



Editorial



Nick Spencer

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Ten years ago I wrote a book entitled *Asylum and Immigration*. It began with the following sentences: 'Writing about asylum and immigration is rather like walking on ice. The subject is lethally slippery, the ground beneath your feet of uncertain strength and the writer never quite sure that a single, misplaced phrase will not send him crashing into the freezing waters of public opprobrium.'

Things are better today – but not much. In the early years of the century, the 'debate' around asylum and immigration – the two very different terms were often carelessly elided – was little short of hysterical. 'Stop this Asylum Madness Now' screamed the front page of the *Sun*, in August 2003, which went on to comment the following day, 'There is a time bomb ticking in our midst which must be defused.' Such metaphors of mental illness and violence were common.

The atmosphere is slightly different now. It is quite possible to speak out against immigration (at least at recent levels) without being judged a closet-racist (a genuine risk a decade ago). It is equally possible to make a positive case for the moral duty of offering asylum without being faced by verbs such as swamped and deluged.

But we should not imagine that the situation is very much better. Immigration remains high up on the pre-election agenda, having provided the rocket fuel for UKIP's rapid rise. The topic still provokes extreme passions and although there is broad political consensus that the level of net inward migration that the nation experienced from the late 90s to the late 00s was unsustainable, there is rather less consensus on what

to do about it, still less on what might constitute a settlement that is just and equitable to migrant and host-community alike.

And there's the rub: for so long the debate about migration was conducted not in the vocabulary of 'justice' but in that of economics – was migration good for the economy? Did migrants contribute to the economy? Did they put in more in taxes than they took out in benefits? People disagreed but irrespective of whichever side of the debate they came down on, the question itself was inadequate, treating the economy like some vast insatiable machine that required human beings to be fed to it with sufficient frequency to keep it healthy. Where was the human in that?

That the Bible may have something to say to this seemingly modern issue may strike some as odd. And yet, as Christopher Hays rightly says in his essay in this edition of *Transmission*, 'the Bible is, in great measure, a story about migrants'. Moreover, it is a human story of migrants, not one that deals in economies and figures but one that speaks of expectations and fears. Time and again, it invites us to see the migrant's life from the inside; indeed, it invites us, no matter where we live or how far we have travelled from our birthplace, to identify ourselves with migrants. These are themes to which the contributors of this edition repeatedly return.

Casey Strine shows us how the seemingly disconnected worlds of the Old Testament and twenty-first century both are preoccupied with issues of migration. By drawing on the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, on Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and on the considerable Mosaic legislation, he demonstrates that not only

are quintessentially modern issues of displacement, migration and seeking refugee not quintessentially modern but actually very ancient, and that the Bible speaks to them, as well as to the attendant issue of living as a host nation, in a complex, wise, subtle and polyphonous way.

Christopher Hays is equally focused on the repeated stories of migration in the Scriptures but uses them to look specifically at the plight of the *Desplazados*, or the internally displaced persons (IDPs). Beginning with Columbia, where in 20 years more than six million people have fled their homes as the result of beatings, threats, murder, rape, and the forcible recruitment of child soldiers, he proceeds to those countries, like Syria, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, and Sudan, where IDPs also number in the many millions. What can the scriptures say in the face of such material and emotional misery? A great deal, is the answer. By looking in detail at the story of the Good Samaritan – and particularly drawing an analogy between the ‘bandits’ who robbed the man and the guerrillas responsible for so many IDPs across the world – and then by drawing on the manner in which the early Christians saw themselves as sojourners in the world, he shows how ‘we who are not forced migrants in the terrestrial sense are nonetheless foreigners and sojourners in the salvation-historical sense’, and that the call to love the migrant should be central to our identity as people of God.

Luke Bretherton examines the moral status of borders, a crucial but often ignored factor in the immigration debate. Comparing ‘liberal utilitarians’ for whom borders are, in principle, problematic even if practically sometimes necessary), and ‘communitarians’ for whom the cultivation and maintenance of a distinctive national life is often seen as an end in itself, he argues that an authentically Christian approach will adopt the communitarian recognition of the legitimacy of borders, but treat them as more than simply a means of preserving national life. ‘We need to see borders as a face that we, as a nation, present to the world’, he writes; and, moreover, a face that declares the nation has ‘a personality and a history and a way of doing things’ and which is, like its people, ‘made for relationship’.

Fleur Houston takes us into the often depressing reality of immigration and asylum in Britain today. Dealing with three categories of migrant – those from EU states, from non-EU states, and those seeking asylum – she looks to question some of the popular myths that have grown up around migration. There is, for example, she argues, precious little evidence that access to UK welfare is a significant driver for EU migrants. Beyond the myths, there are moral problems. The points-based system in operation among migrants from beyond the European Economic Area, effectively differentiates between rich and poor applicants. The Immigration Act 2014 discriminates between those immigrants who want to join their families, effectively excluding many perfectly fit and healthy parents or grandparents. The asylum system is such that many seekers end up in destitution.

Christians, Houston asserts, should not rest easily with so much dehumanising practice so near at hand.

Shari Brown focuses on the human details behind the theory. Writing of Restore, a project of Birmingham Churches Together, whose mission is to welcome, include and assist integration of refugees and those seeking sanctuary from persecution, she tells stories of those who are involved with the work and those who have been affected by it. They are inspiring and sometimes almost unbearably moving. Behind every statistic, behind every policy there are parents, children, brothers and sisters who happen to be asylum seekers, afraid, hopeful, desperate, and – just occasionally – joyous. The problems are big, the system can be unforgiving and the task may seem hopeless but, as one Restore befriender wisely put it, ‘you can’t always make it better but you can make a difference.’

Anderson Jeremiah tells the migrant story from a point of view we too rarely hear, that of ethnic minority Christians coming to live in Britain. It is a telling tale. Many Christian immigrants, he writes, expect, when they arrive in the UK, to see a devout Christian country, full of missionaries preaching the gospel message. One can only imagine how shocked they are – or, rather, one doesn’t need to imagine as Jeremiah tells us. Issues of food, dress, sexual conduct, family structure, parenting, drinking, socialising and gender hierarchies in church: all of these can shock and upset ethnic minority immigrant Christians. As Jeremiah says, in such a discombobulating environment, the Bible becomes (even more) important to migrant identity, a provider of ‘cultural norms for Christians living in an immigrant context’ and a ‘cultural constant when an immigrant’s identity is questioned and challenged’.

Daniel Akhazemea looks at how immigration, particularly from Africa and the Caribbean has reshaped the British Christian landscape, especially the urban one. The involvement and influence of black majority churches (he acknowledges that there are a variety of legitimate terms available) in British cities has generated considerable energy and hope for Christian Britain. But this is more the just a story of numbers or of the vibrancy of worship. BMCs not only serve as ‘religious’ organisations, but also serve as community networks for advice and integration, providing training on writing curricula vitae and wills, seminars on financial empowerment, immigration seminars, housing and educational initiatives, and the dissemination of information about job opportunities and advisory services. It is by serving the whole person and the whole community that these churches flourish.

None of the contributors to this volume fall into the obvious trap of imagining a straightforward ‘solution’ to the questions of migration that will be posed repeatedly in the pre- (and post-) election periods. Neither immigration nor asylum are soluble ‘problems’. Both, rather, reach down deep into the human soul, asking how place, culture, networks, identity all inform what it means to be truly human.

NOTES

1. N Spencer, *Asylum and Immigration: A Christian Perspective on a Polarised Debate* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).