

Is a welcoming environment possible?

Vaughan Jones

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I have been asked to paint a picture of an ethical asylum system. I have no doubt that with the expertise in the group this afternoon we could quickly map out the changes needed. Then we can ask for a meeting with the Home Secretary and her officials. Yet somehow, I doubt that they would be receptive.

My cynicism is well founded. In the context of British politics today, with an impending Sovereign Borders Bill, we need more than a simple set of proposals to tweak the process. Asylum needs a radical re-imagining.

So this afternoon, I will outline:

- Asylum as a space;
- Asylum as an ecology;
- Key actors and the part they play;
- The role of Christians in the transformation of a hostile into a welcoming environment; and
- Some theological principles underlying our involvement.

Defining asylum

Let me propose a re-definition:

Asylum is the space, within which there is protection for people who live under violence, intimidation, threat, exploitation and abuse and those who have no alternative but to leave their homes and/or countries as a result of environmental degradation. This space is geographical, communal, liminal and spiritual, rooted in the principles of fundamental human rights. It ensures safe and accessible, non-discriminatory entry points, a place of safety, and pathways to settlement or freely chosen return, always respecting the agency of those who need or are within this space.

This fluid space is dependent on a range of people, conditionality, policies, practices, effort, good will, force-fields and visions. It is not nirvana but a space constantly in the process of construction, constantly undermined, constantly recreating and constantly evolving in response to changing circumstances and historical moments.

There are four broad categories of actors, some prevailing and some countervailing and some who are both:

- State and inter-state governmental, legal and quasi-legal institutions;
- Economic interests;
- Civil Society; and
- People who claim their asylum rights.

State and inter-state actors

Let me begin with the numerous State and Inter-state actors. Beginning with the UK, clearly the Home Office, has a significant role. It makes and enforces the processes. It polices the borders and has the power to detain and deport.

Yet, it is not the only player. Policies and practices of the Departments of: Housing, Communities and Local Government; Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; Health; Education; Work and Pensions are all involved in shaping the experience of refugees within the space we call asylum.

Asylum is needed because of conflict, so the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has a significant role. So does the Ministry of Defence. Refugees are people not collateral damage, so any military intervention should take responsibility for the immense damage done to civilian populations.

Asylum and refugee strategies have an impact on national budgets, so the Treasury are also involved.

Within a democracy, the effectiveness and priorities of opposition parties are not without consequences. The so-called Overton Window has moved a long way from liberal, progressive agendas on migration generally. Opposition parties need to shift the public discourse and prepare alternative policies. If they perpetuate restrictive policies and practices or only offer amelioration of the worst excesses of government, then they carry a responsibility.

On an international level, there are inter-state actors notably for us the EU. Their policies and decisions have a huge impact on refugees. EU countries are countries of transit for asylum claimants who come to the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Failure of the international community to deal with the dictatorship in Eritrea, the war in Syria, Yemen, its messy engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan feed the flow of people in need of protection. We cannot pretend that the dynamics of international politics between Europe (and the USA) and conflict regions has no bearing on young people risking their lives in the Mediterranean and English Channel.

The United Nations is both peacekeeper and parent to key agencies, notably the High Commission for Refugees. Through our membership of the UN we are obliged to conform to conventions and agreements. In 2018 the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants was signed as an attempt at resource sharing and setting minimum standards for protection. The issue is not whether this is a useful development but whether the signatories will take any notice of their obligations.

The UK government will argue, with some justification, that the Syria programme set up by the Cameron government meets their obligation to this agreement. I would argue that virtue in one area does not excuse negligence in others.

Concluding this section, state and inter-state bodies hold levers to make a significant and vital contribution to the space we are calling asylum.

Economic interests

Asylum has its own economics. Politicians justify an increase in draconian measures as a means of breaking the 'business model' of people smugglers. Yet we know that smuggling is increased as legitimate routes are closed.

