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HOSPITALITY IN A TIME OF MIGRATION: REFLECTING ON RACISM AND POVERTY

Linh Hoang[♦]

Siena College, New York

Abstract

Migration is racialized, especially when documentations made it more difficult for some to move. Asians were selectively discriminated against through passports. It is also difficult on the poor who may not afford travel documents. In similar manner, early Christianity formed by distinguishing itself from other religions through ethnic and racial markers. These markers are a natural part of every person which automatically make religion as well as ethnicity and race, an essential part of humanity. The second part of the article examines the practice of hospitality within Christianity. Hospitality is an important teaching in Scripture which emphasizes the welcoming of all people and especially the poor. The practice of a Christian hospitality will make better the situation of racism and poverty in the migration process.

Introduction

Migration is a natural condition of human existence and in many ways contributes positively to human development. It would be unimaginable to adequately cover the extensive migration history in any one volume let alone in a singular paper. Bringing attention to this limitation is not to shy away from the responsibility of

[♦]**Linh Hoang**, OFM, PhD is Associate Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at Siena College in New York. He teaches in the area of Catholic Studies, Globalization, World Religions and Asian American Studies. His book *Rebuilding Religious Experience* (2007) was his doctoral dissertation. He has published articles in *New Theology Review*, *American Catholic Studies*, *Horizons*, *Multicultural Review*, *Asian Theology Review*, *Visions*, and chapters in *The Catholic Studies Reader* and *Southeast Asian Diaspora in the United States Memories and Visions, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*. He is currently serving a three-year term as a consultant to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Asian and Pacific Islander Catholic concerns. Email: lhoang@siena.edu

addressing many complicated issues which accompany any discussion on migration such as politics, poverty, and racism.

Racism has influenced the teaching on migration in the West where the dominant narrative of a European migration prevails rather than as a worldwide phenomenon. For instance, Asia, dominated by the Chinese who moved to many different places. "From 1870 to 1930 approximately 35 million migrants moved into the 4.1 million square kilometres of Southeast Asia, compared with the 39 million migrants who moved into the 9.8 million square kilometres of the United States."¹ The sheer number alone resituates the rather popular but narrow focus of global migration dominated by a European narrative. A reason for this skewed attention to migrations outside of the Northern Atlantic region rests on the cultural and racial attitudes of the Europeans to others, and in the 19th century, especially towards Asians. Many writers stereotyped Asians as backward and earthbound peasants unable to participate in the sweep of modern history which included the ability and desire to migrate. Their travel was dictated by external dynamics such as employment opportunities and coercive intervention such as colonization.² Migration, it seems, was not an initiative taken by Asians.

The discrimination against Asians was apparently more concentrated because Africans at this time were already enslaved and moved involuntary around the globe to labour for Europeans' newly settled places. As Europeans continue to migrate, the safety of their travellers became a top priority. Regulations as a means to secure protection for Europeans going abroad were established. Then eventually it became an apparatus to prohibit those coming to the European borders. Hence, identity documentations such as passports, visas, and other migration controls are now often perceived as obstacles against free exchange stemming from fearful racial attitudes.³

When the Europeans migrated so did their religion. As the late Middle Ages was the height of Catholic missionary activity around the world, the 19th and 20th centuries became a time of reinforcing and reconstructing Christianized places. The migration of Christianity into new places added another layer to the racializing aspect of European migration, especially since early Christianity involved race-productions.

¹Adam M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, 64.

²McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 43-44.

³McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 3.

