TOWARD A POLITICAL THEOLOGY
OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

JOSHUA RALSTON

The author evaluates the current partnership between the church, religious NGOs, and the US State Department on refugee resettlement. In conversation with refugee studies, he teases out positive implications of and limitations in two prominent models of post-Christendom political theology, those of William Cavanaugh and David Fergusson. He then draws on the thought of Johann Baptist Metz and the practice of the Jesuit Refuge Service to suggest ways that a political theology of refugee resettlement might reform current practice and occupy a space between the theologies of Cavanaugh and Fergusson.

SINCE THE REFUGEE ACT OF 1980 was ratified, the US government has welcomed approximately 1.8 million refugees into the country.[1] Numerous actors, including the UN's' High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the US State Department, and nongovernmental agencies (NGOs), are integral to the process by which an individual or family is granted legal refugee status, selected for resettlement, provided a visa, relocated, and put on a path toward citizenship. Refugees exist at the intersection between international, national, and local politics, as well as between discourses about humanitarian, political, and human rights responsibilities.[2]

JOSHUA RALSTON, having completed master's degrees from The Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and New College, University of Edinburgh, is a PhD candidate at Emory University. In fall semester 2012 he will begin an assistant professorship at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, VA. With special interests in Christian-Muslim dialogue, ecclesiology, and political theology, he has recently published "Preaching Makes the Church: Recovering a Missing Ecclesial Mark," in *John Calvin's Ecclesiology*, ed. Eddy Van der Borght and Gerard Mannion (2011). In progress is his dissertation entitled "The Law, the Gospel, and Social Goods: A Political Theology in Conversation with Sunni Islam."

[1] This number includes only those granted refugee status outside the United States and subsequently resettled. There is also a fluctuating number of asylum seekers who are granted legal status within the United States each year. Asylum seekers differ from refugees insofar as they seek refugee status directly from a state, while refugees are identified and classified through the UNHCR.
[2] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, "Key Ethical Issues in the Practices and Policies of Refugee-Serving NGOs and Churches," in *Refugee Rights: Ethics,*

Often going unnoticed is the central role that churches and religious agencies play in the long resettlement journey. In practice, the US Office of Refugee Resettlement (USORR) contracts with a number of religiously based NGOs, most notably Church World Service (CWS), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), World Relief (WR), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), and Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS).[3] These religious NGOs are involved in nearly every aspect of the resettlement process, including advocating for the resettlement of particular populations, administering interviews to determine refugee status, overseeing camps, and providing the logistical and legal support to refugees when they arrive in the United States.[4] "Faith-based resettlement agencies, once organized on a volunteer basis, are now comprehensive not-for-profit organizations that receive annual federal funding in the millions of dollars to help newly resettled refugees find housing and jobs, learn new skills, go to school and build social networks."[5] The US government directly funds religious NGOs, commissioning them to act on behalf of the state. "States and international governing bodies that assist and resettle refugees do so by funneling funds through NGOs."[6] Religious NGOs often mimic the State Department by "contracting" out their work to local congregations who will pick up refugees at their point of entry and assist with cultural orientation and housing. Funding for such activity comes from both religious communities, whether local congregations or

---

Advocacy, and Africa, ed. David Hollenbach, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University, 2008) 225–43, offers a useful summary of the debates within refugee scholarship about the political, humanitarian, and human rights dimension of responses to refugees.

[3] I follow Elizabeth Ferris's definition of religious NGOs: "While there is no generally accepted definition of faith-based organizations, they are characterized by having one or more of the following: affiliation with a religious body; a mission statement with explicit reference to religious values; financial support from religious sources; and/or a governance structure where selection of board members or staff is based on religious beliefs or affiliation and/or decision-making processes based on religious value" (Elizabeth Ferris, "Faith-Based and Secular Humanitarian Organizations," *International Review of the Red Cross* 87 [2005] 311–25).

[4] Currently, the US Congress has an annual cap of 80,000 on the number of refugees to be resettled. In practice the number resettled typically falls closer to 50,000. See http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/ (this and all other URLs cited herein were accessed on February 9, 2012). However, the executive branch of the US government makes the final determination on which populations are to be resettled.

[5] Sara L. McKinnon, "'Bringing New Hope and New Life': The Rhetoric of Faith-Based Refugee Resettlement Agencies," *Howard Journal of Communication* 20 (1993) 313–32, at 314.

[6] Stephanie J. Nawyn, "Faith, Ethnicity, and Culture in Refugee Resettlement," *American Behavioral Scientist* 49 (2006) 1509–27, at 1509.

national denominations, and the US government. Refugee work defies the conventional perception about the relationship between church and state in US politics and law. As Bruce Nicholas has argued, the relationship between the church and the state and the legal precedents set by rulings on the First amendment and the nonestablishment clause "are different overseas."[7]

In the twilight of so-called Christendom, the practice of refugee resettlement by the United States and the church's relationship therein demands theological consideration. My aim here is to evaluate the applicability for refugee resettlement work of the two prominent post-Christendom models for political theology: (1) an ecclesially oriented model exemplified by William Cavanaugh, and (2) a theology of the common good and civil society found in David Fergusson's work.[8] In conversation with refugee studies, I tease out some of the positive implications of Cavanaugh's and Fergusson's projects for a political theology of refugee resettlement. I contend that neither of these political theological models is complex enough to address the multidimensional and interrelated issues facing refugees, local communities, nation states, the international community, and the church. Instead, I employ aspects of Johann Baptist Metz's thought and the practice of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) to suggest ways that a political theology of refugee resettlement might reform its current practice and inhabit the space between the political theologies of Cavanaugh and Fergusson.

My article is an exercise in what Nicholas Healy calls "practical-prophetic ecclesiology." He contends that ecclesiology—and I would add political theology—should not be understood as the construction of ideal blueprints focused on the heavenly church. Rather, it should aim to assist the pilgrim church "respond as best it can to context by reflecting theologically and critically upon its concrete identity."[9] Part of the church's identity, mission, and politics in the United States, not to mention Canada, Australia, and certain European nations, includes engagement with the state in the resettlement of refugees. It is there that many of the church's theological commitments regarding national identity, catholicity, and its views of human persons' relations to the law are most clearly expressed. Before turning to these theological considerations, I want first to offer a

---

[7] J. Bruce Nichols, *The Uneasy Alliance: Religion, Refugee Work, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford, 1988) chap. 1.

[8] By focusing on these two models of political ecclesiology, my article serves as something of a contextual application and ecumenical extension of the themes developed in Kristen E. Heyer, *Prophetic and Public: Social Witness of U.S. Catholicism* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2006).

[9] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (New York: Oxford, 2000) 22.

definition of refugees and further explore the self-understanding of religious NGOs.

THE POLITICAL NATURE OF REFUGEES

The United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the creation of the UNHCR aimed to provide a legal and political framework for protecting and aiding refugees. Article I of the Geneva Convention broadly defines a refugee as a person who

has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his formal habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.[10]

While this definition leaves many questions open regarding its relevance for asylum seekers and internally displaced persons, it has been legally applied to persons who cross national borders because of active persecution and are formally categorized as refugees by the UNCHR. Legal recognition of refugee status is critical since it, at least theoretically, guarantees the right to nonrefoulement and protection under international law.[11] As Luke Bretheron notes, "It is vital to properly locate the status and need of refugees and asylum seekers in order to make sense both of the subsequent debate about the duty of care to refugees and to identify how to best help them."[12] Debates about who counts as a refugee, not to mention the relationship among refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants, have far-reaching political and legal ramifications.