Other commercial interests include the management of detention estates, surveillance, security forces. Enormous sums of money are spent on closing borders which could be redirected to conflict resolution and ensuring safer and sustainable futures for refugees.

The arms industry has enormous economic weight whilst proliferating the violence which creates refugee flows. Like the debate on guns in the United States, we ask whether arming the world makes it safer or less secure.

The re-allocation of resources from surveillance, securitisation, conflict, detention, prolonging legal cases unnecessarily would make economic sense. There may well be enough money to fuel our asylum space if only resources were not wasted.

Refugees themselves invest in their asylum, being forced to waste money on clandestine routes into safety. They work hard to establish a safe space for themselves and their families in exile. Their contribution is rarely valorised.

Civil Society

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Civil Society is a wide consortium of actors. It includes the legal profession, labour representation, media, citizens' organisations, international non-governmental agencies, large domestic NGOs, campaigning and advocacy organisations, community organisations and faith institutions and communities.

They (or should I say we) are at the heart of the asylum space. If we are creating a space of dignity and respect where human interaction takes place on the basis of equality and justice, then we cannot abandon it to government and economic forces.

Lawyers, advocates and campaigning organisations have made an incredible contribution preventing the excesses of government agents. They have saved many lives.

The voluntary sector provides an alternative social protection for hundreds of thousands of people in the absence of state-provision.

Some agencies provide a service at times when it is needed. Others build community. Others advocate for individuals and some for change. Some provide practical support in distinct areas, health, education, employment. Some do it all. Together the voluntary sector is constructing important dimensions of our ideal asylum space.

It is the cutting-edge organisations, engaging voluntary action, building partnerships with and within diaspora communities which are at the vanguard of the movement from the status quo to an alternative, just asylum space.

In a democratic country, the media are independent of government and free to report news and express opinion. They form much of the narrative which shapes public opinion. Ownership and interests of media matters.

In this era of new media all of us can create media. Denominational newspapers are media as are church websites, newsletters, and Sunday notices.

People who claim their asylum rights

The final protagonists in the asylum space are those who claim their asylum rights. If asylum space is more than a bureaucratic and impersonal process then it must be shaped by the ambitions, aspirations, experiences, and needs of those who will live within it. The roles of all the other actors must be responsive to them.

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People make brave, bold, determined, albeit limited, choices in leaving their country - the decision to leave or the means of departure; the destination; who leaves; who stays behind.

This agency continues and extends into diasporic self-organising as community organisations, faith communities, cultural and linguistic groupings, and continuing to work for the resolution of the problems which caused their exile.

Asylum as a whole system

Mapping these various actors, we conceive asylum as a complex web of interacting forces which I am describing as an ecology. The asylum system is not the exclusive domain of the Home Secretary or the governing party. It embraces the person who reads a newspaper in the morning, the Navies patrolling the Mediterranean, the young person who decides to pack their bags in Eritrea. We enter the asylum space as a neighbour to a refugee, or share a pew in church, work in an advocacy agency, a trade union, are members of a political party, teach children from refugee families, work in a GP surgery or a hospital, work in a homeless hostel.

Let me point out the irony here.

This is the logic of the hostile environment. Governments cannot stop refugees from coming and legitimately claiming their right to asylum no matter how many caseworkers, detention centres or border guards they employ. In truth they are operating on a limited budget and with an impossible task.

So controlling our borders – control being the operative if inaccurate term – is outsourced to a wide range of actors.

The hostile environment is designed to prevent arrivals and settlement, to pursue claimants and disrupt routes to the UK, to protect not the asylum claimant but the

narrowly defined integrity of the UK borders and engages the UK community as actors (often unaware) in this negative regime.

Our borders are internalised at the school gate, university admissions departments, the estate agent, the GP surgery, A&E and privatised companies.

Our sovereignty focused government has externalised our borders relinquishing them to commercial interests, foreign governments, security firms and mercenaries. It has invested billions in security and little in protection.