My paper will focus on migration through the lens of racism, with special attention to poverty which can be a consequence of both migration and racism. Particular attention will be given to the time period 1840 to the present when mass migration occurred in almost every corner of the globe. The paper will be divided into four parts. First, I will describe how early Christianity used race as a means to distinguish themselves from Judaism and other religions. Second, I consider the 19th and 20th centuries as a period when racial profiling was concretized through the use of travel documents which is now popularly known as the passport. Third, I draw attention to refugees who defy the use of passports because they either were stripped of them or theirs became void due to the fact of their home country ceasing to exist or renamed. Also, the plight of the refugees converges on the discussion of migration, racism, and poverty in varied but palpable ways. Fourth, I will discuss how hospitality as an important aspect of theology must also be considered in reflecting on migration, racism, and poverty. It is hospitality that is practiced in the Bible which provides examples to welcoming the stranger who is now reflected in the migrant and refugee in our global society.

Christianity as Differentiating between Races

The beginning of Christianity was an effort to move across cultural differences in order to build a relation not only with people in power but also with the larger Gentile population. The daunting task of winning over political power and leaders would provide Christianity with security and stability. The process, as Denise Kimber Buell describe in her book *Why This New Race*, was steep in ethnic and racial strategies.⁴

From the earliest foundation of Christianity, race has been part of the creation of a Christian identity. It may not have the same volatile pulse as current debates on race, but race was used to make distinctions between groups and within the larger group of Christians.

Ethnicity was used to distinguish between the religions or rather the people who practice those religions, especially making the distinction between Judaism and the newly formed Christianity.⁵ This is evidenced by the early Christian texts' use of *genos* and *ethos* which can be variously translated as race/ethnicity. Even though one could

⁴Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This new Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

⁵ Buell, *Why This New Race*, 37.

argue that the early Christians did not have the racial debates of contemporary times, they did use *genos/ethnos* to distinguish their newly found religion from the older Jewish tradition. Judaism and other religions at that time benefited from the way Christians made these distinctions since they were not as persecuted as Christians under Roman rule.

In this way, race was then naturally infused into the way religion was distinguished from one another. The reading of race/ethnicity into the early foundation of Christianity is to highlight that human beings have been intrinsically conditioned to make distinctions between one another. At the basic level or most tangible level is the physical appearance of people — how they perceived themselves as well as how they were differentiated by the outside world.

This brief description of early Christianity's racializing of their identity against their Jewish counterpart provides a way to understand how even religions are not even immune from making race as an identity marker. These identity markers as concretized by travel documents provide even stronger evidence for the racializing of migration.

Early Racial Profiling: The Travel Document

Prior to the proliferation of border control and the international documentation apparatus, the global community was involved in the debate of free mobility. It was initiated predominantly from European nations advocating for the natural right to explore new territories privileged on the natural law tradition advocated by Christianity. Assertions of the natural rights of mobility were increasingly qualified by an overriding concern with allegiance and the mutual obligations of individuals to the states.⁶ The nation-states found authority and also legitimacy with appeal to a natural law which seem to privilege free whites and their desire for unfettered travel.

Adam McKeown argues that border regulations through the use of passports, photographs, and fingerprinting initiated in the late 19th century relied on the authority of nation-states. The goal by white settler nations was to regulate Asian migrations specifically the Chinese. Second, he asserts that border control created a new order, a "melancholy order," in which migration regulation began to deal directly with the individual which gradually took away responsibility the nation-states had to the individual. These principles have diffused throughout the world becoming a universal standardized reality today.

⁶McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 24.

In the 1860s and 1870s, white settler nations espoused ideals of individual freedom and rights, but rejected the Asian migrants. The discrimination against Asians was twofold. One, it was the fact that Europeans considered Asians not civilized enough in comparison with whites. Second, it stemmed from stagnant policies and ideologies rather than practicing the progressive democracies which the Europeans implemented in their respective countries. The irony was that while these nations excluded Asians, particularly the Chinese, from white settler nations, they were simultaneously demanding that Asian borders be opened to foreign trade. In the practice of regulating borders, these authorities individualized migrants' identities.⁷ While there were multiple types of identities linked to ancestry, caste, class, title, nobility, and so forth, migrant regulation in white settler nations resulted in regulating migrants as only "free individuals"; but free individuals who were not welcomed to stay in white settler nations because their contributions would be suspect since they did not share the same cultural background.