The distinction between forced migrants and economic migrants is generally agreed to center on the issue of explicit rejection by the nation state.

---

[10] United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article I.A, http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html.

[11] Ibid., Article 33 (1) covers "non-refoulement": "It provides that no one shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee against his or her will, in any manner whatsoever, to a territory where he or she fears threats to life or freedom." The increasing reluctance of Western states to accept applicants for asylum begs important legal and ethical questions about the practice of refoulement and the applicability of international law and human rights decrees within sovereign nations. For a historical survey of the changing opinions on asylum in Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, see Matthew Gibney, *The Ethics and Politics of Asylum: Liberal Democracy and the Response to Refugees* (New York Cambridge University, 2004) chaps. 3–6.

[12] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 129.

Gil Loescher contends that "the key criterion determining refugee status is *persecution*, which usually means a deliberate act of the government against individuals."[13] At least legally, this definition points toward the political nature of refugee status—in contradistinction to the economic issues facing other migrants.[14] Refugees are persons who have been forced to flee their political polity and are thereby rendered stateless. The primarily political nature of refugee status also suggests that a central part of the solution to the plight of refugees must be political—as Emma Haddad has argued, "There cannot be an apolitical humanitarian solution to the 'politically charged events of mass human displacement.'"[15] In the long term, what is most politically necessary for a refugee is a polity that will welcome and protect them.

At the moment, the UNHCR takes responsibility for between 12 and 20 million refugees worldwide, the largest number since World War II.[16] Most refugees live in camps at or near the borders of their countries of origin, often for decades or generations.[17] The long-term solutions for refugees, in order of preference, are: (1) repatriation to their native country; (2) integration into their host country; and (3) resettlement into a third country, typically a Western nation such as the United States, Canada, Australia, or a member nation of the European Union. While African nations such as Kenya currently bear the largest burden for hosting refugees, the United States has played the most prominent role among Western countries in hosting refugees. Between 1975 and 2000, "the USA

[13] Gil Loescher, *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis* (New York: Oxford, 1993) 4, emphasis original.

[14] While the distinction between political and economic motivations for migration might be legally necessary, theologically a strict divide between the political and economic is problematic and fails to capture the complex dynamics involved in acts of migration and the inherent dignity of human persons regardless of legal status.

[15] Emma Haddad, *The Refugee in International Society: Between Sovereigns* (New York: Cambridge, 2008) 204.

[16] This number excludes Palestinian refugees, who are covered by UNRWA, and refugees that the UNHCR does not formally take responsibility for including refugees in urban centers such as Cairo, Islamabad, and Nairobi. Estimates for the number of worldwide refugees, asylum seekers, and international displaced persons run closer to 50 million; see Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th ed. (New York: Guilford, 2009) chap. 8. While the numbers are constantly in flux, currently the largest numbers of refugees are from Afghanistan (1.9 million), Iraq (1 million), Sudan (700,000), Burundi (450,000), Democratic Republic of Congo (430,000), and Somalia (400,000).

[17] The situation of Palestinians is the obvious example, but similar situations exist in the Great Lakes region of Africa, in Cairo (for Sudanese), in Nepal (for Bhutanese), and in Thailand (for Burmese refugees).

accepted more people for resettlement during this period than the rest of the world combined."[18] Like any other political decision, US involvement in refugee resettlement is highly complex and refracted through the lens of national interest, both foreign and domestic.[19]

Returning to the primary issue of this article, ecclesial partnership with the US government in the process of refugee resettlement cannot escape its political trappings. The focus of CWS, WR, and CRS on purely humanitarian and religious motivations for resettlement are complicated by their partnership with and reliance upon the decisions of the US State Department. Thus, Christian engagement with refugee resettlement is an act of political theology, whether or not the agencies and churches recognize this fact. The question is what theological judgments might be offered on this lived political theology so that Christian engagement with refugees and nation states might be more faithful to the gospel and better foster peace, justice, and hospitality.

IMAGINING ECCLESIAL ALTERNATIVES TO THE STATE

The current model of church-state partnership in the refugee resettlement program would seem to depend on certain theoretical divisions between religion, the state, and civil society. The nation state is the ultimate authority with sovereign power over immigration and citizenship, while religion is free to play a public role in civil society through humanitarian services. These distinctions between public and private, state and civil society, politics and religion have come under intense criticism by Catholic political theologian William Cavanaugh. Throughout his works, he contends that these distinctions are created in the modern era: "Modern politics was not discovered but imagined, invented."[20] The political imagination of the modern era serves to reinforce the primacy of the nation state as the totalizing authority over communities and human lives. Cavanaugh contends that the modern state exercises power over its citizens through the construction of various myths, most notably that of the state as peacemaker or savior, the myth of civil society, and the myth of religious violence. These myths function to enthrone the state as the final arbiter over

---

[18] Castles and Miller, *Age of Migration* 193.

[19] See Gil Loescher, *Calculated Kindness: Refugees and America's Half-Open Door, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1986); and Matthew Gibney, *Ethics and Politics of Asylum*, chap. 5.

[20] William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Consumerism* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2002) 2. Cavanaugh's understanding of imagination in connection to the nation state is indebted to Benedict Anderson's seminal work in nationalism studies, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

violence, the law, and the communal good.[21] Central to this founding myth of the state is a description of religion as primarily conflictive and divisive and the state as neutral and uniting. "The modern state is, however, founded on certain stories of nature and human nature, the origins of human conflict, and the remedies for such a conflict in the enactment of the state itself."[22] The state's control over violence and the law allows the state to discipline bodies, justify the use of violence, and demand the privatization of religion.

According to Cavanaugh's genealogy, Christian theology has capitulated to the hegemony of the state by consigning itself to roles of moral formation and charitable works in civil society. Cavanaugh lays much of the theological blame for this submission to the state at the feet of Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray. In different ways, Cavanaugh argues that the attempts of both Maritain and Murray to secure some role for the church in the modern period has the unwitting consequence of reinscribing the state's founding myth as judge over religion. Cavanaugh, argues that Maritain's distinction of planes leads to a dualism that hands bodies over to the state,[23] while Murray's attempt to locate the church's role in civil society obscures the church's peculiar language, identity, and practices.[24] "Religion, in this conception, is not necessarily privatized, hidden from public view, but the church takes its rightful place in civil society, and occupies itself directly with the social, and only indirectly with the political, which pertains to the state."[25] The problem of such an arrangement is that it fails to challenge the state's claims to authority over human bodies. The case in point for Cavanaugh is illustrated by the difficulty that the church in Chile had in adequately responding to Pinochet's practice of torture. "This trap which New Christendom ecclesiology set for the church often made the church reluctant to challenge the state."[26] The mystical and moral body of the church disappeared from view and thereby lost its capacity to function as an alternative to the state's practices.

