thin line between despair and action (Athwal 2006). When it comes to seeking sanctuary, stories of hope may be stories of simple survival, especially during the COVID-19 period when many countries opted for total lockdown of their economies instead of more measured, selective lockdown based on testing and tracing (Caduff 2020 forthcoming). Stories of hope are useful in this complex situation because ‘...like the plow [they]... use a simple application of force to dig deep... they condense complex life into simple plots’ (Tilly 2006, p. 95). Advocacy and self-advocacy are unpredictable, even for those familiar with the law. Stories help convey the rich, experiential knowledge gained by volunteers, local officials, faith-based communities, and most importantly, by those seeking sanctuary. Working closely with professionals, and with undocumented people, local volunteers are essential to most sanctuary movements, and their inspiration is often faith-based. Besides lawyers, doctors, journalists, police, local politicians, local government officials, educators, and artists, there are also churches, mosques, and synagogues. All form part of most sanctuary city initiatives. The support networks embedded in local faith-based groups are especially important at first, given the religious origins of sanctuary principles and practices. It is their prior collaboration on inter-faith issues that often enables them to bring solidarity networks together and cut through the dilemmas mentioned above around legality and illegality and around selective disrespect for unjust laws.

The first story, in an article entitled ‘Last Refuge of Desperate Illegals,’ appeared in the 15 September, 2010 issue of Haags Straatnieuws (Hague Street News), a magazine sold by homeless people in the Netherlands. Margaret Bal’s article profiled the Hague-based NGO...
Participating Refugees in Multicultural Europe (PRIME). She tells the story of a young man, Cheikh, from Guinea-Conakry, who is visiting PRIME. Cheikh was smuggled into the Netherlands in 2000, hidden in the boat of a Christian Dutch national who wanted to help him. Cheikh was 14 when he arrived, and over the years, his many applications for asylum were rejected. As a young adult, he was liable to be deported. The kindness of a stranger could not ‘save’ Cheikh from the threat of later deportation. Kindness had brought him to the Netherlands in a boat, where he was left high and dry once he turned 18. Cheikh had come to seek advice from PRIME’s director, Ahmed Pouri, because he hoped to qualify and become legalised under the Dutch amnesty or ‘Generaal Pardon,’ introduced in 2007. Because Cheikh lived outside the Netherlands for some months, and later re-entered, again illegally, the Dutch authorities rejected his regularisation request. He was now stuck and feared being detained and sent back to Guinea, where he had no family left. His parents had fled Sierra Leone to Guinea when Cheikh was very young. His lawyers had also run out of advice, and he was at the end of the line. PRIME was one of the few places left to provide a warm place to visit, a listening ear, food boxes, and referrals to sympathetic dentists, doctors, and lawyers. Small, volunteer-run organisations like PRIME cannot work miracles however.

In response to a situation like Cheikh’s, PRIME director, Ahmed Pouri, suggests that, because undocumented migrants and refugees alone know the risks they face, they should be supported to plan and undertake their own autonomous form of protest. Wherever possible, they should represent their own demands, individually and collectively, asking for the kind of support they need from local citizens, local government, professionals, and faith-based groups. Supportive outside advocacy by citizens and local organisations, professional or amateur, can be defined as ‘...the process of identifying with and representing a person’s views and concerns, in order to secure enhanced rights and entitlements’ (Cambridge and Williams 2004, p. 98). To avoid unintended consequences, advocacy on others’ behalf needs to be grounded in the genuinely informed consent of those on whose behalf advocacy is undertaken.

Sanctuary Cities in North America

Written from an insider’s perspective Ignatius Bau’s (1985) This Ground is Holy: Church Sanctuary and Central American Refugees documents the early US-based movements to offer sanctuary to refugees from Central America. This movement started with churches responding to the murder in San Salvador cathedral of Archbishop Oscar Romero, killed by US-supported death squads. Soon civilians and activists were being indiscriminately murdered in El Salvador, and many sought safety in the United States. In 1980:

The network of religious congregations that became known as the Sanctuary Movement started with a Presbyterian church and a Quaker meeting in Tucson, Arizona... when, after two years, none of the refugees they assisted had been granted political asylum. Rev. John Fife of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson announced – on the anniversary of the assassination of Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero – that his church would openly defy INS and become a “sanctuary” for Central Americans (Gzesh 2006).

