

Thoughts on Churches and Sanctuary for Refugees

Posted by

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Brian Burch burch@web.ca : I had the privilege of participating o-n o-ne of the panels at No o-ne Is Illegal's conference: COMMUNITY/SOLIDARITY/SANCTUARY. I believe that the entire day was video taped. For more information o-n the day, including upcoming actions, contact No o-ne Is Illegal at < nooneisillegal@canada.com >. What follows are o-ne poem and my complete notes for my presentation.

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What follows are o-ne poem and my complete notes for my presentation. If o-ne, or both, end up being picked up for publication, please send a copy of the publication to:

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NO o-nE IS ILLEGAL---NOVEMBER 29, 2003

Around me are faces, most not indigenous to this land: Faces from Africa, from Southeast Asia, from Northern Europe, from the Middle East. Faces from this land dot the gathering.

Many are descendants of the oppressed, marginalized refugees pushed out and ending here, having no real place to call home.

Others have known first hand, in body and in spirit, violence and injustice in other lands and in our

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streets.

The faces hold hope and anger, hold relief and fear.

The faces are old and young.

The faces are female and male.

The faces are voices, loud and defiantly present.

Identity papers aren't shown.

All faces here are legal.

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NOTES FOR A MORE COHERENT PRESENTATION Faith and Sanctuary O.I.S.E., November 28, 2003

There is a definitive anarchist streak in the Christian faith, that ultimately puts obedience to a personal understanding of divine will as being more important than obedience to the dictates of the nation state. And there is also a real streak of arrogance---that we are indeed at times morally superior than others, a superiority that demands that we trust our own judgement rather than popular will. While this can be expressed in ways that have led to oppressive and violent movements, at its best it has inspired movements of liberation and radical compassion and encouraged individuals to take extreme personal risks on behalf of strangers and outcasts, defying convention, laws and threats of violence, imprisonment or death to do so. At this time when our government jails people without charges, sends people to other countries to face

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poverty, imprisonment or death, works hand in hand with those that believe you cancel someone a danger because of whom they pray with, this positive stream of resistance can be found, needing nurturing and encouragement but providing, for a few people, an opportunity for hope in a time of growing hopelessness. We, as a people of faith, are expected to obey the overarching demands of the law of love and resist being an advocate of the human law of violence.

(The above was inspired by Leo Tolstoy's *The Law of Love and the Law of Violence*).

At the root of our understanding our sanctuary are calls heard in scripture for sanctuary, for active compassion and for a willingness to see the divine in all. In Deuteronomy 19: 2 - 3 we read: "you shall set apart three cities for you in the land which the Lord your God gives you to possess. You shall prepare the roads, and divide into three parts the area of the land which the Lord your God gives you as a possession, so that any manslayer can flee to them." The roots of our understanding of the importance of sanctuary can be found in this passage. People accused of violence had to have a place to flee to in order for them to be able to challenge the accusation they were faced with. This wasn't a suggestion on how to live in relationship with the divine; rather it is a challenge to humanity to recognise that we need to have places where those facing injustice could be safe. Further on in the Old Testament we read in Isaiah 58: 6 - 7a: "Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house?" Expressions of worship, in this passage, include active compassion for those in need---freeing the oppressed and providing a place to live for those without a home. How can one free the oppressed if there is no place for them to live? How can one offer a home to someone without a homeland without opening up one's doors? And in an often quoted passage in Matthew 25: 41 - 46 we read: "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.'" Ultimately, we will be judged not by our participation in the rituals and sacraments of the church but by the way that we directly and effectively meet the needs of those in need---including welcoming the stranger, the sojourner, who comes into our midst. We are not expected to have perfected mediation techniques, become skilled in theological debate or live a life of retreat and prayer. Rather, we are expected to respond to the physical, human needs of those around us when they are needed. It is from these, and other, passages that the idea of sanctuary and the call for real hospitality, of being open to providing a haven from refugees, arise. And, as individuals and as people of faith, our living out such basic and inherently conservative values is something that we can be held accountable for.