Cavanaugh's solution calls not for a return to a premodern form of Christendom, but for a reimagining of the church as an alternative political space gathered by the Eucharist. The church is called to live into the imagination, space, and practice of the Eucharist. It does this not by serving the state in the civil realm as in the modern period or by directly ruling over

[21] William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University, 2009).
[22] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* 9.
[23] For Cavanaugh's critique of Maritain, see *Torture and Eucharist*, chap. 4.
[24] For Cavanaugh's critique of Murray, see *Theopolitical Imagination*, chap. 2.
[25] Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist* 4.
[26] Ibid. 97.

politics as in the Christendom period, but by living as a contrast society that embodies a counter politics and discipline. To show how the Eucharist can function as a counterpolitics, Cavanaugh proffers a definition of the Eucharist as a performance of the "true body of Christ."[27] In the Eucharist, space and time are collapsed, and communicants are thereby united to Christ and to one another. "[The] Eucharist makes real the presence of Christ both in the elements and in the body of believers. The church becomes the very body of Christ."[28] The performance of liturgy is a public event that reveals the body of Christ as a political body, a *polis* and *oikos* that is marked by reconciliation, forgiveness, and self-offering. These virtues receive their concrete shape from the life, death, and resurrection of the One on whom the community feeds. Christ, then, becomes visible in and through the members of his body. The Eucharist is a public and political space that manifests Christ to the world and thereby embodies an alternative politics in which torture, violence, and self-aggrandizing power are rejected.[29]

While Cavanaugh is careful to resist mapping his eucharistic counterpolitics directly onto the grid of the modern nation state, he does draw out the political implications of such a performance. For instance, he notes how "the Eucharist transgresses national boundaries and redefines who our fellow-citizens are" by signifying the "eschatological breakdown of divisions."[30] This breaking down of divisions, however, does not come at the expense of the particular or the local. Instead, the local in all its uniqueness becomes the bearer of the universal. "Catholic space, therefore, is not a simple, universal space uniting individuals directly to a whole; the Eucharist refracts space in such a way that one becomes more united to the whole the more tied one becomes to the local."[31] This account of catholicity serves to challenge the system of the nation state where differences are subsumed under the overarching narrative of state unity and citizenship. "To recognize Christ in our sisters and brothers in other lands, the El Salvadors, Panamas and Iraqs of the contemporary scene, is to begin to break the idolatry of the state, and to make visible the Body of Christ in the world."[32] The political import of such a practice is the practice itself. For the Eucharist to receive political merit there is no need to translate it into the language of the modern nation state. The church creates alternative space and politics in the very act of worship. Still, Cavanaugh does think

---

[27] Ibid., chaps. 5 and 6.   [28] Ibid. 205.
[29] Hence, Cavanaugh advocates for the excommunication of torturers from the Eucharist, so that the sacramental body can more accurately reflect its eschatological identity.
[30] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* 50.
[31] Ibid. 115.   [32] Ibid. 90.

that the church can engage in ad hoc witness or advocacy to the state. He contends that the reasons for doing so should be based on building up the body of Christ and serving the Lord, not assisting the state. In sum, Cavanaugh advocates a eucharistic political theology of the church as a contrast society, one that resists the nation state's hegemony over bodies, social imagination, and the civil society.

In his recent essay entitled "Migrant, Tourist, Pilgrim, Monk: Identity and Mobility in a Global Age," Cavanaugh briefly sketches how the church's identity and mission as both a pilgrim and monastic community might provide a response to the challenges of migration and an alternative to the voyeuristic gaze of tourism.[33] According to Cavanaugh, globalization is marked not primarily by a celebration of difference and the breaking down of national boundaries, but by the enshrinement of global capitalism. Capital is the true god of globalization, and a capitalist global system actually depends on the enforcement of borders in order to maintain a cheap work force. This system marginalizes the poor from the global system, thereby creating migrants and refugees. "Indeed the displacement of people has become a major phenomenon of a globalized world."[34]

In such a context, the Christian tradition offers an alternative in the typology of the pilgrim and the monk. In living as a pilgrim community, the church finds its home, not in the power of the state establishment, but through its journey into God. The catholicity of the pilgrim church provides an alternative to the aimlessness and voyeurism of tourism as it celebrates the true differences of humanity. "The pilgrim does not constantly seek differences for its own sake but moves toward a center, which in the Christian case is communion with God."[35] Such a theological practice calls for the church to enter into places of liminality and marginality alongside migrants and refugees. In so doing, the church resists the finality of the borders of the state, even as its commitments to locality demand the building of "strong local communities and cooperative social arrangements deeply rooted in their place."[36] The church, then, is called to perform an alternative to the "imperial gaze" and "rootlessness" of globalization and tourism by entering into the margins with migrants and by extending them hospitality.

Cavanaugh's political theology offers a number of salient insights, both implicit and explicit, into the current crisis of forced migration and the church's engagement with the refugee regime. His theology rightly notes the nefarious underbelly of the modern nation-state system. Cavanaugh

---

[33] In William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) 69–87.

[34] Ibid. 73.   [35] Ibid. 82–83.

[36] Ibid. 86.

illustrates how the modern nation state is not a neutral entity, but a constructed historical community dependent upon clear demarcated lines of inclusion and exclusion. As Haddad has pointed out, borders are physical signs of these points of exclusions: "the refugee highlights the imagined power of geographical space via the territorial boundaries of sovereign states and of moral space constituted by the ethical borders of identity."[37] Against Cavanaugh's negative rendering of statist imagination, it could be argued that borders are not necessarily morally problematic. Belonging to one geographically defined nation need not entail judgment against members of other nations. International and human-rights law also exists to safeguard and protect citizens from their governments and limit the power of the state. Both in theory and when practices are at their best, this is in fact the case.[38] Refugees, however, are living icons of the failures in the nation state system. They serve to reinforce Cavanaugh's claims regarding the problematic nature of state power and the violent expulsion of difference that often accompanies sovereignty.[39] Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben captures this reality well:

The refugee must be considered for what he is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link, and thereby make it possible to clear the way for a long-overdue renewal of categories in the service of a politics in which bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights.[40]

Numerous other political theorists and refugee scholars echo Cavanaugh's concerns regarding the nation state system and its claims to absolute sovereignty. They have called attention to the fissures and failures in the nation-state system that allow for the continued production of refugees. Haddad contends that refugees are not primarily created by illiberal governments, but are an unintentional and yet necessary result of the

---

[37] Haddad, *Refugee in International Society* 202.

[38] This line of thinking is evidenced in Drew Christiansen's argument\: "Where governments either prey on their own people or fail to protect their rights, borders ought not have any more weight. Where governments are prepared to shoulder their burden for the universal common good through an adequate refugee regime and where borders can help promote the common good domestically, there the control of borders continues to have some relevance" (Drew Christiansen, S.J., "Movement, Asylum, Borders: Christian Perspectives," *International Migration Review* 30 [1996] 7–17, at 16).

[39] The causes of forced migration are obviously more complex than simply an exclusion of difference by the state. Loescher offers a succinct analysis of the various theories of refugee movements and their causes in *Beyond Charity*, chap. 1.

[40] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1998) 134.

nation-state system. "The existence of modern political borders will ensure the constant (re-)creation of refugees."[41] Refugees exist because of failures in the international system of nation states, not simply because of failures of individual nations. Persons who are theoretically to be accorded protection and rights are instead excluded and marginalized from their nation of birth. Claims to human rights and international law are largely impotent to redress the situation because legal rights are chiefly protected by states. Even the Geneva Convention reveals this tension when it claims that human beings have a right to emigrate, but does not place a moral demand on nation states to allow immigration.[42] Selya Benhabib argues: "There is not only a tension, but often an outright contradiction, between human rights declarations and states' sovereign claim to control their borders as well as to monitor the quality and quantity of admittees."[43] Neither a state-centric approach nor an international human rights argument alone can address the challenges facing refugees.