Our government, among others, is not contributing to a mutually enriching asylum space but orchestrating a negative system in which many are involved wittingly or unwittingly.

If the government understands the system – shouldn't we?

Projects and movements

Many of us here are involved in projects either as refugees, people seeking asylum, churches, charities, NGOs, casework for individuals or groups, improving the access to services, assisting language acquisition.

The diversity of these projects is a strength. They challenge the hostile environment. No doubt we are labelled as disruptive human rights activists, liberal do-gooders, naïve, woke, or whatever for our pains.

When we knit the projects together, then they become a movement.

Christians within a movement for change

This movement should seek to transform an environment which is intentionally hostile to this alternative asylum space, and I believe that Christians can and should immerse themselves in it.

Historical

Asylum is a historic right enshrined from biblical times ¹ It entered European awareness in the 17th century when the word refugee entered the English language in Mile End for the protestant Huguenots. After the Second World War, the UN

¹ Joshua 21:27; 1 Chronicles 6:71

Convention on refugees sought to prevent future refugee crises such as the one experienced in Europe before, during and after the Second World War, especially the scandal of Jewish refugees turned away from these and other shores. This and the holocaust horror gave birth to the post-war refugee regime of the Geneva Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today refugees include Rohingya Moslems from Buddhist Myanmar, Uighur Moslems in China, Christians from Pakistan and Hong Kong, Pentecostal Christians from Eritrea. Faith continues to be one major reason people become refugees. Asylum is a faith issue.

Our colonial and imperial legacy has created inequalities between nations. The perpetuation of conflicts derived from 'divide and rule', the imperial drawing of borders still fuel the protracted tension at the root of so many. There is a responsibility for past crimes and that includes Christian theology and Church practice. Refugee rights are a constituent part of reparations.

Migration has been positive except when it has been to conquest, to enslave, to displace the indigenous. Refugee flows are specific to the context of conflict and should be read within their historical perspective. Without it we will not understand the roots of conflict and without that reconciliation and progress is not possible and refugees will continue.

Political

We could as Christians limit ourselves to important and valuable humanitarian efforts and leave asylum politics to others. However, being apolitical is a political choice.

The sin of the refugee is to cross a border or several borders. They move from one nation state to another. What is our politics of border, citizenship? How do we balance the natural and responsible human instinct to define and protect personal and communal space within cultural boundaries with international and ethical obligations? Politicians have limited success in this and are more often magnetically drawn toward the closing of borders.

Sovereignty has been exploited by populists in recent years, yet the Brexit debate is not over. The European Union is an experiment with open borders, freedom of movement for people, goods and services. It has proved deeply problematic for our current debate. The prediction at the time of Maastricht in 1992 that Europe would

become a fortress has proved true. Europe is a crucial political platform for refugee rights. The Church is a transnational organisation and a core member of European civil society.

The political world pays attention to public opinion which is fluid. The role of the media is significant but so is political and religious leadership. Opinion is formed and shaped from a variety of information sources, emotions and the language and ethics of leaders play a major part. What a difference Pope Francis makes! What a difference Joe Biden makes in contrast to Donald Trump. Leadership matters in the asylum space.

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Conflict resolution is the key to resolving any so-called 'refugee crisis'. The weakness and tragedy of contemporary international politics is the absence of effective intervention strategies in cases of flagrant violations of Human Rights and criminality in the public sphere where the people do not have democratic means to tackle them by themselves. The military interventions of the Bush/Blair era proved devastating. Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan are still problematic. Apart from limited high-profile trials, international war crimes courts have failed to bring perpetrators to justice. Yemen, Eritrea, Syria, Myanmar are left to their fate. The urgent political question is how to stop these injustices without making the situation worse. Forgive me for not know the answer but asking the question seems to be the first step.