When passports were first issued in the late 19th century, they were monitored by an enormous variety of local governments, ministries, and personalities who could vouch for the migrant. There was a personal stake involved from both sides of this process so that the migrant could feel supported and protected. Passports were not just sent away to be processed but they were locally processed because personal reputations were on the line. Each state, province or city had its own particular brand so that there was no uniformity. These passports were valid for particular destinations and voyages and fell under terms of treaties or other reciprocal privileges honouring safe passage.

The acquisition of the modern international passports grew increasingly impersonal under centralized regimes, with paperwork replacing face-to-face relationships and generating new means of distancing and obstruction. But the issuing of passports only worked for legal travel. There are times when people must travel either illegally that is not having or carrying a passport. These include those who would not have the means to acquire a passport because it is too expensive such as those living in abject poverty or illiterate people. Then there are refugees who must flee their countries sometimes they do not have passports readily available or lose them during their quick exit from their home country. These exceptions expose the

⁷McKeown, *Melancholy Order*, 177.

many flaws of passports: the expense, racializing as well as the class and status symbol of passports. Furthermore, the passport system is not effective for everyone, that is, there are people whose home countries are renamed under a new military government so the former country ceases to exist. The old passports become insufficient. There are also people who cannot afford passports because the cost of time and money is too burdensome. The refugees may fall into both of these categories and considering their plight will help us better understand the racializing of passports. These exceptions would help nations reconsider the issuing of passports. The refugees help to uncover how the racializing of passport must be reconsidered.

Plight of Refugees

As people move they become categorized differently, migrants are considered as voluntary movers who are seeking better employment, more opportunities or re-unification with their family. Refugees are forced movers who fled their homes and must find new places to resettle. Their resettlement relies on the assistance of countries or territories willing to welcome them.

What makes refugees different from other categories of migrants is their need for international protection and their right to enjoy asylum and seek resettlement in another country. It is this broader collaboration within the international community that makes refugees a special case. The cooperation between asylum countries and resettlement countries needed to be ironed out in order to protect and shelter refugees. Asylum states are to temporarily house refugees in transition to a resettlement country.⁸ This may be the same country but that falls on the authority and priority of the particular country. But it reinforces the fact that refugees seek the help of those who can provide safety for them.

Refugee issues are often considered somewhat obscure. Refugee plights frequently arise episodically, thus falling between the cracks even for policy authorizers. This is compounded by the fact that refugee issues in broad terms have not had political advocates in recent times. More often, particular ethnic groups have been championed, said one senior United States Democratic staffer involved in appropriations. "There is no real political pay-off at home."⁹ This creates a situation where there is no incentive to

⁸J. Bruce Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance: Religion, Refugee Work, and U.S. Foreign Policy*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 87-90.

⁹Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance*, 88.

develop expertise on refugee issues and provide a counterweight to the Executive Branch. Nevertheless, in general terms, refugee programs have done 'better than most' this staffer said; both Democrats and Republicans like humanitarian aid more than long-term development aid.¹⁰

The case of the United States interaction and involvement is the example I will use to highlight a few points about resettlement. The U.S. government has less involvement with migrants after their arrival. In cooperation with voluntary agencies, the government decides where refugees will live initially, ensures that their health is monitored, decides what special cash and medical assistance should be available to them, allocates money for language and employment training, and has conducted a wide range of research on what factors hasten or retard their adjustment. "The result is a level of social planning that is uncharacteristic of American government and thus a rich source of practical information on what more extensive Americanization programs might be like."¹¹

A State Department staffer that I spoke with indicated that the screening for refugee resettlements in the United States does not involve knowledgeable questions about religion. If a refugee is entering the U.S. based on religious persecution, they are asked to demonstrate that. Also, they are asked to demonstrate the knowledge of their own faith background. For many, this becomes a daunting task especially when they do not have strong doctrinal knowledge of their faith. They may have a ritual or popular knowledge of their faith. They know what their parents taught them or their personal experiences. This is also the same for the interviewer who also has limited knowledge of their faith. There are currently no steps taken to address this issue.¹² As the world becomes more aware of the plight of refugees, this needs to be addressed.

