
Planning for Immigration

BY DANIEL G. GROODY, C.S.C.

Unfortunately, few theologians address immigration, and scholars in migration studies almost never mention theology. By building a bridge between the Christian tradition and one of the most vexing problems of our time, these two books provide an ethical compass to help us navigate the difficult issues of immigration policy.

More people are migrating around the world than ever before in human history. Largely because of changes precipitated by globalization, the number is twice as large as it was twenty-five years ago. Today nearly 200 million people are on the move, which is roughly the equivalent of the population of Brazil, the fifth largest country on the planet. Of these, approximately thirty to forty million are undocumented, twenty-four million are internally displaced, and almost thirteen and a half million are refugees. Because it touches so many areas of life and human society, some scholars have referred to our time as the “age of migration.”

Such flows of people cause much conflict and controversy. Amidst the ensuing clash of cultures, identities, and religions, there is a great need to sort out the conceptual issues of immigration and to design just and humane policies that respond to the pressing needs of the new migrants – some of the most vulnerable people living on the planet.

The two books reviewed here take up the hard challenges of thinking through the issues of migration – Dana W. Wilbanks’s *Re-Creating America: The Ethics of U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy in a Christian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996, 236 pp., \$22.00) and Peter C. Meilaender’s *Toward a Theory of Immigration* (New York: Palgrave, 2001, 272 pp., \$75.00) – and both make important contributions to the debate over refugees and migrants. The first looks at how Christian values can help shape and

even transform current U.S. immigration and refugee policy and the second seeks to examine the more foundational conceptual, philosophical, and political premises that underlie this heated public debate.



In *Re-Creating America* Dana Wilbanks, professor emeritus of Christian Ethics at Illiff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, takes up the formidable challenge of public theology in a democratic society. He examines the premises and values that underlie the immigration debate and develops how a specifically Christian perspective can help inform and transform public policy. Given the plurality of perspectives in the immigration debate, and especially the dehumanizing undercurrents that ground the opinions of many, this in an important work, not only for theologians but also for pastors, practitioners, and political leaders. Presently very little theological reflection has been done about migration, and at the same time scholars in migration studies almost never mention theology. By building a bridge between the resources of the Christian tradition and one of the most vexing problems of our time, this book provides a valuable ethical compass to help us navigate the difficult issues of immigration policy.

Wilbanks examines the contributions that Christian communities can make to public discourse and decision making. He does not specifically argue for open borders, but he does argue for more generous admission policies and for preference for those who are most vulnerable. The book is well reasoned and articulate, and while he does not pretend that Christian churches have easy answers to difficult problems like immigration, he recognizes that Christians must bear witness to a God of life by showing active concern for the poor and practicing specific virtues, such as offering hospitality for the stranger. He acknowledges distinctions between church and state, but he also recognizes that Christians bring an important orientation to the migration issue and can play an important role in building a more humane world through public policies that give priority to those most in need.

The author is versed in theoretical issues of migration, but he offers very practical guidelines as well. His insights into some of the major metaphors related to migration that shape public rhetoric – such as the “the golden door,” “promised land,” “guarded gate,” and various “water” metaphors – are most valuable (p. 22).

To lay the groundwork for the ethical deliberations in later chapters, Wilbanks begins with a picture of the recent situation, gives historical background to the international refugee crisis, and then looks at current U.S. refugee policy. He describes the recurring patterns in U.S. immigration history that have stirred vigorous and sometimes heated debates between “restrictionists and inclusionists, cultural monists and pluralists, nativists and cos-

mopolitanists.” Of course, after he wrote this valuable introduction to U.S. immigration history in 1996, both government policies and popular debates in America continued to evolve, especially in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Wilbanks looks at how American self-identity influences who is let into the country. He addresses some of the major questions about immigrants, namely, who they are, why they come to the United States, if they will assimilate culturally and linguistically, and finally, if they will contribute to the common good. His analysis is particularly valuable in light of race, culture, and national moral traditions.

