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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The challenge of migrants and refugees is plaguing many developed nations today. Australia is no exception. In fact, its policies have been widely criticized by many human rights organisations. The present article begins by recounting a documentary film on this concern but exploring this specifically on its impact on the ordinary Australians. It recounts the conversion process of a Christian woman in small-town Australia as she encounters Muslim asylum seekers from Afghanistan. The article then examines briefly Australia's history and policies as far as immigration is concerned. It also sheds light on the responses of the people as well as of organised groups including the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. The second part of the article then engages in a theological reflection on the incumbent issues, especially the fact that the most recent immigrants are refugees and asylum seekers are racially and religiously different from that of mainstream Australians.

As I set out to write this article the headlines in the local newspapers today is that Australia's immigration proposals are in violation of international law. At stake is the 1958 Migration Act, especially the way the asylum seekers' refugee claims would be assessed.¹ That Australia's overall policy surrounding the refugees

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¹"Human Rights Committee finds Australian immigration proposals violate international law," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (November 2, 2014), accessed at

and asylum seekers is controversial is stating the obvious. The government's "protect the borders" and "stop the boats" policies have been well publicised and severely criticised. The victims of such policies today are in the main the boatloads of refugees coming primarily from Africa, the Middle-East and South Asia. If they do manage to get on Australian territories they face a mandatory confinement for an indefinite period of time in immigration detention centres. These were previously located within Australia but today have gone offshore to Papua New Guinea and Nauru. There is much to be discussed here but the present article will focus not so much on governmental policies as on the ordinary Australian's response and reaction to the influx of refugees and asylum seekers into the continent.

A documentary film on precisely this topic is currently being screened throughout the country and so it is opportune that it be used as the starting point for the present discussion. The article will interrogate how the refugee and asylum seeker is seen as the cultural and religious "other." The othering process keeps "them" apart from "us" whereby a psychological wall is erected to hinder interaction or any expressions of concern for the "other." But what if the presuppositions for this othering are challenged and the walls eventually come crumbling down? The article attempts to examine these as it employs Gospel themes, in particular the teachings and acts of Jesus, to discern the Christian response. In particular the investigation will explore the dynamics at play in the encounters of the predominantly local Anglo-Celtic Australian Christians with the mainly Muslim refugee asylum seekers who have been coming to its shores in recent times.

Mary Meets Mohammad

No, this section is not about an encounter between Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mohammad, the Prophet of Islam. Instead, it is the story about Mary of Pontville and Mohammad the Afghan asylum seeker. *Mary Meets Mohammad* is the title of a feature-length documentary film surrounding the building of the immigration detention centre in the tiny town of Pontville in Tasmania to house 400 asylum seekers. The film opens with a confrontational meeting in 2011 between the local residents and officials from the Federal

Government regarding the decision to construct the detention centre in their neighbourhood. As expected, except for a few rational and reasonable voices, most of the Pontville residents were up in arms about the decision.

At exactly the same time independent filmmaker, Heather Kirkpatrick, had just returned to Tasmania and was looking for something to do a documentary on. Upon watching the news of the meeting on television she immediately decided she would follow the story. She soon found out that a local knitting club was going to do something nice, i.e., knit beanies (woollen hats) for their new neighbours. "I walked into the knitting club and I immediately saw this very colourful group of women, who to me represented a cross-section of Australian society, where everybody has a different opinion on asylum seekers," Kirkpatrick said in an interview later.²

Among them was Mary, a 71 year-old widowed pensioner who is a staunch Christian. She was fiercely opposed to the idea of having a detention centre nearby especially since the inmates would be mainly Muslims. She regarded them as a "pack of heathens" even as she admitted she had never ever met a Muslim person in real life before. She was rather blunt in expressing her feelings: "I am dead set against them coming here." She was also afraid that the government would be spending less on the local residents' welfare while the detainees "get all the pension money, [while] people who are waiting for houses will be left on the waiting list." There was a rumour that the refugees were living in luxury, with spa bath and three-course meals. So, when the knitters were planning to deliver the beanies to the asylum seekers at the detention centre Mary, who refused to contribute a beany, decided she would go along: "I am curious about what they've got and how they are living. I want to go and see if it's true. I don't think I'll change. I still think I'll be against the whole thing."

