

***Refugee Stories: Seven personal journeys behind the headlines* Dave Smith**

Refugee Stories is an unsettling exploration of the violence perpetrated against refugees and asylum seekers. It is also about the people who work to protect them. The author, Dave Smith, is the founder of the Manchester-based Boaz Trust which provides housing for refused asylum seekers and refugees. The most disturbing sentence in the book is not his. It appears in the postscript and concerns his on-going struggle with the Home Office in the United Kingdom: "...his biggest enemy has been the seemingly cruelly inefficient and impersonal bureaucracy that needlessly condemns so many asylum seekers to near destitution and despair."

Refugee Stories chronicles not only the violence done to refugees in the countries from which they have fled, but also the hidden violence that the UK asylum system can inflict. The three-fold typology of violence — direct, cultural and structural — developed by the Norwegian founder of peace studies, Johan Galtung, is a helpful lens through which to delve into the book.

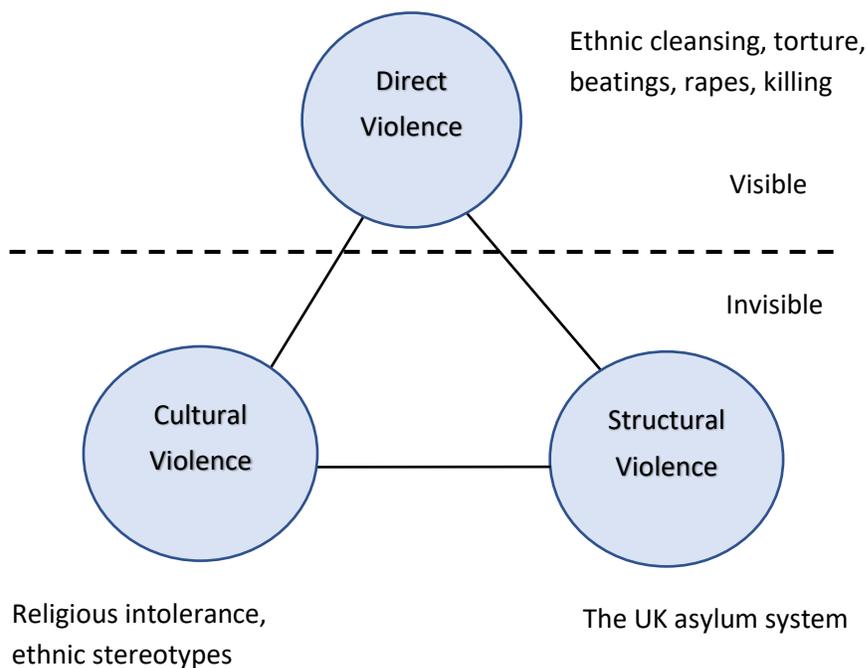


FIGURE 1: Johan Galtung's Triangle of Violence

These different types of violence all feature in the narratives Smith has assembled. All seven refugees have personally experienced or witnessed some form of direct violence in their home countries — ethnic cleansing, torture, killing, maiming, threats, sexual assault — and have fled in fear. In the first story Hanes, a refugee from southern Ethiopia, recalls, "One night they came and took my father away. They had their heads covered, so we couldn't recognize them. The next day we found out that he had been murdered. They had taken his body to the hospital and left it there. If people die in a police station it's obvious who did it, but if they die in hospital, they can pretend that someone else did it, or that they don't know how it happened." Later Hanes himself was arrested and tortured by police because of his political activism. Like his father, his apparently lifeless body was dropped off at the hospital. But he survived. After 25 days of treatment he was released, and he fled Ethiopia. This first story sets the raw tone of the book.

Many of the people interviewed in *Refugee Stories* have also experienced what Galtung calls cultural violence. For example, merely being a member of a particular ethnic minority or religious sect can mean that you are oppressed, hated and disenfranchised. In the fifth story Sheikh states, "When I was a child in school, people tried to discredit us.

They said that Ahmadis were bad people. They really hated us. In Pakistan, the Ahmadis are a minority, but it's difficult to say how many Ahmadis there are, because everyone is afraid and wants to be safe, so some people don't declare it." To openly signal your religious or ethnic identity may put your life at risk.

However, the most disturbing aspect of *Refugee Stories* is the structural violence portrayed in the book. There are subtly brutal ways in which refugees and asylum seekers can be prevented from consulting lawyers, denied opportunities to work, and barred from accessing welfare services. As it is described in this book, the asylum system in the UK is not only rigid and inflexible, but at times capricious and incompetent. An asylum seeker can be ensnared in an administrative limbo for years. Ayesha, a medical practitioner in Sudan before she escaped persecution and sought refuge in the UK, diagnoses the effects of the asylum system on those trapped in it: "When your life is on hold," she says, "you go through so much stress and depression... People are playing with your life and they destroy you from the inside... The thing that I have suffered most from, and still do, is that I lost my confidence... I am trying, but I can't concentrate, I can't remember... When I look back I can see the level of cruelty that is created in the asylum system."

Others tell a similar story. "The Home Office has done all the same things against me which we faced in our country," says Sheikh. "Firstly, they try to prove that the asylum seeker is a liar and not credible. Then they start to take away his respect, to make him humiliated and pitiable." Refugees and asylum seekers who have been traumatized by direct violence choose to flee their countries in the hope of finding safety. But the structural violence of an erratic asylum system often exacerbates their trauma rather than providing a space where they can heal.

Another name for this sort of structural violence is "social sin". Social sin extends beyond the personal and may permeate the systems ostensibly set up by governments to bring good order. In the introduction to *Refugee Stories* Smith states that there is one question he would like the reader to take away at the end of his book, "How can a civilized country like the UK have refused asylum to those refugees, leaving them in destitution and despair?" Smith hopes that we, the readers, will be part of the solution. When faced with a system which is cruelly inefficient and impersonal, how should we respond? It is hard to address social sin on our own. The best responses to social sin are community-based. We need to join with others and become a "social grace".

As I read *Refugee Stories*, I began to conceive of the Boaz Trust as an embodiment of a social grace. The way the refugees describe the welcome, encouragement, protection and practical support they receive from the people at Boaz reinforces this image. Boaz opposes the structural violence embedded in the asylum system by walking with refugees and providing them with well-organized, just and loving support.

Smith challenges the reader to be part of the remedy. He calls us to socio-political conversion (although he doesn't use that terminology). He hopes that reading the stories in his book will not only move our hearts, but also prompt us to act. Smith invites us to get **practically** involved, and he outlines ten ways: (1) get informed, (2) pray, (3) welcome, (4) be a friend, (5) use your skills, (6) offer your spare room, (7) help people transition to refugee status, (8) visit people in detention, (9) campaign, and (10) give. Of these ten, it seems to me that the starting point is friendship. One young woman asylum seeker, who was taken in by a couple, discloses, "Even more important than having a roof over my head was having a friend." Smith observes that refugees and asylum seekers, "...just want to feel normal, with a home, a job, a family, doing the ordinary things that we take for granted..." While this book unsettles, it is the sort of unsettling that invites the reader to become friends with and help refugees and asylum seekers feel normal and ordinary again.

But friendship is not enough. We need to campaign. Smith's vision is the reform of the UK asylum system. "Let's persevere, pray and work until the UK asylum system is transformed, just and compassionate, and the destitution, detention and degradation of refugees in our country and beyond is abolished."

The reviewer, Michael Smith SJ, is the International Education Officer for Jesuit Refugee Service, and is based in Rome.