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B. Some 20th century expressions of sanctuary

I have decided not to devote a great deal of time looking at pre-modern examples of communal and church based expressions of sanctuary---it is a fascinating tradition but feels far from our lives. One example that must be stressed of sanctuary in pre-modern times was the welcoming of the Jews expelled by Christian Spain by the Islamic world, and specifically the Ottoman Empire. Thousands were welcomed into a foreign land all at once, a sign of real compassion all too rarely emulated in modern times. I do want to touch upon offering of sanctuary both under extremely oppressive situations and under stressful and uncertain situations in the modern, Western world. My comments will necessarily be brief, but in the current time of denying sanctuary and dignity to many people from many lands, I do feel that looking at the recent past can be both encouraging and a call to action. Two examples of offering sanctuary I'll focus on are:

(A) under Nazism, Christians offering sanctuary for the Jews; and (B) in the 1960s and early 70s, Canadian faith communities welcoming U.S. draft resisters. It is surprising to hear advanced as serious arguments against providing sanctuary and support to those who come to this land the dangers of losing charitable status, the irresponsibility of breaking the law, even statements that perhaps in these periods of terrorist activity we must not be so concerned with justice. I contrast this with the many who lived on Nazi occupation who risked imprisonment, torture and death to provide sanctuary to declared enemies of the state. As Martin Gilbert wrote: "Those who had hidden Jewish children, saving them from deportation and death, included Roman Catholics...Greek and Russian Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Baptists and Lutherans, as well as Muslims in Bosnia and Albania." (The Righteous, pg. xvi) One of the more phenomenal examples of offering sanctuary to Jews under the Nazi's was the French village of Le Chambon. This was an entire community, led by both Protestant and Catholic leaders, that combined to provide effective sanctuary to large numbers of Jewish people. They did so over the objections of their church hierarchies and civil authorities. Some of those offering sanctuary or advocating resistance to the Nazis were tortured and executed. Individual Jews and some Jewish families were successfully rounded up and many were killed. However, from active non-co-operation with efforts to vilify Jewish to specific efforts to interfere with initiatives that fed into the Holocaust machine, this small village successfully provided a safe haven for a large number of Jews and remains an example of successful pacifist actions against a violence and oppression structure. Within Germany itself, where the official Catholic and Protestant church leaders actively supported the Nazi regime, offering of sanctuary was seen as the only real way of living out a faithful life by thousands of individuals who took substantive risks to provide shelter and some degree of safety. As one example, again from Gilbert, "Only a few Pomeranian Jews were not deported. They owed their survival, write the historian of Pomeranian Jewry, Stephen Nicholls, 'either to the loyalty of their Christian partner or to the bravery to those who were prepared to hide single Jews. For example, Joachim Pfannschmidt, vicar of Gross Kiesow near Griefswald and an active member of the German Confession church, hid Gertrud Birnbaum in his vicarage from 1939-1944. This pharmacist from Berlin survived the

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war. (pg. 285).

(Comments on sanctuary under the Nazis are based on: Irving Abella and Harold Troper. None is Too Many. Martin Gilbert. The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust Philip Hallie. Lest Innocent Blood be Shed Anny Latour. The Jewish Resistance in France, especially the sections 'The Huguenot Stronghold' and 'Underground Networks for Child Rescue' Milton Meltzer. Rescue.)