Meanwhile, a catholic pastor in Los Angeles designated his church as ‘sanctuary’ for poor, homeless, and undocumented people (Tobar 1993). Synagogues in several US cities
joined the sanctuary movement, which spread across the United States (Bhogal 2010). Soon Quakers, Baptists, Catholics, and Jews in Arizona, California, and elsewhere offered sanctuary in their places of worship to those refused refugee status (McDaniel 2017). By the mid-1980s, undocumented Salvadoran or Guatemalan refugee families were being supported by more than a thousand local Christian and Jewish congregations. Protestant denominations, Conservative and Reform Jewish associations, and several Catholic orders all actively embraced the concept and practices of sanctuary.

Sanctuary workers coordinated with activists in Mexico to smuggle Salvadorans and Guatemalans over the border and across the country. Assistance provided to refugees included bail and legal representation, as well as food, medical care, and employment (Gzesh 2006; see also Spener 2011; Baker 2017).

Decades later, the movement had become more organized across the United States, and ‘...in 2013 and 2014 at least 259 localities (twenty-six cities and 233 counties) officially restricted the extent to which LEAs [law enforcement agencies] may hold individuals for transfer to ICE’ (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) (Chen 2016, p. 25). Open calls on citizens of US cities and decisions by state and city authorities to selectively disobey federal laws had grown into a national movement going well beyond the initially faith-based responses to those fleeing Central America in the early 1980s (Chen 2016; Ridgley 2008). By 2018, counties in 27 US states and numerous towns and cities had declared themselves part of the sanctuary movement. Whilst the US sanctuary movement arose decades before Donald Trump became President, his government’s ‘...anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation... has underlined the urgency of protecting some of the world’s most vulnerable people – undocumented migrants – from the excesses of state power’ (Trew 2017).

In Canada in 2013, following the example of the United States, Toronto city councillors voted by ‘an overwhelming majority’ to pass ‘...a law that requires all city staff to ensure that illegal immigrants can access its services without fear of being reported to Canada Immigration and possible deportation’ (Moyal 2005). By 2017, four Canadian cities – Toronto, Hamilton and London in Ontario, and Montréal in Quebec – declared themselves Sanctuary cities for illegal refugees. In Montreal, the Sanctuary city initiative was spearheaded by the mayor, formerly the Minister for Immigration, Denis Coderre. In Canada, as in the United States, the sanctuary offered was explicitly protection from the detention and deportation policies of central government. The sanctuary movement sought to offer practical protection from arrest by immigration police. According to the Canadian Sanctuary Network, this was a faith-based organization that did the following:

provides support to places of worship wanting to offer sanctuary to house failed refugee claimants, the concept is grounded in two items of faith: that human life is sacred and worthy of protection; and that there are places and spaces beyond the reach of the state (Trew 2017).

City authorities were accused of aiding criminals, and some US city and county authorities have been fined for refusing to cooperate with law enforcement. Faith-based communities have been part of a pattern of law-breaking in the name of justice. When US ICE
immigration police have sought to round up, detain, and deport undocumented people, they have faced simple refusal to cooperate, alongside locally organised protests. Once some local and state governments decided to refuse cooperation with ICE, for their own political, legal, and moral reasons, the sanctuary movement became national and soon international (Ridgley 2008).

Cities of Sanctuary in the UK

In the United Kingdom, the first report of the Independent Asylum Commission (IAC), a faith-driven civic initiative, was entitled: ‘Saving Sanctuary’ (2008). In defining the goal of the IAC, the report pointed to ‘...grave misunderstanding in the public mind about the term asylum’ and explained that IAC sought to launch a campaign to ‘...win hearts and minds and long-term public support for sanctuary’ (IAC 2008). The explicit purpose of using the word sanctuary was to reinforce public support for a general ‘culture of hospitality’ toward ‘strangers.’ This tradition, the IAC argued, had existed since times when religious orders and civic bodies in the United Kingdom offered shelter to those fleeing unjust punishment and persecution, first capital criminals, and later Jewish and Huguenot refugees (IAC 2008).