If this is the case, then Cavanaugh's political theology can be an important resource in drawing the church away from a fixation on the state as the primary location for political engagement with refugees. Moreover, Cavanaugh rightly demands that the church's engagement with the political be based on the primacy of the gospel—a gospel that breaks down social barriers and reunites people across the very divisions that create categories of citizen and alien. The church is a community that unites persons to one another across the borders of the "natural" divisions of the nation state. The Eucharist "is a fundamental disfigurement of the imagination of citizenship in the territorial state. One's fellow-citizens are not all present Britons or Germans, but fellow members (and potential members) of the Body of Christ, past, present, and future."[44] This insight sheds light on another reality of the church's engagement with refugees. The church is not simply the host for refugees arriving in the host country; in a very real way it is already constituted by refugees. The church exists on both sides of the resettlement process. As Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator puts it, "It is the church, in its original sense as the people of God, which has moved and has been displaced."[45] Christian political engagement in our age of migration

[41] Haddad, *Refugee in International Society* 2.

[42] The nonrefoulement clause is intended to provide temporary protection to asylum seekers, but the increasing unwillingness of Western states to recognize asylum seekers begs questions about the effectiveness of international treaties.

[43] Selya Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (New York: Cambridge University, 2004) 2.

[44] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* 51.

[45] Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, S.J., *From Crisis to Kairos: The Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees, and Poverty* (Nairobi: Pauline, 2005) 173.

must be based, not primarily on the logic of a bounded nation, but on the expansive and porous borders of the church.

The outstanding question is how such an orientation beyond the state can be related to the church's actual engagement in refugee resettlement. Should the church continue to act as partner with the state, or should the church reject cooperation with the state and enact a counterpolitics that welcomes refugees apart from state support? Cavanaugh would likely prefer the latter option. However, I suggest, for both political and theological reasons, that counterpolitics alone is neither theologically nor politically wise. The church is certainly called to live as a society with its roots grounded in Christ and the Spirit, but such a commitment does not necessitate rejecting engagement with the state in the pursuit of temporary goods.

Cavanaugh rightly calls attention to the myriad of ways that engagement with the state tends to compromise the church's identity and witness. This is readily apparent in the contemporary arrangement between religious NGOs and the USORR. Ironically, the church's distinct identity as a community that exceeds the borders of the state is blurred in the very act in which the church attempts to reach out to those beyond the state. A reason for this can be traced to the church's decision to shift work with refugees from the local congregations or denominationally guided organizations to religious NGOs. These NGOs, then, end up mimicking secular NGOs and the state. As Bretherton has noted, "involvement with the state often exacerbates social divisions and forces the church to mimic the state in its form and practices."[46] By locating the primary engagement with refugees in NGOs that serve on behalf of the state, the local church often loses sight of its primary calling of welcome, hospitality, and mutuality in Christ. What the church and the NGOs primarily offer, then, is what is required of the state: a welcome at their point of entry, a few months' rent, and cultural orientation. Once these services are completed, the church typically moves on to a new client. This process hinders the type of long-term hospitality, companionship, and shared learning that would allow the local church to more appropriately sign its eschatological identity as a community gathered from all nations. The primary danger of the current refugee-resettlement arrangement is that it will minimize the church's mission and function down to a purely humanitarian institution.

The second problem in the current church/NGO/state arrangement is seen in the limited capacity of the church to challenge the very mechanisms of the state and international society that create refugees. By acting as an *oeuvres de suppléance* to the state system, the church often lacks the imaginative resources to challenge the policies and practices of the state and

---

[46] Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* 57.

international society.[47] Rather than imagine alternatives to the current refugee crisis that consigns millions of people to lives of dislocation, the church often reinforces the system that "keeps the existing injustice in place."[48] For instance, the church's work with refugees is often constricted by the legal definitions of human beings offered by the state. Instead of meeting human beings through the lens of the gospel, religious NGOs primarily encounter persons through the legal definitions offered by either the US government or the UNHCR. Thus, religious NGOs often wait upon formal legal recognition of refugee status before engaging in ministry. This leaves countless persons in the limbo of living without legal recognition by any nation or international community.[49] The Christian claims of a community that exceeds borders and a gospel that identifies with humans apart from the law are spiritualized and their political implications lost. Agamben comments on the humanitarian dilemma well:

In the final analysis, however, humanitarian organizations—which today are more and more supported by international commissions—can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight.[50]

Given these problematic theological and political consequences of refugee resettlement, it would seem that Cavanaugh's call to separate from the state and perform an alternative identity would be both more faithful to the gospel and possibly more politically effective. The nation-state system is the chief cause of forced migration, and thus the church should resist partnership with it.

And yet, nation states are neither as theologically or as politically univocally problematic as Cavanaugh contends. Certainly the imagination of the state is severely limited and often deeply flawed. The existence of millions of refugees attests to these failings. However, exiles and forced migrants are not unique to the modern nation-state system; they are as old as human history; the biblical narratives of exodus and exile and the centuries-long realities of the Jewish Diaspora witness to this fact. Historically, then, the causes of forced migration are not simply the nation-state system but the human and communal propensity for exclusion, greed, and scapegoating. Moreover, Haddad is correct to note how, in our current historical

[47] See Jean Marc-Ela's critique of the church's accommodation to the state in *Ma foi d'Africain* (Paris: Karthala, 1985).

[48] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 183.

[49] An alternative is seen in the Jesuit Refugee Service and the 1980's sanctuary movement in the United States' practice of treating forced migrants as de facto refugees.

[50] Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 133.

situation, states are "both the source of the 'problem' and the location of the 'solution'"[51] to forced migration. On a political level, a refugee is someone who lacks a polity. The most important long-term political need of a refugee is a nation state and/or a legal arena that offers protection. While the church might offer ultimate citizenship in the Body of Christ and even enact this through sacramental incorporation and/or temporary sanctuary, this citizenship does not eliminate the threat of deportation or further forced migration. A physical home is part of the quotidian good of being a finite creature. It is also an issue of central theological and political importance in the scriptural narratives of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible.[52] There is a danger in Cavanaugh's use of the pilgrim and monk typologies to abstract from these biblical images to address the complications of both forced migration and national citizenship. Edward Said pinpoints the dangers of Christian romanticism about exile and alien citizenship:

> Is it not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography?[53]

Given these realities, Cavanaugh's argument that the church should treat the nation state as a "telephone company" is too constricted. The state is more than simply an organization that "may provide goods and services that contribute to a certain limited order; mail delivery, for example, is a positive good."[54] National citizenship in the 21st century, even when properly desacralized and demystified, is more akin to a baseline necessity for stability in social and political life. The over-half-century-long existence of millions of Palestinians who lack such political identity testifies to the critical necessity of citizenships in the modern world. By participating with the US government in welcoming into the nation refugees who lack such political identity, the church can extend hospitality, political stability, and community.

Cavanaugh is right to ask the church in the United States to enter into the "margins" and "liminal space" of migrant existence by offering welcome and hospitality. However, doing so depends, at least in part, on church members' already possessing the rights and political home that national citizenship provides. Instead of simply renouncing the "privilege

---

[51] Haddad, *Refugee in International Society* 203.

[52] For more on the relative neglect of scriptural accounts of land and political rule in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and Cavanaugh, see Steffen Lösel, "The *Kirchenkampf* of the Countercultural Colony: A Critical Response," *Theology Today* 67 (2010) 279–98.

[53] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2002) 174.