Hospitality in a Theology of Migration

Hospitality is central to the moral human life but also theologically significant to Christian belief and practice. There has been much

¹⁰ Arthur C. Helton, *The Price of Indifference: Refugees and Humanitarian Action in the New Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, 252.

¹¹David W. Haines, "Refugee," *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters & Reed Ueda, Cambridge & London: Harvard University Press, 2007, 65.

¹²Personal interview that I conducted with a State Department official. The name is withheld at their request.

written on hospitality in Christian practice. These vary from the monastic hospitality of the Benedictines to the daily scriptural guidelines of living the compassion of God. The continuum of writings on hospitality provides so many options and opportunities to see the broad scope of hospitality. The following discussion on hospitality considers migration, race, and poverty.

While dealing with their own status as a new ethnicity as well as newcomers, Christians also acted out of the Gospel mandate making hospitality an essential mark of what it means to be Christian. For example, Tertullian, the third-century theologian, understood and empathized with the plight of women whose non-believing husbands insisted on going to the baths when their wives wanted to receive visitors or sneak food to the imprisoned.¹³ Pope Gregory the Great pulled no punches when he discovered that Janurius, the bishop of Caralis, allowed a monastery to charge a mother for her daughter's burial plot. "This abuse which comes from avarice, be not ventured on any more even in the case of strangers."¹⁴ The response to uprooted people is biblically demanded, the imperative, however, rests on something deeper than Hebrew Scripture law. The demand to love God with all one's heart and mind and to love one's neighbour as oneself is made clearer and more specific in Jesus' teaching in Matthew chapter 25. All nations will be gathered and separated according to fairly simple criteria: provision to the least of these of food, water, clothes, medical care in the context of invitation. They crossed a border in order to dwell in a better situation. These historical and biblical examples initiate a conversation about hospitality in theology.

Hospitality reminds Christians of the ancient Hebrews and Christians who were strangers and aliens crossing borders and dwelling in precarious situations that forced them to take hospitality seriously (Gen 15:2; Ex 32:13; Num 27:1-11; 36:7). Their experiences influenced the life of the Church which has been born by the Holy Spirit into a new community. The Holy Spirit drives the Church into the world, even to the ends of the earth, to interact with and receive the hospitality, kindness, and gifts of strangers of all sorts. In addition, the New Testament describes all dimension of hospitality where it finds a place. Some of the specific references to hospitality can be found in the synoptic gospels Mark 6:30-44, Matthew 25:31-46

¹³*Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans*, Chapter 8.

¹⁴Pope Gregory I, *The Letters of Gregory the Great, Books 1-4* trans. John R.C. Martyn, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004, 101.

Luke 22:7-30; Acts 10, and Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans (1Cor 11:17-34; Rom 14:1-15:7).¹⁵

Furthermore in the New Testament, it is the encounter with the stranger who, as we are reminded, may be God's special envoys to bless or challenge us. Even though the stranger may be there to test our compassion, they are persons who occupy a space and also sense of purpose. The stranger needs the help and support of the host but also the host needs their experiences in return. Strangers can be characterized as those who are different from us. They are those out there who occupy spaces that are unwelcoming and dangerous. This is usually in an extreme cases because strangers tend to be a mixture of human characteristics similar to every other human such as culture, race and socioeconomic status. The same possessed by the host who welcomes them. "They can be or are families, friends and neighbours who have become alienated from us for a variety of reasons."¹⁶ A stranger is never really a stranger but one who possesses some of the same qualities as other people.