In 2005, one Methodist Minister, Inderjit Bhogal, took the first steps toward declaring Sheffield a City of Sanctuary. He was inspired by the case of Virraj Mendis, a Tamil Sri Lankan asylum seeker, protected by John Methuen, vicar of the Ascension Church in Manchester, between 1988 and 1989. In 1989, 50 armed officers raided the Ascension church, breaking age-old principles of sanctuary as mentioned in the quotation at the start of this entry (Bhogal 2010). Mendis was deported and then returned to the United Kingdom, years later (Shifrin 2004). Bhogal drew further inspiration from existing faith-based and secular sanctuary movements in the United States, Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, and Sweden (Bhogal 2010). By 2005, the scale of failed asylum seekers’ destitution in the United Kingdom became alarming (Williams and Kaye, 2010). Detention and cruel mistreatment of deportees, including small children, the elderly, and disabled, shocked some sections of the UK public, especially when it happened within their own cities, in their street, tower blocks, and schools. Bhogal had also worked at the Corrymeela Community in Ireland, where Protestants and Catholics came together for peace talks. He explains ‘the roots of Sanctuary are thousands of years old,’ starting with Hebrew traditions of protecting fugitives from mob justice. Sanctuary was first enshrined in the canon of Hebrew, and then in Christian, law (Bhogal 2010). Christian churches gave sanctuary first to escaped slaves and also to those facing capital punishment (Bhogal 2010). The second City of Sanctuary in the UK was Swansea in Wales.

The UK Cities of Sanctuary movement is grounded in traditions within all major religious and spiritual traditions, which provide safe havens for those fleeing earthly oppression, war, and the threat of an unjust death. ‘The basis of sanctuary... [has] always been moral’ (Bhogal 2010), and the Golden Rule on which it is based cuts across most religious and ethical belief systems. The moral imperative is to treat those seeking protection in a humane and just manner. Yet the idea of sanctuary has its critics, especially from those on the secular left, who do not always appreciate its spiritual overtones. For them, religious, spiritual, and moral values can never substitute for practical solidarity, arising from secular or socialist principles of solidarity, equality, and human rights. The sanctuary movement is sometimes
criticised from a secular perspective, as too much about Christian charity and too little about organised solidarity for broader social justice. Yet in practical terms, the sanctuary movement is no longer as closely associated with faith-based precepts and institutions as when it started in recent times. Instead, cities of sanctuary have grown and appealed across social divides of all kinds. In the United Kingdom, people from all walks of life support sanctuary initiatives as a practical alternative to the inefficiency and injustice of state immigration policies. They aim to modestly rebuild cities, as it were, from the ground up so that they become more inclusive places for everyone to live in.

Swansea and Sheffield were typical in this respect. Among the first to be involved in City of Sanctuary proposals were Methodists, Quakers, Bahais, reformed Jewish synagogues, and Muslim faith-based organisations. However, soon left-wing groups like Trotskyists were also supporting almost identical initiatives, followed by some local media, housing associations, and businesses. Once local government and police came on board, at least partially, so did selected schools, colleges, and charities. Despite a turmoil of sanctuary activity, in interviews, local undocumented people in Swansea felt the hard-won City of Sanctuary status made little difference to them. They felt it was: ‘...a lot of noise, some newspaper articles... [but] nothing really changed’ (Hintjens and Pouri 2014, p. 223). A significant factor keeping undocumented people marginalised was that they were not allowed to work. This remained unchanged, even though local organisations were supporting them. In Wales, unlike in England, undocumented people could attend university and complete degrees.

For many years, to qualify as an official City of Sanctuary in the United Kingdom, a city’s sanctuary movement has to show they ‘...met the criteria set by the national City of Sanctuary network for this prestigious status’ (Bhogal 2010). By 2009, 10 British Cities of Sanctuary had been established (Sheffield, Swansea, Leicester, Bradford, Nottingham, Coventry, Oxford, London, Bristol, and Hull). By 2014, 25 UK locations were declared Cities and Boroughs of Sanctuary, with 13 cities moving toward City of Sanctuary status. By 2020, Wales had become a Nation of Sanctuary, and in total, there were 114 towns, cities, and locations of sanctuary across the United Kingdom, and 10 in the Republic of Ireland (City of Sanctuary website). As in US Cities of Sanctuary, such initiatives aim to create safe spaces for those seeking protection from punitive and unjust laws imposed by central government. For City of Sanctuary status, public, private, and voluntary organizations need to sign up as partners. Faith-based organisations and refugee support groups play essential mediating roles in the process, often co-ordinating broad alliances among local actors and institutions, providing part of the ethical and spiritual ‘cement’ that holds such alliances together. In Swansea, over 100 organizations committed themselves to working together, across political, religious, and public-private divisions. That ‘nothing much had changed’ for undocumented people reflected their relative absence from decision making, for instance in inter-faith meetings or in meetings with police and local government.

