



“No Longer Strangers” (Ephesians 2:19): The Ethics of Migration

WILLIAM O’NEILL

It was a familiar story, a story of a child born to a poor family in an obscure village of an occupied country. It was a story repeated many times, of a family forced to flee persecution, seeking asylum in a neighboring country as countless other “illegal aliens.” Upon their return home, they lived the life of the poor, the *anawim*. And after years without event, when their son spoke up for the poor, his agitation, too, was quickly suppressed. Still young, he was executed as a political criminal. His life did not seem an important failure.

It is, as I say, a familiar tale—one that we might have heard even yesterday. And yet it is a story that we, who are named Jesus’ followers, recount as part of the “good news,” the gospel. That gospel, Matthew tells us, unfolds against the backdrop of exile and redemption. “Jesus and his family,” writes Donald Senior, “recapitulate the migration of Jacob and an earlier Joseph to find refuge in an alien land. And then, too, God calls them out of Egypt—evoking the memory of the Exodus.”¹

¹Donald Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles,” in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, ed. Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) 23.

The Christian gospel unfolds against the backdrop of exile and redemption—of Israel in Egypt and the infant Jesus in Egypt. Sharing this history of migration, the people of God, then and now, are called to particular care for the most vulnerable members of society, especially the immigrants.

“This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son’” (Matt 2:15).

Again and again, God bids Israel to remember her saving history. Indeed, in the book of Exodus, the Decalogue is, itself, a deed of memory: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”—therefore, you shall obey my precepts (Exod 20:2). And in Deuteronomy, “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords...who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deut 10:16–19).

So, too, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus inaugurates his prophetic ministry, his exodus to Jerusalem, by recalling the words of Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). Here, the divine reign—“good news” for the widow, orphan, and migrant—takes flesh. “Today,” says Jesus, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4: 21).

Luke’s Greek speaks of a fulfillment that persists in history, at once invitation and demand.² But how is the gospel to be fulfilled in *our* hearing? How do *we* remember? In these pages, I will first look to the biblical wisdom underlying the ethics of migration, treating, in particular, three themes interwoven in both Old and New Testaments: the primacy of the love command, justice as covenant fidelity, and the virtue of hospitality. In the second section, I will take up the burden of translating and interpreting these themes for citizens of faith in a religiously pluralist polity like our own. Finally, in the last section, I return to the surplus of biblical meaning, of the distinctive demands faith places upon citizens today.³

THE BIBLICAL HERITAGE

The solemn words of Lev 19:33–34 admonish us to remember the stranger or resident alien in our midst: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”⁴ Save for worship of the one God, no command is repeated more often in the Hebrew Bible.⁵ Yet for the children of exile, the “golden

²Robert J. Karris, “The Gospel According to Luke,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 690.

³For a comprehensive interpretation, see William O’Neill, S.J., “Rights of Passage: The Ethics of Forced Displacement,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 27/1 (Spring/Summer 2007) 113–135.

⁴For a consideration of Israel’s sabbath obligation to treat all the landless poor as “brothers and sisters,” see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 59–67.

⁵See W. Gunther Plaut, “Jewish Ethics and International Migrations,” *International Migration Review: Ethics, Migration and Global Stewardship* 30 (Spring 1996) 18–36, at 20–21. Plaut distinguishes the differing legal status accorded temporary or permanent migrants in the Hebrew Bible and Talmud.

rule” of Lev 19:18 (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”) is no mere abstract maxim. Only in remembering her blessing as a sojourner in a strange land will Israel fulfill this “canon within the canon.”⁶

In such lived remembrance, moreover, Israel proves her covenant fidelity (*tsedaqah*) in deeds of justice (*mishpat*).⁷ For a people born of exile, freedom is always “bonded,” in Michael Walzer’s words, always proven true in the redemption of the *anawim*.⁸ In times of prosperity, Israel is thus summoned to effective remembrance that the land “was a gift not a birthright.”⁹ And so it is in gracious hospitality to the widow, orphan, and stranger—those most vulnerable in kinship societies—that Israel realizes her distinctive covenant identity. To oppress the alien, conversely, is no less than apostasy. Israel, says the Deuteronomist, must ever cherish “the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Exod 23:9). Cultivating the virtue of hospitality to the stranger or alien is, thus, no mere supererogatory act of charity, as hospitality is often seen today.¹⁰ It is the measure of righteousness, *our* token of belonging.

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For Christians, too, memory speaks. At the heart of Christian ethics is the law of love (Luke 10:27, cf. Lev 19:18, 33; Deut 6:4; Mark 12:30–31; Matt 22:37–38) and, for Jesus’ disciples in Luke’s Gospel, it is the stranger, and not the scribe or religious expert who reveals its meaning. The parable of the Good Samaritan unfolds as a hortatory midrash (exposition) of the great levitical injunction (Luke 10:29–37). Jesus’ disciples are called to “go and do likewise,” that is, to love the nameless, half-dead stranger as themselves. For “love,” writes Wolfgang Schrage, “does not follow the dictates of convention and prejudice but dares to ignore them, dares with sovereign freedom to surmount the barriers that separate people. A person who loves can see in anyone a neighbor in need.”¹¹

In what Walter Benjamin terms “anamnestic solidarity”¹² with the stranger

⁶Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 71.

