

Practical Theology and Contemporary Social Issues

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Introduction

As people of faith, our theology should be evident in our daily lives and in particular should inform our response to contemporary social issues, including those issues that evoke controversy because of their seemingly political nature. There are some Christians who argue that church leaders should not be intervening in the political arena, strongly asserting that politics is the sole domain of elected officials. While it is safe to assume that church leaders from most denominations respect the legitimate role of government. Nonetheless scripture exhorts Christians and Christian leaders to make the church's prophetic voice known, particularly in matters of injustice. This includes challenging unjust laws and structures that oppress the poor and marginalised. The words of the Old Testament prophets and the teachings of Jesus make clear God's concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. This paper uses a practical theology lens to examine how the Christian church in general is responding to one of the more critical social issues affecting humanity: how we deal with the mass migration of people and, in particular, refugees who are fleeing persecution and conflict.

Practical Theology

William Burton Pope's Compendium of Christian Theology is renowned as an authoritative textbook on dogmatic theology in the Wesleyan tradition. Pope defined theology as 'the science of God and divine things, based upon the revelation made to mankind in Jesus Christ, and variously systemized within the Christian Church' (Orton & Culbertson 1963). Theology has several sub-divisions including historical theology, biblical theology, philosophical theology and systematic theology. Indeed, it has become common practice in theological colleges and seminaries to apply the term theology as a prefix to many sociological concepts, for example the Theology of Work, the Theology of Homelessness, the Theology of Disability, the Theology of Sport, etc. The emerging field of practical theology is gaining more traction within theological colleges and academic studies. Practical theology is a discipline that seeks to explore the deeper levels of human experience with and about God. It involves a critical reflection on the praxis of the church in the world focusing on scripture, Christian traditions and other relevant knowledge. Christian praxis is the place where theology becomes embodied and acted out in everyday living (Swinton & Mowat, 2006). The

role and practice of the church and Christian community is centred in the continuing mission of God in the world. The church's praxis should illuminate the Kingdom of God. The actions of the Christian community in addressing contemporary social issues should be a witness to God's abundant love for the world and all humanity. Practical theology is a useful tool to examine the biblical injunctions, Christian traditions and the praxis of the Christian community in responding to the plight of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Refugees and displaced people

One of the greatest immediate human tragedies facing the world today is the rise in the number of refugees and displaced people. According to the UNHCR (United Nations Refugee Agency) 2015 Global Trends report, there are over 65 million displaced people globally - including more than 21 million refugees. This equates to 34,000 people forced from their home every day as a result of conflict or persecution. The UNHCR report suggests that one in every 113 people in the world is either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced or a refugee. Sadly, almost 50 per cent of refugees are children. The placement of refugees is becoming an increasing concern to world leaders and in particular the UNHCR. The Refugee Convention, which was established in 1951 for the protection of refugees, is under considerable strain. The number of refugees displaced by the conflict in Syria has grown to over 13.5 million people. Of these, 4.8 million have fled to the five neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq and 6.6 million are displaced within Syria. Thousands of Rohingya refugees escaping persecution in Myanmar are fleeing to countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Pakistan is home to over 1.6 million refugees primarily from Afghanistan. There is a desperate need to expand the number of resettlement places across the globe, particularly in wealthier nations, and yet there is an increasing reluctance in many western nations to accept refugees.

