

The Theological Discussion on Refugees

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Situation of Refugees

The United Nations Convention article 1 of the 1951, as modified by the 1967 Protocol says, refugee a person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.¹ The problem of refugees became prominent only at the end 17th century because it was told that anyone who crosses the country should have passport and visa. It was made as law and very strictly enforced on the people. As a result in the 1st World war (1914-1919), the war between Japan and China and in the Second World War many people left their own countries and fled to other neighboring countries in order to save their life. Mostly people became refugees due to the internal conflicts rather the external affairs. The population of the forcibly displaced people due to armed conflicts, generalized violence, human rights violations and persecution in the world has grown to exceed 50 million. About forty-one percent of refugee population is children and about fifty percent are women.²

In India refugees from neighbouring countries like Tibet, Srilanka, Bhutan, Palestine, Africa, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Pakistan and Bangladesh, United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Australia.³ According

to the latest available data which was presented by Minister of State for Home Affairs Kiren Rijiju in March 2017, a total of 2,89,394 refugees are living in India from 28 different countries which also included stateless people.⁴ In India, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, Utrakhand, Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh where majority of the refugees are seen.

In this globalist and self-centered world people have failed to think of them. However, it has become our duty to think of them and care for them. For, they are image of God and in Old Testament we read that, they are Anawim of Yahweh. So, they need to be taken care of with due respect. In this article, I would like to make an attempt to discuss the theological understanding on Refugees.

1. God Accompanies us in Exile

There is no question of idealizing exile or forced displacement. Let us not be confused. Its sheer existence is evil, and this is the way the Bible primarily looks at it. Nobody should feel obliged to flee one's land due to war, persecution or poverty. Rui de Menezes would say that, why the prophets sent by God to speak in his name and guide the people envisaged it, first of all as a punishment that God might send upon Israel.⁵ In the 8th century BC when Amos saw that the people had strayed far from the paths of the Lord, he threatened them with exile. Prophet Amos would say that "Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land" (Amos 7:17).

But it was another story when exile and deportation had actually fallen upon Israel and evil seemed to triumph making the innocent suffer. Was God actually punishing them? Habakkuk protested: O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction

and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes loose and justice never prevails (Hab 1:2-4). Jeremiah lost heart and despaired: Cursed be the day on which I was born. The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! Cursed be the man who brought of the news to my father, saying, "A child is born to you, a son", making him very glad, because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame? (Jer 20:14-18).

We are no different from them. The sight and experience of evil harm us deeply. We feel wounded and are tempted to think God has forgotten us or is not listening.⁶ This is why the prophet Isaiah told the Jewish community exiled in Babylon. But Zion said, the Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me. Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands (Is 49:14-16).

This is the key experience which must nurture our spiritual life: the closeness of God. God is with us. As a Burundian widow from Lukole camp in western Tanzania said: God understands us for he has also lost a son.⁷ Scholars debate the meaning of Yahweh (YHWH), God's name revealed to Moses in the Old Testament. Jesus is also called "Emmanuel" meaning God is with us (Mt 1:23), and his final words to the disciples are I am with you all days till the end of the world (Mt 28:20). Jesus, the Son of God, died on the cross, He accompanies us in suffering and death too.

The prophets teach us, as do the psalms, that we should not break off our communication with God.⁸ In the Bible women and men keep talking to God in all sorts of situations, health or sickness, victory or defeat, success or failure. As such, no situation prevents our relationship with God. Theologian Esther Reed says that, we just have to find our own way. Moses, Deborah,

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, Judith, Mary, Jesus found their own words to express what they felt. There is nothing here against traditional prayers, only a call to discover the invitation men and women make to us from the Bible to address God spontaneously with great freedom.

2. Time to Discover the Real Face of God as a source of hope

Today, it is common place to speak of the three big monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although the three affirm that there is only one God, the influence of Judaism on the shaping of the other two in this regard is evident as it is much older. But when did this belief in one God start in Israel? Rui de Menezes says, an exile was the first human being to affirm monotheism and deportees were the first persons to believe in it.⁹ For the first time in her history Israel heard that not only had she one god, but that her god was the unique God. All the peoples of the earth had to turn to this God for it was the only one. Today we consider monotheism as the first call to peace and solidarity the fact that we believe all human beings share the same creator helps us to realize the atrocity of war and violence.¹⁰ How can I harm the life of another if our lives are the gift of the same God? We are manipulating God. Whoever believes in one God must admit that God cannot be for one people and against the other. Friends and enemies share the same God. The God of Israel, the God of Christianity and the God of Islam are ultimately one and the same God. The one God is perceived through different cultural and religious traditions.¹¹

This God is willing to continue to reveal himself again in exile. God is in our history, in our present, and also in our future. We have God's promise through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, "the Lord lives who brought the people Israel up out of the kind of Egypt", but "As the Lord lives

who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them, Then they shall live in their own land” (Jer 23:7-8). Thus says the Lord God, I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place on you; on your own soil (Ezek 37:12-14).