[54] Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy* 42.

and power that Constantinianism assured us,"[55] the privilege and power inherently granted by citizenship in the United States should be used on behalf of those without such citizenship. The very locality of welcome that Cavanaugh commends depends to some extent on the good of national citizenship. In the context of refugee resettlement, the church should, in the words of Augustine, make "use of earthly peace during her pilgrimage" in order to aid and love her refugee neighbors, even as she herself refuses to rest in or enjoy such privilege.[56] An outright rejection of all engagement with the state, particularly when Western nation states are extending welcome and eventually the status of citizenship to those excluded from polity, risks minimizing Christ's lordship over the whole world and threatening to obscure the political complications of the Christian call to care for the stranger, who in this case are those without citizenship. In sum, just as the exceptional case of the refugee exposes the deeply problematic nature of nation states and borders, so too does the exceptional case of refugee resettlement illumine the potential goods of national identity and borders. As Oliver O'Donovan astutely argues, "Our membership in the kingdom of God may be transcendent, but it can be gestured toward in the way we do our earthly justice."[57] What is needed, therefore, is a political theology that recognizes the primacy of the gospel, the dangers of nationalism, and also the possibility of the state as a limited "arena of earthly friendship and peace."[58]

FROM THE GOSPEL TOWARD THE COMMON GOOD

Scottish Reformed theologian David Fergusson, in his two monographs, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* and *Church, State, and Civil Society*, sketches a political theology that begins with Christian ethical distinctiveness but moves toward contribution to the common good. Like Cavanaugh, Fergusson is attentive to the failures of the liberal nation state and the compromises to Christian faithfulness that church-state establishment produced.

He rejects a return to either Christendom or a secular liberalism that limits public discourse to a supposedly neutral rationalism. He also roots Christian political engagement in the distinctiveness of the gospel, the peculiar identity given through the sacraments, and the "politics of Scripture."[59] He contends

---

[55] Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy* 82.

[56] Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University, 1998) 946.

[57] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 215.

[58] Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* 126.

[59] David Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* (New York: Cambridge University, 2004) chap. 1.

that "in the church our lives are reconfigured to the service of Christ through baptism and the Eucharist"[60] and that "the particular demands that the church imposes upon its members through the sacrament of baptism set it apart."[61] On these points he shares much with Cavanaugh and other ecclesially-oriented political theologians such as Hauerwas. However, he departs from Cavanaugh and Hauerwas by arguing that Christian faithfulness also entails commitment to the common good, a commitment that will seek out moral overlap and partnership in a pluralist and non-Christian society. He charts a political path between "withdraw and assimilation" for those whose "citizenship was ultimately in the church but who were called to serve God in other places and communities."[62]

I see two key differences between the positions of Fergusson and Cavanaugh. First, Fergusson grounds his political theology primarily in Christology, not in ecclesiology.[63] Drawing from Karl Barth, Fergusson maintains that "it is not the uniqueness of the church that is decisive, but the uniqueness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ."[64] Shifting the primary focus of political theology away from the church as a contrast society to Jesus Christ opens wider possibilities for seeing the public and the state as arenas of God's redemptive activity and thus locations for genuine Christian engagement. For Barth and Fergusson, God's election in Jesus Christ to be for humanity means that God has reconciled the entire world to God's self. No part of creation, including the modern nation state, is unaffected by God's work in Christ. If Christ is lord over the whole world, then Christian engagement with the state can give witness to the gospel. Of course, Fergusson does not wish to sever Christology from ecclesiology or to deny the genuine importance of ecclesial action. However, he does wish to emphasis the asymmetrical relationship between Christ and church, whereby he sees Christ as both head of the church and lord over, beyond, and at times against the church. Christ and church are united and related, but they are never merged. The church, then, can expect to find witnesses to God's word and kingdom in the political community.

[60] David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge, 1998) 43–44.

[61] Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* 164.

[62] Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* 79.

[63] By drawing a sharper distinction between Christology and ecclesiology, Fergusson follows Barth and other Reformed theologians such as John Webster in highlighting the asymmetrical relationship between Christ and church. Cavanaugh's account, especially as he draws from Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism*, presses for a much stronger correlation between Christ and his body. Space precludes a full engagement with these differing positions on Christ, church, and history, but I would suggest that this asymmetrical rendering of the relationship between Christ and church is better equipped to recognize Christ's presence and work *extra ecclesiam*.

[64] Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* 2.

Fergusson develops these Barthian insights to argue for the Christian importance of hearing God's word in the world and seeking out areas of moral overlap with non-Christian society. "Since God has not abandoned the world, we may expect signs of that same kingdom in strange and surprising places."[65] Fergusson illustrates his point by appealing to the example of secular human-rights language. Some Christian ethicists, not to mention Islamic and Jewish thinkers, criticize human-rights language for overly relying on secular liberalism.[66] Rather than follow this logic, Fergusson contends that Christians should interpret secular accounts of human dignity and rights as a faint echo of the Christian claim regarding the worth of each person as created by God. Moreover, Fergusson persuasively shows through numerous intellectual and moral arguments how human rights can be theologically supported. Agreement on the ends of human rights and the political and legal protection that such rights offer need not entail a shared commitment to a particular form of moral argumentation.[67] Christians can affirm human rights, even as they justify this affirmation with reference to the biblical accounts.[68] Engaging with non-Christians in civil society in working toward communities of justice, charity, and dignity can be an act of faithfulness to Christ, not a secular minimizing of Christian ethical distinctiveness.

These arguments lead to Fergusson's second divergence from Cavanaugh's political theology. His christological politics includes both a positive and negative account of the state's role in accomplishing justice. Through a historical examination of the shifting roles of the church-government relationships, Fergusson notes that the Christian tradition recognizes how "the state could be the enemy, but it could also exercise a legitimate authority and where possible Christians were urged to live peaceably with others."[69] The state, even in its modern from, is not monolithically hegemonic and evil. It can be a limited and provisional good.

---

[65] Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* 74.

[66] See, for instance, Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, "The Concept of Rights in Moral Discourse," in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 143–56; Stanley Hauerwas, "On the Right to Be Tribal," *Christian Scholar's Review* 16 (1987) 238–41.

[67] This way of thinking illustrates Fergusson's commitments to liberal political structures coupled with a hesitancy to embrace the totality of the liberal intellectual project. "Liberalism remains a worthy and necessary strategy for enabling the coexistence of rival perspectives and lifestyle. But, as a unitary politico-ethical theory to which everyone can be expected to subscribe, it has ceased to be credible" (Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* 68).

[68] For more on this see Nicholas Wolterstoff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2008).

[69] Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* 79.

Certainly the state is prone to self-aggrandizement, and Christians must always be wary of the state's propensity to act like Babylon. Nevertheless, the state remains a form of government through which Christians might exercise genuine authority and justice.[70] In recognizing the state's limited import, Fergusson joins in critiques of religious nationalism that subsume Christian identity under the state. "The alignment of churches with nationalist movements can produce deplorable consequences."[71] Christians are first and foremost citizens in the body of Christ that exceeds the borders of the state. Still, "the new communal identity determined the character of its members and called for their highest loyalty . . . yet the polity of the church did not require Christians to abandon all previous commitments, social ties, and standards."[72] Christian identity extends Christians beyond the local, but it does not do so in such a way as to lose sight of the importance of particular local commitments. These differences lead Fergusson to construe Christian citizenship in nation states as "subordinated or stratified," not as alien.[73]

Fergusson develops an account of Christian public engagement through civil society that moves from the gospel toward the common good. The church's mission in the world is to witness to Christ, and this witness extends outward in the pursuit of justice, peace, and charity. Fergusson maintains that "in ceasing to function as a national institution, the church may nonetheless remain publicly significant."[74] The church has a stake in the welfare of the society in which it resides. Acting within civil society does not necessarily entail theological marginalization or a compromise with the state's hegemony. Rather, through activities such as public advocacy for immigrant rights and works of hospitality, the church might faithfully respond to God's call to be leaven and salt in the nation. Fergusson suggests a number of ways for the church to contribute to the common good, ranging from public advocacy by denominations to local congregations gathered around the Word and Sacrament witnessing to a form of community that models hospitality, love, and justice. Christians are also present in "other spheres of civic life" such as business, law, education, and medicine and are called to aid society through these activities.[75] In sum, "the danger of assimilation or captivity is the loss of evangelical and catholic identity, whereas the danger of withdrawal or isolation is the absence of

---

[70] For a sympathetic defense of the modern nation state in relation to God's justice and Christ's lordship, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University, 1996) and *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

[71] Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* 142.