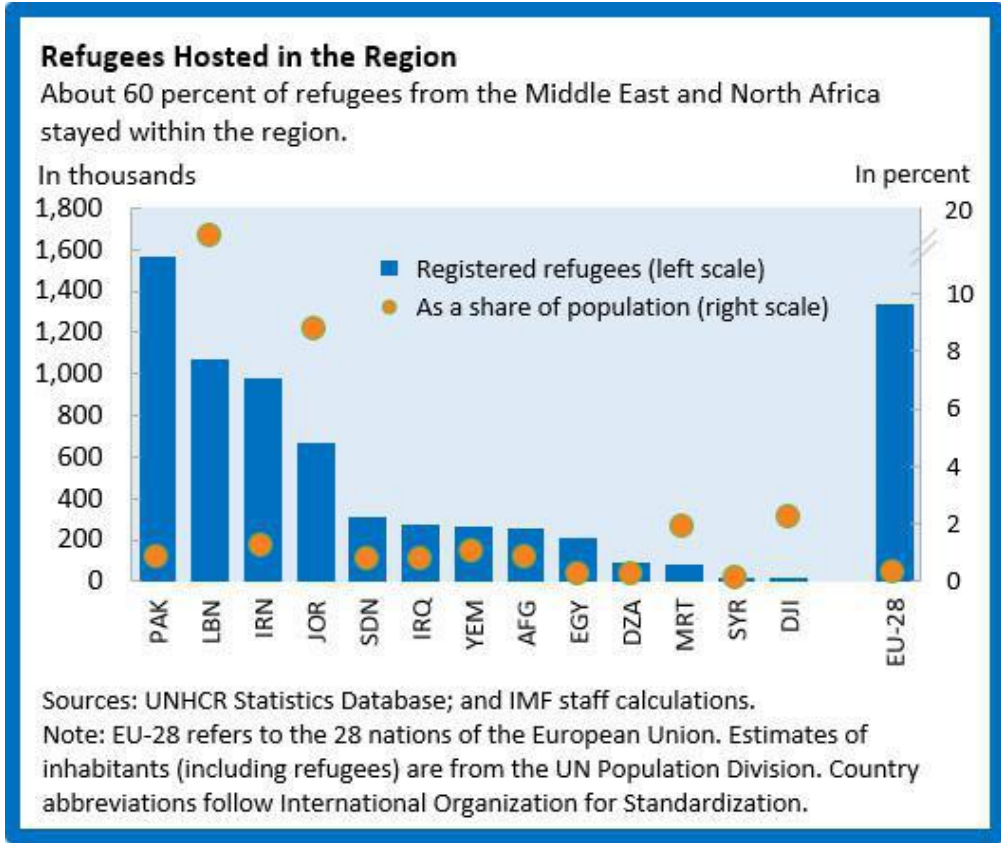
In addition to refugees, the current period in history has seen an increasing mass migration of people across the globe. In total over 244 million people live outside the country of their birth. Many of course have made the choice to emigrate to a new country for various family, social or economic reasons (United Nations, 2016). Countries such as the United States and Australia are immigrant nations. Except for the First Nations Peoples, the majority of the people living in the US and Australia are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Indeed, migrants seeking opportunities in new lands helped to build these nations. The well-known phrase associated with the Statue of Liberty, that stands on Liberty Island in New York Harbour, speaks to the compassion that was felt towards those seeking a better life for themselves and their children: 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses and yearning to breathe free'. Australia, too, has a history of migration although this has been clouded by the White Australia policy, which was designed to maintain Australia's British

heritage. Notwithstanding, from the mid 1950s until recently, Australia has encouraged and indeed celebrated multiculturalism.

However, the growing number of refugees and displaced people, global conflicts and the upsurge of terrorist ideologies, coupled with downturns in the economy, have created a sense of unease in western nations. As a consequence, many countries, Australia included, are witnessing a rising anti-refugee and indeed anti-immigration sentiment fuelled by populist political parties. These groups feed on often unfounded fears and engage in destructive discourse focussing on nationalistic policies.

In France, the National Front, led by Marine Le Pen, promotes its anti-immigration stand using populist rhetoric. Geert Wilders, who was found guilty by a court in the Netherlands for inciting racial hatred, heads the Dutch Party for Freedom, which is currently ahead in opinion polls in the lead up to the Dutch parliamentary election in March 2017. The neo-fascist party Golden Dawn rose to prominence in Greece, winning 18 seats in the Greek Parliament in 2012. In Australia, the re-emergence of One Nation, with its anti-immigration stand capitalised on nationalistic sentiment and claimed four seats in the Federal parliament in the July 2016 election. The anti-immigration movement exploits the concerns that people may hold, particularly concerns about personal safety, economic security and disruption to societal norms.

Wedge politics or the politics of division takes advantage of personal fears and prejudices and often results in marginalising a specific group of people who then become scapegoats. This has occurred in a number of social arenas and comes to the fore when there is a general sense of insecurity within the community, whether this is economic or social. For example, the fear of growing economic debt has seen a rise in the vilification of welfare recipients; pejorative terms such as 'dole bludgers' are applied to the unemployed, and single parents are accused of moral failings. Politicians who practice wedge politics are able to manipulate both the real and imagined fears of the general community and use them to their political advantage. This is particularly evident in the current debate on refugee intakes and migration in countries such as Britain, the United States and Australia.