On the other side of the fence is 27 year-old Mohammad. He's an Afghan Hazara but fled his beloved war-torn country with his parents in the 1980s as a young child to live as a refugee in Pakistan. Because they were undocumented migrants who also belonged to a different denomination from the majority Muslim community of Pakistan they were treated harshly by the locals there as well as by

²Sophie Timothy, "Detention centre sets scene for tale of melting prejudice and hope," *Bible Society: Life Light* (12 September 2013), accessed at <http://www.bible.society.org.au/news/mary-meets-mohammad#sthash.pYqmoF3O.dpuf>.

the Talibans who had control of the area. When two of his brothers were killed and he received death threats, Mohammad sold his little business, left his wife and family and fled the country. Dependent on people smugglers, he made his way to Australia and was one of those incarcerated at the newly-built detention centre. The documentary records him as saying, in simple English: "I thinking about the Australian community: it is good or not? I saw a lot of time in the television the politics kicking the asylum seeker just like a soccer ball." Since cameras were not allowed in the detention centre it was his words alone which the outside world could listen in to, at least in the earlier stages of the documentary.

So, when Mary and four other knitters went to the detention centre to deliver the beanies they met with Mohammad and his friends. Face-to-face encounters have a way of breaking down the walls of prejudice and the knitters then became regular visitors. They saw with their own eyes the less-than-desirable conditions the asylum seekers were living in and, more importantly, they realized, in the words of one of the visitors, that "they are people." These were ordinary decent human beings hoping to be given a chance to live a good life in Australia. The visitors were more than touched when the detainees insisted on buying them tea with the credit points they had carefully saved up over the months. They also brought out some art paintings which again they insisted the visitors take away as gifts. Perceptions changed, conversions occurred and soon they became good friends.

Meantime, Mary had been sharing with her other pensioner friends outside the knitting club about her visits to the detention centre. Needless to say, their reactions were diverse. Most thought she was crazy. Their only source of information on the asylum seekers is the media where reporting happens only when there is a crisis, such as a hunger strike, suicide or riots. After six months of filming, Mohammed and his friends were released on a bridging visa and decided to make Tasmania their home. Mohammad and Mary became very close friends and he even regarded her as his Australian grandmother. He volunteered at a local charity and helped Mary in her garden. They found out that they had a lot in common and were often even finishing off each other's sentences. The beautiful friendship matured and Mary soon became very respectful and appreciative of her adopted grandson's culture and religion. All this took place within the span of 18 months, which was the duration of the filming of the documentary.

Australia's Immigration History and Policies

The history of people moving to the Australian continent began 50,000 years ago. These first settlers were the ancestors of present-day Australian Aborigines or the indigenous Australians. After that, it was not until the 18th century that mass-scale migrants came from other continents to settle in Australia. Following the independence of the United States from Great Britain, the British authorities were in search of a new penal colony to house convicts from their overcrowded prisons. The first shipload of convicts landed in Australia in 1788 and for the next eighty years the penal transportation settled more than 160,000 British nationals in the new British Crown colony. Meantime, free settlers from Britain and Ireland also migrated to Australia and established farmlands in the virtually free Crown land.³

But it was the discovery of gold in 1851 that led to the transformation of Australia economically, politically and demographically. People from the British Isles emigrated to Australia by the hundreds of thousands, as did those from continental Europe, North America and also China. The next several decades saw the Australian government actively sponsoring the immigration of skilled immigrants from Europe. When the British self-governing colonies came together to form a single federation of Australia in 1901 the Immigration Restriction Act was enacted. Its aim was to restrict non-White settlement, which it eventually succeeded by putting into law that immigrants pass a dictation test in a European language selected by the immigration officer. Its targets were the Chinese and also the indentured workers from New Caledonia who were being imported in large numbers to service the sugar plantations. This became unofficially known as the "White Australia Policy" but was officially in place right through to after the Second World War, with aspects of it still lingering on and implemented until the 1970s.⁴

The 1970s saw the advent of the multiculturalism rhetoric in Australia. The immigration policy shifted from one based on country of origin to one where migrants were admitted according to personal and social attributes or occupational group. This new policy was adopted in time for the arrival of the first "boat people" after the fall

³"Australia's Immigration History," *Australian National Maritime Museum*, accessed at <http://waves.anmm.gov.au/Immigration-Stories/Immigration-history>.