The next chapters move more into theological territory and specifically the ethics of hospitality. Here there are some very helpful treatments of immigration from a biblical perspective, particularly the narrative ethics that shape a Christian view of welcoming the stranger. Wilbanks does a good job arguing that Scripture gives us a new imagination to understand the world and our relationships and not simply another rational argument about migration. When he moves to examine in more depth the quest for a just and humane migration policy, Wilbanks perceptively names the tension between the Christian ideal and the politically possible, and he reviews a variety of Christian perspectives that deal with sovereign rights – including reformed covenant ethics and Catholic social teaching among others. “Christian ethics provides no simple solutions to dilemmas and ambiguities in a nation’s migration policy. But it does provide a normative perspective on these questions that is

not identical with the interests of nation states,” he notes. Indeed, “the fact that Christian ethics seems so ‘alien’ to the nationalistic ethos of nation-state politics may not signal its irrelevance so much as, precisely, its relevance” (p. 137). The heart of Wilbanks’s case rests not on arguments over national interests but on relationships – relational encounters between residents and migrants, and

particularly those migrants who are most in need, in this case refugees.

In the fifth chapter, Wilbanks links the issue of hospitality to specific proposals for U.S. refugee policy. Lamenting the fact that refugee protection has little place in a culture that seeks to maximize its own affluence without being bothered by the claims of the poor, he makes a strong case that the moral health of an economy is shown by how it treats its most vulnerable

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members. He offers many specific recommendations on how to prioritize refugees (by their urgent needs, suffering life-threatening violence, or qualification under the rules of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees) and then addresses the role congregations can play in resettlement. Churches inevitably will face some internal tensions and external conflict when they resettle refugees, he admits, but they “must be prepared to serve God rather than the state when the lives of neighbors are at stake” (p. 178). Though he discusses some ways congregations and denominations have taken a stand against prevailing policies, more could have been done to emphasize a prophetic Christian response to refugee policies.

Wilbanks concludes by outlining a more generous immigration policy, with specific recommendations for immigrant selection criteria, border control, guest worker programs, worker authorization systems, and social services. He urges us to recognize the rights and meet the needs of migrants, but not avoid the tough issues of “justifiable limits” and “humane enforcement.”

This book helpfully addresses the perennial themes of migration by examining the Christian virtues of hospitality and magnanimity and by naming the perennial sins of xenophobia, racism, and nativism. Whatever specific policies we adopt, Wilbanks reminds us, the influx of immigrants and refugees is “re-creating America.” Migration is part of a birth process of an ever-evolving, multicultural community.



In *Toward a Theory of Immigration*, Peter Meilaender, a political scientist at Houghton College in Houghton, New York, offers an important map of the complexity of the immigration debate, grounds it in specific instances of theory and practice, and presents a theoretical framework with which to understand and critique the debate. This well-written book for a scholarly audience is a valuable complement to *Re-Creating America*; it is an excellent resource for examining the conceptual, philosophical, and political terrain of migration. Meilaender provides a helpful summary of his main argument in “Loving Our Neighbors, Both Far and Near,” on pp. 11-19 in this issue of *Christian Reflection*.

Meilaender begins his book by surveying the complexity of immigration in a globalized world. He considers the various motives people have for migration, why certain countries welcome or reject them, and why border control is so controversial. In a valuable review of the literature on immigration, he charts the intellectual landscape of the debate until about the turn of the twenty-first century. Once again, this subject stands in need of more reflection since 9/11. Although he includes specific case studies, Meilaender does not focus primarily on particular immigration policies but on the larger theoretical issues that shape the public debate. For instance, when he exam-

ines the issue of open borders, he presents even-handedly both the inclusionist and restrictionist perspectives and critiques their relative strengths and weaknesses.

When Meilaender turns to the issue of national identity and its implication for immigration policy, he argues for “broad state discretion in regulating immigration” and demonstrates that immigration policies are closely connected to how a country understands itself and its political community. To demonstrate how a range of possibilities can be advanced to allow or restrict immigration, in part because “immigration policies are closely tied to particular understandings of political community” (p. 8), he contrasts the policies of Germany and the United States in some detail. Chapter four looks at immigration in light of law and policy, and chapter five examines the relationships between politics and culture.

In a final chapter, Meilaender examines how the human rights of immigrants put a moral limit on a nation state’s right to control its borders. “Justice requires a world of far more open borders than now exists,” he argues (p. 3). Each nation’s right to control its borders is not an absolute right. Overly restrictive immigration policies should be challenged by citizens, and even by non-citizens, who cry out on behalf of a world of need.



Both books reviewed here present fine scholarly analyses of the conceptual issues behind the global immigration debate and outline a Christian-based response to refugees. This makes them valuable resources not only for the political leaders and scholars who struggle to balance national security and human insecurity, sovereign rights and human rights, and civil law and natural law, but also for Christians who must negotiate the boundaries of citizenship and faithful discipleship.



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