**Wider Circles of Sanctuary**

Beyond the UK and North American experiences, online interactive mapping has promised new avenues for self-organised sanctuary in some large cities. The Welcome Map for Paris shows refugees and undocumented people where they can go to find meals, have a bath or shower including in church and mosque-run facilities, read up on news, or use other kinds
of common spaces, located in different kinds of institutions, scattered around the city. During COVID-19 lockdowns, all such spaces were shut down, not only in France but also across most of Europe. During the holy month of Ramadan, even under lockdown, some mosques were able to serve food to the homeless as well as those fasting.

Islamic religious communities’ role in offering sanctuary is rarely discussed in the context of Western Europe or North America. Yet more refugees are hosted in Muslim countries than in the European Union and the United States put together. Those like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, which border Middle Eastern countries beset by both post-imperial and civil wars, have shown a willingness to open their borders to a remarkable extent. Saeher Muzaffar suggests that Islam should be ‘...interpreted as encompassing both principles of socio-economic justice and asylum, as well as mechanisms that provide a framework for refugee assistance and protection’ (Muzaffar 2001, p. 251). The Koran ‘exhorts Muslims to provide sanctuary and aid to both Muslims... and non-Muslims... alike’ (Muzaffar 2001, p. 254), showing that the religious basis for offering sanctuary in Islam is well-established.

Whilst Red Crescent and Red Cross work alongside one another, some faith-based communities still need to recognise how widely shared precepts of charity and obligation are among different faiths.

Shared values and actions around sanctuary help, by cutting across multiple religious, racial, political, and neighbourhood divides. The question is whether such shared values and actions, and the trust they can create, are sufficient to resist policies of detection, destitution, detention, and deportation. Examples like Toronto, a City of Sanctuary, can inspire the hope that during COVID-19, self-interest in public health may mean that, ‘access without fear policies’ may work, with city authorities, voluntary bodies, and undocumented migrants working together to build ‘collective resiliency’ through access for all to public services (Hudson 2020).

Resisting Criminalisation: The Politics of Hope

For failed asylum seekers and their supporters, engaging in resistance usually tests the limits of a ‘politics of hope’ (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; MacDonald 2006). In 2008, the Dutch government decided to revoke the refugee status of all Iraqis in the country. The prospects seemed bleak, yet for close to a decade, armed only with the conviction of the rightness of their cause, a group of mainly Iraqi men in The Hague campaigned to obtain the right to remain, and to regain protected, legal status. Despite indifference from city and ministry officials, and adverse court rulings, which took a ‘tough’ stance, the Iraqis persisted. The Dutch government tried to oblige the Iraqi government to take back those whose refugee status had been revoked:

We will put pressure on countries to readmit their own citizens who have been denied admission to the Netherlands. [even if these actions] affect trade and development relations with such countries (cited in Delaney 2014, p. 15).

Despite such threats, the Iraqi government refused, and the Iraqi refugees persisted in their campaigns. For the Dutch, both were infuriating. In 2013, after five years of campaigning, municipal representatives in The Hague, the so-called ‘City of Peace and Justice,’
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convinced a judge that the Iraqi refugees’ self-organised tent city should be closed down on ‘health and safety’ grounds. Located near the Central Station, the collection of tents had become a much-visited site of resistance, and home to most of the Iraqi men protesting for their right to remain (for the situation of Iraqis in the United Kingdom, see Hintjens 2012). The court agreed with the municipal officials, declared the camp a public health and fire hazard, and ordered it demolished. Following this court ruling, considerable force was used against protestors in disbanding the camp, after which all the Iraqi refugees returned to the streets for a time (Hintjens 2013a).