Australia’s Chequered Refugee History

During the 1970s Australia welcomed over 60,000 refugees from Vietnam. The influx of Vietnamese came after the removal of the last elements of the White Australia policy. This initial wave of refugee boat arrivals was well received by the Australian community, who reached out in compassion to the Vietnamese and Indo-Chinese coming to Australia following the end of the Vietnamese war. However, the continuing boat arrivals from various nations that increased over the following four decades, began to raise alarm with the general public. Wedge politics came into play once more and asylum seekers arriving by boat were seen as queue jumpers. Border control became a major topic of discussion in relation to what were referred to as ‘unauthorised arrivals’ (Phillips & Spinks, 2013). This issue came to a head in 2001, when a fishing boat carrying over 400 asylum seekers became stranded on its way to the Australian territory of Christmas Island. A Norwegian freighter, The Tampa, intercepted the distress call and went to the rescue. The closest port to the point of rescue was in Indonesia. However, in desperation a number of asylum seekers pressured the captain of the vessel to take them to Christmas Island. The Australian government refused to allow the Tampa to land any of the asylum seekers on Australian soil and the ensuing saga went on for eight days. Eventually the asylum-seekers were taken by the Royal Australian Navy to Nauru and this set in place a framework for dealing with asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat, which became known as the Pacific Solution (Mares, 2011). The controversy surrounding the

Tampa affair demonstrated how public opinion can be manipulated using the politics of fear. Polls taken at that time showed that '77 per cent of Australians supported the Howard Government's decision to refuse entry to the Tampa and 71 per cent believed boat arrivals should be detained for the duration of the processing of their asylum application' (Phillips & Spinks, 2013).

Since 2001, Australia has taken a firm approach to Border Protection and the current pronouncement from the Australian government is that no unauthorized person arriving by boat will be settled in Australia. The off-shore detention centres in Nauru and Manus Island, that house refugees and asylum seekers, have attracted much condemnation from human rights groups as well as ordinary citizens in Australia and throughout the world. However, a significant percentage of the Australian population express agreement with the current policy. Triggering a fresh wave of commentary throughout mainstream and social media on the issue of border protection was the action taken by the newly elected President of the United States of America. President Donald Trump in his second week of office evoked a global controversy in signing the Executive Order that essentially blocked the entry to the USA of refugees and travelers from seven predominantly Muslim countries for a 90 day period. The ensuing public debate has focused on manipulating the concerns that abound in the USA relating to potential terrorists arriving from these countries.

Biblical Injunctions

The anti-immigration rhetoric builds on the human tendency to fear 'the other', those who are not like us. However, as Christians, the theology of *Imago Dei* affirms that each human person is created in the image of God and is therefore worthy of dignity and respect. This applies to all peoples and should help to inform Christians in responding to the human crisis of refugees and asylum seekers.

The Judeo-Christian scriptures are very clear on how God expects us to respond to our neighbour, the stranger and the alien. Indeed the bible emphasises that the stranger or foreigner is our neighbour. The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel answers the question 'who is my neighbour' explicitly through the actions of the Samaritan in caring for the stranger in need. The Samaritan exemplifies mercy and compassion and Jesus tells his followers to go and do likewise.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats found in Matthew 25, Jesus clearly articulates the way we are to respond to those on the margins of society, and this includes welcoming the stranger. In feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner and inviting the stranger in, we are responding in compassion to God's children as if we are responding to Jesus himself.

Throughout the Old Testament, we are constantly reminded of the importance of showing love and acceptance to the foreigner. In fact the Hebrew word that translates into English as 'immigrant' appears 92 times.

In Deuteronomy 10:17, the Children of Israel are reminded that they were once strangers in a foreign land:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Indeed, the formative experiences of the people of God have been marked by migration and exile. In Exodus 22:21 we read, 'do not mistreat or oppress the foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt, and again in Leviticus 19:33-34, 'When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God'.

Refugees are identified as the most marginalised people in the bible, along with widows and orphans. These are seen as the weak and the powerless. The test of obedience to God and the teachings of Jesus for Christians is how we care for the most vulnerable within society.

Stephen Mattson (2015) notes that:

if Christians refuse to accept and help refugees, we are ignoring, misinterpreting, and even blatantly rejecting Jesus's teachings and various texts throughout the Bible (Jeremiah 22:3-5; Zechariah 7:8-10; Isaiah 16:4; Matt. 25:34-40; Heb. 13:1-2; James 2:5).

