

God and Refugees: Foundations for Hope

The Church Responding to Muslim Refugees

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This paper was presented at the Muslim Refugees' Consultation in Amman, Jordan December 2015.

Why does God care for the refugees and migrants? God's particular concern for vulnerable foreigners is based on the fact that they are displaced from their homes, where they have been physically rooted. Place and one's identity and security are integrally linked. The process of being displaced is devastating for individuals. Both the Old and New Testaments include the care for the foreigners in need, along with the poor and vulnerable, as the responsibility of the people of God. The paradigm for ministry to refugees is found in Miroslav Volf's concept of exclusion and embrace. This is the missiological basis on which the present ministry to refugees in the Middle East is based.

The refugee crisis engulfing the world right now is not a new phenomenon. It is only the latest wave of refugees who are fleeing conflict, persecution, destruction of their homes and livelihoods, and death. Displacement as a result of war and natural disasters has a long history through the ages. While there are legal difference between refugees and migrants, in reality there are very few differences because people move when they are unable to continue living and supporting their families where they are.

The level of human suffering of these waves of refugees requires the Church and Christians to understand God's perspective on refugees. Yet how the church demonstrates the reality and compassion of Christ to those displaced will vary from context to context. While the majority of the refugees are comparatively poor, their needs are different than those who live in poverty, because refugees have lost their homes and their identity. Princeton theologian Daniel Migliore writes, "Confession of Jesus Christ takes place in particular historical and cultural contexts. Our response to the questions of who we say Jesus Christ is and how he helps us is shaped in important ways by the particular context in which these questions arise".¹ This paper will explore the biblical, theological and missiological foundations, as well as some observations from current missions for this discussion. While most of what will be discussed is common for all refugees, there are some aspects that are specific to ministering to Muslim refugees.

Biblical and Theological Foundations

The problem of refugees and displacement cannot only be analysed through political and social lenses. The theological and biblical framework and context for understanding the problem of refugees and displacement is the fallen world we live in. Sin is not only an individual reality but is manifested in social institutions and values. American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr states that evil is often thought of as an individual trait, whereas institutions may in effect represent a far more insidious evil that is more likely to abuse

¹ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapid, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

power and is usually more resistant to change.² There are social, legal and economic structures in society that are unjust and inherently evil. These may be in the form of deeply imbedded social attitudes, legal and economic systems, or religious and social practices that discriminate against specific people, groups and individuals. Racism, apartheid, communalism, sexual exploitation, female genital mutilation, political oppression, hyper patriotism, human trafficking, forced displacement, and ethnic cleansing are just some examples of how these socially imbedded attitudes surface in everyday life. Oftentimes these attitudes are institutionalized through laws, economic policies and institutions that discriminate against particular groups or favour the wealthy, the elite and specific social groups.³ This is the context within which displacement with its devastating consequences of dehumanizing individuals and whole communities takes place. It highlights our role as a society in any refugee or migrant crisis and as to how they are treated. This is also the context within which God responds and brings healing and wholeness.

The Grace and Compassion of God

Displacement has always been a reality since the beginning of time. Adam and Eve were displaced from their home that God had created for them because of their disobedience. Cain was judged and driven from the area where he had made his home because of jealousy and murder. Centuries later, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered and the elite were driven into exile because of idolatry and social injustice. *Yet what is remarkable in each instance is the character of God, who extends grace and unmerited favour to those who have been displaced enabling them to cope with the consequences of their own actions, even though the crisis was their fault.* In the case of Adam and Eve, He provided them clothing so that they could cope with the consequences of shame. Even in their exile from His presence, God never abandoned them but blessed them with children (Gen. 4:1) and enabled them to worship Him (Gen. 4:3-4). God gave Cain a physical mark so that as he wandered he would be protected and not harmed, as he feared. God never abandoned ancient Israel in exile and promised that at the right time He would restore them (Jer. 29: 10-14). He even instructed them what to do so that He could bless them in exile (Jer. 29: 4-8).

At other times, when the tribes of Jacob were humiliated and enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, away from the land they had lived in, God heard their cry and sent them a liberator. So whether people are displaced because of their own actions or are victims of the brutality of others, God is concerned for their plight and wellbeing. God never abandons His creation and in His righteousness will fulfil His obligation to them.⁴ God's

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), *passim*.

³ There are others who have written extensively about institutionalized evil (sin). Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992). Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1917).