⁴"Australia's migration history," *The Migration Heritage Centre*, accessed at <http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/belongings-home/about-belongings/australias-migration-history/>.

of South Vietnam to the North and the fall of East Timor to the Indonesian troops in 1975. The Lebanese Civil War also saw an influx of refugees to Australia, as did the cruel dictatorship regimes in South America which gave rise to political dissidents from countries such as Chile, Argentina and Uruguay seeking refuge in Australia. Other sources of conflict such as the Tiananmen Square massacre and the Yugoslav Wars in the Balkans in the 1980s and the Jakarta riots leading to the overthrow of the Suharto regime in the 1990s also saw more refugees and asylum seekers. In the last decade it was the Iraq and Afghan wars, as well as conflicts in African and South Asian countries, which fuelled the arrival of refugees to Australia from those regions.

It is the arrival of this latter group of refugees which is shaping much of the public debate surrounding the immigration policies in Australia today. Of significance is that they are not of Western background but are coming from regions associated more with the Orient than the Occident. Another factor is that amongst them are also those who come from traditionally Muslim-majority nations, a religion which remains a minority in Australia but which is becoming increasingly visible. A third factor is due to the fact that they are desperate enough to be making their way to Australia through non-conventional means such as dinghy boats, courtesy of the people smugglers.

These factors have resulted in the newly arrived being seen as "illegal" even as the United Nations' Refugee Convention (which Australia is party to) spells out in no uncertain terms that asylum seekers and refugees have a right to protection regardless of how or where they arrive or whether they arrive with or without a visa.⁵ The fact that the Australian government puts these arrivals behind bars confirms, at least in the minds of the common people, that they have broken the law and so deserves to be treated as criminals. Add that to the fact that these refugees are significantly different (in race, religion, culture and language) from the dominant mainstream of Australian society and we have a situation which borders on xenophobia and racism. The One Nation political party which arose from these anti-immigration sentiments is testimony to this, as is the fact that 60% of the wider population want the Government to treat asylum seekers more harshly.

⁵"Asylum seekers and refugees guide," *Australian Human Rights Commission*, accessed at <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/asylum-seekers-and-refugees-guide>.

There is, however, an alternative voice in the Australian society. In Pontville, there were numerous NGOs and religious organisations pleading for a more humane response to the plight of the migrants and asylum seekers. The *Mary and Mohammad* documentary featured the efforts of two young immigration activists, Emily and Clarissa, who worked tirelessly in order to raise awareness of the detainees' rights. They were the ones who facilitated the visits of the knitting club women to the detention centres. There is also the Statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on Asylum Seekers. It highlights some of the salient issues:

Island dwellers like Australians often have an acute sense of the "other" or the "outsider" – and that is how asylum seekers are being portrayed. They are the dangerous "other" or "outsider" to be feared and resisted because they are supposedly violating our borders. Do racist attitudes underlie the current policy? Would the policy be the same if the asylum seekers were fair-skinned Westerners rather than dark-skinned people, most of whom are of "other" religious and cultural backgrounds? Is the current policy perhaps bringing to the surface not only a xenophobia in us but also a latent racism? The White Australia policy was thought to be dead and buried, but perhaps it has mutated and is still alive.⁶

The Asylum Seeker as Syrophoenician Woman

What is the Christian response to the phenomenon of asylum seekers and refugees? Having outsiders knock on your doors is already a problem but if the outsiders seem so radically different from "us" then the challenge is multiplied. This shifts the question to what are our attitudes towards the religious and cultural other? What is the Christian thing to do when someone who is regarded as an out-group member comes begging for mercy and assistance? To assist in our reflections we turn now to the Gospels to first explore Jesus' own attitudes and then his teachings.

