

# MIGRANTS, THEN AND NOW

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**I**MMIGRANTS and immigration policy are the subject of intense debate in many countries, including Australia. The Roman Catholic Church regards the hospitable treatment and regularisation of the status of immigrants, especially asylum-seekers, as a moral bedrock policy, because it implements the Church's longstanding teaching of treating other human beings as children of God. The Australian Church has long provided programmes, and material assistance, and counselling to help newcomers and would-be immigrants.

The Catholic Church is not alone in accommodating migrants, including asylum-seekers. Various Protestant groups accept them and assist them in becoming legal residents, and help ease language, family, cultural, and economic challenges. In fact, this was the policy of the Christian church from its earliest days, including the first two centuries of its existence, long before Christianity itself was legalised. We can learn much about the spirit of Christ in this era, before the beginnings of the denominations we have today, a period when the oral teachings and Bible interpretations were still preserved in Christian memories, as indicated by the fact that many authors in different parts of Christendom and from different language and cultural backgrounds held identical views on how to treat people, and how love of neighbour is to be implemented in practice.

Some Australians object to an open immigration policy because the current flood of applicants is not Caucasian. The issue is similar in some European countries, where the undesired aliens are Black African or Arab. Thus there is an element of racism, due to the belief that persons of a colour different from the established inhabitants cannot assimilate or

blend into the existing population. There was no parallel to this in ancient Christian times; believers before AD 250 welcomed newcomers regardless of skin colour, and perhaps did not even notice it.

Racism was absent in the earliest church and in the non-Christian society surrounding it. Christians and other subjects of the Roman Empire simply did not make distinctions based on race. In fact, mentions of a person's skin colour were so rare as to be insignificant. On the contrary, the Christian Bardesanes early third-century Syria mentioned the fact that people come in different colours as an example of what everyone agreed was inconsequential, Christian and pagan<sup>1</sup>. The only discriminations were based on cultural factors. Jews divided the world into themselves and Gentiles, while for Greeks the distinction was between themselves and 'barbarians', *i.e.* people who did not share Greek language or culture. The Romans divided people between citizens and non-citizens, and then among various economic classes of citizens. The main Roman xenophobia was against hostile peoples outside the Empire.

In each case, however, individuals could cross the divides by joining the preferred group, through financial or military achievement or by changing religion. Any antipathy was cultural, not ethnic, and was directed most against 'oriental cults' or 'superstitions', of which Christianity was one. In fact, there is only one xenophobic slur by a Christian in the whole of the New Testament, and even that is a quotation from a member of the maligned group (Titus 1.12f).

Scripture and other early Christian writings say much about how to regard individuals new to a community, whether they come for employment, business opportunities, or

conditions in their homelands. The term ‘immigrant’ nowhere appears in the early literature because strict separation into nation states did not yet exist, with its restrictions on travel and employment. The ancients did not generally think much about the reasons why newcomers had come, other than military invaders.

The use of the term ‘stranger’ in the early Christian period was thus wide enough to include all persons new to a locale. Christian writers before AD 250 encouraged welcoming and generous treatment of immigrants and other strangers.

The earliest instruction about strangers is Christ’s preaching that they be welcomed and protected, and whoever does so to the least of strangers does it to Jesus himself (Matthew 25.34-45). One apostle wrote that Christians are loyal to God when they render any service to newcomers (3 John 5).

A description of Christianity for heathens written in Athens around AD 125 reported that it was the Christian custom to take strangers into one’s home and rejoice over them as if brothers and sisters<sup>2</sup>. A similar book by a Christian teacher in the City of Rome who was martyred for the faith around AD 165 records that local Christian congregations used their funds to provide for orphans, widows, the sick, the needy, and strangers<sup>3</sup>. It also details that among the effects of conversion to Christianity was that ‘we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them’<sup>4</sup>.