⁴ Theologian James D.G. Dunn emphasizes the relational dimensions of righteousness and states that God's righteousness was the "fulfillment of His covenant obligation as Israel's God in delivering, saving, and vindicating Israel, despite Israel's own failure" (Dunn, p.342). So, just as God was righteous in His relationship with Israel, He is also righteous with the rest of His creation and will fulfill His obligation to redeem and save them. (Rom. 1: 16-17). Dunn states that while the Greek understanding of righteousness meant a state of moral perfection, in Hebrew thought "righteousness" is understood more as a relational concept – "as the meeting of obligations laid upon the individual by the relationship of which he or she is

character demonstrated through His grace, compassion and righteousness is the starting point in knowing how God relates to the refugees and displaced.

God's Concern for the Displaced and Vulnerable

God caring for those who live on the margins of society because of their suffering is a prophetic act. It illustrates physically God's concern for those who are spiritually not part of His Kingdom because of the evil that has broken them and the darkness that holds them in bondage. It is a prophetic act also because caring for those who suffer shows what the Kingdom of God is really like – where the weak, poor, the vulnerable, the broken, the refugee, and the rejected are not discarded but are valued and find that they belong. It speaks about the value and worth of each person in the economy of God. Because He created them, they are of equal value regardless of their social or economic status, nationality or ethnicity.

While much has been written as to why God cares for the poor,⁵ there is very little on *why God cares for the displaced and the vulnerable foreigner*, other than the fact that He does. God's concern for the displaced (the refugee and migrant) speaks to the fact that human beings are created to belong to specific places. In creation God placed human beings in a specific location. The consequences of sin included being uprooted and displaced from what had been their home and all that was familiar to them. Anglican theologian John Inge states, "place is a fundamental category of human experience"⁶ and therefore the theological dimensions of the interaction between place and human beings needs to be understood. Philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil explains,

To be rooted is perhaps the most important need of the human soul. It is the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of the community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future...It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he form[s] a natural part.⁷

Belonging to a place gives a person an identity. The identities of Paul of Tarsus and Joseph of Arimathea indicated not only their hometown, but also identified who they were in terms of their family, social standing, and culture. Even the Son of God was referred to as Jesus of Nazareth. After identifying Jesus was from Nazareth, Nathaniel responds to Philip, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn.1:46 ESV). The place implied the moral character of its inhabitants. The idea that one's existence is

part." James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 341. German theologian G. Schrenk states that *sedaqa* implies a relationship. He writes, "This linking of right and salvation is most deeply grounded in the covenant concept. *Sedaqa* is the execution of covenant faithfulness and the covenant promises. God's righteousness as His judicial reign means that in covenant faithfulness to His people He vindicates and saves them." Quoted in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1980), 755

⁵ Rupen Das, *Compassion and the Mission of God: Revealing the Invisible Kingdom* (Leicester: Langham Global Library, 2015).

⁶ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 46.

⁷ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 43.

somehow connected to a place is what Craig Bartholomew, Professor of philosophy at Redeemer University College, refers to as *implacement*.⁸ He writes that the Bible reveals how God “intends for humans to be at home, to indwell, in their places; place and implacement is a gift and provides the possibility for imagining God in his creation.”⁹

Therefore, physical belonging, along with all its social, psychological and cultural dimensions, provides the foundation to understand what it means to belong to an eternal Kingdom and a heavenly family. It is in understanding the importance of belonging to a place and the devastation that displacement causes to an individual by destroying their identity and sense of self and dehumanizing them, does one begin to grasp God’s concern for the displaced. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann states that existentialists don’t understand that there is “human hunger for a *sense of place*.” He writes, “it is *rootlessness* and not *meaningless* that characterizes the current crises. There are no meanings apart from roots.”¹⁰

Brueggemann explains that physical places have meaning in the biblical narrative. He writes, “land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience.”¹¹ Brueggemann looks at the Old Testament narrative through the lens of the land and suggests that the central problem in the Bible is about homelessness (anomie¹²).¹³ The New Testament affirms this narrative when the letter to the Hebrews refers to certain Old Testament characters as “being strangers and exiles” and “seeking a homeland” (Heb. 11: 13-14 ESV). God then responds to the problem of displacement and loss of their home by bringing them into an eternal city, a new home and a new identity in a heavenly country (v.16). Hebrews 12:1-2 then encourages Christians to follow the example of Jesus who bears the loss of everything so that He could be “home” at the right hand of the Father. The Apostle Paul writing to the church in Philippi states, “Our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20). This dual identity of an earthly sense of belonging to a particular place and a heavenly home and citizenship are intertwined. However, the loss of an earthly home and all that it means still allows the refugee to be secure in a heavenly and enduring citizenship if they choose to accept the gift God offers.

