

Asylum Seekers and Community

An encounter of hostility or embrace?

Like you, I will remember that I grew up in the home of others, and in a foreign land I faced deadly dangers. So that, whoever asks my hospitality as you do now, I would not know how to turn away. In future you will stay here in safety, like me.

Theseus in 'Oedipus at Colon' by Sophocles

Every human being needs a place where they feel welcome; A place to be with others and to be and become oneself. This reality becomes acutely apparent when people are uprooted from their communities, forced to flee their homes in terror. With return to the homeland an impossibility, their sense of belonging is threatened. They are subjected to a physical and emotional exile.

Frequently having endured extreme hardship, torture and trauma on their journey refugees are survivors. Today, however, global, national and local communities alike all too often exclude them. The onslaught of neoliberal political and economic values has led to a situation in which the welfare and needs of people are subservient to the well-being of the market. Individualism is the result, narrowing the concept of hospitality from one of open embrace, to one of reluctant tolerance or worse, rejection.

Through looking at the situation of refugees, both globally and in Australia, this article will endeavour to set forth the nature of exclusion and hospitality in our current world. Some key issues of concern to community will then be highlighted, juxtaposed with some desirable directions for the future. It is essential that our society responds positively to those in need; with justice, compassion and conviction. Any less and we could be accused of countenancing the spread of sorrow.

Exclusion

To exclude someone from society is to render them powerless. It results in a denial of that person's values, attitudes and actions and, ultimately, strips them of their humanity. The resulting estrangement also leads to major social problems such as crime, health and drug abuse. Therefore, exclusion not only has ethical, but also political and economic ramifications.

Social exclusion is to a large extent emphasised by popular speech and social traditions (Spohn 2001). This is demonstrated nowhere better than in the media where we see incessant headlines asserting that 'waves of illegals' are hitting our shores, suggestive of a natural disaster. Similarly, the notion that our country's waters are being 'penetrated' or 'invaded' by boatloads of asylum seekers implies a military campaign. Both these ideas produce a sense of panic and crisis in the community, suggesting that a military response such as closing off borders or repelling the invaders would be appropriate.

It is not accidental that this ideology is present in contemporary society. It proceeds from the philosophy of liberalism, as first espoused by Adam Smith in the 18th century. In relation to humans Smith believes that *'every individual... intends only his own gain, and he is.... led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part his intention'* (Smith 1991, pp. 66-7). The resulting conclusion of many following this philosophy is that individuals need not worry about assisting others as the market manages to create its own balance. Today, however, this concept has been remodelled into neoliberalism, combining classic liberalism with a 'concept of control'.

Governments, the media and business reinforce values of economic progress, driving the movement of globalisation and, in the Australian context, economic 'rationalism'. It can be observed that this is causing a shut-down of many processes and services aimed at helping people and the environment (as opposed to increasing the country's Gross National Product). With an ever increasing gap between rich and poor, both on a global and on a national level, people and countries are 'competing' or 'fighting' with one another to come out on top. The effect of this on refugees is particularly detrimental as governments and citizens are placed in a climate of scarcity, looking for ways to cut costs and trying not to sink into an (often) imagined sea of despair. In situations of hardship or conflict it is always 'the other' who suffers and is excluded, being an easy scapegoat to objectify and blame for individual fear or misery. As one Iranian refugee states 'We just have to understand that they are ignorant' (Pittaway 1991, p.24). Perhaps it is this ignorance we must change.

Hospitality

Being hospitable is a fairly neutral word in English, usually being applied to money-driven societies as a 'soft, sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversation, a general atmosphere of coziness' (Plaut 1995, p30). Usually the recipients of hospitality, too, are friends or acquaintances, unless this hospitality is carried out at a professional level. The original meaning of the word, however, is much more encompassing, referring to the welcoming of strangers. The host creates a space in which strangers can enter and be a friend instead of an enemy, free to be themselves and share themselves. As such both parties take part in a dialogue of honour, respecting each others' cultures and traditions.

This latter concept of hospitality is inspired by spirit; whether this be the spirit of God, the essence of nature or the consciousness of humanity. All religions and many philosophies hold the importance of welcoming all people, for the simple reason that they are human and as such are our sisters and brothers. From Christianity with the proclamation that by harbouring strangers we may, unaware, be entertaining angels (Hebrews 13:1), to Islam where the overarching rule is to 'give what is due to kindred, the needy and the wayfarer' (Quran 30:38) to ecological philosophers who assert that as we are all part of the one ecosystem we have a moral obligation to encircle and accept one another, it shines clear that to be hospitable is to do far more than simply offer charity. To be hospitable is to embrace and to be embraced, to share and to understand.

Borders are arbitrary. We are divided by borders of nation, state and suburb and by borders of difference and ideology. Even our body creates a border between us and the outside world. We all cross borders every day of our lives and as such are immigrants (Wilfred & Beozzo 1999, pp. 38-47). Although people seeking asylum have undergone a more profound 'migration' than many others, we nonetheless share the commonality that when entering a

new place or circumstance we often feel uncomfortable, scared and dispossessed. We all, therefore, require people to be hospitable to us, as strangers, at some time in our lives.