Our first reflections will be based on the Markan (7:24-37) and Matthewan (15:21-28) texts of the Syrophoenician mother who came pleading with Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Mark is specific in mentioning her racial profile (Syrophoenician) and her socio-political-cultural profile (Gentile). Matthew uses the general term Canaanite. Both texts make it clear that she is a non-Jew who is

⁶Statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on Asylum Seekers, - ACBC Media Blog–Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, accessed at <http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/?p=2892>.

also pagan in upbringing.⁷ She is the stereotypical “other,” much like the asylum seekers who are also perceived negatively, oftentimes as violent and hostile to “us.” Both, the woman and the asylum seekers, cannot be trusted, much less shown compassion to. The texts have thus pointed our radar onto concerns around issues of identity, boundaries and cultic purity. In short, good Jews have nothing to do with Syrophoenicians. Likewise, good Australian Christians have nothing to do with the Afghan Muslim refugees. Worse still if it is a woman, especially one who comes unaccompanied by any male, and is tainted because her daughter is impure. Numerous boundaries would have been transgressed. Yet the woman crossed them so she could come face-to-face with Jesus in order to beg him to heal her daughter. Desperate is a word often used to characterise this motherly love. And desperate would also be the word to characterise the asylum seekers whose love for life (in the face of impending death if they remained in their home-countries) led them to risk practically everything and cross treacherous seas in order to reach Australia. Like the Syrophoenician woman, they come begging for mercy.

Matthew’s Gospel has Jesus giving the woman the silent treatment and his disciples urging him to send her away. Jesus justifies his indifference by saying he was sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). Taking care of one’s own is certainly the most human and natural thing to do. Selfishness is an inborn trait. Many anti-immigration protesters speak of the poor and homeless who are already present within Australian society who need to be taken care of, without having to take on the additional burden from abroad. The Australian Bishops’ Statement makes reference to this:

There may also be the selfishness of the rich. Not everyone in Australia is rich, but we are a rich nation by any reckoning. The asylum seekers are... not being ‘pulled’ to Australia by a desire for wealth but are being ‘pushed’ from their homeland and other lands where there is no life worth living. No-one wants them.⁸

To continue with the text, far from going away from Jesus the unnamed woman (much like the asylum seekers who are known by the number of the boat they arrived in) in Matthew’s Gospel persisted

⁷Hisako Kinukawa, “The Syrophoenician Woman: Mark 7:24-30,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, London: SPCK, 1995, 138–155, at 142.

⁸ Statement by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on Asylum Seekers, - *ACBC Media Blog—Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*, accessed at <http://mediablog.catholic.org.au/?p=2892>.

and even “came and knelt before him” (v. 25). As if pushed to the wall Jesus responded, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26). This is a stinging sentence, uncharacteristic of the loving and benevolent Jesus who is Lord and Saviour. It is unkind, insensitive, offensive and racially inappropriate. Some interpreters suggest that it is merely a test which Jesus is putting the woman through in order to ascertain her faith. They cite how the episode concluded with Jesus proclaiming “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (v. 28). Others point to Mark’s version which has the additional clause, “Let the children be fed first” (v. 27), insisting that the divinely appointed order in which the Gospel would spread has to be respected.⁹ In other words, it is more important for Jesus to be obedient to God’s time than to give in to human respect. Reaching out to the Gentiles can wait.