This understanding of the importance of place and the devastating and dehumanizing experience of displacement provides the framework to understand God’s compassion and concern for the foreigner in ancient Israel.¹⁴ As Israel transitioned from a group of

⁸ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), Kindle Location 174.

⁹ Ibid, Kindle location 698.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 4

¹¹ Ibid, 2.

¹² Dictionary.com defines it as “a state or condition of individuals or society characterized by a breakdown or absence of social norms and values, as in the case of uprooted people.” Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “social instability resulting from a breakdown of standards and values; *also*: personal unrest, alienation, and uncertainty that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals.”

¹³ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 187

¹⁴ The foreigner in the Old Testament was known as a *ger* who is “is essentially a foreigner who lives more or less permanently in the midst of another community, where he is accepted and enjoys certain rights.” Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965), 74. Abraham and Moses were *gerim*. Later when the Israelites settled in the land and saw themselves as “the

nomadic tribes wandering in the wilderness to forming a nation in the land into which they were led, the social contract that they established through the laws that were given to them by God, identified the importance of care of the vulnerable in society.¹⁵ While in the first giving of the Law in Exodus (the Covenant Code) foreigners were not identified as a vulnerable group, the foundation for how they were to be treated was described in Ex. 23:9, “Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.” The experience and history of the Jews in Egypt would give them a fresh and deeper understanding of a new dimension of poverty and exclusion, and as a result would impact the social contract that was beginning to be defined by the Covenant Code of Exodus.¹⁶ The Jews by then understood the devastation that displacement causes. By the time of the second giving of the law, the Deuteronomic Code (Deut. 12-26), the fixed word pair of “widows and orphans” to signify the most vulnerable and poor,¹⁷ now included the stranger in the land (Deut. 24:20).

This is significant because while in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel there was much in the Egyptian wisdom texts and prayers, and in the ancient Near Eastern royal ideology of being just and compassionate to the poor in everyday life, in business dealings, and in the court, there was nothing about care for the foreigners who did not belong to the community and nation. A king’s concern was only his citizens and never for the foreigner. This unique distinction of concern for the vulnerable foreigner in Israel’s law speaks of God’s compassion for the displaced.

Jesus and the Vulnerable Foreigner

The Gospels do not speak much about displacement or refugees. It occasionally refers to strangers and briefly mentions that Jesus, as a child was a refugee. However, Jesus follows in the tradition of the Old Testament of showing compassion for the vulnerable in

people of the land” and the legitimate owners, all the former inhabitants became *gerim*, unless they became slaves or were assimilated into Israelite society through marriage. To this group were latter added immigrants. So while the *gerim* were free men and not slaves, they did not have full civic or political rights. Since most of the landed property was in the hands of the Israelites, the *gerim* worked by hiring out their services. So they were poor and were considered in the same category as the widows, orphans and the other poor, who were protected by the Mosaic Law to receive charity and help.

¹⁵ These included the slaves, who were to be part of households and even though did not have any rights, there were guidelines on how they were to be treated and cared for. The most vulnerable were the widows and orphans, who were to be cared for by the extended family. If for some reason this did not happen, the community had to assume responsibility to care for them.

¹⁶ David J. Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 40-42.

¹⁷ Arthur Glasser, *Announcing The Kingdom: The Story Of God's Mission In The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 87-88.

society.¹⁸ At least 75-80% of his audience were poor, which included foreigners residing in the land.¹⁹

Only a few of Jesus' encounters with foreigners were recorded. In His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well belonging to a community that was despised and marginalized by the Jews, Jesus showed her respect, compassion and understanding. When a Centurion of the hated Roman occupying army approached Jesus for healing of his servant (Lk.17: 1-10), He honoured the Centurion in front of the crowd for his understanding of authority and faith, while also healing the servant. During a visit to Tyre, when a Syro-Phoenician woman approached Jesus asking for deliverance of her daughter from demonic spirits, Jesus did not ignore her because she did not belong to the Jewish community, but healed her daughter. In every instance, Jesus showed respect to the foreigners and in compassion met their needs and made no distinction between them and the poor and vulnerable Jews He was ministering to.