In the place of the stranger in the New Testament is now the migrant, the refugee who must bridge the familiar with the unfamiliar. Encountering the stranger involves three moments: first, migrant and refugees need basics food, clothing and shelter. The hospitality offered in such cases is palpable, and God's redemptive gifts are tangibly felt rather than just heard. Second, the receiving of migrants/refugees is an occasion for exchanging stories, learning to live together, and envisioning the future together. Third, the creation of new moments and spaces provides safe places where the pains and hurts that refugees, exiles, and migrants carry can be freely expressed and heard. The current situation of the world where natural disasters such as typhoons, earthquakes, fires as well as military skirmishes underscores the fact that refugees need immediate basic accommodations and food. These situations call for an urgent response to create a culture of hospitality that extends from political leaders to aid workers to the refugees waiting in camps.

The encounter of the migrant and refugee in resettlement areas provides an opportunity to create places that are welcoming. In order to create a hospitable environment, the identities of the host and the guest cannot be blurred. They must be able to maintain who they are

¹⁵Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.

¹⁶Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 107.

and where they came from. Thus, a guest should not be forced into any sort of naïve syncretism of the host's preferred religion or beliefs. Remember that refugee resettlement is protection rather than full assimilation into another country. The host is bound to the guest.

When Jesus speaks of the Kingdom as a place whose origin coincides with the "foundation of the world," it indicates that for Jesus hospitality is fundamental to the very being of God. Jesus is explicit that the Kingdom is inherited. "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34). Inheritance is one of the critical concepts of biblical life; the entire structure and success of the nation of Israel turned upon the critical idea of land and place being passed along through family lines. "Inherit" suggests a complete turning over, a willing, of house and property. The stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the migrant/refugee are in peril; they are in need of hospitality, because they have been disinherited in one sense or another (1 Samuel 2:7-8). They have lost basically everything they know. They have become poor. Jesus raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour.

The hospitality to people in poverty becomes ever more urgent. We must also acknowledge the theological theme of the responsibility of the rich. While no one is too poor to give, the Bible suggests that those who have are obligated to share. In Acts we are told that no one in the community of faith was in need (Acts 4:34) and this was made possible by sharing. Failure to welcome the immigrants, refugee, displaced person or migrant worker constitutes a moral failure, not simply an economic choice. The expectations of welcoming go far beyond provision of material needs.

In his book, *Poor People*, William T. Vollman states that the measurement of who is truly poor fluctuates so much that it is difficult to accurately describe who is poor. But as he states,

for me, poverty is not mere deprivation; for people may possess fewer things than I and be richer; poverty is *wretchedness*. It must then be an experience more than an economic state. It therefore remains somewhat immeasurable... I do associate economic factors with emotional ones, in hopes of making some comparisons between people, however vague and loose; but I can best conceive of poverty as a series of perceptual categories.¹⁷

¹⁷William T. Vollman, *Poor People*, Harper Collins Publishers, 2007, 36.

It is the wretchedness of poverty that many migrants and refugees are thrown into. But they are usually lifted from it because many helping hands are extended to them.

Hospitality, as it has been practiced from ancient days, protected people from the dangers of travelling alone. There were no safe and cheap shelters for travellers. Along the way people could be brutalized, robbed, wounded, and lost. Hospitality acknowledges the vulnerability of being human, both my humanity and that of the stranger. Travellers are prone to all sorts of dangers. As the practice of hospitality increases our wisdom and openness, we tend to become more aware of the deeper implications of hospitality. We come to recognize that the need for hospitality goes deeper than we originally realized. Pursuing a life of hospitality will eventually make you realize its social and moral implications. Hospitality involves our entire culture. In a culture that excludes others, prejudice and hatred are common. Prejudice has deeper effects, in addition to simply causing people to exclude others: it is at the root of hostility that is cruel and violent.

What if they are not Christians? Christians cannot receive religious others in exactly the same way as Christians receive other Christians — or else the differences between religious traditions will be ignored. Christians do not corner the market of hospitality, and an interreligious dialogue on hospitality would seem to flourish amidst the mutuality of hospitable practices. Inasmuch as the ancient Israelites were willing to be hospitable to and perhaps even instructed by the wisdom traditions of their neighbours, might we not also profitably adopt this same posture today?

