

# CENTER FOR PUBLIC THEOLOGY

— WESLEY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY —

## **“Immigration and Christian Conviction”: A Memorandum from the Center for Public Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, December 19, 2018**

The conversation about immigration to the United States has recently focused on the “migrant caravan.” Yet, this cluster of issues is perennial. These range from the family separation policy that became a flashpoint in the summer of 2018, to the long history of U.S. intervention in Central America that helped create the destabilized conditions that provoked the current migrant crisis, and to the nation’s original codification of a “Manifest Destiny” narrative that granted land title to immigrants of European descent but not to the native inhabitants of North America. Today, emotions surrounding immigration often run as high as its stakes, and rightfully so.

Public policies that grapple with immigration are complex, and much has already been written about these topics. We believe, however, that the resources of Christian theological and ethical traditions can be, but have not often been, applied fruitfully to the human phenomena of migration, particularly by those who claim Christian conviction in public.

The Hebrew Bible and New Testament provide a record of human migration in all of its complexity. From the expulsion from the Garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem that comes by grace, human relationships to place, including in transit to new places, provide a constant theme and focus of reflection. The Exodus story celebrates a liberation of oppressed people from the empire that exploited them into a new land, even as it records stories of the violent actions of those liberated people toward the previous inhabitants of their home. The later exile of the Israelites from this home raises questions not only of destiny, but of identity, as they struggle to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. The ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was nomadic, taking him far away from his hometown, an exile of a sort in his own country.

The Bible also enjoins Christians to certain standards of treatment of the foreigner among them, as an expression of hospitality and human solidarity, and as a reenactment of God’s acts on behalf of Israel and the church. The Hebrew Bible echoes with remembrance of captivity in Egypt, a remembrance that compels those who were once strangers to love those who sojourn as strangers among them. Jesus’ teaching recommends the Samaritan who provides care despite differences in national identity as the paradigm for love of neighbor. The ethical witness of scripture resounds with clarity on the just and merciful treatment of those traveling far from home, especially the most vulnerable among them.

Immigration in our contemporary world raises issues that many white Christians have not explored in detail. The modern nation-state, whose borders are in historical flux, makes claims of loyalty that ought to be examined critically by Christians who seek first to render unto God what is God’s. The nation-state as a form of social arrangements, its borders, and the identity that it generates are not given aspects of God’s good creation, but human political constructs produced to order our lives. They make no legitimate claims on us that can supplant what Christians owe to each other and to their neighbors.

The conversation around immigration raises uncomfortable questions about the ways white supremacy inflects the reactions and fears of white Christians and the policies they produce, especially as they deal

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with the reality that whites will soon be a population minority in the United States. Public rhetoric that expresses a preference for European immigrants repeats and extends a devastating history of violence and exploitation toward others no less deserving of hospitality. Those white Christians who promote fear of immigrants ought to remember too that their ancestors came to America's shores as immigrants and sojourners themselves. Their territorial expansion within this continent was propelled by the slaughter and displacement of its indigenous inhabitants. Just as memory of their own story obliged Israel to welcome the stranger, the history of white Christians in America should be acknowledged and should motivate practices and policies of hospitality toward those seeking refuge at our border.

Christians also ought to think carefully about migration in light of coming social and environmental challenges. Generations born now are likely to see a world populated by ten billion people, and climate change will force many to relocate as the natural environment of their homes shifts or is destroyed. Central Americans and U.S. citizens from the southern borderlands alike may well be compelled to migrate to a habitable zone elsewhere, or to adjust dramatically their experience and expectations of home. These possible challenges remind us that wisdom calls us to genuine empathy with the other, not least because we share their human vulnerabilities.

The Center for Public Theology does not advocate for a specific set of immigration policies, though we recognize that some such policies are dramatically more difficult to square with responsible Christian theology and ethics than others. But as practitioners and scholars of the church's public witness, we wish to reassert that peace with justice cannot depend alone on the stasis and security of the national borders set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; that world depends on a God who is making all things new.

Selected biblical references: Genesis 3:22-24; Exodus 6:2-8; Exodus 22:21; Exodus 23:23-33; Leviticus 19:33-34; Psalm 137; Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 10:25-37; Hebrews 13:1-3; Revelation 21:10-27

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