The promise brings us hope. The Lord has committed his name to liberation, he has given his word. As God did in the Exodus, he is engaged to free his people and to give his spirit to us. But as Gustavo Gutiérrez says, God’s power is manifested not only in the return of the exiles which happens eventually, but it is manifested when God brings us out of our graves and makes us live itself. “The challenge of life is already posed to us. The real return is not from one land to another, but from death to life, from antagonism among us to solidarity, from challenge to community building. If all this is missing, no land can be the promised one, none can be holy”.¹²

3. The Theology of Borders

What exactly can theology offer to this complex issue of refugees? Here I would like to highlight three Christian themes that touch directly on the refugees’ debate and help us understand that crossing borders is at the heart of human life, divine revelation, and Christian identity. These three areas are the *Imago Dei* (the Image of God), the *Verbum Dei* (the Word of God), and the *Missio Dei* (the Mission of God).

3.1. Broken Borders: God of Refugees

The notion of the *Imago Dei* emerges in the earliest pages of Scripture. We read in the first creation account that human beings are created in God’s

image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27). No text is more foundational or more significant in its implication for the refugee's debate. It reveals that refugees are not just about a political problem but about real people. The *Imago Dei* is the core symbol of human dignity, the infinite worth of every human being, and the divine attributes that are part of every human life, including will, memory, emotions, understanding, and the capacity to love and enter into relationship with others.¹³ Reading to stories of refugees, I have discovered that a common denominator around the world among all who migrate is their experience of dehumanization.

The insults they endure are not just a direct assault on their pride but on their very existence. Their vulnerability and sense of meaninglessness weigh heavily on them. They often feel that the most difficult part of being refugees is to be no one to anyone. The *Imago Dei* brings to the forefront the human costs embedded in the refugee's equation and it challenges a society more oriented towards profit than people to accept that the economy should be made for people and not people for the economy.¹⁴ It is a reminder that the moral health of an economy is measured by how well the most vulnerable are faring. The *Imago Dei* insists that we see refugees not as problems to be solved but people to be healed and empowered.¹⁵

3.2. Crossing Borders: Jesus the Refugee

The centre of this theological notion that is central to the refugee debate is the *Verbum Dei*. It declares that God in Jesus crosses the divide that exists between divine life and human life. In the incarnation God migrates to the human race and, as Karl Barth notes, makes his way into the "far country." This far country is one of human discord and disorder, a place of division and dissension, a territory marked by death and the demeaning treatment of human beings.¹⁶

The Gospel of Matthew says God in Jesus not only takes on human flesh and migrates into our world but actually becomes a refugee himself when he and his family flee political persecution and escape into Egypt (Matt 2:13-15). The divine takes on not just any human narrative but that of the most vulnerable among us. This movement toward the human race takes place not on the strength of any human initiative or human accomplishment but through divine gratuity. James Hoffmeier would say that, walking the way of the cross, overcoming the forces of death that threaten human life, Jesus gives hope to all who go through the agony of economic injustice, family separation, cultural uprootedness, and even a premature and painful death¹⁷. Certainly refugees who cross the deserts in search of more dignified lives see in the Jesus story their own story.¹⁸ He opens up a reason to hope despite the most hopeless of circumstances.

What impresses me most in speaking to refugees in the midst of their difficult journey is their ability to believe in God even in the most godless of situations. They speak about trusting in God even after all has been taken away. They affirm God's goodness even when their lot has been marked by such suffering and pain.

3.3. Beyond Borders: A Civilization of Love

This notion of theology gives us a different way of understanding refugees as the *Missio Dei*. The mission of the Church is to proclaim a God of life and make our world more human by building up, in Pope Paul VI's words, the "civilization of love."¹⁹ In imitation of Jesus, it seeks to make real the practice of table fellowship. The significance of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners and social outcasts is that he crosses over the human borders that divide one human being from another. If the incarnation is about God crossing over the divine-human divide, the mission of the Church is to cross the human-human divide. It is fundamentally a mission of reconciliation, a

realization that the borders that define countries may have some proximate value but are not ultimately those that define the body of Christ.²⁰

In the midst of a desert of death and a culture of fear, the Eucharist is not just a tool for activism or social reform. It should be a testimony of God's universal, undivided, and unrestricted love for all people. It speaks of the gift and challenge of Christian faith and the call to feed the world's hunger for peace, justice and reconciliation. Leonard Boff says, in uniting people beyond the political constructions that divide us, it gives tangible expression to the moral demands of the Kingdom of God, the ethical possibilities of global solidarity, and the Christian vision of a journey of hope.²¹

Refugees may be the most challenging issue of the new century, but this need not blind us to the core issues that lay at the heart of every one of us. How we respond to those most in need says more about who we are individually and collectively than it does about those on the move. Martin Mande says, theology supplies a way of thinking about refugees that keeps the human issues at the center of the debate and reminds us that our own existence as a pilgrim people is migratory in nature.

