The Sacred Penultimacy of the Refugee Crisis

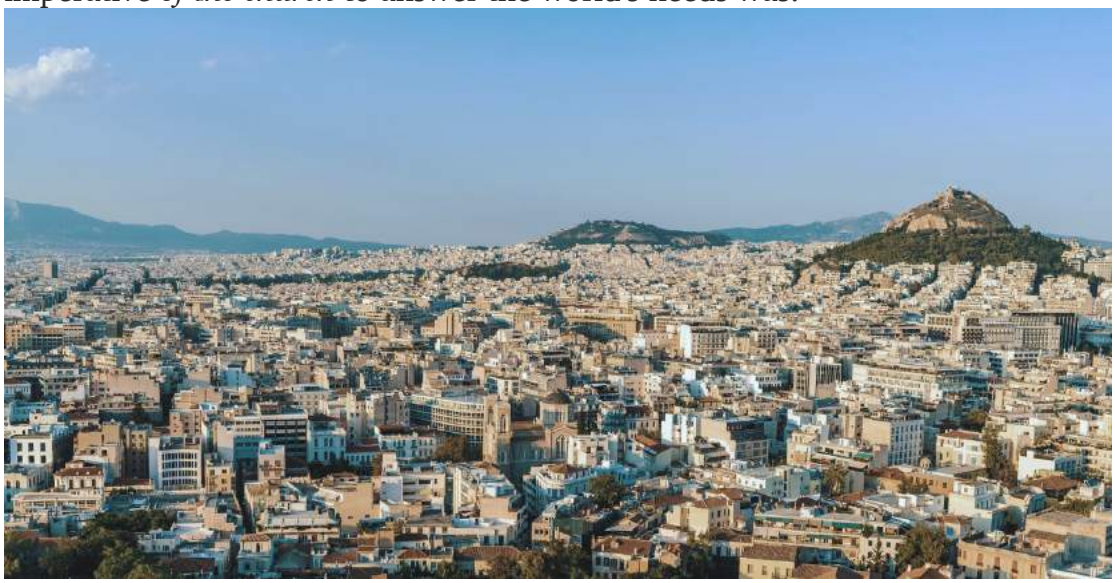
When the refugee wave hit Athens in the summer of 2015, most of our actions as a local church were instinctive. As we witnessed thousands of refugees arriving on our doorstep, we knew that we had to do something — anything — to relieve their distress.

In God's providence, we had already set up an organization called Faros ("lighthouse") several months prior specifically to serve unaccompanied minor refugees in Athens. With the infrastructure already in place, we were able to rapidly expand, open a day centre for mothers and children, and a shelter for the unaccompanied minors.

Since then, we adapted the day centres to focus on integration services and opened an after-school technical academy for unaccompanied minors and young refugee women. We also repurposed the whole ground floor of our church to host refugee families and help them integrate into Greek society, both through trained staff and daily interaction with the church family.

Throughout this process, we had precious little time to stop and consider the reasons we were doing what we were doing *in depth*. Mostly, we knew that we couldn't just stand there. But we still needed to work hard to understand the relationship between gospel ministry and social action in order to understand what our long-term role should be.

Most of the answers I heard seemed truncated and reductionist or merely functional — they were able to make the right distinctions and install appropriate safeguards, but I was still left wondering what the ethical imperative *of the church* to answer the world's needs was.



Athens, Greece

New Faces, Familiar Ideas

As you probably know, I'm not the only one asking questions like these. Europe's recent influx of refugees and irregular migrants from the Middle East and Africa has evoked a lot of soul-searching among many Europeans.

Some view the refugees as a threat to the social fabric of European society due to an ethnocultural fear of the "other" or a socio-economic concern about overburdening public services. Others have a more positive view, even considering the refugees a solution to declining birth rates or having a more diverse society. As often happens in times of upheaval and crisis, these hopes and fears have hardened into political fault lines.

Within the church, the battle is along different — but no less familiar — lines. As hundreds of thousands of people arrive from countries where sharing the gospel is incredibly difficult, it is hard to deny that the refugee crisis poses a unique opportunity for discipleship. However, agreement usually ends there, as Christians are still deeply divided on what a distinctly Christian approach to the refugee wave should look like.

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At one end of the spectrum is the fundamentalist trend, which views the refugees chiefly as objects of evangelism, only to be clothed or fed if it leads to an opportunity to share the gospel. At the other end is the social gospel trend, which views sharing bread already as sharing Christ and considers verbal gospel proclamation unnecessary and even undesirable.

Of course, one may encounter a whole range of views that sit somewhere between these two, but very few are the result of a renewed theological reflection prompted by the crisis at hand.

Due to a lack of a robust theological consideration of how to engage with the refugees, many churches simply failed to take any action; or, if they did, they stepped back once the initial panic was over. One rather cynical way to put this is that, at the peak of any such crisis, you will usually encounter a brief outburst of both evangelistic opportunism and soup kitchen tokenism. As a pastor of a local church on the ground in Athens, I have seen firsthand how such responses seriously undermine both the church's witness and its theology.

Four years later, the refugee crisis is still uncharted territory for our generation and requires renewed theological engagement to develop and flesh out our piecemeal theological rationale. From this engagement can come a new Christian unity that Europe desperately needs.