[72] Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism, and Christian Ethics* 13.

[73] Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* 27.

[74] Ibid. 164.   [75] Ibid. 150.

any contribution to the common good. Both need to be eschewed. . . . There remains the ineluctable duty of seeking the welfare of the city in faithfulness to God."[76]

Unlike Cavanaugh's political theology, Fergusson's offers no explicit engagement with the realities of either forced migration or refugee resettlement. However, his explicitly theological defense of the common good, civil society, and the limited benefits of the state serves as a corrective to Cavanaugh's overly negative construal of modern national politics. The importance of the state and the citizenship it can provide refugees cannot be underestimated. Simply put, at this stage in history only a nation state can offer the goods that accompany national citizenship. Christian engagement with refugees, not to mention explicit partnership in refugee resettlement, depends on some positive account of the state's potential as a site for justice. Fergusson's political theology offers a christological justification for the state's moral importance and the church's contribution to a common good therein. Additionally, his theology of the common good also offers a clearer theological justification for Christians' engagement with the religious plurality of refugees. Christian engagement with refugees can be an act of Christian witness and faithfulness to God's love in Christ, even if it does not entail explicit evangelism or participation in sacramental practice.

Finally, Fergusson's account of Christian participation in civil society, one that emerges out of a commitment to the gospel, provides warrant for engagement in the refugee resettlement process. Certainly, the previous concerns raised about the current church/NGO/state partnership must be addressed. If the church is to participate in refugee resettlement, then it must find more faithful ways to engage with refugees so that Christian practice does not end up mimicking the state's bureaucracy or leaving the current international system unchallenged. Fergusson's focus on the church's public witness to Christ that encourages partnership in working for the common good offers some practical direction for how the church might engage with the state without mimicking it.

Fergusson's appeals to the common good, however, are too vague to be of much help in developing a political theology of refugee resettlement. Debates about immigration and refugees are regularly framed around the common good. The problem arises in deciding between a plurality of common goods and how best to adjudicate among them. "The refugee brings into stark view the clash between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism."[77] What takes precedence, the good of the local community and nation or the good of the refugee and the international community?

---

[76] Ibid. 194.
[77] Haddad, *Refugee in International Society* 203.

Communitarians such as Michael Walzer argue that states have a "collective right to shape the resident population"[78] and thus a "right to refrain the flow"[79] of refugees and the stateless into their borders. The shared goods of culture, economy, and tradition are all factors that would limit the obligations of states to welcome refugees and asylum seekers. The cap placed on the number of refugees accepted into the United States each year depends on such communitarian argumentation. This logic is evidenced in the comments of a congressman during the committee stages of the Displaced Persons Act of 1948: we "should not, in our zeal to fulfill our humanitarian responsibilities, forget our responsibilities to our own land and our own people."[80] Certainly these communitarian arguments can risk deteriorating into xenophobia and an ardent nationalism. However, they also raise important ethical issues by calling attention to the needs of the local community and the limited scope of economic resources.

In contrast, cosmopolitans, such as Selya Benhabib, argue that in immigration policy the moral good demands porous borders and a preferential option for refugees and asylum seekers—what she terms "cosmopolitan federalism." In so doing she calls attention to the fundamental tensions between territorial sovereignty and human rights discourse. Drawing from Kant, Benhabib contends that the good of the nation, while important, is secondary to the good of humanity and the right to have rights. Cosmopolitans offer a clarion call to reimagine social justice, politics, and the common good in such a way as to better reflect our age of migration and globalization. The danger is that moral cosmopolitanism, as Cavanaugh notes, will drift away from the local realities and result in an idealistic call to love all of humanity, an ideal that does not account for the finite nature of human persons.

These debates illustrate how Fergusson's theological defense of the common good is restricted by the framework of the liberal nation state model and thus is unclear about how to relate to pressing moral and political questions of migration and globalization. Certainly he appeals to a Christian identity that exceeds the state and at times places Christians in contrast to their native state. And yet his understanding of the common good is largely limited to a conception of the local and national good. What is lacking is concrete engagement in debates about how the local

---

[78] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic, 1983) 52.
[79] Ibid. 51.
[80] Quoted in Gibney, *Ethics and Politics of Asylum* 140.

common good might contribute to the global good.[81] Moreover, his focus on subsidiarity, the notion that the local takes precedence over the universal, and his appeals to work toward a common good, not a global good, would lend itself to a restricted account of the state's responsibility to refugees. This restriction (and lack of clarity) is illustrated in his comment that "our baptism into the church is accompanied by obligations and commitments that override those of patriotic loyalty. Nevertheless, there usually remains affection for one's native lands, its customs, and its institutions."[82] The moral responsibilities toward those beyond our native lands, especially when they are in conflict with the perceived good of our native land, goes largely undeveloped in Fergusson's political theology. What is needed is a political theology that better locates the Christian commitment to the common good within the particular narrative of Christ's love for the world, especially for those excluded by worldly power.

THE COMMON GOOD AS SOLIDARITY IN SUFFERING

While Fergusson offers a persuasive christological justification for Christian commitment to the common good, his Christology largely lacks concrete appeal to the actual shape of Jesus Christ's life and ministry. Attention to Jesus' life, especially his commitment to those marginalized by political, religious, and social factors, would give Fergusson's political theology more explicit criteria through which to engage the state and adjudicate among conflicting goods.[83] The Hebrew prophets (Isaiah 58 and Amos 2:6–16, e.g.) are clear that the common good of any particular society or state is best judged not by its wealth or power but by its commitment to those in situations of poverty and social marginalization. The church most faithfully witnesses to its Lord by following Jesus' example of gathering in those despised and rejected by society. To that end, liberation theology provides an important counterbalance to Fergusson's discussion of the common good and Christian participation in the civil society. As liberation theology

[81] O'Donovan attempts theologically to connect the local good with the global good: "To ask about the justice with which any particular representative arrangement comes to obtain, is to ask about *universal* justice. But that is to ask about the kingdom of God, and about the obedience to his rule on the part of a multitude of peoples and tribes and nations, not by one tribe on its own. To each particular identity, then, is put the question: how can the defense of *this* common good, focused around *this* common identity at *this* time and in *this* way, be brought to serve *that* common good which belongs to the all-embracing identity, individual and collective, of God's kingdom?" (*Ways of Judgment* 184).

[82] Fergusson, *Church, State, and Civil Society* 27.

[83] My critique of Fergusson's political theology echoes James Cone's critique of Barth's Christology. See, e.g., James H. Cone, *The God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 99–149.

and Cavanaugh rightly point out, Christian political theology, both in its ecclesial and common-good form, should always be attentive to and in solidarity with those who reside on the margins of society. The primary challenge facing Christians in the political arena is not how to debate in the public square without compromising Christian distinctiveness and faithfulness but to witness prophetically on behalf of and in solidarity with those whom Gustavo Gutiérrez calls "the '*nonperson*,' the human being who is not considered human by the present social order—the exploited classes, marginalized ethnic groups, and despised culture."[84] Political participation is an act of public witness to the God who claims all human beings. The question, then, is whether our politics actually serve to "tell the nonperson, the nonhuman, that God is love, and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters,"[85] or whether our political actions merely illustrate our primary commitments to our own social interests, class, race, and nation.

