

Immigration and Xenophobia

Matthew Huish
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Immigration is currently a key issue in UK politics. It is no longer the debating territory of a single party but, in response to the public's emotional feelings about the subject, all the mainstream parties have been drawn into making a statement on their proposals for opening up or restricting the UK's borders. It is quite a sensitive matter. For example, the media usually refers those from other countries who come to live and/or work in the UK as immigrants, whereas British people who live abroad will be referred to as 'expats' (a truncated version of 'expatriates') rather than emigrants; anyone sensitive to the nuanced implications of language might protest at this discrimination, especially if they feel victimised by anti-immigration sentiment. For anyone voting in next month's general election, this issue might be one of the main factors that help you choose your local representatives. With that in mind, some deep reflection on the issue is necessary.



It's not just in the UK that immigration is a serious issue. Recently I've been saddened by the xenophobic attacks taking place in South Africa against Africans from other nations, such as Malawi and Zimbabwe. When I was a student a decade ago I met a Zimbabwean student called Acie Lumumbawho had aspirations of becoming someone great in his country. His success over the last ten years has included being elected as a member of parliament. Today, using his position of influence, he posted a video on his Facebook timeline, introduced with some graphic images, to rally Zimbabweans to the South African embassy tomorrow in order to submit a petition in response to the violence his compatriots have suffered in the neighbouring country. Hopefully this march will be peaceful. However, there is a danger that in provoking South Africans to react to their citizens' behaviour, this Zimbabwean message could antagonise South Africans and deepen the wedge between the two countries.

[Update: the planned march was cancelled, perhaps wisely so as to avoid aggravating South Africans.]



I have also been upset by the drowning of hundreds of Libyan migrants on their way to Italy. Seeking to escape the bleak or even dangerous circumstances in their home communities, migrants are flocking to Europe. I am disheartened to think that so many people can calculate the risk of dying against the promise of a more hopeful future in Europe and take the chance anyway. So many people have died, betrayed by the traffickers who profit from their deaths, and yet many more are saving up the money to pay their would-be smugglers just for a chance to enter Europe. It's easy for me to complain about the UK or about Europe and how things can be better, and yet many people compare what I consider normal with their own circumstances and risk their lives to taste what I am privileged to take for granted. It depresses me to think how awful the world can be that people are willing to risk so much just to migrate to my country/continent.

In considering a response to these worldwide realities, what religious precedents can be considered?

In my experience, leaving one's home can be not only a journey of discovering the world beyond one's known borders, but also discovering oneself. I find multiple examples of migrations in religious history that catalyse a change of identity and give birth to new religious communities. Abraham himself was a permanent migrant, beginning his nomadic lifestyle from what is now Iraq in search of the land promised to him by God in what is now Israel. Being at the mercy of his hosts, and being a generous host himself, the virtue of hospitality is valued highly in the Abrahamic tradition, especially for Jews and Muslims. It was while they were migrating from Egypt to Canaan that the Israelites met God at Mount Sinai. The prophet Muhammed migrated from Mecca to Medina as a refugee seeking religious freedom and political asylum. Jesus migrated from his homeland of Galilee to minister in Judea. Gautama Buddha departed from the luxury of his palatial home and wandered as an ascetic in search of truth. Sun Myung Moon left his homeland to study in Japan, and while much of his early life was spent migrating around Korea as an occupied or war-torn country, his later life was spent migrating around the world. The one who migrates is thus one who has the opportunity to meet God, with the migrational journey considered as a pilgrimage.

That's not to say that all migrants are pilgrims. There are many economic migrants in my local community, many of whom came from Eastern Europe seeking better employment opportunities. Some people I know are refugees, seeking asylum due to dangers at home. There is also the large number of spouses who are matched and blessed in marriage with local folks and who want to migrate in order to be with their spouse. Not all of these motivations can be necessarily equated with a spiritual journey, but the potential for a transforming experience is present if such an itinerary is open to meeting God.

How then should immigrants be treated? When the Hebrews migrated from Egypt to Canaan, God instructed them to love, rather than mistreat or oppress, any foreigners, reminding them that they used to be slaves in Egypt. The religious tradition of hospitality should thus be instructive for our own policies towards migrants. However, once a religious community is established, maintaining the identity of that community, especially when foreigners bring their alternative identities and cultural practices, is important. Some minimum expectation of behaviour is required in different religious communities to tolerate the inclusion of guests. As long as certain rules are kept, the guests may remain. Deciding what those rules are, however, is where politics come in. The underlying heart, however, should be one of loving hospitality. A line, however, must be drawn in a way that one's hospitality is not abused. The degree to which a host nation can be hospitable towards, let alone tolerate, foreign guests can be the difference between military war and peace, economic growth or stagnation, life and death. With that in mind, next month's UK elections present an excellent opportunity for voters to express their hearts in who they vote for.

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