As the Koekamp tents were destroyed, an anarchist group Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), with long experience of squatting empty buildings, was exploring how to help the mostly Iraqi refugees find an empty building. Eventually they squatted a deconsecrated catholic church in the suburbs of the city. A network of Christians, Muslims, anarchists, refugee organisations, and the general public (students, media, lonely hearts, politicians, local neighbours) had visited the Koekamp tent city and now came to the ‘Vluchtkerk,’ the Asylum Church. At first, such help was needed. Yet gradually the refugees’ sense of ownership was undermined. The spirit of working together, that had so powerfully united them at the Koekamp, the glue that made collective self-organisation possible, started to dissolve. Many outside well-wishers, including the AFA, Catholic priests, and lay pastors, started doing jobs the refugees could perfectly well do themselves, including cooking, cleaning, repairs, and so on. Committees were formed, with only a few refugees involved, and there were too many volunteers. Disunity about how to work together started to be evident.

After a few months, Catholic fathers mysteriously re-occupied the upstairs diocese offices in this deconsecrated building. Students, researchers, and single women and men wanting company, all hung about drinking tea and wasting the refugees’ time. People dropped by all day long, and conversation became stilted and superficial. Local neighbours also popped by to see if they could help; indeed, the refugees were drowning in help. All this well-meaning outsider presence soon led to serious tensions. The committees of volunteers now managed food, repairs, finance, health, and campaigning. Mostly white Dutch well-wishers took over, and soon most of the Iraqi men refused to be involved. Meetings were held in Dutch, spoken well by only a few refugees. As arguments and even physical fights began, some Iraqis fled the church of refuge! Those who remained decided to reassert their control over the Vluchtkerk space. They threw out the Catholic priests from the offices, asked the AFA to only come in when asked, and asked volunteers to stop hanging around all day. All had had the best of intentions, but control had moved out of the hands of the refugees. A few months later, things changed. Delaney observed this period, noting, ‘...the men staying at the Vluchtkerk have learned to organize themselves and to plan their own activities.’ She noted a significant change from her earlier visits, when the following occurred:

...only a year ago makeshift bedding was conglomerated in an open space and people roamed around the church somewhat aimlessly... [whereas] recent developments have included the construction of individual and group housing units, lined up neatly in rows which are divided by ‘streets’ (one street... the men have humorously named Wall Street) (Delaney 2014, p. 33).

Self-organization was needed after internecine conflicts threatened to tear apart the solidarity of Vluchtkerk residents, carefully constructed since 2008. Not all residents were
Iraqi; Azerbaijanis, Iranians, and others lived there, with Kurds and other minorities represented. Yet it was not these religious, linguistic, or national diversities that divided the men. It was their loss of control over the spaces they needed in which to self-organise. They needed to discuss their affairs in a common language, and visitors’ constant presence made this difficult; they needed to be protected from their erstwhile saviours and resolve their own tensions (Hintjens and Pouri 2014, p. 120).

After the Catholics, anarchists, and other visitors were asked to leave, some expressed anger at the refugees’ ingratitude and stopped coming altogether. Others understood. Left mostly in peace, the refugee men completely re-organised their daily lives. There was a settled daily routine, with fixed and limited visiting hours. The committees were scrapped, and instead, a functioning rota system was set up in which everyone agreed the tasks. In the reorganised space, artwork started to appear around the church. Those men who lived in the building could discuss and agree on the kind of moral, political, and material support they needed and with which groups of outsiders they would like to work. Strict visiting times allowed for privacy, reducing stress and ensuring talk around shared mealtimes, with only some visitors invited. Privacy was provided by the wooden sleeping units, mostly built by those who lived in the building.

