

RERUM NOVARUM LECTURE
Catholic Commission for Justice, Development and Peace
Melbourne Archdiocese

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Between Anguish and Hope: A World of Refugees

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“The more welcoming a family, town, city or nation has been to strangers, the healthier is its spiritual state.”

Australian Catholic Bishops, Social Justice Sunday Statement 2003

Let us first honour the indigenous people of this place. They have known all too well experiences of exclusion and dispossession. They have welcomed waves of new settlers to this country, not without hardship to themselves. We thank them and learn from them.

Let us acknowledge too the generations of Richmond settlers who came from many nations of earth to build our Australian society. From Ireland, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Vietnam and East Timor.

May we also acknowledge those men and women who, over 130 years ago, built this church of St Ignatius. What faith and courage they had, and what hope and vision they had for the future of this country. Let us not disappoint them.

As the Australian Catholic Bishops have stated in this year’s Social Justice Statement, “The more welcoming a family, town, city or nation has been to strangers, the healthier is its spiritual state.” The message of *Rerum Novarum*, a document almost as old as this church, was that the standard by which any policy or legal institution is to be evaluated, is the worth of the human person.

Tonight let also welcome a child recently born under guard in Adelaide, now the 187th child held in detention, half of whom have remained imprisoned for over 2 years. Our Jesuit school in Adelaide, also called St Ignatius, has been declared a detention center so that this baby’s two older brothers, consequent on immense lobbying, would be permitted to attend the College. Other Afghan boys at the College are currently being deported to Afghanistan so that they may apply officially for entry to Australia. At ridiculous expense, through this circuitous, clumsy and wasteful route, the fictional construction of an “orderly way” is established. Can you understand that children are so exploited in order that we may believe that a government is “strong”?

Tonight I have been asked to speak about the international context of the refugee phenomenon. For many of you, the focus of your attention has long been a concern at

Australia's own refugee and asylum policy. Tonight I plan to paint the picture of the international scenario, as a backdrop to our discussions and actions on the home front.

For as long as intolerance and oppression have been part of human history there have been, and will be, refugees. But the number of people involved and the extent of human suffering is enormous. Pope John Paul II described the suffering of refugees as a: “*festering... wound which typifies and reveals the imbalance and conflicts of the modern world.*”¹

Two years ago I completed 20 years of work abroad in this field with Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). Much has happened in those two years. We had Tampa in August 2001, the World Trade Center's destruction on September 11, 2001, the sinking of Siev X on 19 October 2001 with the loss of 353 lives, and the Bali bombing on 12 October 2002. Some would say the world has changed totally in two years. Well I am sorry to tell you, there are many parts of the world where there has not been much change, at least not much change for the better.

Tonight I want to discuss three questions:

1. Who and where are the refugees? What is a refugee?
2. Why are they refugees? What are the forces that deprive refugees and displaced people of their land, livelihoods; a place of belonging on this earth.
3. What can we do to assist refugees, to protect their rights, and to make our world a safer place for all?

1. Who are the refugees?

Who is a refugee? The circumstances and conditions under which people become involuntarily displaced are as old as the bible story of Joseph's brothers who went down into Egypt, driven by a devastating famine. Yet circumstances change. The nineties saw different patterns and causes of forced displacement than the Cold War eighties. In a new century we have the war on terror and the characterization of “Islamic militants”. Yet the human experiences of uprooting and exile can be remarkably similar.

Who are the refugees? Call to mind these images. The young Sudanese man studying for university entrance exams in Launceston; his sister and her children waiting in file day after day outside either the UNHCR office or the Australian embassy in Kampala, seeking to re-submit an application – already lost several times in the shuffle - to join her brother in Australia; their nephew, a lad laboriously shaping a letter on his primary school chalkboard in a refugee settlement in Adjumani, northern Uganda; the grieving Colombian woman whose husband was taken by the paramilitary the night the whole community fled from their village near Barrancabermeja; the Tamil refugee family chased by the army from the Sri Lankan sacred shrine of Madhu where they had long sheltered; the Mauritanian asylum seeker waiting in growing despair in Rome for the documents that will give him the right to work. All these people have one experience in common: they have been involuntarily displaced, they are refugees.