Responses to the current refugee/immigration controversy from Christian groups

In the main, Christian groups have strongly condemned the action taken by President Trump in imposing a temporary ban on people coming from specific nations. Indeed, from pulpits to public vigils, various clergy and Christian groups have been very vocal in their outpouring against the plan and the sentiment it conveys. Evangelical leaders have asked the President to reconsider his refugee ban, joining other Christian groups in arguing that welcoming refugees is an essential part of their faith (Beckett, 2017). In an open letter, published in *The Washington Post*, over 500 conservative evangelical pastors and leaders representing all 50 states have urged President Trump to reverse his temporary ban on refugee resettlement. Well-known pastors including Tim Keller, Max Lucado, Bill and Lynne Hybels and others who rarely speak out on political matters signed the letter, which stated,

We have a historic call expressed over 2,000 years to serve the suffering. We cannot abandon this call now (Weber, 2017).

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has noted its strong disagreement with the prohibitions on some migrants and pledged to ensure that refugees coming to the USA are humanely welcomed (Green, 2017).

The Baptist World Alliance also released a statement urging the community to welcome refugees. In response to the actions of President Trump, the BWA reissued a resolution, which was approved by its General Council in Vancouver, Canada, in July 2016. The resolution states, 'the BWA calls upon its member bodies, affiliated churches, and individual believers to actively embrace opportunities for Christian ministry and witness that exemplify the biblical teaching to love the stranger (Lev. 19:18b) and Jesus' teaching to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40), being salt and light in ways that bring the values of our Lord into our culture' (Baptist World Alliance 2017).

Various other Christian world aid groups have been critical of the President's decision to refuse entry of specific groups of refugees (Shellnutt, 2017). Indeed, through their practice and action, Christian leaders and communities from all denominations have been demonstrating compassion and acceptance of others that the Gospel requires of followers of Jesus.

In Australia, the church and Christian communities have been very active in advocating on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. The National Council of Churches Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) includes representatives from all major denominations. This group speaks for the broader Christian community in articulating the theological position of the church in relation to care for the outsider. The ACRT's theological statement begins with the verse from Matthew 25:35:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me

One of the campaigns initiated by the Churches Refugee Taskforce in 2016 involved encouraging churches to offer sanctuary to asylum seekers. 'The granting of Sanctuary is a strong and pivotal act of civil disobedience on the part of the church. It derives from the ancient power of the church to give 'Sanctuary' and offer protection from the authorities to those most vulnerable who are in fear of their lives. The granting of Sanctuary was recognised by English law from the fourth to the seventeenth century to provide immunity to arrest' (National Council of Churches 2016). Over 100 churches became involved in offering support for refugees and asylum seekers, in accordance with the Christian doctrine of Sanctuary.

Another initiative that involves Christians from all Christian traditions is the movement known as Love Makes a Way. Love Makes a Way is a group of Christians who are seeking to end Australia's inhumane asylum seeker policies through prayer and nonviolent love in action. The people involved in this sincere and gentle protest movement come from all religious traditions; many could be described as conservative Christian leaders who are deeply passionate about alleviating the pain and suffering experienced by refugees in immigration detention centres in Australia and the off-shore processing centres.

In commenting on the actions of Love Makes a Way, Julia Baird, an Australian journalist, noted:

The Bible is irrefutably clear on two things: first, that all Christians should show love and hospitality to strangers and, second, and crucially, we should protect and care for children. There is nothing ambiguous about these claims. So the reaction of some to the appearance of the interdenominational group Love Makes a Way formed to end 'inhumane' asylum seeker policies through non-violent protest, was: 'At last!' or 'Where on earth have you been?' (Love Makes A Way 2015)

Many of those involved in Love Makes a Way have made their voices heard through peaceful demonstrations in the offices of politicians, which has subsequently resulted in them being arrested for trespassing. Rev. Dr. Brian Brown, a past moderator of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW & ACT, was arrested in the Office of the Prime Minister. In referencing this event, he stated:

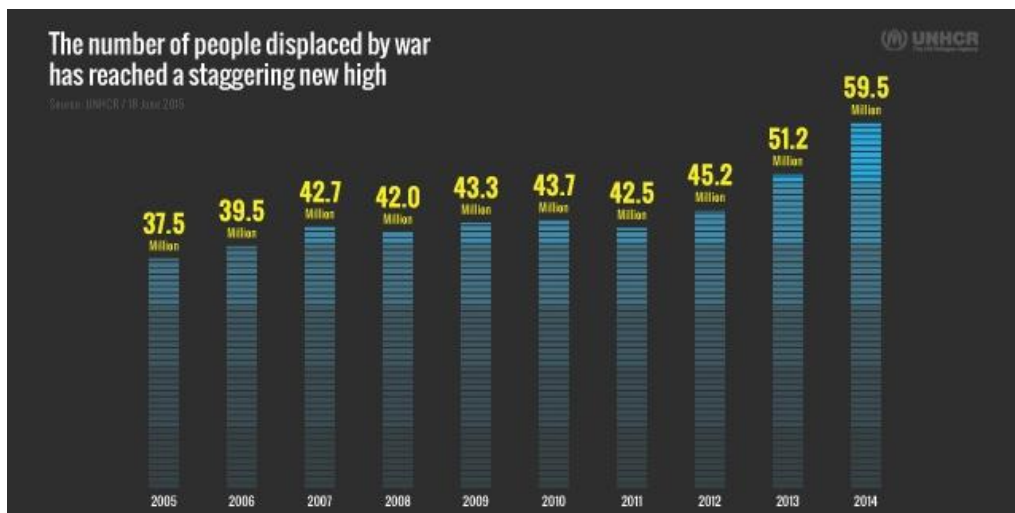
It was my privilege to be arrested with seven others, including clergy of Uniting and other churches, in the office of the Prime Minister. I commend the 'Love Makes a Way' leaders on their leadership in this crucial witness to Jesus' compassion for the poor. I find it clearly within the ethos of the Uniting Church to be acting in this way, especially in concert with other churches. Love Makes a Way is giving credible and necessary impetus to an issue of major importance to the Australian community and beyond, in standing up for those who have fled persecution to find shelter and protection here. (Love Makes A Way 2015)

Theology of migration

The Rev. Daniel G. Groody, an associate professor of theology at Notre Dame University in Indiana, speaks about a theology of migration, centred on the fact that God in Christ Jesus left his homeland to dwell in a world where he was despised and rejected by many. He notes that God's deep love for this world and humankind means that he will always cross over any barrier or division that we might create, so that all can enter into a right relationship, firstly with him and also with the whole of creation, particularly our fellow human beings. This theology of migration emphasises the dignity of each human person, made in the image of God and especially focusing on those who are marginalised (Groody, 2011).

Groody argues that a theology of migration crosses the divine-human divide and helps us to understand that God, in coming to live amongst us in the human person of Jesus, reached out to those whose lives were most under threat, the outsider and the poor. Jesus crossed racial, religious, political, economic and social barriers to demonstrate our common humanity and interconnections as children of God. A theology of migration helps us to see beyond the notion of nationalism and recognise that we are citizens of God's Kingdom and our calling is the reconciliation of man to God. In this sense Groody suggests that Christians are 'spiritual migrants' seeking our homeland with God. This, he argues, should give us empathy with those in search of a new and safe homeland here on earth.

Groody acknowledges the strong influence of Catholic Social Teaching and incarnational theology in his life. Incarnational theology essentially speaks to the belief that Jesus Christ became the human expression of God on earth and therefore came to understand the circumstances of humankind (Langmead, 2004). The objective of incarnational theology or incarnational mission is to be like Jesus in responding with compassion to the poor (Robinson 2015). This means becoming immersed in the culture of the specific social group and therein gaining a unique understanding of their suffering (Adam, 2006). The theology of migration enables us to understand the sacrifice that God made for each one of us and in turn helps us to develop solidarity with the refugee, the alien and the stranger.



UNHCR/ 18 June 2015

Conclusion

Schleiermacher (1850) noted that all theology should be practical in order to support Christians and Christian communities in gaining a deeper understanding of Christian doctrine and traditions and bearing witness to Christian faith and experience. The discipline of practical theology mediates the relationship between Christian traditions, doctrine and praxis focussing on the challenges presented in the contemporary social context. In particular, practical theology provides a mechanism to reflect on the actions of Christian communities as theology is applied.

Theology and the Christian experience have a crucial role to play in the world in demonstrating to others the love of God. For Christians, the call to respond compassionately to the needs of migrants, refugees and foreigners cannot be seen as a political or ideological position; it is a biblical mandate. Indeed, the golden rule which exhorts us to, 'do to others what you would have them do to you' (Matthew 7:12) applies in this area more than any other, for many of us are immigrants in the country we now call home. Moreover, as Jesus said, this sums up the Law and the Prophets. Christians who are actively involved in advocating on behalf and supporting refugees and asylum seekers are integrating theology and practice in an authentic Christian witness.

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