When Jesus described the judgement seat of Christ in Matthew 25:31-46, He specifically referred to the faithful who had invited in strangers (v.35). Strangers in first century Palestine were non-Jewish foreigners, and tended to be poor and did not belong to the community. Jesus was stressing that those strangers who were desperate and in need were as much His concern as were the Jewish poor, widows and orphans.

While the needs and problems of the poor are different than those who have been forcibly displaced, both groups are vulnerable, experience deprivation, and often face discrimination. So when Jesus speaks about the poor, He is referring to all those who are vulnerable. God's attitude towards the vulnerable (the poor, migrants, refugees, disabled and others) is probably most clearly seen in the parable Jesus told about Lazarus the beggar. The parable is about the rich and poor in 1st century Palestine (who also included widows, orphans, and foreigners) where the rich were immortalized in lavish burial tombs that honoured their name and memory. Going against the cultural norm, Jesus instead honours Lazarus, who was not only poor but also a beggar who had nothing and no social standing, so that he is remembered by history through the living memorial of the parable because he has a name. However, Jesus leaves the rich man anonymous and thus having no lasting honour. By giving Lazarus a name, Jesus identifies him as a unique individual and not just as one of the poor who hide in shame.

In the parable, the name that Jesus pointedly chooses for the beggar is Lazarus, which is derived from Hebrew אלעזר, El'āzār, meaning "one whom God has helped". Through that He reveals the heart of God for the poor and the broken. The dogs, whose saliva is

¹⁸ So when Jesus spoke about the poor, He was referring to the majority who were oppressed because of the greed and injustice of a small wealthy and powerful elite. When He taught and preached, his listeners were the chronically poor and those in extreme poverty (who lived in the fringes of society), while some from the wealthy and elite sections of society listened in. He used parables about being exploited that they could relate to (Mk. 12:40-44, Matt: 18:21-35). He spoke about a God who cared enough to feed the birds of the air and clothe the flowers of the field because they were worried about their next meal and did not have a spare set of clothes or enough warm clothing for the winter (Matt. 6:25-34). He fed them as they listened to Him teach, because they did not have enough food to bring with them (Matt. 14:13-21). He healed them because they could not afford to go to the doctors (Matt. 8:1-17, 9:1-8, 12: 9-14, and so many more).

¹⁹ Philip A. Harland, "The Economy of First-Century Palestine: State of the Scholarly Discussion," in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches*, eds. Anthony J. Blasi, Jean Duhaime and Philip-Andre Turcotte (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2002), 515.

healing for his sores, care for Lazarus. God's creatures had more compassion for the beggar who was sick and desperately hungry than the rich man, who was oblivious of Lazarus' existence as he passed him everyday as he went in and out of his house.

The rich man is not condemned for being rich, but for not being concerned for the poor. His concern right to the end remains only for his family and never for those who are not part of his social circle. He excludes the outsider as not being worthy of his attention and care. Abu Zayd 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Khaldun al-Hadhrami (known as Ibn Khaldun), the Tunisian Arab historian and sociologist, observed that tribes survived by taking care of their own and rarely those who did not belong to their tribe.²⁰ Jesus challenges this prevailing attitude that a family's and tribe's only concern should be for their own, to the exclusion of all others.

The most remarkable thing in the parable is that Lazarus never complains nor speaks through out the parable. Culturally he would not have been allowed to speak to the rich. How can one so shamefully poor and socially outcast speak with an honourable member of the community! God breaks through this stifling cultural barrier and honours him by speaking for him who has no voice.

Lessons from Missions

Missiological Foundation

Based on these biblical and theological foundations the missiological paradigm to understand how to relate to and minister to refugees is found in Croatian theologian, now at Yale, Miroslav Volf's concept of exclusion and embrace. He writes that so many of the sins we commit against our neighbour are acts of exclusion.²¹ Volf describes exclusion as "not recognizing the other as someone who in his or her otherness belongs to the pattern of interdependence. The other then emerges as an inferior being who must either be assimilated by being made like the self or be subjugated to the self."²² The foreigner, the refugee and the migrant are thus seen as a threat to the values and security of the community. Volf writes that such societies have a false sense of purity and "want the world cleansed of the other rather than the heart cleansed of the evil that drives people out by calling those who are clean "unclean" and refusing to help make clean those who are unclean."²³

In understanding how refugees and migrants are mistreated and excluded from society, the basis for any ministry to them is found in God's act of redemption. Volf writes, "God's reception of hostile humanity into divine communion is a model of how human beings should relate to the other."²⁴ He explains that in order to move from exclusion to embrace there need to be moments that provide space for repentance, forgiveness, making space in oneself for the other, and healing of memory.