Some months after this self-organisation process, the building was demolished. Again, the Iraqi refugees ended up on the streets of The Hague. But at around this time, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), and EU Council of Ministers obliged Dutch municipalities to ‘set up a scheme to offer basic provisions to irregular migrants, the so-called Bed-Bath and Bread Scheme,’ from December 2017 (INLIA 2015). The Hague soon had to provide undocumented residents of the city with basic night shelter, shower facilities, breakfast, and dinner. Many Iraqi men who had protested in the Koekamp, and then moved to the Vluchtkerk, ended up in a municipal centre, under the Bed-Bath and Bread regulations. Later, they were ‘processed’ individually, and most were eventually granted the right to remain. This was largely because of their capacity for self-organisation and their determination not to give up. It had taken 10 years to resolve their situation, and they had not expected magnanimity from the government but recognition of their rights. The ECHR ruling was the more readily complied with in The Hague because of the desire to avoid further negative publicity that could damage the city’s reputation for orderliness, one of ‘Peace and Justice.’

As with other successful sanctuary campaigns, what mattered was defiance of well-meaning interference, and the Iraqi men’s firm belief in the justice of their cause. Being able to recreate the safe, trusted space of the Koekamp in the church building made their self-organisation critical to resolving their key problem: the lack of refugee status. First, the municipal authorities and the court and the well-meaning ‘volunteers’ were ‘...violating [these] shared moral principles of the participants,’ which were the basis for their shared ‘reason for non-compliance’ with official regulations (Olesen 2005, p. 31). Too much help exhausted these one-time refugees, reducing their identity to hapless, helpless victims. Faith-based well-wishers and other supporters tended to divide ‘deserving’ from ‘undeserving’ refugees. Highly organised groups, like the anarchists, tended to take over tactics and strategies. Conventional citizens were often most appreciated when their support for undocumented people was personal, based on simple neighbourliness in the city (Zorn 2009, p. 249). In the case of the Iraqi men, the most significant aspect of their resistance was their moral resistance. Most were Muslim; some were Christian; many were secular. An unshakable conviction in their legitimate right to seek safe and permanent residency kept them going over the
decade from 2008 to 2018, when most finally secured the right to remain. This example shows that support not based on self-organisation principles can prove divisive and disabling for the undocumented. Those who wish to offer support, whether Christians, Muslims, anarchists, or simply neighbours should therefore avoid laying down their own conditions.

Sanctuary and Risk-Taking

Public and civic initiatives in the sanctuary movement revolve mainly around how ‘safe public spaces’ can be created to bridge those with citizenship and rights and those whose rights are denied or violated. To remove barriers dividing ‘legitimate’ legal residents from those viewed in David Lyon’s phrase as ‘categorically suspect’ (Lyon 2010) requires a strong shared commitment to social justice. Among those working with the sanctuary movement, Joy Adams, Methodist Pastor from Sheffield, involved in Sheffield’s City of Sanctuary movement, warns of sanctuary work: ‘It’s not the sort of work you can fiddle about with. It has to be done properly.’ For those working alongside people without the ‘right to have rights,’ however creative, capable, and vibrant they may be, also requires serious attention to detail (Bhabha 2009). In Ottawa, sanctuary city supporters queried whether it was wise to ask undocumented people to trust staff or demand services in hospitals, schools, libraries, and other public institutions because this might expose them (the undocumented) to detention, arrest, detention, and deportation. One of the Ottawa City Network organisers, Karen Coq, stated the following:

...(o)n a number of levels... the Toronto sanctuary designation... communicates to the general public and to people who might be needing to access certain [city services] that they are safer than they really are.... In effect, it’s a trap’ (in Trew 2017).

What ordinary citizens say or do, and how they do it can adversely affect the safety of the undocumented, and can inadvertently destroy their livelihood or even threaten their survival (Hintjens and Pouri 2014, p. 221). Websites like citizenspeak.org and cityofsanctuary.org.uk feature films and other forms of relevant information for those organizing city of sanctuary movements so they understand these risks fully and are able to bring about net benefits for the community without increasing risks for undocumented people, who in most cases have already suffered several kinds of trauma (Sigona 2012).

Threats are not only to the undocumented. In the United States, the priests, pastors, imams, and rabbis who provided sanctuary for refugees, ‘...were targeted by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (now... ICE....), spied on, and in some cases prosecuted and jailed for their actions’ (Trew 2017, p. 18). By 2017, laws were toughened to allow for prosecutions of state-level and county-level officials who refused to hand over undocumented migrants to ICE.