According to my dictionary, hospitality is the friendly and generous reception and accommodation of guests and visitors. Saint Paul in his Letter to the Romans 12:13 encouraged his readers to be ‘given to hospitality’ as well as to contribute to the needs of other Christians. First Peter 4:9 exhorts us to practice it ungrudgingly, as well as to be engaged in other forms of charity. One New Testament author and some other ancient Christian writers highly



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commended hospitality to strangers.

The New Testament and other early Christian writings and sermons were directed to all readers and to all people present in congregations. Their admonitions are put to all of us to provide generously for people we barely know or even not know, simply for the name of Christ and without regard to their means, status or land of birth. Jesus Himself provides a special blessing for the hospitable: in Matthew 10:11f and Luke 10:5 he instructed Christian travellers to salute and wish peace on the homes of hosts who showed them hospitality. These hosts might well have been hospitable to angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2).

In the middle of the second century AD, a brother of a bishop of Rome put forth commandments for the Christian life in a book he said were revelations from the divine. In hospitality, the book said, is a fruitful field for goodness<sup>5</sup>.

In showing how elevated were Christian ethics, a bishop in France in the AD 180s included providing lodging in one’s home to ‘the roofless stranger’ and to ‘give rest to those that are shaken’<sup>6</sup>, which would cover a newcomer feeling disruption from moving to a new country. About the same era, the bishop of Antioch in Syria wrote similarly.<sup>7</sup> Both bishops quoted Zechariah 7.10 in support: ‘And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.’

Clement of Alexandria (Egypt) was dean of the world’s foremost Christian educational institution from AD 192 to 202. He reiterated

Matthew 25.34-45 to the effect that whoever harbours the least of strangers will be rewarded as if he had done so to Christ Himself<sup>8</sup>. Clement praised hospitality, which he described as ‘akin to love is hospitality, being a congenial art devoted to the treatment of strangers.’ His illustration of its width and why Christians should welcome and assist newcomers was ‘Hospitality, therefore, is occupied in what is useful for strangers; and guests are strangers; and friends are guests; and brethren are friends.’ Even more universal is his statement ‘those are strangers, to whom the things of the world are strange.’<sup>9</sup> Christian morality, wrote Clement,

obliges us to love strangers not only as friends and relatives, but as ourselves, both in body and soul... Accordingly, it is expressly said, ‘Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, for thou wast a sojourner in Egypt;’ designating by the term Egyptian either one of that race, or any one in the world.<sup>10</sup>

Clement’s successor as dean was Origen, the most outstanding Christian teacher, writer and preacher of the first two centuries of church literature, *i.e.* until AD 250. So great was his knowledge of the Christian faith that he was called upon as a theological consultant by bishops throughout the eastern Mediterranean. In his *Commentary on Romans*, he regarded receiving guests as a Christian virtue, along with rescuing the innocent and helping unfortunates, such as the hungry and naked.<sup>11</sup> He said that great grace is to be found in hospitality, both with God and with people.<sup>12</sup> In one of his homilies he valued hospitality in the same list as justice, patience, gentleness, and helping the poor.<sup>13</sup> He urged more than waiting for migrants to ask: ‘be anxiously concerned about, and pursue, and make a diligent search for strangers’.<sup>14</sup>

In some localities, hospitality for fellow Christian strangers was a standing institution. A first- or second-century church manual from Syria or Egypt called *The Didaché* prescribed detailed regulations for the reception and accommodation of travelling Christians.<sup>15</sup> About

the same time as Origen, the church father Tertullian in Tunisia placed hospitality to Christian travellers in the same class of Christian activity as relief of the poor and attending church at Easter.<sup>16</sup> A little later, papyrus letters of recommendation for travellers indicate that there was a network of hospitality among the churches.<sup>17</sup>

The Bible considers being hospitable as a desirable trait especially for bishops. First Timothy 3:2 stipulates it in the same passage with such qualifications as being above reproach, an apt communicator, and not a lover of money. Titus 1:7 includes hospitality in a list with such necessary qualities as self-control, being upright, and a lover of goodness. In a paraphrase of 1 Timothy, Origen considered a hospitable nature as necessary for a bishop, as also being above reproach, vigilant and respectable.<sup>18</sup> Such linking reveals early Christians’ high esteem for both the office and the practice: while it demonstrates how dedicated a bishop must be, it also shows the centrality of hospitality in church life.