The slandered woman’s response sets the stage for further theologizing. Her riposte, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (v. 27), calls into question some of the theories bandied about above. The outsider woman was clearly challenging Jesus’ exclusivist attitude: “some feminist interpreters like Sharon Ringe and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have embraced the idea that the Syrophenician woman bests Jesus in the repartee, calling Jesus to account, even teaching him something about the nature of his own mission.”¹⁰ A few points can be made to support this thesis. Firstly, she was not asking to be treated like the master’s children. Like the asylum seekers, she was looking for crumbs or loose change. Both the master’s household and the dogs eat simultaneously; there is no need to wait until the former has finished. Bread is plentiful, as illustrated by the Feeding of the Five Thousand, a miracle Jesus had performed earlier while en route to Tyre and Sidon (Mt 14:13-20). Secondly, the woman was not asking for bread, but for healing. The former is an economic entity while the latter transcendental. Healing, like salvation, compassion or love, does not run the risk of running out. The asylum seekers are asking for acceptance, to be recognised as human beings and not treated like dogs, locked up in cages. There is plenty of love and compassion in Australia. Bishop John Harrower of the Anglican Church in Pontville

⁹Eric Lyons and Kyle Butt, “Was Jesus Unkind to the Syrophenician Woman?” *Apologetics Press*, accessed at <http://www.apologeticspress.org/apcontent.aspx?category=10&article=3797>.

¹⁰Jane E. Hicks, “Moral Agency at the Borders: Rereading the Story of the Syrophenician Woman,” *Word & World* 23/1 (Winter 2003) 76–84, at 77.

is recorded in the *Mary Meets Mohommad* documentary as saying: "Not only are they locking them in; they are also locking love out." These three points suggest that the genius of the Syrophoenician woman was in her dogged persistence which turned out to be a lesson to Jesus of his own earlier teaching about things which defile. Purity is not about what one eats or who one associates with: "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles" (Mt 15:18).

While Matthew cites the woman's faith for the healing of her daughter, Mark points to her retort: "For saying that, you may go — the demon has left your daughter" (v. 29). In other words it was her words, her wit and her challenge which coerced Jesus to change his mind. This, of course, happened only after Jesus engaged her directly. Social relationships have a way of affecting conversion, even for Jesus. That is why social psychology advocates that facilitating proximity and familiarity enhances the potential for developing positive relationships between parties. This is what happened in the case of Mary of Pontville and her fellow knitters when they encountered Mohammad and the other refugees. Like Jesus, their minds were opened and hearts were changed. That's another way of saying they had a conversion experience.

The Asylum Seeker as Good Samaritan

Another classic Gospel text often used to theologize about the "other" is the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). Here, it is Jesus' teachings which are explored and not so much his own witness or demeanour. To begin, it is important to mention that the label "Good Samaritan" has been employed over the centuries as an oxymoron, suggesting that Samaritans are not expected to be good. The Gospel seems to have used the negative stereotype on a whole racial group just in order to teach a lesson. It is inappropriate, to say the least. In the context of our discussion it is very much like saying the "Good Asylum Seeker" or the "Good Muslim." They are certainly offensive labels. At best they leave a bad taste but they could also be reinforcing the ethnic and religious divide. The incident which Jesus narrates is looked upon as an exception, just as asylum seekers or Muslims being good are. Thus, the Good Samaritan is by no means a flattering label. It is thus used in this article hesitatingly and with caution.

As is true of all parables there are multiple interpretative paradigms for understanding the teaching intended in this Lukan

parable. Augustine's allegorical interpretation is probably the most common.¹¹ The man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho represents every person. The robbers are the satans. Over the centuries the priest and the Levite have come to represent the Prophets and the Law of what Christians pejoratively call the Old Testament. They are too concerned with issues of purity and so touching a wounded person would render them unclean. In other words, according to Christian theology, the religion of the Old Israel will not bring the ordinary person to salvation. The next person to come by is the Samaritan, who "was moved with pity" (v. 33). This, according to the Christian interpretation, is the Lord Jesus who, "having poured oil and wine" (sacramental symbols) on the wounds (sin), "put him on his own animal" (the Lord's body which bear our sins) and "brought him to an inn" (the church) (v. 34). "The next day he took out two denarii" (Baptism and Eucharist or knowledge of Father and Son?), asked "the innkeeper" (church leader) to "[t]ake care of him; and when I come back (second coming), I will repay you whatever more you spend" (v. 35).

