



PUBLIC JUSTICE *REVIEW*

A PUBLICATION OF THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC JUSTICE

A JUST WELCOME

Vol. 2, 2017

The Religious Act of Welcoming the Stranger

Chelsea Langston Bombino

Chelsea Langston Bombino is the Director of Equipping and Membership at the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance, a division of the Center for Public Justice. She holds a JD from the University of Michigan and is a licensed attorney by the State Bar of Michigan.

Deuteronomy 10:19 is perhaps getting more mainstream media coverage and public attention than at any other time in our history. Seemingly simple and straightforward, it comes in at fewer than 140 characters, perfectly tweetable for our soundbite culture: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

On January 27, 2017, President Trump released an Executive Order containing several directives relating to immigrants and refugees. Some of the provisions of the Executive Order were suspended as they were under review by a federal judge. The elements of the initial Executive Order pertaining specifically to refugees that were on hold pending federal review included: 1. A prohibition of indefinite length on Syrian refugees entering the United States 2. A four-month ban on all refugees coming to the United States, with limited exceptions. Since then, the president has revoked this EO and released a new and revised one with the hope that this updated EO would put to rest some of the legal challenges that had plagued the initial order.

The new Order made some significant changes regarding refugees. It removed the indefinite ban on Syrian refugees and removed the provision of the initial order that “allowed for prioritization of refugee claims from members of persecuted religious minority groups.” But another provision of the Order, which is unchanged in the latest revision, calls for a reduction in the total number of refugees the United States can resettle in Fiscal Year 2017 (which began October 1, 2016) from 110,000 to 50,000.

A lot of questions are being asked in the wake of these orders: What *can* the president do, legally and constitutionally, with respect to limiting refugees? What *should* the president do with respect to American policy toward refugees? What is the role of Congress with respect to refugees? What is the role of the courts? What is the role of American citizens, of families, of churches and service organizations and advocacy groups?

These questions are particularly relevant to Christians who believe, as we do at the Center for Public Justice, that our faith calls us to hold government accountable to advancing public justice and supporting human flourishing. This public justice perspective holds that government should create space in society for other institutions to likewise contribute to areas of human flourishing that are beyond the government's proper scope. A public justice framework is especially helpful here because it can speak directly to the questions about the right roles and responsibilities of different branches of government, but also the roles of other institutions, like churches, nonprofits, and families, with regard to refugee resettlement in this country.

Understanding Deuteronomy 10:19

The “welcome the stranger” theme, which we see repeated throughout the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, has become a rallying cry (sometimes literally) for Christians who are disappointed with the decisions of the current administration. But “welcome the stranger,” tweeted or chanted at a protest by itself and taken out of its biblical context, actually has the capacity to lessen our good, reasonable, and substantive challenges to the Trump administration's actions regarding refugees.

As people of faith and members of the body of Christ, we must exercise greater theological and intellectual rigor than simply hashtagging #welcomethestranger. As we look at this text, we need to ask: What is the historical context? Who is talking? Who is God talking to? Is God talking to an individual, a religious community, a government? Are these God's directives for a specific people in a highly particular time and place, or do they apply to all people at all times? And, even if the latter, to whom do certain God-given directives apply?

At the heart of it, this God-given call to welcome the stranger is about a faith-motivated act of hospitality. This biblical theme applies to Christian individuals and families. It certainly extends to churches and other communities of Christ-following co-religionists. And, quite relevant to our current political and cultural moment, “welcome the stranger” is the faith-rooted mission of faith-based refugee resettlement organizations such as World Relief.

Therefore, while “welcome the stranger” has, in recent weeks, sometimes been used as a catch-all approach for how individuals, families, communities of faith, nonprofits, and government should act, the lack of nuance can water down the important message and highly particular calling of welcoming the stranger in different spheres of life. In other words, the call to serve the stranger needs to be

unpacked in a way that asks: “What is government’s role in serving the stranger?”, “What is the church’s role in serving the stranger?”, and “What are individual families’ roles in serving the stranger?” My focus here is specifically on how the biblical call to welcome the stranger has particular implications for faith-based organizations.

FBOs Responding to Refugees

“Welcome the stranger” is a tangible call for many Christian individuals and organizations that compels a tangible religious action. Although welcoming refugees may not, to an outside observer, look as explicitly religious as other overtly religious exercises such as prayer or worship, that perception does not change the deeply religious significance of welcoming refugees for many.

The ability to live out a divine calling on one’s life, as an individual or as an organization, is the essence of religious freedom. Religious freedom certainly has legal and constitutional dimensions; we live in a democracy that considers religious freedom our First Freedom, ensconced in the First Amendment of our Constitution. So naturally, when we discuss a problem with religious freedom, the conversation is usually an argument about how an individual or an organization’s religious freedom has been legally violated.

Unfortunately, we often view religious freedom only as a legal protection for acts that many may perceive as negative. In truth, religious freedom is a necessary foundation for persons and groups to live according to what they believe God requires of them. Religious freedom is not only a legal claim; it is an essential public good that provides normative guidance for the unfurling of culture in a pluralistic society. The conversation about religious freedom must go beyond the legal dimensions and penetrate underlying cultural assumptions about what we value most.