Theology offers not just more information but a new imagination, one that reflects at its core what it means to be human before God and to live together in community. We need to overcome all that divides us in order to reconcile us in all our relationships. Raymond E. Brown says, Christian discipleship reminds us that the more difficult walls to cross are the ones that exist in the hearts of each of us.²² Unable to cross the elements that divides us by ourselves, Christian faith rests ultimately in the one who migrated from heaven to earth through his death and resurrection, passed over from death to life. From a Christian perspective, "the true aliens are not those who lack political documentation but those who have disconnected themselves from their neighbor in need that they fail to see in the eyes of the

stranger a mirror of themselves, the image of Christ and the call to human solidarity".²³ We cannot separate love for God from love for our neighbour, as St. John said: Those who say, "I love God, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1Jn 4:20).

4. A Refugees God who Loves Refugees

The Book of Deuteronomy says, that when God's people reached River Jordan after wandering in the wilderness from where they could see the land which God is about to give them for years, Moses reminds them of what's been happening since the Lord brought their mothers and fathers up from Egypt. In his first speech, he tells them that on their journey to the land the Lord their God is giving them, "...you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place" (1:31). Even though they did not trust in God, Moses says, "the Lord your God...went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go" (1:32–33). This God migrated with the people, carrying them along the way and going ahead of them to show them the way.

In Moses' second speech in Deuteronomy, God's people hear some astounding claims about God, about how God loves and how God wants God's people to love: "Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day" (10:14–15). They hear that to God belongs everything, all the heaven and earth, everything that God has created. And yet for all that God owns, God has a particular affection and desire for them.

Out of all the people on earth, God chose Israel. God chose you, the church lavishing love on you.

5. Refugees People who Love Refugees

Refugees are just the sort of people that God shows love too. Nowhere in the New Testament is this clearer than in the First Letter of Peter. Peter writes to the “elect strangers of the Diaspora” (1:1), and Peter urges his readers to conduct themselves with reverence during the time of their temporary residence, their “residence as aliens” (1:17). Again, his directions for holy living address those newly called “Christians” (4:16) as “visiting strangers and alien residents” (2:11). Here, Peter takes on the exact phrase used of Abraham in Genesis and David in the Psalms and applies it to the churches.

What is the case for Israel in Deuteronomy also becomes the case for the churches. God’s people are refugee communities. Those “born again through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:30), Peter calls alien residents or settled refugees (*paroikoi*) as well as visiting foreigners (*parepidçmoi*).²⁴ Perhaps many in the churches of Peter’s time already had this status as people who were from somewhere else, but Peter suggests more.

God’s people are told to love the refugees, and in the Hebrew, a command is the same as a promise. Deuteronomy 10:19 means, “You all must love the refugees,” and it also means, “You all will love the refugees.” Remember that, God might be expected to speak of justice for the stranger, but instead God goes farther to command love for the refugees. The Book of the Covenant in Exodus 20-23 forbids mistreating and oppressing the refugees (22:21; 23:9), but this passage goes further, commanding and promising love. When one translation uses “befriend” instead of “love,” it

specifies the love for refugees in a way that is easier to imagine. Go and befriend the refugees. I promise, you all will be enabled to befriend the refugees.

The Lord wants a people who love like the Lord. Love those who come from outside, who lack home or family. These are the very people that God cares for, both in a physical and in a spiritual sense. Thanks to the mercy of Jesus Christ, members of every people in the world can join in being a new people, God's people. 1 Peter makes clear that for those of us who are in Christ, the church is our nation (2:9). Those who are part of God's nation hear a very different story about refugees. God has loved them immensely to the point of migrating with them, and in response they are to love the refugees.²⁵

The linking of Deuteronomy 10 with 1 Peter is only one set of passages from Scripture that could result in a story about God and refugees. Different stories could be told: about the conquest of Canaan and a destruction of idolatrous foreigners, about Nehemiah and Ezra doing away with foreign wives and children. As theologian Susanna Snyder is right to point out, "it is possible to draw different theologies of refugees from Scripture, and Christians are often complicit with scapegoating or hating foreigners".²⁶ Still, the account developed here stands in line with the trajectory of God's covenant that is confirmed in Jesus Christ. That trajectory moves from Israel blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3), to the prophecy that foreigners will join themselves to the Lord so that God's house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples (Isaiah 56:6-7), to unity for Jews and Greeks baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27-29). Recounting Deuteronomy's telling of a refugees God loving a refugee people and calling that people into the same love, and actualizing that story for the church by way of 1 Peter, is in line with this path toward a nation of refugees united in Christ.

