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Religious Conviction and Human Trafficking: Motive Matters

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Individuals and groups acting primarily out of a sense of religious conviction form the backbone of a great deal of anti-human trafficking work being done today. Religious groups of many differing faiths have undertaken various projects both to free victims and to provide services to survivors. Funding and resources for these projects typically come from appeals to congregations, temples, and individuals using imagery and illusions to shared religious practice. This paper aims to analyze how these convictions affect the stated and practiced goals of religiously based groups, focusing on how such convictions and foci manifest in: gender issues, religious diversity, “rescue” and “rehabilitation” practices, and the training level of direct aid providers. Of primary interest will be what each group articulates as the primary motivating factors for its work, looking specifically for evidence of the primacy of proselytizing and evangelism.

RELIGIOUS CONVICTION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING: MOTIVE MATTERS

PRESENTATION NOTES

Religion: "A belief in the existence of a reality greater than the human. This reality is qualitatively different than the world around us."

-*The Illustrated Guide to World Religions*, Michael D. Coogan. Gen. Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

Adherents: "All adherents of religions self-advocate. This means that adherents of all religions believe that their religion is true."

-*Terry Monk, How to Study Religion: A Beginning Guide to Method*, (Wood Hill Publishing, 2005).

Proselytizing: "The process of introducing someone to one's faith or to recruit someone to join one's party, institution, or cause." -*Merriam-Webster*

Agency: The state of being in action or exerting power; "the agency of providence"; "she has free agency" -*Merriam-Webster*

Trafficking: The process of compelling people to work, through force or fraud, for no pay beyond subsistence. -*Kevin Bales*

Presentation Thesis: The opportunity exists for anti-trafficking groups to move survivors from one loss of agency (trafficking) to another (based on anti-trafficking groups' biases), thus changing the survivors' circumstances but not their condition.

GENERAL APPLICATION OF AGENCY

- Overuse of term victim: Label of victim affixes to its bearer traits of helplessness, powerlessness, passivity.
 - "Because you use the phrase 'women and children,' 'women and children,' and it becomes 'women as children,' 'women as children.'"
-*Jennifer Block, "Why the Faith Trade is Interested in the Sex Trade," Conscience, Summer/Autumn 2004.*
- Distinction needs to be made between rescue work for children and rescue work for adults. All cultures acknowledge that children do not have full agency before a specific age.
 - Ages of adulthood vary by culture which raises an important question when differences exist between the survivors culture and that of the anti-trafficking group.
- Misidentification of trafficking victims/survivors.
 - Human trafficking is often conflated with prostitution despite its diverse conditions.
- When we make interventions in trafficking situations, how do we respect the moral agency of the oppressed?
- If you are partnering with another agency (faith-based or otherwise), are you comfortable that its idea of agency matches your values?

FOUR CASE STUDIES

<p>Israeli Jewish Group: Operating Location: Israel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Works with different marginalized populations (Victims of terror attacks, WWII heroes, Trafficking survivors) • Black & white outlook. • “We were slaves in Egypt, they are slaves here.” • Trafficking = Prostitution. • Movement from no agency (victimhood) to full agency (survivors). • Government corruption & inadequate application of laws to blame. 	<p>European Christian Group: Operating Location: United Kingdom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on a feminist ethic and theological sources based in the book of Genesis. • All sex work is non-consensual (Includes erotic bars, sex aids, online porn, brothels, lap dancing, and sex chat lines.) • The real problem is the demand of men who utilize sex industry. • In treating women like objects to be rescued, they violate the very feminist ethic at the heart of their work.
<p>American Evangelical Christian Group: Operating Locations: United States, India.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual exploitation is articulated as a particular violation of “value of life.” • Program goal: Rescue victims and bring them to emotional, spiritual, or physical health. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Spiritual health = acceptance of Christian faith. • “Restoration of the sense of self through <u>Biblical principles.</u>” • No agency while trafficked. Great agency in leaving. • Agency lies with Holy Spirit. • “Voluntary” acceptance of this Spirit is a part of healing and rescue. Without it girls are viewed as being under the power of evil, without agency. 	<p>C.I.S. Jewish Group: Operating Locations: Former Soviet States.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innate assumption that women have the ability and agency to prevent themselves from becoming trafficked. • Educated women would automatically choose to actively resist being trafficked. • Recognizes the agency of the women in regards to their status as mail order brides. • Use of education for prevention both limits and encourages agency. • Mail order marriage, common front for sex trafficking, is acceptable to this group when marriage is involved.

CONCLUSIONS

- Different groups have different motivations and hope for different outcomes.
- Myth: All shortcomings are trumped by the fact that people are being removed from slavery.
- The processes for liberating people must not only remove them from abusive situations but also restore to them opportunity for self-determination.
- The very point in which victims of sex-trafficking act with ingenuity and dexterity within terrible environments, we as “helpers” are at our most vulnerable to remove the basic agency they do have and to take it over.