

Religious Responses to Human Trafficking

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On October 24th students, academics and community members filed into the McMurtry Auditorium on the Rice campus to attend the Religion and Public Life Program's panel discussion on "Religious Responses to Human Trafficking." Guest scholars Prof. Kimberly Hoang, Assistant Professor of Sociology and International Studies at Boston College, and Prof. Richard Flory, Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of Research at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California, served as panelists alongside RPLP Director Prof. Elaine Howard Ecklund. The discussion explored the efforts that religious groups have made to combat human trafficking and their subsequent impact on the issue.



As Ecklund noted in her introductory remarks, human trafficking is an internationally recognized human rights violation that continues to affect all countries and regions of the world. Advocacy groups, governmental agencies, NGO's and local congregations address the issue from various perspectives and with distinctive approaches. RPLP's goal in hosting a scholarly discussion on religious responses to human trafficking was to bolster our understanding regarding the complexities of the issue. Flory reiterated the importance of this type of forum when he suggested that it "provides society space to stop and reflect on the situation."



Throughout the discussion, Hoang offered interesting insight on human trafficking, particularly within the international context. She spoke in depth about her attempts to better understand the structures and systems that render migrant workers vulnerable to trafficking. Hoang's first book, *Chasing the Tiger and Emulating the Dragon: Sex Work and Finance Capital in Vietnam's New Global Economy* (forthcoming from the University of California Press), is based on a twenty-two month in-depth study where she worked as a bartender and hostess in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. This unique expertise provided Hoang the opportunity to engage successfully with the audience, who

seemed impressed and somewhat surprised by the nature of her fieldwork.

While Hoang's contribution to the panel discussion brought a focused perspective on trafficking, Flory's expertise in the sociology of religion shed light on how religious groups are responding to the issue. Flory's research focuses on the social role of religion and religious institutions, so his comments illuminated some of the current trends and preventative measures employed by religious organizations to combat human trafficking. According to Flory, many religious and non-affiliated organizations focus on raising awareness and direct intervention. Specifically in religious communities and among young people, Flory said, "human trafficking has been a central cause for many social groups within the past ten years." While awareness and intervention is extremely valuable, Flory emphasized how we must reposition our efforts toward policy change and sustained prevention. He provided four recommendations to make advocacy groups stronger and more effective: "get educated about the issues, spread awareness, think beyond rescue, and don't go at it alone."

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In agreement with Flory's characterization of the responses of religious groups to human trafficking, Hoang suggested that we should "make a conscious effort to move away from victimization and towards empowerment" when considering rehabilitation strategies. I found this comment especially significant during the dialogue--- however difficult it may be to look past victimization and recognize the strength and initiative of these individuals, such a mental shift is a necessary step in addressing the issue.

A question and answer series with the audience followed the initial discussion, allowing the panelists to respond with some practical advice for those wanting to engage more with the issue. When confronted by the seemingly overwhelming task of abolishing human trafficking in its various forms, those who want to make a difference were encouraged by both Flory and Hoang to keep pursuing the issue. In particular, Hoang suggested that the problem needs to be attacked from different angles: "We need to collaborate on multiple fronts to effectively deal with this issue. If your passion is research, do research. If it's business or law or public policy, then go do that. All of these fields provide arenas within which we can address this multifaceted challenge-- academics, religious groups, non-religious groups, doctors, lawyers, everyone."

An informal reception followed the event, and from the conversations that took place over coffee and dessert, it was evident that the panelists' comments on human trafficking resonated with



discussion attendees. I was struck by their encouragement that, while the problem is nuanced and complex, there are still ways to address the issue. To end one of the most egregious breaches against humanity today, we must attack the systematic causes of the problem from multiple angles and focus on sustained relief.