¹ Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 1987 #24

Let me paint more pictures through stories.

Gabriel, a six-foot-six Dinka, had arrived in Thailand after a journey that, for his people, rivalled Marco Polo's. Travelling by foot to escape the fighting which had begun in 1983 in his home in Southern Sudan, he had crossed into Egypt and on to Iran to study, but instead was drafted to be a porter in the Iran-Iraq war. Escaping, he failed to get passage westwards to Europe and so, heading east towards Australia, was stopped in Singapore and diverted to Thailand. There I found him, culturally disoriented, alone and desperate. He visited frequently, and with an officer from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), we searched everywhere for a country to take him. Australia, New Zealand, USA, Canada, Sweden, none would even interview him. Finally he was offered three choices, a trip home to the Sudan, or Kenya, or Liberia. In desperation he accepted Liberia and departed in 1987. The women in our office gave him the biggest shirt they could find in the shops. Several times he wrote to me, his words dictated to a Scottish Salesian priest. A few years later I was in my new position in Rome. Deeply moved by the suffering of the Liberian people, I went in 1992 to war-ravaged Monrovia to see what could be done. While there I hunted for Gabriel. Visiting the Salesians, I asked if they had known him. Sure enough, they pointed me to a Scot, the one who had written Gabriel's letters. He told me how Gabriel had died, mistaken for a Mandingo, waving his long arms and showing his refugee card, trying to explain to a drugged, over-armed Krahn follower of Charles Taylor, that he was 'under the protection' of the United Nations. I wept for Gabriel and the many victims of that senseless never ending war.

Perhaps there is no moral to draw from the story of Gabriel who had traversed, mostly on foot, the geography of our world of conflict and refugees: escaping the Sudan war he was caught in a middle Eastern one, blocked when trying asylum routes west, east, south and north, caught in the eddy of the Indochinese refugee tide, finally a target in someone else's war.

Two years ago in Los Angeles, I accompanied a JRS worker to the prisons for foreigners. In a juvenile facility, we spent a Sunday afternoon playing Uno-Uno with a Sri Lankan boy of about 12 years old, with an Indian boy of 15 or 16 from Gujarat, and with a girl of 14 of El Salvador, although brought to the USA as a baby. Taken from his village to be a Tamil Tiger, that is an armed fighter, the Sri Lankan boy's family had somehow managed to rescue him, and to keep him safe they had smuggled him out of the country. He had a ticket to Montreal where he should join his 'uncle'. But when his plane touched down in Los Angeles, US immigration officials detained him. After a lengthy bureaucratic procedure of more than six months, I later learned, he was sent on to Montreal.

The Gujarati lad with him had been a witness in a human smuggling court trial. Although the case was concluded 5 months earlier and he only wanted to go home, that boy's papers were lost, so he remained detained. Neither boy knew much English. There was no schooling in their prison. They had permission to make only local phone calls, but had no one to call, having no relatives in Los Angeles.

Each time I visit Sydney I meet Alberto, a former UNITA soldier, captured, tortured and forced into service with the government's army, who left his wife and children four years ago in Angola, a country to which he rightly fears to return. After three years of

applications and appeals in Australia he is about to be deported. He will leave with nothing.

Each of these people have one thing in common, though they come from very different parts of the globe. They are caught in problems not of their making, they are adrift, they search for safe haven, they are refugees.

Overview of refugee situations

Let us make a brief *tour d'horizon*, naming and painting a thumbnail sketch of a few of the main refugee-producing conflicts around the world.

There are long standing, intractable, refugee-producing conflicts, such as in Burma, the Sudan, Congo, Burundi and Palestine. It remains to be seen whether military intervention will bring improvement to Iraq or Afghanistan.

The conflict in Afghanistan, ignited during the Cold War with the Soviet invasion of 1979, produced millions of refugees. Some returned home at the end of the Cold War, but a protracted civil war, combined with poor harvests and cruel climatic conditions, continued to take a toll of lives. The political ascendancy during the 1990's of the Taliban, which had been fortified politically and militarily by an alliance between the US, the Saudis and Pakistan, caused many to flee. The US led strike against the Taliban created new refugees, but last year 1.8 million refugees repatriated from Iran and Pakistan. Yet the war-ravaged country continues to be dangerous.

