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Christian Ethics and the Global Refugee Crisis

The number of global refugees has been on the rise in recent years. While displaced peoples are not a new phenomenon, the status and treatment of refugees has become a major modern-day issue. The 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the political instability and violence present in Venezuela – among many other examples – have all contributed to the refugee situation present today. As refugees forcefully migrate to new temporary or permanent homelands, the response to these displaced peoples have varied greatly. Some communities and countries have helped alleviate immediate needs, but not all people and governments have been supportive of permitting refugees to remain long-term within their cities and borders. In the midst of all the perspectives on modern refugees, this global crisis has created an open door for the witness of the Church. Thus, as the number of refugees worldwide grows, Christians must employ an ethic of love as they meet both the immediate needs and the long-term spiritual needs of these displaced peoples.

A Brief Snapshot of the Current Refugee Crisis

The number of global refugees has leaped substantially in the past 5-years. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), there were over 21 million reported refugees and people in refugee-like situations worldwide in 2021.¹ However, in early 2023, the number of refugees worldwide has grown to be around 30 million.² These numbers

¹ United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). *Global Report 2021: The Stories Behind the Numbers*, (Geneva, Switzerland: UNHCR, 2021), 124.

² United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). *Global Appeal 2023*, (Geneva: UNHCR, 2023), 52.

signify that this is a growing issue. Thus, while this paper cannot be a complete and comprehensive evaluation of the current status of refugees worldwide, this section will primarily focus on the refugee situation present in Germany. Drawing from those same UNHCR reports, they state that the number of refugees in Europe “rose to almost 9 million” in 2023, and this has created “significant humanitarian need.”³ The most current influx of refugees to Europe, and Germany in particular, are due to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Thus, Germany offers a prime case study for a lens into this modern-day issue.

Germany is no stranger to immigrants and refugees in the past decade. Since the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis to this present day, refugees have flooded into many Western European countries. Being a destination country for many refugees, “Germany has received more refugees than any other European nation.”⁴ However, even with Germany’s initial hospitality, this crisis does not come without its problems. As with many majority culture people who have migrants in their communities, “Europeans have felt both compassion and fear, and they have responded with both generosity and hostility.”⁵ With these juxtaposing perspectives on how to handle and treat refugees, the ethical issues that refugees face are very convoluted. Without question, in some “areas flooded with refugees, fear and anxiety about the future are very real.”⁶ Both the needs of the refugee and the person who is affected by the arrival of the refugee must be taken into account. Thus, Scott Rae articulates that “some of the most pressing debates in Europe about immigration involve precisely these changes to the majority culture in various European countries, and the majority is pushing back against these changes.”⁷ Much of Europe is currently

³ Ibid.

⁴ John P. Thompson, “Christian Ministry to Refugees in the Contrasting Settings of Greece and Germany.” *Great Commission Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (Spr 2019): 32.

⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁶ Hans Feichtinger, “Refugees in Germany.” *First Things* 260 (February 216): 22.

⁷ Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics*, 4th Edition, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 460.

struggling with this very timely moral issue. Figuring out how to respond to this growing refugee crisis is a worldwide endeavor.

The Bible as a Migration Story

The Bible has much to offer regarding the topic of migration and the treatment of displaced peoples. In fact, Joan Maruskin claims that “The biblical story is a migration story,” and that all people are migrants on the face of this earth.”⁸ In her article, “The Bible: The Ultimate Migration Handbook,” she points out the many instances in Scripture that deal with the transnational movements of people. Such Old Testament (OT) examples of migration include: Adam and Eve being dismissed from the Garden of Eden, Abram being called to leave his homeland, the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, the exile of Israel and Judah, etc. The concept of uprootedness is one that is carried throughout the entire OT – whether it be the people of God or the foreigners in their midst. Additionally, the major biblical theme of hospitality is important to the OT. Maruskin notes that the concept of OT hospitality “is based in offering hospitality to the stranger, the sojourner, the alien, the migrant, and the foreigner.”⁹ God often reminded the Israelites that they used to be foreigners in Egypt, and because of this they should not mistreat the strangers among them. Exodus 22:21 is an example of this truth: “Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (NIV). Thus, as people who know what it is like to be mistreated and foreigners in a land not their own, God’s people were called by Him to minister to these vulnerable groups of people. While the theme of migration might be easier to identify in the OT, the New Testament (NT) also has much to say regarding this topic.