⁷For an interpretation of biblical conceptions of justice, see John Donahue, “The Bible and Catholic Social Teaching: Will This Engagement Lead to Marriage?” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004) 9–40.

⁸Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) 53, 73–90.

⁹Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles,” 21.

¹⁰See Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

¹¹Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 74, 76.

¹²Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968) 253ff. Cf. Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 205–210.

—like the man fallen among thieves, stripped of title, status, and role—disciples thus prove themselves faithful to the covenantal demands of *agapē* (Luke 10:36). Citizens of faith “see and have compassion” (*esplanchnisthē* signifies being moved in one’s inmost heart), even as compassion (literally, a “suffering with”) becomes a way of seeing the stranger “in all her truth”—the stranger, says Simone Weil, “exactly like me,” albeit “stamped with a special mark by affliction.”¹³

Not surprisingly, then, Christian hospitality to “strangers and aliens” shaped the earliest understanding of disciples as fellow “citizens with the saints” in the “household of God” (Eph 2:19). Indeed, hospitality (*philoxenia*, “love of the stranger”) is at the very heart of Christian discipleship. In Senior’s words, “Jesus begins his earthly journey as a migrant and a displaced person—Jesus who in this same gospel would radically identify with the ‘least’ and make hospitality to the stranger a criterion of judgment (Matt 25:35).”¹⁴ And for Luke, we have seen, seeing and having compassion for these least, for example, the naked, half-dead stranger, marks the way of eternal life. Again and again in the image of the eschatological feast (Amos 9:13–15; Joel 3:18; Isa 25:6–8), hospitality is offered not only to kin and kind, but also to those whose only claim is vulnerability and need (Matt 8:11; 22:1–14; Luke 14:12–24.).

THE TASK OF TRANSLATION

Marking covenant fidelity in the exercise of love, hospitality forms, we might say, the “moral squint” of citizens of faith.¹⁵ But how are these themes to be fulfilled today, in a religiously pluralist polity? To be sure, no simple or complete translation is possible—there is, as we shall see in our final section, always a surplus of biblical meaning. Yet the central themes of love, covenant fidelity, and hospitality permit at least a partial translation.

The primacy of the love command, for instance, enjoins more than mere respect for persons’ dignity. But, as we have seen, in biblical wisdom, *agapē* is never less than just. Inspired by the great biblical injunctions of justice or righteousness (*tsedaqah*) and right judgment (*mishpat*) that mark the reign of God, Christian ethics today turns to the distinctively modern idiom of human dignity—our creation in the “image of God” (*imago dei*). The equal recognition and respect due moral persons as agents, in turn, is specified by agents’ basic human rights (as the conditions or capabilities of exercising agency) and correlative duties.¹⁶ Codified in international law, rights become a lingua franca, permitting citizens of faith to speak prophetically to the world.¹⁷

¹³Simone Weil, “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” in *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1951) 115.

¹⁴Senior, “Beloved Aliens and Exiles,” 23.

¹⁵In Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, Cardinal Wolsey chides Thomas More: “If you could just see facts flat on without that horrible moral squint.”

¹⁶See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁷The International Bill of Rights comprises the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenant on

So, too, as a political virtue, hospitality enjoins solidarity where care is offered not to the “illegal alien”¹⁸ or stranger but rather to my neighbor, especially my neighbor “stamped with a special mark by affliction” (Weil, above). Indeed, precisely our moral entitlement to *equal* respect or consideration, in concert with the ethical ideal of such solidarity, justifies *preferential* treatment for those whose basic rights are most imperiled—in Camus’ phrase, our taking “the victim’s side.”¹⁹ For if equal consideration does not imply identical treatment, so we may distinguish legitimately between indiscriminate regard for moral persons and discriminate response to their differing situations.²⁰ In social ethics generally, such an option for the poor finds expression in the graduated moral urgency of differing human rights, that is, the priority of my neighbor’s basic rights over other, less exigent claims, for example, property rights, and in the differing material conditions presumed for realizing the same human rights, for example, access to education or health care.

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For citizens of faith, then, the urgency of basic human rights establishes the relative priority of migrants’ rights as the touchstone of policy. Indeed, inasmuch as the legitimate sovereignty of states in regulating immigration serves the global common good, states are morally bound to respect and promote the basic human rights of both citizen and resident alien, especially the most vulnerable—for example, those fleeing persecution, generalized violence, or hunger.

Roman Catholic social teaching, to cite but one strand of Christian tradition, thus recognizes not open, but porous, borders, respecting a person’s right to change nationality for social and economic as well as political reasons.²¹ For in view of the “common purpose of created things” (and the mutually implicative character of basic rights), “where a state which suffers from poverty combined with great population cannot supply such use of goods to its inhabitants...people possess a

Civil and Political Rights with its two Optional Protocols, and the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. For an illuminating history of the contributions of the Lutheran theologian Otto Frederick Nolde to modern international human-rights law, see John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

¹⁸To speak of *persons* (rather than behavior) as *illegal* divests migrants of moral standing, a moral solecism that turns subjects into the mere object of social policy, for example, mass deportation.