Metz's political theology, particularly his account of praxis, solidarity, and becoming a subject before God, offers critical insights into a political theology that inhabits the space between Cavanaugh's counterpolitics and Fergusson's public theology.[86] First, Metz articulates a political theology that understands public good in the context of the global dynamics that create the "nonperson."[87] He locates the challenge of political theology in the West in a larger account of globalization and human interconnectedness; the identity and mission of the church in the West is caught up in the issues facing the Global South. Discussions of the common good must have a global dimension, even as they are rooted in the local and national debates:

The theological category of solidarity wins its breadth of scope only from the global point of view as well. . . . It is becoming possible to see the breadth of obligation contained in a statement as seemingly self-evident as the one about the equality of all men and women as God's creatures. The considerations given . . . forbid us from radically interiorizing this theological truth that everyone is a creature and is equally created in God's image. They also forbid us from letting it be held without any connection to those profound inequalities that exist all around us that make it impossible for many to become subjects because of their misery and oppression.[88]

[84] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983) 193, emphasis original.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Metz connects these themes with narrative and memory, but space precludes complete engagement with them.

[87] Since my focus here regarding the process of refugee resettlement is on the Western church's engagement with liberal nation states, I have chosen to develop a liberative theology of the common good in dialogue with Metz's theology instead of Gutiérrez's. A summary of Metz's theology is beyond my scope here; instead, I focus on his views of solidarity and becoming subject before God, as these are both central to his thought and the most pertinent to a theology of refugee resettlement.

[88] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroads, 2007) 213.

Contemporary political theology exists in the complex global world where the international, national, and local continually intersect. Discussing the church or the state in isolation from broader global movements, therefore, is no longer possible.

Metz's theology moves away from "subjectless ideas and concepts" and toward the "concrete historical-social situation in which subjects find themselves: their experiences, their suffering, struggles, and obstacles."[89] Political theology is best evaluated by its capacity to produce hope and meaning in human persons, not by its coherence within a theoretical or even theological system. The apology or witness of Christianity in a world of suffering and social marginalization is enacted through praxis, not through theoretical justifications of theodicy. Theology is "bound up with a praxis which resists every attempt to radically condition religion socially or to reconstruct it in terms of an abstract theory. Theology remains bound to a praxis of faith that is dually constituted as mystical-political."[90] Theology is mystical in its orientation toward God and its willingness to enter into suffering with other human persons; it is political in its demands that commitments to justice and hope be enacted through socioeconomic and political action. These dual commitments provide a theopolitical framework for enacting a political theology that draws from the best of both Cavanaugh's and Fergusson's models.

Two key themes in Metz's political theology, becoming a subject and solidarity, illustrate his constructive import.[91] The first theme Metz grounds in his reading of Scripture as an account of human beings becoming subjects or full persons. "They are histories of the dramatic constitution of human beings as subjects—precisely through their relationship to God."[92] Theologically, becoming a subject is not equivalent to the individual subject of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment accounts of subjectivity are radically individualistic and posit a bourgeois religion in which the upper middle-class person becomes the standard through which all persons are judged. Metz rejects this account of subjectivity and instead claims that human beings become full subjects only in relation to God. It is God and God's concern for humans that constitutes a subject.

However, the political realities of the world, especially gross injustice, radical suffering, and grinding poverty, limit the capacity of human beings to become subjects. These conditions often produce a loss of hope and failure to reach full personhood. Moreover, society tends to obscure the existence of millions of people from the sight of both the church and the

---

[89] Ibid. 23.   [90] Ibid. 29.

[91] Metz connects these themes with narrative and memory, but space precludes complete engagement with these ideas.

[92] Metz, *Faith in History and Society* 70.

body politic. The task of political theology is to join these forgotten persons in solidarity with suffering as witness to the "dangerous memory of Jesus Christ."[93] "Solidarity is a category of assistance, of supporting and encouraging the subject in the face of that which threatens him or her most acutely in the face of his or her suffering."[94] Entering into solidarity with suffering, however, has an eschatological end: to proclaim the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ that defeats suffering and establishes hope. Political theology, then, is an act of discipleship. "Christ must always be thought in such a way that he is not just thought. For the sake of the truth that is proper to it, every Christology is nourished by praxis: the praxis of discipleship."[95] On this point, Metz offers a corrective to Cavanaugh's somewhat one-sided focus on the church as a contrast society and calls attention to the points at which the church can and should engage in political action. "It would be Christianity's real inhumanity if all it did was teach men and women to bear these inhuman conditions. . . . Here it is the conditions under which people live that have to be transformed."[96] Solidarity's aim is not suffering, but its transformation. In the context of the liminal space of those without citizenship, solidarity and transformation may demand engagement with the state in the work of extending citizenship and its accompanying rights to those currently deprived of them.

These aspects of Metz's political theology are particularly relevant for addressing the issues surrounding refugee resettlement. First, refugees are contemporary society's nonpersons par excellence. As Hannah Arendt noted, "Much more stubborn in fact and more far reaching in consequence has been statelessness, the newest mass phenomenon in contemporary history, and the existence of an ever-growing new people comprised of stateless persons, the most symptomatic group in contemporary politics."[97] Refugees live without the protection of governments or the stability of roots. Therefore, the church's struggle for the common good must include concrete attention to the realities of those excluded from any participation in civic life. This is not to say that the church should necessarily advocate for a complete open-door policy to refugees. The fact that economic injustice and poverty exist within North America and Western Europe suggests that the number of refugees resettled into the state should not come at the expense of existing marginalized populations. Nevertheless, the church should shift the current immigration debates away from an exclusive focus on what is in the best economic interest of the host nation and toward a broader account of justice and humanitarian outreach. In so doing, territorial

---

[93] Ibid. 87–96.   [94] Ibid. 208.
[95] Ibid. 63.   [96] Ibid. 133–34.
[97] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966) 276–77.

sovereignty is reimagined as primarily entailing responsibility, not absolute authority. One way this transformation might occur is through advocating for changes in immigration policy so that refugees and asylum seekers have priority.