Lastly in this section we should bear in mind that sea change Kairos moments arise. The Overton Window moves, seemingly off-beam ideas become reality, they just take time. The Christian is always called to be alert and to read the signs of the times with the patience, insight, courage and spirit of the prophets.

Economic

Economics is the science of forecast, management and choice. Those choices are ethical as well as financial.

Many conflicts go unresolved for decades, and long-lasting scarring of home economies is caused by wasting talent and expertise, kleptocratic leadership and money spent on armaments rather than people. Once conflicts become entrenched and dictatorships allowed to impoverish their countries, the harder it is to reconstruct.

Corruption becomes endemic and the moral leadership of the country has either been silenced or exiled.

Western governments then spend a fortune keeping people away from their borders. Sustainable development beyond conflict, requires speedy resolution and the employment of the talent of the diaspora. It also requires the reallocation of resources.

Defence industries are part of the national economy so diversification into green economies would contribute to deescalating conflict in refugee-sending regions. That is a bold economic choice which would transform our world.

Refugees are an investment rather than expenditure. I resist the economic argument for migration which turns a human being into an economic unit but there is no escaping the economic reality that migration is a net contributor to our economy and that a country like the UK is likely to be receiving an educated and entrepreneurial section of the refugee population.

Social protection and pathways to independence

Within this wider framework for reimagining Asylum, there is the essential question of the social protection of people who find themselves in a precarious situation, comprising income, access to health, and decent and secure housing.

The right to work and adequate income protects the asylum claimant from exploitation, destitution and provides them with a steppingstone to longer term settlement.

Anyone seeking asylum should be provided with decent accommodation and be enabled to progress through transitional accommodation to long term independent accommodation.

Health issues are paramount. Attention needs to be given to trauma recovery whether from torture, or the prolonged duress of living with violence. The physical effects of trauma have long term impact on health. Medical attention needs to be available whether there are immediate symptoms.

Child refugees need special attention. The number of missing child refugees in Europe is very disturbing. These children need the attention that all looked-after children need. We know what these requirements are.

We should not overlook other equalities concerns. People with disability whether visible or hidden need access to health care and aids. Gender based violence takes place in conflict, post-conflict and transit.

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Churches and other faith communities have a particular responsibility for the treatment of LGBTQ refugees given our role in their persecution.

I would prefer to talk of independence than integration. By which I mean that someone seeking asylum can establish relationships with others in their own community, their professional community, their faith community, the new community in which they settle on their own terms without judgement. Social protection measures should enable the pathway into the new community with dignity.

Faith and culture

Culture, although a fluid concept, is crucial to our identity as human beings. Faith is a highly transportable component of culture. Space to practice faith in a form and language which links to home and the new circumstance needs to be recognised. To worship in mother tongue is not an affront to the local language.

Language is essential to identity and maintenance of mother-tongue is important. Interpreting is a skilled job requiring linguistic dexterity, familiarity with terminology, technical language in the mother tongue as well as English. Staff, from the Home Office official, the GP receptionist, teacher, to the DWP job advisor, working with non-English speakers need training in communication.

Living in an inter-cultural environment is exciting for some and threatening for others. It is important that we are all ourselves. There is a need, then, for bridge builders. There is social capital on both sides of the divide. Any effective asylum ecology needs people who can interpret one culture to another.

Diaspora communities can stay in contact with each other, can build mutual support and assistance, build community through the networks available through social media platforms. Social media is a frontline in the battle for a welcoming

environment. It is affordable, accessible, useful and dangerous. We need to ensure that asylum exists in cyberspace.

Theological

Let me outline some theological principles to guide the Christian approach to asylum.

The Hebrew Bible is literature written and redacted in the light of the Babylonian exile. The familiar stories of the expulsion from paradise, the exodus from slavery in Egypt, the entry into the Promised Land, the prophetic promises are to be read in the light of the catastrophic events of 597 – 539 BCE. Our faith story is a story of asylum and the prophets asserted that the dry bones of exile will live again² and the refugees should seek the welfare of the city in which they were forced to reside³. They said that every valley would be exalted and every hill made low⁴ to make sure refugees could go home.