It is not just individuals that need to be hospitable. Wider communities need also to provide hospitality beyond mere safety from danger. As the regulations and customs of society provide the context within which individuals act, for hospitality to be widespread in 'western' society nations must foster reciprocal values rather than those of individualism and acquisition. This does not have to mean sacrificing ourselves or our society to help others. If we truly believed in a global community we would share our resources equally beyond nations, just as we would generalise our problems. For this to happen people, especially those in influential positions, must rise above individualism and materialism. We must all value people above possessions.

Propositions for an Australian response

There are a number of issues in the Australian community that make it difficult for people to truly welcome and accept asylum seekers. These issues all begin with attitudes and beliefs that aren't necessarily well-founded or conducive to a functional and healthy community. In order to better understand the corrosive nature of these beliefs they will be explored and some preferable alternatives proposed.

Racism and xenophobia are major factors contributing to the non-acceptance of asylum seekers. Most asylum seekers come from Asia (especially the middle east) and Africa, so therefore are 'non-white' and confronting for the majority white Australian population. Similarly, a large number of asylum seekers are Islamic, a religion gravely misrepresented in Australian society. Perhaps it is that Australian culture values conformity, concepts such as 'mateship' and 'survival' requiring people to have similar attitudes to work effectively. Or perhaps it is only a culture-fuelled ignorance, based on the eurocentricity of our history books and education systems.

Whichever the case, in order for our society to avoid future conflicts, be truly welcoming and to discover the potential of all our citizens, we must learn to celebrate difference. That does not necessarily mean radically changing the way we live, merely our outlook on life. For example, if when we meet a stranger from a distant land we greet them and seek to learn and understand something of them, and at the same time we share something of ourselves, we celebrate their difference and as well as our own. They are no longer a distant 'other' but approachable as a human being. We therefore not only overcome our ignorance but our fear. We are both empowered to engage in future acts of unselfishness.

The Australian community is often quite indifferent when it comes to social issues. On the issue of asylum seekers, however, people generally have very strong views. Asylum seekers, through presenting a different way of life and reminding us that we are not removed from conflicts and global problems, have the ability to shake the complacency of our society. The collective re-examination that results is positive, even if only to make us aware of some of our attitudes and assumptions.

Globally, so-called 'first-world' countries take very few refugees and asylum seekers. By far the majority are located in Africa (which generally attempts to look after its own refugees) and Asia (Pakistan currently has close to three million Afghanistani refugees within its borders). While they are provided with some assistance from the United Nations and other

bodies, a serious strain is nevertheless placed on the resources of those countries (Plaut 1995, pp140-141). Richer countries all too often disdain asylum seekers, not really willing to share resources with those not considered to have 'earned' them. While it is justifiable for poorer countries to sacrifice their standard of living (for they were poor anyway) by no means should the wealthy countries have to give away any of their hard earned profits. This attitude is hypocritical and discriminatory and should be reviewed.

In the case of asylum seekers, by being denied basic services such as English language lessons and job assistance, the Australian community is failing to be hospitable. Without being able to communicate effectively or be productive asylum seekers are incapable of participating fully in society and thus unable to integrate and make beneficial relationships. They therefore do not have the ability to reach their full potential and transcend the arbitrary boundaries of language and culture.

As many have pointed out, if one watches a malevolent act take place and does nothing to try remedy this situation (providing another equally evil act would not take place by doing this), one is complicit with the perpetrator. It is therefore crucial that Australia is unselfish in her dealing with global problems, not only seeking to reach out and assist others, but also not contributing to suffering by either inaction, or negative action (such as supporting an aggressor in conflicts).

Fundamentally we should support dignity over humiliation. We should reject measures that seek to take away a person's dignity, such as the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, and uphold models that enable a person to retain (or regain) their humanity and active control of their lives (Goldewijk 1999, 58-61). We should use politics and beliefs to help people transcend their difficulties, firstly by providing practical assistance and secondly by promoting wider strategic reform. This is opposed to those who use their politics and beliefs to denigrate and dehumanise others, denying them a fulfilling role in society.

To conclude, UNHCR surveys show that in the world today one person out of 135 is a refugee or a displaced person (Plaut 1995, p142). Even pandering to those in our community with purely selfish values, one should assist asylum seekers so that in the future, if it were needed, we too could seek safety in a foreign land. On a deeper level, though, our community cannot afford to exclude asylum seekers if we wish to retain something of a just and cohesive social fabric. We will merely face an escalation of social problems that will serve to fuel growing racism and resentment towards this group of people. It is therefore essential that organisations assisting asylum seekers are encouraged and supported, both in the provision of basic services as well as in the area of advocacy and political action. Only when government policy and community attitudes change to acting towards all people with dignity and compassion can Australia say that it is truly hospitable.

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