The interreligious relations in our early twenty-first-century context need to be addressed under the umbrella of hospitality especially since the crossing of borders is also an encounter with someone of a different religious background. Christians span across the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist spectrum of practices with people in other faiths. The exclusivist stances view a discontinuity between the Christian faith and other religions. Christianity from the perspective of soteriological and eschatological claims focuses on the ecclesial and historical practices that have shaped by and also inform such claims. The inclusivist approach views the relationship of Christianity to other religions in terms of a spectrum of continuity. Christianity fulfils the highest aspirations of other religions. The distinction from these two perspectives can be illustrated as “if

exclusivism emphasizes 'no salvation outside the church,' inclusivism accentuates, 'no salvation outside of Christ and the Spirit.'" The pluralist perspective is not easily identifiable. One way of describing this approach is that pluralists (of theology) begin with a theocentric model that includes many ways or approaches toward an indefinable or ineffable centre. And, as Yong points out the scholars in this area of study such as Raimon Panikkar, Aloysius Pieris and John Hick do not fit neatly into this category because their work are so complex, multifaceted and many stranded. "The approach of systematically linking Christian theology of religions to Christian interreligious practices is relatively new."¹⁸

Beliefs and practices are part of being in the Church but that does not completely suffice. The Church is also the body of Christ which identifies who we are and also needs to be recognized by what we do. There is definitely an ecclesial hospitality that needs to be considered as the Church continues to maintain and expand its ministries to people who are in most need of assistance. The Church has developed through the ages and still maintains this attitude in some respect that is no longer merely guest but host to others.

A theology of migration requires recognition of the biblical directive and also a creative imagination. From the many major religious traditions, there have been and continue to be stories about people on the move. A theology of migration must attend to the religious diversity that many refugees bring to their country of resettlement. This religious diversity is not only the obvious difference between religious traditions but also the subtle differences within a particular religious tradition. Moreover, a theology of migration must also seriously recognize how poverty affects and continues to affect the way some people are able to engage.

Conclusion

Hospitality is welcoming the migrant, the poor, and the refugees. These are our modern day people who are now guests that are crucial to the making of Christianity. If Christianity is about the community and community is about all who are there then these are the people that needs to be recognized. They are the grace given to Christians. Hospitality tops the list of what is valued in a Christian because people are valued, and an equal dignity for all is assumed. Christian hospitality is devoted to the vision of unity among God's children. Every human is sacred; every life is holy ground.

¹⁸Yong, *Hospitality and the Other*, 120.

The reflection on migration through the lens of racism and poverty has provided a view into the complexities of people on the move. Not every migrant is the same nor are they categorized in the same way around the globe. Some are given free and safe travel through the form of passports and other documents but then there are those who cannot afford or able to obtain these documents. The situation is not fair nor seem to be alleviated any time soon. Thus, the poor will still be with us as Jesus has stated. But this does not mean that they need to be fettered behind doors or limited in their ability to move. The hope of migration or moving to new opportunities affords people in poverty some meaning to their lives. Through the hospitality of others this can become a reality for people in poverty.

Finally, the ability to practice hospitality is a responsibility of every human person on the globe. It is not just a Christian mandate but rather a human condition similar to migration. Hospitality does need practice and there are exercises to do. The first is listening. Listening is the power of hospitality; it is what makes hospitality the life-giving thing it is. In the listening stance, the focus switches from the self to the other. Listening is the most hospitable thing we can do, and if we do no other thing than train ourselves to listen to others, we will have taken great steps in hospitality. Listening is the core of hospitality, and while the people we listen to benefit, in the end we are the ones transformed. Listening means we move past what we think we know, and by listening to someone else's story, we learn something we would not have discovered any other way. Listening helps us understand how others are different from us, and how they are the same. This will also locate where we come from and where we should move to. It is the migration process.