What about strangers whose skin colour is so different that they and their descendants can never be identical to the established population? Unlike the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and among a few Christians today, no early author asserted that Noah and God cursed the Black race and forever made Africans subordinate to Whites, or outside the circle of people to whom Christians must give equitable treatment (Genesis 9.25-27). This was argued much later by some Whites in South Africa and the Americas as a Biblical justification for Black slavery and apartheid. For their sin, Noah’s son Ham (translation of ‘black’) and grandson Canaan were forever consigned to be slaves of his other (White) sons. Yet, of the 170-odd Christian authors before AD 250 whose writings have come down to us, not one discussed the passage, still less endorsed the argument. They were probably too well-versed in the Old Testament, for the next chapter records that Canaan was the ancestor of the Jebusites, Amorites, and other peoples who

occupied the Promised Land before Joshua's invasion. Ham begot the Egyptians and Mesopotamians, not the Ethiopians or other Blacks.

While theories can be based on the Bible in our time, the issue of racism should remind us that it is sometimes inadequate for reaching the complete truth, and that we should also give great weight to writers close to its origins.

These authors lived so early and were so geographically widespread that their senti-

ments could have originated only with Jesus himself. Because they predate the division into present-day denominations, and before racism and immigration were subjects of controversy, well before Christianity was a state religion, their comments are relevant to Christians of every stripe and hue in Australia today. They are the common inheritance of all Christendom and still regarded as authoritative by many denominations, and should be taken into account when discussing racism and immigration with non-Catholics.

#### ENDNOTES

Except where otherwise indicated, all quotations from the church fathers are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers; Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. American reprint ed. by A Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885-96; continuously reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson)

1. Bardesanes *On Fate*, also known as *Book of the Laws of Regions*
2. Aristides *Apology* 15
3. Justin *I Apology* 67 ANF 1.186f
4. Justin *I Apology* 14 ANF 1.167
5. *Pastor of Hermas* Mand. 8.10
6. Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 4.17.3
7. Theophilus *Autolytus* 3.12
8. Clement of Alexandria *Quis Dives Salvetur* 30

ANF 2.599-600

9. Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 2.9 ANF 2.357
10. Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 2.18 ANF 2.367
11. Origen *Commentary on Romans* 3.3.2
12. Origen *Commentary on Romans* 10.18.3
13. Origen *Homilies on Genesis* 11.2
14. Origen *Commentary on Romans* 9.13 in Thomas P. Scheck (trans) *Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* Books 6-10 p. 214 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002) © Catholic University of America Press 2002
15. *Didache* chapters 11 and 12
16. Tertullian *To His Wife* 2.4
17. Edwin A Judge, article 'Papyri' in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland, 1990) p. 688
18. Origen *Commentary on Romans* 8.10.5

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The current policy has about it a cruelty that does no honour to our nation. How can this be when Australians are so generous in so many situations where human beings are in strife? Think of the way the Vietnamese boat people were welcomed in the 1970s and 80s. The question becomes more pointed when we think of the politicians who are making and implementing the decisions. They are not cruel people. Yet they have made decisions and are implementing policies which are cruel. [...]

Do racist attitudes underlie the current policy? Would the policy be the same if the asylum seekers were fair-skinned Westerners rather than dark-skinned people, most of whom are of 'other' religious and cultural backgrounds? Is the current policy perhaps bringing to the surface not only a xenophobia in us but also a latent racism? The White Australia policy was thought to be dead and buried, but perhaps it has mutated and is still alive.

—Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Statement on Asylum Seekers,  
9 May, 2014.