‘Texas... has introduced legislation that could lead to police officers being jailed for abiding by sanctuary policies, such as by ignoring ICE requests to check a person’s status on arrests for driving infractions and other minor crimes. Miami-Dade County in Florida has already changed its immigration policies to comply with Trump’s orders (Trew 2017, p. 21).
A growing tendency across the European Union to criminalize and prosecute organizations and individuals providing support to so-called ‘illegal’ people means that social workers, educators, health workers, and even human rights lawyers can face prosecution (Fekete 2009; Mitsilegas 2015; PICUM 2013; Webber 2000). The creeping criminalization of those seeking to protect the ‘right to sanctuary’ and even the ‘right to have rights’ of undocumented people is a growing risk many people of faith are willing and may even feel obliged to take for reasons of moral and religious principles.

Concluding Reflections

What is striking during encounters with undocumented people who are organized is their consistent practice of sharing whatever they have: food, warmth, and hope. This, too, is a form of everyday resistance to the dehumanization of the asylum system. Such acts of hospitality are rarely documented or noticed, as common as they are remarkable in their own way. Through their daily efforts to live a meaningful life, together with respect for one another, undocumented people manage to remain sane and healthy. This is something everyone can learn from. Forced into the margins and struggling against the odds, facing up to allies and enemies, failed asylum seekers and undocumented migrant workers are the heart of any meaningful sanctuary movement. Their control over appropriate responses, strategies, and values, collectively and individually, includes the importance of protest, which generates its own sense of control, by bringing private concerns into the open:

The counterbalance to the tendency to undermine democratic rights in the name of self-defence or deterrence is citizen protest, based on the twin principles of solidarity and action. This is the only way that the rights of the weakest and least privileged can be defended and promoted, in the interests of all (Hintjens and Jarman 2003, p. 85).

Seeking to support one another, undocumented people and their supporters cannot avoid being caught up in what Bagelman calls a ‘suspended state,’ with their time and energy devoted to organising, killing time, fighting hopelessness, and seeking ways to keep hopeful. Time for socialising helps lend sanctuary movements a stronger sense of common purpose, firming up social networks that later mobilise during emergencies like COVID-19 lockdown. Since undocumented individuals may need to demonstrate their continued presence and social integration at a later date, for amnesties, realistically: ‘...sanctuary may be viewed not as an exceptional space, but rather as one more mode of governmentality... that compels migrants to live precariously in-between’ (Bagelman 2016, p. xvi). Cities of Sanctuary can even ‘...become implicated in the extension or prolongation of this “suspended state”’ (De Genova et al 2016, p. ix). If undocumented people are able to organise together, then well-meaning, faith-inspired individuals should refrain from doing for them things they can do for themselves. Some external support and encouragement that promotes self-reliance within the limits of the possible, should be the touchstone of contemporary sanctuary movements, including those that are faith-based.

The relative success stories in this chapter are part of a wider politics of hope. Even so, the dominant deterrence paradigm remains in place. Stories of resistance help inspire hope. Yet more realism about the cruelty inflicted in the name of deterrence is also important,
including for those inside the sanctuary movement. Dealing with COVID-19 will damage undocumented people most, ‘...and the response to it will require us to reimagine lives, rebuild conditions of existence and find better ways of doing science and politics,’ including within sanctuary cities (Caduff 2020 forthcoming). Hopefully, the dramatic social movement challenge to systemic and institutionalised racism in the wake of George Floyd’s murder will in future feed into more effective challenges to the exclusionary logic of state asylum and immigration policies as well.

One final story. When failed asylum seeker, Manuel Bravo from Angola hung himself in Yarl’s Wood immigration removal centre, in 2005, just a day before he was due to be deported, he sought to ensure that his 13-year old son could remain in the United Kingdom. What Bravo could not have anticipated was that his son would be deported once he turned 18 (Bernstein 2011; Weber and Pickering 2013, p. 124). The authorities responsible for deporting people rarely know or care what happens to those deported; there is no surveillance of their situations except occasionally by media or researchers (Anderson et al. 2013; Hintjens 2013b). Some deported people end up without funds or family. They can be threatened by gangs, be recruited into armed groups, and are often treated like pariahs. Others are arrested or go into hiding. In these ways, the cycle of flight, risk, and betrayed hopes starts all over again.

References


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