The NT provides insight into how Christians are to treat people around them. While the NT “does not offer a systematic exposition on the issue of migration and integration,” it does

⁸Joan M. Maruskin, “The Bible: The Ultimate Migration Handbook,” *Church & Society* 95, no. 6 (July 2005), 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

offer teachings that address Christians' disposition to their local and global witness.¹⁰ From some of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels to the multicultural images revealed in the eschaton, the global concern of the NT is prevalent throughout its pages. Some theologians have drawn on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Great Commission or Jesus' command to "Love your neighbor as yourself" – among other passages – to illuminate the need for Christians to treat all people as beloved people of God. Additionally, and also an interesting observation, Maruskin proposes, "The New Testament opens with a migration story, and perhaps the only real 'alien' story in the Bible."¹¹ She goes on to describe Jesus as the Refugee Christ. Having left heaven and taken on human form in His incarnation, Jesus, essentially, become a voluntary refugee. As such, Maruskin concludes, "All Christians owe their salvation to a refugee."¹² This thought is definitely thought-provoking and does support Jesus' mission to seek and save the lost. Jesus' life and ministry were heavily focused on the lowly and the oppressed. As a Savior who could empathize with all people, Jesus became the much-needed Good News to all people.

Ethical Responses of Christians to/for Refugees

In determining how Christians ought to respond to the global refugee crisis, it would be wise and appropriate to reflect first on the Christian foundation for ethics. Dennis Hollinger in his book, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World*," notes that "the foundation of Christian ethics is the Christian worldview," and that worldview is "ultimately rooted in the actions of the Triune God."¹³ The Christian worldview stems from the theology that informs Christians' everyday faith and practice. With God as the source, norm and power of ethical living, Christians are able to engage the world with their much-needed perspectives. However,

¹⁰ C. A. Strine, "Embracing Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Jeremiah 29 as Foundation for a Christian Theology of Migration and Integration," *Political Theology* 19, no. 6 (September 2018), 489.

¹¹ Maruskin, 86.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dennis P. Hollinger, *Choosing the Good: Christian Ethics in a Complex World*, (Grand Rapids: Baking Publishing Group, 2002, E-Book.

while not every Christian or group will agree on the implementation of ethical responses and practices, this should not deter the Christian community from pursuing justice and righteousness both in their own personal lives and in the communities they can influence. The rest of this paper will reflect on five Christian responses to the global refugee crisis. Biblical support will also be included for each of the topics addressed.

An Ethic of Love

While the concept of love differs greatly between the secular and parochial worlds, the biblical concept of love is a dominant and driving force for Christians as they engage refugees and foreigners – as well as all people. 1 John 4:19 reveals, “we love because He first loved us.” Thus, the impetus for Christian love is firmly rooted in the love of God for all people. William O’Niell affirms this in his article, “Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Forced Displacement.” He states, “at the heart of Christian ethics is the law of love (agape).”¹⁴ Love is of utmost importance as Christians pursue justice in an ethically complex modern world. However, in the midst of this convoluted and pluralistic world, Christians are still to love their neighbors as themselves. This is true for the refugee or displaced person who is now present in new communities. O’Niell goes on to say that the “recognition of the ‘stranger’ or ‘alien’ as neighbor ... attests to [Christians’] common faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person.”¹⁵ As Christians look out for and treat refugees as they would want to be treated if they were in the same situation, the ethic of love that a Christian could employ would have lasting significance in the lives of displaced people. Gustavo Gutiérrez, a leading voice for Liberation Theology, also reiterates this thought, “To be a Christian is to draw near, to make oneself a neighbor, not the one

¹⁴ William R. O’Niell, “Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Forced Displacement,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27, no. 1 (Spr 2007): 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

I encounter in my journey but the one whose journey I place myself.”¹⁶ Refugees do not have to walk the hard road of displacement alone. Christians need to employ an ethic of love as they engage displaced peoples.

Inherent Worth of All People

Unfortunately, many refugee’s and displaced peoples’ dignity and self-worth are stripped away from them as they enter into new countries and communities. This should not and cannot be how Christians respond to these people. Often times, refugees, immigrants and migrants are categorized by their political status rather than being acknowledged as valuable humans. As the Bible reveals, when God created humankind, He made them in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Thus, since all people resemble the *imago Dei* (the image of God), there is built-in dignity and honor that must be respected. As Dennis Hollinger notes that the Genesis 1:26-27 passage reveals “the image of God seems to reflect a relational dimension to life that is to be guarded and nurtured.”¹⁷ Due to the reality that all people are God’s image-bearers, Christians must do their part to make sure that God’s image is not dehumanized or degraded. Rather, refugees need to know that they are humans and should be treated as such. Additionally, Hollinger reflects that “the image of God clearly implies an inherent dignity and worth in all men and women.”¹⁸ Thus, when refugees are taken advantage of or neglected, this is also smearing the beauty of God’s image. The Church and the Christian community must be champions for people whose God-given image is being abused.

