



Dana Wilbanks, Professor Emeritus of Ethics
at
The Iliff School of Theology
dwilbanks@iliff.edu



Hospitality to the Stranger: Reflections on Immigrants and Refugees Religious Perspectives on Current Debates

Recently certain contenders for the U.S. Presidency have proposed that the U.S. close its doors to refugees from Syria. They also advocate expelling all undocumented immigrants from the U.S. as well as completing the wall separating the U.S. from Mexico.

Most religious communities are vigorously opposing these proposals. They violate religious tenets that emphasize compassion for needy and vulnerable people, regardless of national boundaries.

We would like to provide an additional religious perspective on this question. Indeed we are challenged to treat vulnerable people in a hospitable way. But why? Certainly their plight is desperate. Each human being is created in the image of God. The Mexican and Syrian is no less loved by God than the American. Each of us is a member of the family of God, a membership that is more inclusive than nation or ethnicity.

Still I would like to suggest a further reason. It is not just that refugees and immigrants are often exceptionally vulnerable. Even more profoundly, we need them. They are "different" from "us. Different in language, ethnicity, religion, traits and customs. There is nothing more troublesome than "difference" in the national debate, however disguised.

To be sure, differences are real, and they matter. We are not alike, we who make up the world's populations. Yet, how are we to view "difference"? In recent years, philosophers and theologians have challenged us to realize the importance of "otherness" in human interactions. Yes, we have shared needs and characteristics that point to an extended family relationship. But it is often our differences which become the basis of the unjust treatment of "others". Religions have often contributed to the sharp divisions between "us" and "them" even as their sacred texts teach us to practice hospitality to the stranger.

From the Quran we read: "We have made you into nations and tribes so you may know one another." In the Hebrew Bible (Genesis 18) Abraham and Sarah are visited by three strangers who, as it turned out, were divine emissaries. And in the New Testament of Christians: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it."

Intriguing! Often in the ancient world strangers were regarded as heralds, persons who might be bringing news that could mean the difference between life and death. How else would a nomadic people know what was happening beyond their immediate grazing range? How else do contemporary people experience the world beyond our noses other than through encounters with persons who are profoundly different, other than to welcome them into our lives, that is, to be hospitable?

Immigration scholars emphasize the impact of immigrants and refugees in U. S. history. Not only are newcomers changed. So also are receiving residents. Consequently reception of immigrants and

refugees is one of the primary ways the U.S. is constantly renewed and transformed. Of course, this isn't conflict free. This isn't a smooth process. But the challenges newcomers bring ensure an ongoing dynamism in American history. Newcomers are changed. And so also are residents.

If we turn newcomers away we may miss opportunities for moral transformation. Without the personal presence of refugees and immigrants, we close ourselves to the gifts they may bring. How different would we be if we were a population composed of only descendants of the British Isles? The struggles we experience with cultural newcomers provide powerful ways that the U.S. is constantly changing, renewing and transforming itself. For religious communities we may view this as the transforming power of the Creator through genuine encounters with "others".

So it may be with Syrian refugees. Are we so fearful and politically insecure that we must shut the door to those whose lives are endangered? The fact is that the U.S. has policies and procedures to identify likely terrorists. Of course, there is no such thing as absolute security. Attempts to achieve this can lead us in the direction of a police state and is doomed to failure in any case. Reception of Syrian refugees can save lives, open up opportunities for them in a safe environment, and open us residents to a deeper understanding of their religious faith and view of the world. There is no question that U.S. residents have a better understanding of Islam since 9/11 than we had before. We can continue to learn as we open our borders to newcomers.

Hospitality to strangers can provide a vital religious and moral perspective for policies and practices regarding immigrants and refugees. It also provides a challenge to construct institutions that embody these values. Together Colorado is one such example. Historically, the world's religions have done more to create animosity, hostility and even violence than to foster understanding.

Together Colorado is comprised of members of varying faiths, seeking to model a possibility of working together while appreciating the gifts and unique insights of each tradition. How may we work together learning to appreciate each other as we work for justice and peace in our communities? Differences of all sorts challenge our faith and ingenuity. Hospitality to the stranger is a spiritual gift and a spiritual practice.