²⁰ Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), x.

²¹ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 72.

²² Ibid, 67

²³ Ibid, 74

²⁴ Ibid, 100

In a world where violence against migrants and refugees is becoming commonplace because of the perceived threat that they pose, Volf states that neutrality is not an option because taking the side of those suffering is in the prophetic and apostolic traditions of the Bible. He writes, "These people hear the groans of the suffering, take a stance, and act...After all, they are called to seek and struggle for *God's* justice, not their own."²⁵

In order to understand Volf's concept of social exclusion with regards to Muslim refugees, it is important to realize that it is deeply rooted in Arab history and culture, often for good reasons. Ibn Khaldun observes that, "only tribes held together by group feelings can live in the desert..."²⁶ since the group ensured the survival and well being of the individual. Yet this obligation was always limited in practice to the immediate group, family or clan and very rarely beyond it.²⁷ The reason for this is the concept of *assabiyah*, which Ibn Khaldun says refers to group solidarity or group consciousness. *Assabiyah* was what binds society, family, tribe, religion and nation. It gives people a sense of belonging and ensures stability of institutions in the community. It is the driving force behind all social change.²⁸ The fear is that a loss of group cohesion as described by *assabiyah* will result in the destruction of the community. Fida Muhammad at the Eastern New Mexico University writes, "'Disintegration of collective consciousness creates anomie (moral deregulation)...Loss of *assabiyah* will also create moral and economic individualism, but will end up in the destruction of a civilization."²⁹ A focus on the group cohesion ensures the survival of the group but in the process excludes the outsider or other groups.

This then provides the foundation for ministering to Muslim refugees. In the midst of their displacement, they have also lost their community which supports them and which also provides them with their social, religious, cultural and ethnic identity. As refugees they have become foreigners who do not belong in their host community. As Brueggemann stated that the crisis is one of rootlessness and that without being physically, socially and culturally rooted individuals cannot find meaning.

Missiological Lessons

Missiologically, the present refugee crisis in Syria and Iraq and the Church's response needs to be understood in the context of the history of missions among Muslims. David Garrison in his book "Wind in the House of Islam"³⁰ describes many of the different ways the Church historically has sought to minister to Muslim communities. There seem to have been no single strategy, but it varied depending on the historical and social context. The earliest recorded significant number of conversions was in 972 AD and then in 975

²⁵ Ibid, 219

²⁶ Quoted in Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), x.

²⁷ Bruce Malina writing about collectivistic societies states, "Should a group member fall ill, the goal of an individual's healing is group well-being. Focus is on the ingroup, cooperation with ingroup members, maintenance of ascribed status, and group-centered values." Bruce J. Malina, "Collectivism in Mediterranean Culture," *Understanding the Social World Of The New Testament*, edited by Richard E. DeMaris and Dietmar Neufeld (London: Routledge, 2010), 23.

²⁸ Fida Mohammad, "Ibn Khaldun's Theory of Social Change: A Comparison Between Hegel, Marx And Durkheim," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 36-37.

²⁹ Ibid, 34

³⁰ David Garrison, *Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around The World To Faith In Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014).

AD when many tribes in Syria and Palestine converted to Christianity to avoid the financial demands of their Muslim rulers. Since then some attempts to reach Muslims have included:

- Forced conversions (during the Crusades)
- Preaching, a simple lifestyle and miracles (Conrad of Ascoli in Libya in the 13th Century)
- Study of Islamic culture and language (William of Tripoli in Lebanon, 13th Century)
- Learning Arabic and use of tact and persuasion in evangelism along with respect of the rights of Muslims to property (Granada, Spain, 15th Century)
- Using the local translation of the Bible, aggressive apologetics and contextualized communities for the converts (Indonesia, late 1800s)
- Use of Arabic and embracing the culture of the people they served (the White Fathers, Algeria, late 1800s)
- Focusing on Muslim clerics in evangelism (Ethiopia, 1910)
- Being aware that during times of political and religious crises thousands of Muslims turn to the Church and to Christ (Indonesia 1965; Iran since the Islamic revolution in 1979; Algeria, 1990s; and Bangladesh since their independence in 1971).³¹

God has also been using all avenues of Christian media, as well as Christian-Muslim dialogue, and dreams and visions to introduce Muslims to Christ. There has also been a significant interest in establishing insider movements as a strategy for Muslims to encounter Christ and yet remain within their context in the hope that the Gospel would flow along family, clan and tribal relationships.