Christological Ethics

As the initial rush of helping refugees subsided and I pondered the church's role in the refugee crisis, I happened upon an idea that changed the game for me. A blog on Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* introduced me to the author's notion of the Ultimate and the Penultimate.

Put simply, when we talk about evangelism and social action, we refer to two contexts — the Ultimate and the Penultimate — which are completely different but intimately related.

The first context is the realm of the **Ultimate**. This is everything that pertains to Christ coming to earth, taking on our sins, and adopting us into God's Kingdom. There is nothing more ultimate than a Spirit-filled life, justified before God, and raised in Christ. Since the *evangel* — the good news of Christ — pertains to this realm of the Ultimate, the work of evangel*ism* takes place within this first context.

The second context is the realm of the **Penultimate**. Since Christ is ultimate reality, this means that all of reality is Christologically conditioned, with all things considered in terms of their relation to him. If something is in Christ, it belongs to the realm of the Ultimate; if it is outside of Christ, it is considered penultimate.

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The ultimacy of the Ultimate is the key to understanding the whole schema. Feeding, clothing, and teaching refugees is a lesser work than leading them to Christ, not because it is not good work, but because it takes place in the realm of penultimate things. As Bonhoeffer writes, "To give the hungry bread is not yet to proclaim to them the grace of God."

The ultimacy of Christ also means that penultimate things not only cannot *compare* to ultimate things — they cannot *cause* them, either. Being a recipient of or witnessing social action will never be the sole, direct cause of someone coming to faith in Christ; this honour is reserved for the Holy Spirit alone.

This very obviously rules out a social gospel approach that would give pride of place to social action. Yet precisely because of the way these two realms are related, we are finally able to go beyond a fundamentalist approach, too. A fundamentalist approach sees no value in giving bread to the hungry. The Christological ethic of Bonhoeffer, however, allows us to view such acts not only as meaningful, but as a moral imperative to the church despite their penultimate nature.

Christological Entanglement

When God became incarnate and entered into the realm of the Penultimate, he was affirming his love for a world separated from him. There is a fundamental solidarity between Christ and the world of penultimate things. This is confirmed beyond all doubt on the cross, where God judged the Penultimate *without destroying it*, even as he inaugurated the Ultimate through the resurrection.

While Christ, as the Ultimate reality of the world, displaces all things, he does so in a way that makes them valuable. This is precisely because Christ entered into them as their saviour. Bonhoeffer scholar Craig Slane writes that:

Historical time is God's preparation for the ultimate, and therefore it is a subordinate reality to be annulled. But insofar as it is God's preparation it is intrinsic to the gospel itself.

God's agenda has always been to preserve the Penultimate (this world) *for the sake* of the Ultimate (the new creation in Christ). Indeed, the Ultimate is not something apart from this world, but rather the reality of God and the reality of this world **finally reconciled**.

In the resurrection, eternal life invades our temporal world and introduces an ultimacy it never knew before. Far from being sidelined by the Ultimate, the Penultimate acquires greater value through being the primary focus of Christ's saving work.

Where does this leave us on the matter of social action? Even though there is no lasting worth in acts that take place in the realm of the Penultimate, any work that preserves the Penultimate and prepares the way for the Ultimate *is an act worth doing*. For Bonhoeffer, there is no justification for the non-involvement of the church in the world. Just like Christ, we serve the Ultimate by tending to Penultimate things — indeed, we must.

Our involvement in the world's affairs not only preserves it — it also announces God's goodness. Acts of justice and mercy done by the church are not done from the vantage point of the Penultimate, but the Ultimate. In contrast to identical works done by non-Christians, the social action of the church does not aim at "fixing" the situation of the Penultimate, but revealing a new life to it.

Athens, Greece

Ethics on the Boundary

One final insight that we may glean from Bonhoeffer is how this Christological ethic can guide us during times of crisis. Bonhoeffer wrote *Ethics* during the early 1940s in Nazi Germany, an extreme situation that led some to resist the state. The refugee crisis is an equivalent example of ethical complexity, where traditional ethical responses are rendered useless and Christians are forced to re-examine what they believe about reality, worldliness, and suffering.

For instance, Christians are normally called to obey the laws of the country. However, when the Greek government instituted laws banning anyone from transporting refugees in their cars, many people chose to disobey them rather than witness exhausted families, just plucked out of the water, travel dozens of miles on foot with small children.

Even more controversial was the collaboration of several non-government organizations with smuggler gangs in Turkey that loaded refugees into flimsy inflatable boats and point them to Greece. While there was almost universal agreement that these gangs were directly responsible for large numbers of subsequent drownings, the only way to prevent more death was to liaise with them in order to know what boats were coming when.

With such complex ethical decisions to make on a daily basis, the moral imperative to get involved is unquestionable. If everyday scenes of injustice are reason enough to prompt the church to action, how much more so are situations like these, where the breakdown in order is so extreme that the Penultimate threatens its own preservation?

Let Us Tend to the World

In contrast to the fundamentalist and the social gospel approaches to Europe's refugee crisis, Bonhoeffer's two-fold contextualism of the Ultimate and the Penultimate provides the church with a theological rationale for social action that views gospel proclamation as crucial and social action as more than a means to an end. Rather, social action is mandated because it tends to the world that Christ came to save.

About the Author

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