¹⁹Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960) 230. I have developed this analysis in my essay “No Amnesty for Sorrow: The Privilege of the Poor in Christian Social Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 55/4 (December 1994) 638–656.

²⁰See Gene Outka, *Agape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) 20. Cf. Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) 227.

²¹See Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 120.

right to emigrate, to select a new home in foreign lands and to seek conditions of life worthy” of their common humanity.²² Just so, the new home, even where temporary, must provide for the equitable provision and protection of such basic human rights.²³

The rhetoric of basic human rights leaves many questions unresolved. Yet, recognizing the urgency of such rights and correlative duties does serve to indicate the lineaments of an equitable immigration policy, that is, one that takes due cognizance of the moral priority of relative need (gravity and imminence of harm), particular vulnerabilities (for example, of women and children), familial relationship, complicity of the host country in generating migratory flows, historical or cultural affiliations (for example, historic patterns of migration), and a fair distribution of burdens (for example, which countries should offer asylum).

Pope Paul VI and his successors, accordingly, urge acceptance of “a charter which will assure [persons’] right to emigrate, favor their integration, facilitate their professional advancement and give them access to decent housing where, if such is the case, their families can join them.”²⁴ As we saw above, among the most exigent duties enshrined in such a charter are the preservation and protection of families and, of these, the most vulnerable. Citizens of faith, conversely, can never accept detention of undocumented children or threats of massive deportation that would separate families, many of which are of mixed status. Such policies, as immigrants’ stories attest, undermine the very rule of law, imperiling persons’ most basic *human* rights.

THE SURPLUS RELIGIOUS MEANING

Thus far, I’ve argued that, as citizens of faith, we must recognize the rights of the most vulnerable: the widow, orphan, and stranger in our midst. We must, as *citizens* of faith, act justly. And yet, for the citizen of *faith*, justice is tempered by love. To “walk humbly with our God” (Mic 6:8) demands not only “seeing” the nameless, half-dead stranger on our way; we must, as the Samaritan of Jesus’ parable, “see and have compassion” (Luke 10:29–37). As John Donahue observes, “Luke subtly alters the thrust of the parable,” for Jesus does not so much answer the lawyer’s question as “describe what it means to be a neighbor which then becomes the substance of [his] counterquestion.”²⁵

The lawyer’s response to Jesus’ query as to which of the three men in the story

²²“Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope,” a joint statement of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, available at <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml#5>.

²³For statements of the National Council of Churches on immigration, see <http://www.nccusa.org/immigration> (accessed 1 June 2009).

²⁴Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima adveniens*, n. 17, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992) 217, 289.

²⁵John Donahue, “Who is My Enemy? The Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Love of Enemies,” in *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 144.

“was a neighbor” is richly ironic, since it is the despised schismatic who reveals the meaning of the law to the lawyer.²⁶ And with salvific irony, Jesus bids him, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Indeed, Jesus answers the lawyer’s first question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25) by reversing his second (“And who is my neighbor?”). For the command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27) is fulfilled not in this or that particular deed of love, but in one’s *becoming* neighbor: if the disciple is to live, she must enter the world of the *anawim*, of the half-dead stranger.²⁷

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What I must do to *live*, then, is “turn” (*metanoia*) to the world of the poor, of the half-dead stranger—in the martyred Archbishop Romero’s words, “becoming incarnate in their world...proclaiming the good news to them,” even to the point of “sharing their fate.”²⁸ For in Christ, one is always, already in communion with the *anawim*; one’s identification implies not merely taking the victim’s side, but taking the victim’s side as our own. “To be a Christian,” says Gustavo Gutiérrez, “is to draw near, to make oneself a neighbor, not the one I encounter in my journey but the one in whose journey I place myself.”²⁹ And the journey is our story, the gospel in which we are finally strangers no longer, but fellow citizens with the saints in the household of God. ⊕

WILLIAM O’NEILL, S.J., is a professor of Christian social ethics at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. He is a visiting professor at Hekima, the Jesuit School of Theology in Nairobi, Kenya, and has recently published articles on both immigration and refugee policy.

²⁶The lawyer’s response, “‘The one who showed him mercy’ (Luke 10:37),” says Donahue, “alludes to the prophetic tradition of Hosea 6:6 and Micah 6:8, whose authority was not recognized by Samaritans.” Not only, then, “is the Samaritan a neighbor but he acts according to those scriptures which the lawyer himself recognizes as authoritative.” See Donahue, “Who is My Enemy?” 145.

²⁷So Søren Kierkegaard: “Christ does not speak about recognizing one’s neighbor but about being a neighbor oneself, about proving oneself to be a neighbor, something the Samaritan showed by his compassion.” Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 38.

²⁸Oscar Romero, “The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,” in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. and trans. Alfred T. Hannelly (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990) 298.

²⁹Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Toward a Theology of Liberation,” in Hannelly, *Liberation Theology*, 74.

Ephesians 2:19 World English Bible. << Ephesians 1 | Ephesians 2 | Ephesians 3 >>. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, Related Commentaries for Ephesians 2.