Other times, especially during the mid-1800s when it was impossible by law in the Ottoman Empire for Muslims to convert, Protestant missions in the Near East focused on establishing educational and medical institutions to improve local conditions and the lives of Muslims and other local inhabitants. However, the objective was much more profound. Rufus Anderson, who was the senior secretary of the Prudential Committee of the ABCFM³² in Boston, after a number of trips to the region in the mid-1800s, referring to the historical churches in the Near East, wrote, “They need to see – as Muslims also need to see – ‘living exemplification of the gospel’ with all its benevolent influences on society, culture and the nation.”³³

The present Syrian crisis has identified another way that God is revealing the Kingdom of God and the reality of Christ to Muslims. The foundations of this are found in the research of Dudley Woodberry at Fuller Theological Seminary where he interviewed 750 Muslim background believers, asking them what attracts Muslims to follow Jesus.³⁴ Among the findings, two are significant in this context. The first was that they are attracted to seeing a lived faith. This was seen in the love expressed to others, loving

³¹ Ibid.

³² American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM).

³³ Quoted in Habib Badr, “American Protestant Missionary Beginnings in Beirut and Istanbul: Politics, Practice and Response.” In *New Faiths in Ancient Lands*, by Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006), 224.

³⁴ Woodberry, J. Dudley, Russell G. Shubin, and G. Marks. “Why Muslims Follow Jesus: The Results Of A Recent Survey Of Converts From Islam.” *Christianity Today*, October 24, 2007. Accessed April 13, 2015. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/october/42.80.html>

Christian marriages, and willingness to be sensitive to the local culture and religious values, among many other attitudes and behaviour. They were also attracted by the love of God for all people, even enemies. Woodberry writes, “When Christ's love transforms committed Christians into a loving community, many Muslims listed *a desire to join such a fellowship* as next in importance.”³⁵

As the Syrian refugees flooded into Lebanon and Jordan, as had Iraqi refugees previously, many Lebanese and Jordanian Evangelical churches, and churches inside Syria felt that it was important that the churches intentionally show the love and compassion of Christ to the refugees and the internally displaced regardless of their faith. Depending on the location and the funding available, they provided food aid, health care, education and other activities for children, and emergency supplies for the winter months. Most of the churches ensured that there was no conditionality to the assistance that was being provided and that those displaced were not required to attend any activities in order to receive the aid. This demonstration of love and compassion seems to have had a significant impact.

Since this move of the Holy Spirit in the Levant is still quite new, it is too early to evaluate the impact. However, there are some observations that may be of value for this consultation.³⁶

- The local church and the community of believers are critical in this strategy. Foreigners who have been involved have been in the background providing support, and facilitating the humanitarian aid being provided and the spiritual ministry being done. There are a number of reasons that this is important. The first is that an Arab community being the point of contact for the refugees ensures that they do not have to cross too many cultural barriers.³⁷ They would not be seen as “joining” a foreign group. Secondly, and more important, is that a local church that is rooted in a local community (rather than an aid agency that comes in only to distribute aid) is able to demonstrate the love and compassion of Christ in ways that are real and tangible by welcoming them and ministering to their needs.

This has a number of implications. A comment that many pastors and church members heard from Muslim refugees as they received assistance was, “But you know we are Muslims.” They were surprised that Christians would help somebody outside their community. Being so deeply ingrained by what Ibn Khaldun talked about, that one only helps those within their own tribe, the clear impact of reaching beyond one’s religious, tribal, national and ethnic boundary and helping those in need is significant. It also reflects what Woodberry found in his research that many Muslims are attracted to the love of God demonstrated through His people.

- The local church is not a social or humanitarian agency. It is the Body of Christ, which means that the spiritual dimensions permeate everything that the church does,

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ These are mainly those of the author who has been involved directly with the local churches and refugees in Lebanon and Syria, and more recently with Syrian refugees in Europe. It also includes observations by other workers in the field.