6. Refugees and National Lands

It would be possible to agree with the preceding account and still remain confident that those who migrate illegally should be removed from a country. Someone might hear the message from Deuteronomy and 1 Peter and say that it is right to say that the church is a refugee's people, and it might be right for the nations of this age to show justice and love to refugees who come through legal means. But someone might think that, those who break laws to enter a country shouldn't be treated with the same degree of care. Nations are important, and their lands should be protected.

Is this view right? Does God care about national lands, and ought they be protected against those who enter them unlawfully? Or, does the story of the God revealed in Jesus Christ limit the governance of refugees? Here, a focus on one passage will provide an initial and tentative answer. Nigel Biggar says, Human beings are first human beings before God, creatures who can claim no rights against God. Yet out of love, God listens to those who address God and enables them to enter God's presence. They are new comers, invited in to speak to God.

In the Psalms, it becomes clear that human beings are guests in a world that is already God's: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1) In Pentateuch, we read that, God says that the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Leviticus 25:23). Land first belongs to God, Israel receives land as a gift from a divine landlord, and she remains a tenant on that land.

"Do the other nations also receive land from God, or is Israel's experience unique? Deuteronomy tells of one people possessing land and dispossessing another people, having been granted the land by God. Treading on the land and walking around it constitutes possessing it".²⁷

In a surprising way, the pattern of the gift of land that applies to Israel throughout Deuteronomy here applies to three other nations. For Israel, God gives the land and everything in it, and God requires that Israel give in return. Liberation theologian Juan Luis Segundo says in this covenant, “Israel receives the land as a possession so that it might flourish and be satiated. But the land serves as a temptation to forget the giver. Instead, Israel must give tribute back to God in three ways. It must not make images of other gods, it must carry on Sabbath practices of freeing slaves and letting the land rest, and it must maintain justice for those who lack standing in the community”.²⁸

How much of this pattern applies to other nations? It is plain that God gives the lands for possession, and that God enables the dispossession of these lands. Is this linked to some requirement of right worship, Sabbath keeping, and doing justice? In another passage in Deuteronomy, Moses stresses to Israel that the Lord is not giving them the land because of their righteousness, not because of their justice, but because of the wickedness of the nations the Lord is driving out (9:4-5). It seems that God does make requirements of nations other than Israel, both blessing them with the possession of land if they practice justice and righteousness and cursing them with dispossession if they do not.

National lands do play a role in divine purposes, though in a carefully limited way. The God revealed to Israel, the God of all the earth, grants lands to peoples so that they might enjoy their fruits. These are lands to walk about on and possess, lands with borders. Still, God expects a gift in return, and in Israel’s case this means right worship, Sabbath keeping, and justice for the vulnerable. Otherwise they will be dispossessed of their lands. “God gives lands to nations, but if they do not follow God and carry out God’s justice, God will allow another nation to take that land. At the center of God’s justice, a love for the refugees is revealed, and perhaps this too is

required of the nations of this age".²⁹ If a nation neglects God's justice, a justice that involves protecting the vulnerable and the refugees, that nation risks losing its lands. Yet this is the same God who listens to Moses' plea that God will hold punishment of Israel for its rebellion (Deut. 10:10-11, following from 9:6-10:6).

The people of God have a role to play here. As a refugee community, they know what those who do not worship God do not know. As they come humbly before God to receive abundant gifts in worship, they signal that human beings ultimately have nothing to claim against God, no right to do what they want with land, no right to govern as they wish. The people of God have the responsibility to remind authorities that all land belongs to God and it is in God's hand to give to people or to take it away.³⁰ As they pray for leaders and all those in authority, as Paul urges Timothy to do (1 Tim. 2:1-2), they make plain that leaders serve a greater leader, that presidents and parliaments are accountable to Jesus Christ as judge.

Ought nations to have such confidence in opposing unlawful refugees? This passage suggests that governing refugees is a legitimate, God-given activity for this age, but the very holding of land happens as a gift from God. If justice is not upheld, if abundant gifts are not shared, and perhaps if justice and gifts are not extended to the refugees, then God may dispossess that unjust or ungenerous nation. Confidence in governing refugees is wrongly held when an authority fails to respond to its divine landlord.³¹

To Sum up

Refugees are not in need of human dignity, for they never lost it. But they are in need of our recognition of their human dignity and welcoming people. For, they are also God's Children. They are also born in the image of

God. As they are born in the image of God, they also must be respected and recognized. At the same time, it has been the duty of the Church to be in solidarity with them. This eventually helps them to realize that God accompanies them in their exile and they are also loved by God and others. We should be clear in our understanding that we are also refugees to this world. This is not our permanent home. We have an eternal home in heaven. This realization should lead us to welcome the refugees, love and care for them.

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Endnotes

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