In more recent times, in the background of my early years of activism, thousands of Canadians opened up homes, church spaces and drop-in centres to provide sanctuary to up to 500,000 young Americans who would not support the U.S. war in Vietnam. To provide an idea of the climate of the time, immediately following the declaration of the War Measures Act in October 1971 this example of anti-terrorist legislation was seen as a possible weapon against undesirable draft resisters. In John Hagan's book Northern Passage (pg. 141) we read "The mayors of Canada's largest cities used the law in a backlash against American war resisters. Mayor William Dennison of Toronto claimed that "a few hippies and deserters are Toronto's only problem." Mayor Jean Drapeau of Montreal charged that draft and military resisters were part of a "revolutionary conspiracy. Mayor Tom Campbell of Vancouver declared, "I don't like draft dodgers and I'll do anything within the law that allows me to get rid of them." All three expressed a willingness to use the War Measures Act against war resisters. Mayor Campbell was the most explicit, telling the Toronto Star, "I believe the law should be used against any revolutionary whether he's a U.S. draft dodger or a hippie." For most, the difficulties facing U.S. draft dodgers and military deserters were economic, cultural and emotional---leaving a country at war to find haven in a near-by country is difficult. But illegal extradition, arbitrary decisions by immigration officers and changes in rules around granting landed immigrant status that weren't debated in the legislature created additional burdens. Those unable to get legal status needed safe housing, financial support and aid in finding employment and other forms of pragmatic assistance. Churches, such as the Church of the Holy Trinity, opened up their doors for draft resisters to sleep. Individuals, such as Nancy Pocock of the Society of Friends (Quakers) provided emotional support, referrals and hot soup. They operated in a space between laws--- the government wasn't actively sending U.S. citizens back to face (in many cases) charges and imprisonment for desertion or refusing to co-operate with the draft. But there was little in the way of support for those that made it to Canada with no resources on their own. And in 1965 those providing sanctuary to the first wave of resisters did not likely think it would be a decade before their work was over. This openness to U.S. anti-war refugees is, to me, a highlight of the faith response to those coming to Canada. Jewish activists from Holy Blossom joined with those from Toronto Monthly Meeting to find common ground in welcoming those who would not participate in war. Many active from that time, from Ann Pohl to Frank Showler, both in and outside of the faith communities, maintain their commitment to ensuring that there be a haven here for those needing sanctuary.

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(Comments on sanctuary for U.S. draft resisters are based on:

James Dickerson. North to Canada
Sherry Gershon Gottlieb. Hell No We Won't Go
John Hagan. Northern Passage
Roger Neville Williams. The New Exiles: American War Resisters in Canada

The radical risk taking of those providing sanctuary to the Jews under Nazi dominated Europe or the demanding welcoming by those providing sanctuary to anti-Vietnam War Americans, do provide examples today that some congregations (less than a dozen in all) are now following---all too few---and that some agencies are mimicking---but again all too few. People are being sent back to places where they risk torture and imprisonment, possibility even death, while others with almost identical backgrounds are granted refugee status. Some housing providers demand perfect proof of a legal right to reside in Canada while others seek for loopholes in a complex system. And perhaps there is something a little less pleasant in the refusal of some within the faith communities to take risks. This is, after all, a country that refused a shipload of Jewish refugees sanctuary when they were trying to escape Nazi Germany. This is a country that rounded up citizens of Japanese origin during the Second World War. And while Canada did welcome U.S. draft resisters, only a comparative small number of the Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees ended up here---most of them sponsored by congregations or community groups and not as convention refugees. Is there perhaps some unspoken message when Canada does not automatically offer haven to gay men facing imprisonment or women coming here to escape genital mutilation? What is the message that we provide to the world when Leonard Peltier was improperly and rapidly extradited to the U.S. while Holocaust denier Ernst Zundel is only now being considered for deportation to Germany? Is there a proposal to the world that Canada is making with individuals within the Islamic community, Canadian citizens, are not being welcomed back to Canada but sent to Syria or Afghanistan against their will? It was a minority of Christians that defied church leaders and the law to provide sanctuary for the Jews. It was a minority of Canadians of all faith backgrounds and from many places on the progressive spectrum that actively welcomed American draft resisters. I do wonder what is in the hearts of the majority who are silent, the majority who are not showing by their actions that those in need are not welcomed here.