The Palestinians were made homeless in the mid and late 40s in order to provide a home for the Jewish people who had suffered oppression in Europe and elsewhere, but especially during the Nazi regime in Germany. Palestinians fought to retain their rights. They lost and are still nationless. Hopes raised by the peace talks of recent years have now been cruelly ground to dust. Instead of a roadmap to peace, there is now a wall dividing the Palestinian and Israeli settlements, symbolizing that after fifty years of conflict a just solution remains beyond the imagination and will of those with the power to achieve it.

Despite the US led *Operation Iraqi Freedom* successfully removing the Saddam regime, peace, stability and freedom remain elusive for the people of Iraq. Before this campaign, earlier wars with Iran, the Gulf war and a decade of UN sanctions had taken a terrible toll on the lives of the people. Under the US and British occupying powers, violence and instability continue to obstruct efforts at reconstruction including access to clean water, the restoration of basic health services, medical supplies and opportunities for work and education. For the thousands of internally displaced people including Kurds in the north and Marsh Arabs in the south, and the thousands who fled to Iran, there is little promise of protection let alone a secure future.

The colonial period in Burma ended 54 years ago. Incompetent military government and their reluctance to share power, compound the long-standing ethnic conflicts. The military recruits almost exclusively from the majority Burmans. Refugees reach each of Burma's neighbours: Bangladesh, India, China and especially Thailand where as many as 2 million reside. Approximately 125,000 live in camps near the Burmese border, but the rest are classified by Thailand as "illegal immigrants." The ambush and detention of

Aung San Suu Kyi and killing of her supporters in May reveals the determination of the regime to repress any opposition.

More than half of the world's forcibly displaced people are in Africa. While a fragile peace has helped the beginning of repatriation to the largely destroyed homes and fields in Angola, the long-running war in the Sudan, which has its roots in colonial times, continues. In its present phase, Sudan's war has been fought non-stop since 1983. At least 4 million Southern Sudanese are displaced by this conflict, many of them driven towards the barren, desert areas around Khartoum, others across into Uganda, others to Kenya, others to Egypt, Libya, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, while Sudanese refugees also can be found throughout the world. The government of the north fights the people of the south for control of the rich pasture lands, for control over the waters of the Nile, for access to rich oil fields and to impose Shariya law on the animist and Christian southerners.

The upheavals in West Africa, that is in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, are linked not only by geography but also by alliances among rebel elites. Government forces and rebels and militia of all three countries pass freely across all the boundaries. Safe passage has been provided for timber, diamonds and other wealth of the three countries in return for weapons. The war in Liberia began with an invasion led by Charles Taylor in December 1989. Occurring as it did soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall, superpowers no longer saw cause to intervene in this first of the post Cold War conflicts. Intense fighting between government and rebel forces in June killed many civilians and forced thousands to flee their homes. The presence of a regional peace keeping force has helped to restore some security to Monrovia and the surrounding areas, allowing humanitarian and aid agencies to re-establish their programs.

In Uganda, the Lord's Resistance Army continues to devastate northern regions, displacing over a million Ugandans. Since June this year another 300,000 were displaced. Each night, thousands of people living near Gulu, Kitgum and Pader, mostly children who fear abduction, walk into town in search of a "safe" place to sleep.

A US agency, the International Rescue Committee, has been conducting a longitudinal mortality study in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country at war since 1996. It reports that in Eastern Congo, at least 3 million people died in four years between August 1998 and 2002 as a result of conflict or displacement created by conflict. This is the highest death toll in any armed conflict since World War II. Over 2.7 million displaced people struggle to live in conditions of poverty and insecurity.

In Burundi one of our own JRS project directors was killed last October, shot at point blank range by off duty military. He was one of 300,000 people killed in that beautiful country since the October 1993 coup. Despite the 2002 ceasefire agreement and transfer of the presidency this year, ongoing conflict has meant that almost 400 000 Burundians continue to be displaced either inside the country or in neighboring countries such as Tanzania.