³⁷ However, it is important to acknowledge that there are considerable differences between Arab Christian and Muslim cultures.

including the humanitarian assistance that is provided. The reality of Christ needs to be lived out as a community and in the community. Countless Muslim refugees have commented that they respect the spirituality and the Christian disciplines of believers.³⁸ Woodberry pointed out in his research that that one of the most important reasons Muslims choose to follow Christ is because of “the *power of God* in *answered prayers* and *healing*.”³⁹ Many pastors said that when they offered to pray for the refugees, the comment that they would hear is, “Do you mean that God knows my needs and would hear me when I pray?” What the Muslim refugees were desperately seeking was a genuine encounter with God.

Orthodox priest and missiologist Edward Rommen identifies a key distinction between traditional forms of evangelism and being a witness. Referring to the process of contextualization, he and David Hesselgrave had written that it is best viewed as an “attempt to communicate *the message* of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God’s revelation as it is put forth in the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts.”⁴⁰ Writing twenty four years later since that original statement, Rommen states, “the definition given in 1989 includes the communication of a *message about a person* but not the introduction of the person proper.”⁴¹ What Muslim refugees seem to be attracted to was the reality of the Person of Christ and only after that to the message about the Person.⁴²

So the local church through its ministry of compassion and humanitarian assistance enables and facilitates the refugees to encounter the living God in Christ.⁴³

³⁸ This is the author’s experience in Afghanistan also where Muslim national staff of the humanitarian agency he worked for commented that they respected the Christians who practiced and lived their faith in contrast to secularized westerners who had no faith and were involved in activities that were offensive to Muslims. The author is clear to distinguish between the attitudes and behavior of radical extremist elements in Muslim society and those of the majority of Muslims.

³⁹ Woodberry, *Why Muslims Follow Jesus*.

⁴⁰ David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 200. (Italics added).

⁴¹ Edward Rommen, *Come and See: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), XII.

⁴² Rommen writes further. “But in the case of the gospel, which is so clearly focused on an unmediated relationship between the risen, living, ever-present Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:20; 2Pet. 1:4) and the invitee, an indirect presentation via information will prove less than satisfying. Without an unmediated personal encounter there can be no reconciliation, no justification, no new life in Christ. So whatever it is, contextualization involves the mediation, not only of information about God, but the facilitation of a personal encounter with the saving, forgiving, all present, Lord of life, Jesus Christ.” Ibid, XII-XIII.

⁴³ It is important to note here that the objective of showing compassion is never to force conversion. Conversion is an internal human dynamic and not merely a process of changing social and religious groups. It is God who draws a person to Christ. Jn. 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day.” Then it is the Holy Spirit who convicts the individual of sin. Jn. 16:8 (NASB), “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” Finally, it is God who seals the new believer with the Holy Spirit. Eph. 1:13, “And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.” While the individual has a choice of whether to believe God and accept the gift of new life, it is God who draws people to Himself to make them citizens of His Kingdom. Conversion as understood from Scripture is an experience that is much deeper and more profound that impacts the whole individual and is not just about joining a different religious group.

- Finally, the local church is able to provide a community for the displaced. Muslim refugees belong to collectivistic societies and they are dependant on their community for support during times of need.⁴⁴ It is devastating for refugees to have lost their homes and in the process not only their social support but also their sense of identity and who they are. If the church is able to get beyond the social hierarchies within the church and the attitude of being exclusive of all who do not belong to its community, the church can become a place where Muslim refugees can find community, be rooted and carve a new identity in Christ, as part of His Body. The church needs to be inclusive, as Volf stated previously that God's welcome and inclusion of a "hostile humanity into divine communion" is the model for Christians to relate to those who are outside the community of the church. It is through such inclusiveness that refugees can find healing and wholeness again.

Conclusion

Why does God care for the displaced, the refugee and the migrant? The starting place is to recognize that evil and sin are not just personal traits but are imbedded in our social and political institutions and values. This highlights our role as a society as to why refugees are displaced and how they are treated. While the majority of refugees are like the poor, the displaced have lost their home and along with it all forms of social support and their identity in knowing who they are. The devastation that they experience dehumanizes them. This is not God's intention for any human being He has created and He is faithful to redeem and restore them as they turn to Him. The responsibilities of the Church are to reach beyond its social and religious boundaries and embrace those who do not belong to their community. Such acts of compassion and inclusion then are the beginning of restoring dignity for the displaced and for them to carve a new identity and a home both physically and spiritually.

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⁴⁴ See footnote 26 for Bruce Malina's description of collectivistic societies.

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