Although different religions will reach different conclusions about what their faith asks of them, some common themes will emerge. In many major religions, there is not only a call to love our neighbors, but to love the strangers, especially the vulnerable foreigners who have been forced to flee their countries due to fear of persecution because of race, religion, ethnicity, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

On March 3-4, hundreds of faith leaders gathered at Princeton University for a conference called *Seeking Refuge: Faith-Based Approaches to Forced Migration*, sponsored by Princeton’s Office of Religious Life and the Comunita di Sant’Egidio. During the opening session, Joel Charny of the Norwegian Refugee Council – USA explained that the Jewish call to care for refugees is “at the heart a creation story itself.” According to the Midrash, Charny explained, God created man from dust, but in doing so, “God took dust from the four corners of the earth. So no one can say to another, you are not my family.” Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer of HIAS (a Jewish organization that helps resettle refugees in the United States), echoed Charny’s sentiments of the centrality of the God-given imperative to care

for the refugee. Rabbi Grant Meyer explained, “As a rabbi, a Jewish person of faith in general, my Jewish faith doesn’t just inform my work with refugees, it demands it. Welcome of the stranger is a core Jewish value. It is fundamental.”

Imam Shamsi Ali, an Indonesian Muslim with the Nusantara Foundation, likewise emphasized the centrality of care for the refugee in Islam. Imam Ali stated: “Prophet Mohammed had to seek refuge three times. People don’t want to leave their homes. Prophet Mohammed was forced to leave. He died in Medina, a refugee.” Dr. Daniel O’Neill of the Christian Journal for Global Health echoed these sentiments and said that in the Old Testament, there is “an unequivocal, unambiguous call to serve the stranger.”

These speakers, from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian faiths respectively, show us how each interpret their religious missions to care for the foreigner forced to seek refuge in a strange land. While faith-based organizations serving refugees do not have the same legal authority or role as the president does to determine the exact number of refugees that enter the country every year, the EO limits their capacity to serve refugees. Rabbi Grant Meyer’s emphasis on love of stranger as not an optional activity, but a command of her faith, demonstrates that limiting the ability to love the stranger does, in a very real sense, limit her organization’s freedom to embody the core tenants of its faith, even when there isn’t a legal violation of religious freedom.

What the testimony from the conference reminds us is that religion often motivates great acts of generosity; it shows us that the primary significance of religious freedom is to protect the ability of people and organizations to express the sacred callings they believe God has placed on their individual or communal lives. Even when limits to the capacity to fully live out their faith does not amount to a legal claim of religious freedom violation, that does not change the nature of the challenge to an individual or organization whose religious freedom has been compromised.

Framing this as a religious freedom conversation is important, perhaps critical, to how we, as people and institutions of diverse faiths, create cultural meaning. Religious freedom is not just a “legal right,” but also a guiding norm that helps us structure our lives toward human flourishing in all of its dimensions. These speakers and their organizations demonstrate the positive, tangible social good of a religious freedom that gives individuals and groups the ability to love the other — the displaced foreigner — as they love themselves. Religious freedom transcends even legal definitions, and we should care about making the connections between our faith and the activities that our faith calls us to engage in.

The speakers showed how their faith also calls them to pursue hope, innovation, and creativity. Rabbi Grant Meyer painted a compelling picture of the sacred beauty and distinctive character of religious freedom embodied in public life: “Jewish tradition added a real depth to our rally for refugees,” she explained. “We were able to gather ten, a quorum, to engage in the Jewish ritual of *kriah*: mourning.

We transformed this ritual from something normally reserved for immediate family members to apply to refugees, symbolically bringing about their family status.”

This religious ritual, full of sacred, transformative meaning, is the direct result of a foundation of religious freedom. We can bring our faith into the public square, in our acts of service and our acts of advocacy. When our individual or organizational sacred missions are limited for any reason, we still need to tell those stories, and tell them in light of religious freedom as a prerequisite for the embodiment of the sacred, in all of its diverse expressions.

As Christians, this is an opportunity for meaningful and positive embodiment of our citizenship responsibilities, both as individuals and organizations. We are called to engage public officials and encourage change where the actions and policy initiatives of those public officials undermine the ability of individuals and bodies of believers to fully live out what their faith calls them to do, or how their faith calls them to serve.

Our various faith communities’ extensive experience of welcoming refugees both makes us ready to serve more, and also compels us to urge the administration to accept a larger number, without losing its commitment to security. In fact, we can be so welcoming because so many faith communities and faith-based organizations are engaged in this work and have stated that they can and will serve many more. We can work alongside government, offering support and reassurance that churches and faith-based organizations across the country are ready and willing, with the capacity needed, to welcome refugees. This can be a powerful opportunity to demonstrate the value of faith-based organizations in partnering with government to achieve shared goals in support of human flourishing.

To respond to the author of this article please email PJR@cpjustice.org. Public Justice Review (PJR explores in depth specific questions of public justice, equipping citizens to pursue God’s good purpose for our political community. Articles do not necessarily represent an official position of the Center for Public Justice but are intended to help advance discussion. Articles, with attribution, may be republished according to our publishing guidelines available online or at the email above.