In Colombia, a never-ending triangular conflict involving the national army, paramilitary made up of personnel hired by private business, and rebel guerrillas, has displaced one and a half million people. The USA is now intervening in an effort

supposedly directed at cutting off the sources of supply of heroin, but this involvement risks escalating to make Colombia into the USA's new Vietnam.

The 100,000 Bhutanese refugees now in Nepal - an estimated one sixth of the population of Bhutan - have been living in camps in southeast Nepal since the early 1990s when they were arbitrarily stripped of their nationality and forcibly expelled from Bhutan in one of the largest ethnic expulsions in the world. Bilateral talks between Bhutan and Nepal, failed to offer a comprehensive solution and a flawed screening process would leave tens of thousands of refugees stateless. The recent decision by UNHCR to phase out assistance for the refugee camps in southeast Nepal would leave 100,000 Bhutanese refugees in a precarious position.

These are but a few samples of refugee-producing situations. The most striking answer to the question, "who and where are the refugees?" is the statistic that 90% of forcibly displaced people today come from and find shelter in the poorest countries.

Definitions

One definition of this tragedy of forced exile entered international law over 50 years ago. It is a definition designed more to protect the nation state against the unwanted arrival of refugees than to protect the refugee. According to the Geneva Convention of 1951, adapted in a follow up Protocol in 1967, a refugee has "fled his or her country because of fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular group and cannot or is unwilling to return home because of fear".

New circumstances on the African continent lead to a broader definition of refugees that includes people who flee because of "external aggression, occupation, foreign domination" or disturbance of public order. In other words refugee status can be given not just to individuals but to groups - important today when masses are displaced in the Horn of Africa or in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo, or by any of the 17 wars currently raging in Africa. This Organisation of African Unity (OAU) definition came into effect on 20 June 1974, a day celebrated each year as Africa Refugee Day. The 1984 Cartagena Declaration in Central America was inspired by the OAU definition and covers yet other typical conditions, including flight due to generalized violence, massive violation of human rights and social collapse consequent on conflict.

Today, the number of displaced persons who do not leave their own countries, and thus are not, theoretically, entitled in international law to protection, is double that of the already high number of refugees who fall under the strict international law definition.

But Catholic social teaching recognises all these people as *de facto* refugees, given the involuntary nature of their migration and the violence of its causes. "Refugees: a Challenge to Solidarity", published in 1992 by the Vatican, explains this broader concept of refugee. "The States who signed the Convention", argues the Vatican document, "had themselves expressed the hope that it would 'have exemplary value beyond its contractual scope.'"² Even in the case of the so-called economic migrants, "justice and equity demand that appropriate distinctions be made. Those who flee

² *Refugees : A Challenge to Solidarity* 1992 #4

economic conditions that threaten their lives and physical safety must be treated differently from those who emigrate simply to improve their position.”³

The Catholic Church’s understanding of who is a refugee is broad enough to include those whose lives are most precarious or who would otherwise be forgotten, and yet narrow enough so that its services may be focused and effective.

2. What are the causes, and how can we analyse this phenomenon?

The principle imbalance which exists in today’s world is in the distribution of the world’s resources. The contest for control of these resources is a root cause of the conflicts that lead to forced displacement of people today.

In this era of globalisation, it is ironic that although these wars are internal, the forces of globalisation make refugees too, a global matter. The modern means of transportation and communication, as well as the dramatic flows of capital and the shifting needs for labour forces, all tend to globalise the refugee problem.

Experts calculate that there are today 150 million migrants, i.e., people living for extended periods outside their countries of origin. That is two and a half per cent of the population of the world. Forcibly displaced people, refugees and asylum seekers make up about a quarter to a third of this number.

In classic migration theory, three sets of factors influence the movement of peoples: Push, Pull and Networks. Multiple causes are always at play when a person leaves home.

Push factors: For those who are forced migrants, obviously conflict is a big factor, as well as persecution or human rights abuse, loss of freedom and of other rights in one’s home. The nature of conflict has itself changed, from war where armies fought armies to the situation today where civilians are seen as the legitimate targets. In fact over 90% of casualties are civilians. Moreover in some ethnic conflicts, women are particularly targeted, since they have the capacity to reproduce their race. Non-state actors are now more prominent in conflicts and these generally know nothing of, or are inaccessible to, the Red Cross or other bodies that have for years attempted to civilise war.

