

Towards a Theological & Biblical Understanding of Legal Immigration

Pastoral Reveal: Over the years I've observed that in a church like ours, especially among those of us who are baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) or older, subtle forms of prejudice are at work against certain ethnic groups immigrating to Canada. Evidence shows that more Muslims are populating Canada than any other religious group.¹ Canadian sociologists who like to study the thoughts and feelings of Canadians refer to micro-aggression toward Muslim Canadians. I'd like to believe that Canadian Christians would reject Islamophobia (a fear, even hatred of Muslims), nevertheless often in a smug grumble or quiet mutter I've heard believers say, "Why don't they go back to where they came from?" Such a comment fails to acknowledge that all of us have immigrated, either ourselves or through our ancestors, from somewhere. But more importantly there are also theological and biblical reasons for why such a profiling comment betrays a root of elitist pride. Here are four reasons why we ought to make friends with Muslims and welcome them into our communities and churches.

1. By creation all ethnicities are equal before God. The story-line of creation in the Bible presents a genetic unity insofar as all descendants on our planet are the result of an original historical pair (i.e. Adam and Eve). This genetic unity means that before God all ethnicities and people groups are equal image bearers. Therefore all racism is unjustified because we are all equal in Adam. Consequently, despite its abuses, we should thank God for Canada's immigration and refugee policies. In a liberal democracy like Canada, while these policies include useful regulations they are non-discriminatory regarding ethnicity. Unlike some countries on our planet, here in Canada all ethnicities are welcome into our country and in recent years we have welcomed on average 250,000+ immigrants per year.² So, theologically, the human race has a family tree and from the very beginning the essential equality of all races and ethnic groups was established by God: "From one man He [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26). Therefore, ethnic diversity celebrates the creative work of God in humanity and ought never to become the basis for superiority or inferiority. All race-based prejudice is sinful because it fundamentally defies the Creator.

2. By re-creation glorified humanity will be multi-ethnic by God's plan. If we move from the beginning of time to the end of time, we discover that included in God's ultimate goal for the renovation of the heavens and the earth is a celebration of *all* the peoples of the world. In John's vision of the New Jerusalem, we are told that "the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations (*ethnoi*) will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it...the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it" (Revelation 21:23-26). Here is a depiction of the future final reality of the people of God inclusive of all people groups. Glorified humanity will not become a giant tapioca pudding of uniformity; instead, all the glories and treasures of the multi-ethnic cultures of the world will be redeemed and celebrated. Therefore, not only ought we embrace all ethnic people because God has created us to share a common ancestry, but also we ought to embrace them because God's plan in the end celebrates "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language" crying "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9-10).

¹ Ottawa, "Survey shows Muslim population is fastest growing religion in Canada," *Financial Post*, May 8, 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/08/survey-shows-muslim-population-is-fastest-growing-religion-in-canada/> (accessed Oct. 27, 2014).

² "Immigration Watch Canada." *Immigration Watch Canada*. January 1, 2010, <http://www.immigrationwatchcanada.org> (accessed Oct. 10, 2014).

3. The Old Testament (OT) calls us to love all legal immigrants as we would love ourselves. Biblically, there is an OT key that unlocks the door to understanding how we should think about legal immigrants in Canada today. It is instructive to study the verses that use the language of “stranger” or “alien” or “foreigner” or “sojourner” (from the Hebrew word *ger*). OT scholar James Hoffmeier says that the “alien” (NIV1984) or “stranger” (NASB) or “sojourner” (ESV), in OT verses like Exodus 22:21, was “a person who entered Israel and followed legal procedures to obtain recognized standing as a resident alien.”³

Different Bible Versions Use Different Terms for the Foreign Immigrant: e.g. Exodus 22:21

- a) Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt (KJV; NASB).
- b) Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt (NIV1984).
- c) You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (ESV).
- d) Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt (NIV2011).

Therefore, God’s mandate that the Israelites treat OT foreigners (*ger*) fairly and justly in love and kindness provides for us incentive as to how we should treat Muslim immigrants in our society today.⁴

Theologian Wayne Grudem says, “For immigrants...churches should be a wonderful home away from home, a welcoming community that will work in many ways to help families from other nations adjust and adapt to life in this new country...Churches must remind employers to treat legal immigrants justly and fairly, never taking advantage of them because of their lack of language skills or lack of knowledge of [Canadian] culture. All of the biblical verses regarding the “sojourner”...would apply to this situation.”⁵

4. The New Testament (NT) calls us to be welcoming and hospitable to all strangers. In our culture we tend to think of hospitality in terms of inviting over a relative or church person or close friend. But, in the NT, the word translated “hospitality” (*philoxenia*) meant “love of strangers” because in a world where there were no restaurants, hotels, motels or hospices the opportunity to entertain strangers was customary. Therefore, when you read the biblical appeal to be hospitable⁶ don’t exclude reaching out to the newcomer, the new neighbour, the new citizen, the new immigrant. Xenophobia is a fear or hatred of foreigners, and Christians ought never to suffer from it; instead, we ought to love indiscriminately because we’re equal in Adam and we anticipate our multi-national and multi-ethnic “home sweet home,” the new heavens and new earth reality, our future home of righteousness.

³ James Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 52.

⁴ Leviticus 19:33-34 says, “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (NIV2011); Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (NIV2011).

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 481.

⁶ E.g. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it” (NIV2011).

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