Providing Access to Agency

In conjunction with the sections above, another issue that many refugees face is not having their own sense of agency. As has been seen by many refugee situations over the past few

¹⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation” (July 1968), trans. Alfred T. Hennelly, in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 74.

¹⁷ Hollinger.

¹⁸ Ibid.

years, a majority of refugees lack the freedom to make their own choices. In fact, by their very definition, refugees “are those who are forced to leave their country as a result of political, ethnic, or religious persecution.”¹⁹ They are *forced* to leave – no agency. If many of them were to stay in their home contexts, many of them would be put into situations worse than the treacherous journey many embark on to leave their home or country. However, even when refugees reach their final destination, often times they are put in long queues and programs that give them access to few resources and restrict their mobility even further. This is why Kristen Heyer in her article, “Reframing Displacement and Membership: Ethics of Migration,” she asserts, “cultivating migrants’ agency will be essential for adequate humanization, legislative, and cultural responses.”²⁰ This is where the Church will need to work with parachurch, secular humanitarian organizations and governments so that they can meet the needs and to build a bridge forward for many of these people.

Advocating for New Polity

While governments can only do so much for refugees, the Church has the opportunity to play an important role in the lives of refugees and the communities they live in. Rightfully so, many humanitarian efforts are stretched thin as they respond to the needs of millions of refugees around the world. A reality that is emerging is that many people are becoming affected due to the growing number of refugees worldwide. Kristen Heyer reflects this thought when she reports: “one in nine [people] lives in a country where international migrants comprise one-tenth or more of the total population.”²¹ Thus, there need to be programs and government polity that begin to recognize how refugees are an emerging reality in many countries around the world. C. A. Strine even acknowledges, “that refugees are by definition the product of political entities, and

¹⁹ Rae, 459.

²⁰ Kristen E. Heyer, “Reframing Displacement and Membership: Ethics of Migration,” *Theological Studies* 73, no. 1 (March 2012): 206.

²¹ Heyer, 188.

therefore demand inclusion into a new polity.”²² While temporary humanitarian programs and long-term refugee housing were needed at the start of the refugee crisis, governments and the local communities where refugees now live need to begin to develop new laws or inclusionary measures to help integrate refugees into their new countries. While some refugees do hope to return to their home country, this is not always a feasible possibility for them. This is also why the Church plays an important role in providing advocacy for refugees who have a limited voice due to their political status. For refugees, the Church can be a significant force for societal transformation as refugees are welcome into local communities.

Witness of the Gospel Message

The Church is often able to address immediate humanitarian needs of many refugees, but it also offers an open door for refugees’ long-term spiritual needs. Throughout Scripture, and particularly seen in the NT, when people are on-the-move and oppressed, there is also great opportunity for gospel witness. Thompson recognized this cultural moment. He states, “The refugee crisis in Europe may be one of the most significant opportunities for the spread of the gospel on that continent since the fall of the Iron Curtain.”²³ While his statement is focused on Europe, the same sentiment is shared by many Christians around the world. As refugees, who traditionally would not be present in certain places, become present in places with gospel access, there is great potential for refugees to come to know the ‘Refugee Christ.’ Additionally, this global crisis assists the Great Commission. Before His ascension, Jesus commissioned His disciples to, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”²⁴ The command to “go” in this verse is much more obtainable because the people from the ends-of-the-earth are now present in Christian’s communities. This commission

²² Strine, 479.

²³ Thomson, 30.

²⁴ Matthew 28:19.

is incumbent on each and every believer because “followers of Christ become migrant messengers, taking His teachings throughout the known world.”²⁵ In a profound way, Jesus followers then are told to become the immigrants, the refugees and the migrants as they minister the gospel message to the world.

Conclusion

As the refugee crisis continues and morphs over the next few years, Christians must practice an ethic of love as they meet the holistic needs of refugees and displaced peoples. While this paper is unable to capture the scope and extent of this pressing issue, it does offer a glimpse into the need for the Church to respond to refugees in a way that promotes a healthy reflection for those who belong to Christ and His Church. More and more people are becoming affected by this global crisis, especially as refugees become more present in new local contexts. The way that each country and community will respond to these vulnerable people will vary greatly. However, regardless of how governments respond, the Church must also respond in a way that honors and respects the human dignity of refugees. With no current end in sight to this global crisis, the steps that are taken for all displaced people matter greatly.

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²⁵ Maruskin, 90.

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