Among the immediate causes of suffering in these conflicts, one must mention the international market in small arms. Low tech weapons, such as land mines, assault rifles, machine guns, pistols and hand grenades, account for 90% of the deaths, including the appalling toll of civilian casualties. Many of the weapons may have been legally traded to begin with, or sent as government-approved covert aid to liberation movements. But because of the total absence of transparency in this commerce, the weapons sold by the weapons traders, of whom the USA, China and Russia top the list, quickly become the instruments of oppression by tyrants and criminals.

Risk of displacement occurs when the nation state is weakened through a breakdown of law and order, collapse of the local economy, or inadequate local services and porous frontiers. Sheer poverty accentuates the crisis created by conflict. If people are living

³ *op.cit.*

close to the line, then it takes little extra push to make them leave, no matter how profound and spiritual may be their attachment to home and land and to the spirits of their ancestors.

Another “push” factor is that, as economies deteriorate or conflict escalates, minority groups frequently become scapegoats and again they move in order to escape victimization, such as with the Hazaras in Afghanistan.

Pull factors are also reasonably obvious: family ties, the decisions of community, ethnic or political leaders to move as a group, the desire for education for oneself or one’s children, the future of the children in general, the likelihood of getting employment. Sometimes the decision to leave is motivated by a long nurtured dream, even an erroneous one, that “the streets of California are paved with gold”, and that it is worth sacrificing everything to reach there.

Regarding Networks, the basic ones are ethnic and family ties. So Kurdish people travel by the thousands to leave home and reach Germany where already 2 million Turkish people live, among them a sizeable Kurdish population.

The increasingly restrictive measures adopted by many nations to deter and deny asylum seekers, have closed off many of the legal avenues guaranteed through the Refugee Convention for refugees to access genuine protection. A complex array of immigration controls coupled with a badly under-resourced UNHCR, have the effect of forcing desperate people to look for alternatives including the offers of unscrupulous people smugglers. More and more, the means of mobility are provided by the networks and organizations of traffickers and smugglers: Payments of \$2,000 for the Kurds to cross the Otranto Strait into Italy, up to \$50,000 a head to the Chinese snakeheads for a passage to the USA, or \$10,000 a family for Afghans to reach Australia, have made trafficking the third most profitable international criminal activity after the smuggling of drugs and guns. In their efforts to restrict asylum applications, policy-makers need to assess the impact of their policies in contributing further to the illegal and exploitative activities of such trade.

3. What can be our responses to this massive forced displacement of people?

I propose we consider values, actions and policies. First, **values** (or we may speak of attitudes that grow out of value systems). It may seem natural to us that we respond to the suffering of our brothers and sisters with compassion and respect, but it does not always happen. This is Austcare Refugee Week, devoted to multiple initiatives to raise awareness of refugees abroad and to deepen our commitment to serve them. If you have any involvement with Austcare, do urge it to also give a place to the refugees and asylum seekers within our midst, not only those who are abroad.

Pope John Paul’s message this year for the 89th World Day of Migrants and Refugees also touches this point: *“Often solidarity does not come easily. It requires training and a turning away from attitudes of closure, which in many societies today have become more subtle and penetrating...Christians must struggle to overcome any tendency to*

turn in on themselves, and learn to discern in people of other cultures the handiwork of God."⁴

Second there is **action**. By their fruits you shall know them says the Gospel. As the Bishops Social Justice Statement said: "The more welcoming a family, town, city or nation has been to strangers, the healthier is its spiritual state."

The oft-quoted maxim that charity begins at home should not stop us from assisting abroad. Nonetheless it is hypocrisy to be concerned with millions of refugees abroad if those who come to our shores, or are in our neighbourhoods, are denied their rights. The current government policy of linking the off-shore and on-shore humanitarian programs undermines its international responsibilities by trading off its commitment to assist the resettlement of refugees from overseas with its obligation to provide protection to those who apply for asylum on our shores. It is imperative that our government remove the linkage between off-shore and on-shore applications for asylum which denies rights and entitlements to genuine refugees because there was no queue or other way to enter, and which effectively denies thousands of other refugees a place for resettlement.