Christians, therefore, are exhorted to be followers of Christ and to be Samaritans to others who fall by the wayside. In the context of the present discussion the Australian Christians should serve as Samaritans to the asylum seekers. They are neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. The first two passers-by who did not lend a hand were probably too preoccupied with what would happen to them if they stopped. Would not the robbers beat them up as well? The Samaritan's preoccupation was more around what would happen to the man if he did not stop. This shift of concern from one of self-centredness to one of other-centredness is what being Christian means. According to this interpretation Christians are called to be good Samaritans to their fellow neighbours. In fact, numerous charitable organisations and social welfare services today have taken on the name Samaritan as part of their identity.

However, a closer look at this will reveal that there is nothing really unique in this teaching. That is exactly the same message which the episode on the Syrophenician woman conveyed. Helping those in need is a given. Another parable was not needed to explicate on this teaching of love for God and love for neighbour. Jesus already told the lawyer to "do this, and you will live" (v. 28). The parable of

¹¹Robert L. Plummer, "Parables in the Gospels: History of Interpretation and Hermeneutical Guidelines," *SBJT* 13/3 (2009) 4–11, at 5.

the Good Samaritan, according to Amy Jill-Levine, was told to expound on a more radical teaching. She suggests that we need to think of Samaritans “more as the enemy, as those who do the oppressing. From the perspective of the man in the ditch, Jewish listeners might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. They might have thought, ‘I’d rather die than acknowledge that one from that group saved me.’”¹² If we look at Samaritans that way then perspectives change. Within the Australian context where Muslim refugees in general (no thanks to the media) are often inappropriately associated with violence, terrorism and jihad, one can understand the Islamophobia that so pervades society. On hearing that the 400 asylum seekers are mainly Afghan Muslims one of the protesters of the Pontville detention centre is recorded as saying: “We don’t know what kind of people are being introduced into our community and around our children.”

So, if the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches that the one who comes to the aid of the helpless is someone who is hated and feared by the general community then it radically shifts the conversation. Discipleship challenges us as Christians to open our minds and hearts to those whom society perceives as enemies. Acting on negative stereotypes towards others is unChristian. The God of surprises can reveal that at times it is our perceived enemies who will be the only ones who come to our aid. They are our neighbours. They will be the ones who risk their lives in order to save ours. Christians in Australia, especially those who are vehemently opposed to accepting refugees and asylum seekers, have the Christian duty to view these migrants no longer from the “us” versus “them” paradigm. They are neighbours whom we will one day thank for their generosity, love and compassion.

The Asylum Seeker as Neighbour

The best way for such revelations to be discerned is through personal experience. Direct encounters have privileged revelatory significance as they not only change people’s minds but transform their hearts as well. This then has the potential for leading to an acceptance of the “other” as person and child of God. He or she becomes neighbour and the cruelty and violence of stereotyping is broken. Having visited many asylum seekers, the Australian bishops

¹²Amy Jill-Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014) 96.

can relate to this: "Bishops have seen the faces; we know the names; we have heard the stories. That is why we say now, Enough of this institutionalised cruelty."

Mary of Pontville began the journey in the *Mary and Mohammad* documentary with all the characteristics of a xenophobic racist Christian Australian. Thanks to her curiosity she was dragged into direct encounters with the flesh and blood asylum seekers themselves. Towards the end of the documentary she had this to say: "I needed to have this experience... I never imagined that any of these people from Afghanistan would have been in my house. Earlier on I would have thought nothing of just kicking them out if they came to my door. Now we are friends and I think a lot about them." Another of her knitters added: "It taught me about meself (*sic*). My attitudes changed so quickly and I think it was mainly because they just became individuals instead of a sea of people flooding our shores. They are nice people." These changes in attitude and perceptions of the refugee and asylum seeker are made possible because the stranger migrant is now no longer seen as "other" or intruder or foreigner, but has become neighbour. This is the task of the Australian Christian. Jesus' command is: "Go and do likewise."