The New Testament is infused with the Hebrew faith formed in exile. It describes people living in the shadow of a national catastrophe. The brutality of the Roman Empire, the destruction of the Temple created a new community which lived in both the mother country of Israel and in diaspora. This fledgling Christian community described themselves as Citizens of Heaven⁵ who had no permanent home but looked to the city which was yet to come⁶. It is because of the reconciling power of Jesus that Paul said that they were no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of God's household⁷.

When the New Testament talks of Gentiles, it is referring to us. We are the people who have been grafted into the covenant faith⁸. Welcome and hospitality is an important scriptural concept. We are people who have been welcomed into God's covenant. An ethic of welcome springs from our being welcomed. Our approach to asylum then in our time needs to be more than one rooted in being the welcomer to our common experience of being welcomed.

² Ezekiel 37

³ Jeremiah 29.7

⁴ Isaiah 40

⁵ Philippians 3.20

⁶ Hebrews 13.14

⁷ Ephesians 2.19

⁸ Romans 11.17-24

In this Easter season, we need to ask a fundamental question about the resurrection of Jesus. Do we see the resurrection as a sign of the restoration of Israel, and a paradigm for the resurrection of our own nation state? Or is the resurrection a sign of hope for all people? This has huge implications from how we govern our churches, how we engage in politics, whether we are observers or participants in the space we call asylum. Were we able to have a closing hymn, would it be 'and we will build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land' or 'In Christ there is no east or west.'

There is a spiritual blindness in much of our approach to asylum and refugees. Our charity should never overlook our role in the creation of the violence, exploitation, extractive systems. Nor should we overlook the central proclamation of the Christian Gospel. Change comes from the unexpected, the vulnerable, the crucified. And it goes to the core of resurrection message that dry bones do live again, that the hostility of oppressive systems cannot destroy the hope of salvation and restoration.

Our current systems make the refugee a victim and perpetuate victimhood in the public consciousness. What if they are the vanguard of change – the dissident voices whose passion for their country's future, their children's safety, their country's environment, their cultural survival is the dynamic the world needs for change.

The theological tension of scripture is the reality we are called to live. It is the tension between the now and the not yet – between the Kingdom that is among us and the Kingdom yet to come – between an earth which is in decay and a paradise to be restored – an asylum system which dehumanises and one which enriches our humanity.

Conclusion

Someone once gave me a good piece of advice. He said, 'if you are banging your head against a brick wall, walk around it.' In the absence of ethical responses to the deep crises facing humanity, of which refugees are but one symptom, then we must construct our own. We need new coalitions of the willing be they, state and inter-state agents, economic interests, civil society or refugee communities. Our collective task is to create a new space, virtual, practical, safe.

There are 36 million refugees, the population of a medium-sized country. There are 133,000 refugees in the UK - a medium sized town. There is a strong case for representation of the refugee community in both international and national democratic processes. We should talk about belonging, representation and ownership of the asylum space rather than being content with inclusion and voice.

Moral leadership matters and the Church must play its part with one proviso. We must be a Church which is a genuine community of brothers and sisters of Christ and not a powerful Church lending a begrudging helping hand to the weaker.

We need to construct a movement from our diverse projects and locate the refugee cause within wider social, political, economic, racial and environmental transformation. We can do this by building an awareness of the hostile environment within – the peace movement, the ecology movement, refugee and migrant organisations, anti-racist and anti-poverty programmes. We should look to a future with a welcoming asylum space located within the interconnection of social movements and our immersion as people of faith within them.

I am aware that this is all very broad brush – it is intended to contribute to a wider understanding of how we all contribute to the dynamic of change. Asylum is an important issue which is symptomatic of the need for real change in the management of human affairs from the highest level of international decision making to our local initiatives.