Thirdly, consider **policy**. In this talk have hardly touched on Australia's refugee policy. Clearly a high priority should be the removal of the punitive provisions of Australia's asylum laws. Asylum and immigration should be clearly separated as concepts and policies, though of course as realities they are intermingled. There are solid arguments for humane alternatives to detention. Those found to have a reasonable case in their application for refugee status – and remember, over 90% of those Iraqi and Afghan people who came to Australia in recent years were determined to be refugees - should be paroled quickly. Detainees should have access to legal and to religious services, and most importantly children should not be in prisons.

Further, our country has dramatically changed its core foreign policy directions. Australia has recently intervened militarily in other sovereign states. Australia has broken with time honoured international conventions for the protection of refugees and the preservation of human rights.

Albert Einstein warned that militarism, that is maintaining power by armed force, destroys the democratic spirit of a nation and the dignity of individuals. It is not logically possible to say that we go to war to promote a fair go, decency, the equality of peoples, or the search for truth. If dialogue to achieve respect, understanding and common humanitarian goals is in fact our priority, then we are bound to challenge its opposite, namely militarism.

Following the war on Iraq, hitherto one of the major source countries for refugees that reach Australia, the Sydney University based Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies⁵: came up with three ways for promoting a non-violent future first, balanced information; second, promote the role of the United Nations; and third, develop the strategy of dialogue.

⁴ Message of The Holy Father John Paul II For The 89th World Day of Migrants And Refugees 2003, The Vatican, October 24, 2002 # 3-4

⁵ Wendy Lambourne, Ken Macnab, Stuart Rees, "Three steps toward developing non-violent responses to armed aggression." *On Line Opinion* August 26, 2003 www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=642

First, even-handedness in reporting. For example fascination in the media for the technology or killing capacity of smart bombs and guided missiles needs to be complemented by a consideration of the devastation caused by the bombing and the cost of such destruction.

Regarding reporting about refugees, terms such as 'queue jumpers', 'illegals', 'bogus asylum seekers' is inaccurate and derogatory. When xenophobia is enacted into punitive restrictive policies, it is often supported and encouraged by a racist press and politicians. Racism and xenophobia create refugees and harm them.

Second, support for the role of the United Nations. Before the war, the treatment of the UN by Australian governments was at times dismissive, destructive and hypocritical. Australia disparaged the addition of a protocol to the Convention against Torture, permitting inspection of detention centres, for obvious reasons. The Charter of the UN, the Declaration of Human Rights, more than 30 peacekeeping missions, and other activities, indicate that the UN is the most praiseworthy attempt at international cooperation in existence. For the UN to coordinate post war reconstruction will be to affirm that peace is not just the end of violence, but is peace with justice.

Third, dialogue is a key strategy that is open to all. Dialogue for peace is a role that lies begging for Australia to take up as a country. How many opportunities do we have? Look at our relations with one of our nearest neighbours.

Bali was first and foremost an attack on a moderate government in Indonesia. Yet Australia was touched to the core by that event. Bali now rivals Gallipoli as a shrine of national remembrance. So we share with Indonesia in an event which could lead us to deep cooperation.

East Timor has been a painful wound in our relationships. Yet recently even the former Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Alatas, attacking the militarist policy towards Aceh, admitted that Indonesia had followed a flawed policy in Timor and that there should have been dialogue. Australia could follow the example of Norway in Sri Lanka. Even the Cambodian conflict ultimately quietened through dialogue.

With Iraqis in Australia and in Iraq, there are opportunities now for dialogue. They can take ownership of the agenda for peace.

In Southeast Asia, with moderate politicians, NGOs and the many striving to strengthen a peaceful civil society.

With citizens of the USA who share the perspective that violence is counter-productive.

Concluding remarks

Opinion in favour of asylum seekers is now diminishing like a receding tide. But tides ebb and flow. In these lean times, let us work hard to prepare for the returning tide.

More and more, we learn that changes in the way we live our lives can affect how others are able to live theirs. We are more open to learn that there are previously unsuspected connections between the way we live and pollution, global warming, economic

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collapses, unemployment, and much else. And as we grow in our understanding we can accept these connections extend to racist attitudes, conflicts and to whether or not there will be more or less refugees.