Regarding Metz's second theme, his account of solidarity demands that the church rethink the current church/NGO/state partnership in refugee resettlement. Insofar as the current model locates encounters with refugees within the framework of service provision, it reproduces hierarchy and limits the possibility for engagement in solidarity as equals. By casting political theology in terms of solidarity, Metz's account of Christian political engagement with the lives and sufferings of others calls into question the NGO focus on service provision, which obscures the primary call of Christian discipleship to share in life with one another through God. Christian engagement with refugees should be predicated on mutual friendship, equality, and the goal of empowerment, not simply on efficiency of services. For this to occur, however, local congregations must reinvest in ministry with the refugees who live in their midst; congregations must not see their primary model of engagement as one offered exclusively through NGOs funded by the church. To move in this direction, however, the church needs to rethink its notions of ministerial success and efficiency, the dominant economic concepts that too often dictate the terms of Christian ministry in the United States.[98]

CONCLUSION: THE JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICE AS LIVED POLITICAL THEOLOGY

By drawing the political theologies of Cavanaugh, Fergusson, and Metz into conversation with key debates in refugee studies, I have sought to illumine the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary Christian engagement with the state, civil society, NGOs, and refugees. While the organization of my article suggests a move away from Cavanaugh's and Fergusson's models toward a liberation-theology model, my argument actually depends on the insights of both earlier models. Solidarity with those suffering and excluded from society primarily occurs in the context of a catholic community that transcends the borders of any one nation state. Solidarity with those excluded from citizenship demands that Christian political theology develop an account of both the state's propensity toward exclusion and the possibility of the state as a location of justice. Neither capitulation to nor outright rejection of the state is possible. The church must therefore attempt to chart new paths of cooperation with the state, à la Fergusson,

---

[98] Orobator (*From Crisis to Kairos*, chaps. 4 and 6) makes a similar argument about the captivity of church ministry to the category of success and efficiency and how this notion inhibits work with refugees in East Africa.

while being vigilant in resisting the state's limited imagination, à la Cavanaugh. A political theology of refugee resettlement should be rooted in God's embrace of the world though Jesus Christ, a reality that is witnessed to in the power of the Spirit, both in the doxology of a catholic community drawn from every tongue, tribe, and nation and through the public pursuit of the common good in solidarity with the marginalized.

How might such a political theology offer practical-prophetic guidance to the current church/NGO/state model for refugee ministry? As I have argued, the current models of refugee resettlement is inadequate to address the long-term realities of forced migration and refugee resettlement. By dislocating refugee engagement from its ecclesial context and placing it primarily with state-funded NGOs contracted with USORR, the church has allowed the state to set the terms of Christian engagement. These NGOs end up mimicking the state in prioritizing service provision over solidarity, mutual exchange, and growth in personhood. Further, the current models largely exclude refugees from participating in the life of the local congregation, and thus the church fails to truly reflect its doxological catholic identity. Moreover, given the large number of refugees who come from other religious traditions—especially Muslims, at the present time—the church misses the opportunity to engage in local and concrete modes of interfaith exchange and dialogue that might help overcome fears and misconceptions in both the church and other communities. This lack of genuine encounter with refugees in the context of ecclesial communities minimizes the church's capacity to advocate for refugees and challenge the current state-centric system.

In noting these problems, my aim is not simply to critique the current church/NGO/state partnership, but to shed light on ecclesial struggles in order that the church might begin to improve its practices. In searching for alternatives to the current church/NGO/state models, the church and religious NGOs in the United States would be well served by borrowing from practices of the JRS. Pedro Arrupe, former superior general of the Society of Jesus, founded JRS in the late 1970s in response to the crisis of boat people in Southeast Asia. In the 30 years since its founding, JRS has grown into an international organization that works with refugees throughout the world. The key difference between JRS and other religious NGOs working with refugees is in the priority it gives to personal accompaniment. JRS members, which includes both Jesuits and lay volunteers, understand their ministry with refugees as flowing from the practice of accompanying refugees in their lives. This includes everything from offering pastoral care to living alongside refugees in camps. Moreover, accompaniment has a dual purpose. By living with refugees, JRS members serve not only as a sign of God's love and presence to refugees but also as a sign to the world and the church of the continued presence of human persons who have been excluded

from the political system. In this way JRS members are living icons that "God is present in human history, even it its most tragic episodes."[99]

The practice of accompaniment, coherent with Metz's concepts of solidarity and subjecthood, entails giving priority to the personal and pastoral aspects of refugee ministry. A political theology of refugee resettlement cannot ignore the deeply personal nature of forced migration and the psychosocial and spiritual toll that refugees experience. As Arrupe's successor, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, notes, "A personal approach in our work with refugees and a deeper understanding of the fact that the refugee problem is the story of 15 million individual human beings—their suffering, their hope, their indomitable courage, resilience and determination to live."[100] To focus simply on the policy level or to assume that refugee ministry stops once refugees are resettled in a host country is to lose sight of the human dimension of forced migration. JRS's mission, however, is not limited to accompaniment but extends to service and advocacy. By journeying with refugees, JRS members become aware of the needs, skills, and aspirations of refugees. From these encounters, JRS moves outward in acts of service such as education and healthcare; it also advocates with governments to alter policy and change laws. The recognition of the complexity and diversity of forced migration situations leads JRS to take a flexible approach, sometimes acting as NGOs, sometimes refusing NGO status.

Certainly JRS is not a perfect model for the church to adopt. Difficulties abound in translating an organization largely run by members of a religious order under a vow of poverty into local congregations made up of laypeople with jobs, families, and mortgages. Nevertheless, churches and NGOs can employ certain aspects of the JRS model. First, JRS demands that engagement with refugees occur primarily in the form of personal encounter and friendship. The current model of church/NGO/state severely limits the possibility of genuine personal engagement and sharing between newly arrived refugees and the local congregation. The first priority of the church's work in refugee ministry should be welcome, hospitality, and accompaniment. The current model gestures toward these practices by asking congregations to adopt a family and assist them in the first months of their arrival in the host country. The focus on providing services, however, colors this encounter, which is usually limited to donations and financial assistance and is rarely connected to the broader life of the congregation or the ongoing social and cultural needs of refugees.

What I am suggesting, then, is an extension and enhancement of the current model of partnership or congregational "adoption." As it stands,

---

[99] JRS, *Everybody's Challenge: Essential Documents of Jesuit Refugee Service, 1980–2000* (Rome: JRS, 2000) 85.
[100] Ibid. 50.

this model provides an ideal entry point for local American congregations to begin to welcome and accompany refugees. In extending this hospitality beyond the initial weeks of a refugee's arrival, congregations might find ways to mimic JRS's understanding of incarnational accompaniment in refugee camps by providing housing alongside or near the church community. Members of the church may choose to offer English lessons and job training, or simply to invite families into their homes for meals and community. Such accompaniment offers refugees access to forms of prepolitical social life that have often been lost during their migration. These concrete acts of hospitality by the local congregation can use the existing church/state/NGO model as avenues into relationships, even as it embodies how gospel demands exceed the requirements of the state.

Second, JRS illustrates how political engagement with the nation state, United Nations, and local forms of government is a necessary part of ministry with refugees. What sets JRS apart from other NGOs that participate in such advocacy is how its political engagement aims to emerge out of the primary practice of accompaniment. When accompanying refugees as they adjust to life in the United States, the church in the United States is made aware of the numerous ways that existing political, legal, and educational systems fail to meet the needs of newly arrived refugees. As the most recent strategic plan of JRS makes clear, solidarity with refugees demands that Christians "seek to understand and address the causes of structural inequality" and "work in partnership with others to create communities of justice, dialogue, peace and reconciliation."[101] The practice of accompaniment calls attention to the structural injustices that create refugees, even as it frames the priorities of advocacy through the aspirations, ideas, and needs of refugees.

In conclusion, JRS embodies some of the best aspects of the political theologies of Cavanaugh, Fergusson, and Metz and also offers practical-prophetic examples for how the church's engagement with the refugee resettlement project might be both altered and expanded. JRS shows how living as an alternative community that signs God's presence and love in the world demands political and social action in solidarity with the suffering and forgotten members of the world. Out of this shared life, JRS enters into the civil, legal, and public realms of politics in order to advocate for the common good. A political theology of refugee resettlement in the United States would be well served if it were to attend closely to these practices and seek creative ways to appropriate them.

---

[101] JRS, *Jesuit Refugee Service: Strategic Framework 2012–2015*, http://www.jrs.net/Assets/Publications/File/JRS_Strategic_Framework_en1.pdf, p. 13.