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Learning to Encounter ‘Boat People’:
A theological reflection on Australian asylum seeker policy,
in dialogue with Karl Barth

Rebecca Lindsay

At a recent dinner party with friends, my husband made a bold announcement. ‘We should become people smugglers,’ he said. Against the backdrop of increasingly harsh Australian government policy directed at curbing the flow of boat arrivals from Indonesia, this seemed to him the most humane action, and one which took the call of Jesus to love our neighbours most seriously. Soon after attending a service of lament for refugees and asylum seekers, I was deeply moved as the cry went up, ‘Where you there when the boats were turned away?’ While this was a good beginning in bringing our uncertainty, fear, and desire for hope to God in prayer, I wondered what would come next. There is a lack of sustained theological engagement around the issue of asylum seekers and little research into the response of faith-based organisations to asylum seeker policy within the Australian context. What would a genuinely theological approach to the vexed question of ‘boat people’ bring to our ability to think and act coherently in a distinctively Christian way?

There is a deep-rooted fear beneath the Western social fabric. This fear is often directed at those people transgressing the ‘fixed’ boundaries of nation states. Such people belong to dangerous and unstable ‘wild zones’. They may infect, flood, or bring chaos to the ‘stable’ locations where they seek asylum. As such, refugees and asylum seekers are frequently ‘dehumanised’ and ‘abstracted’, seen as ‘dirt’ or pollution in need of purification from the social body. Australian history shows a recurring restlessness around the ongoing prospect of ‘invasion’. Within current Australian rhetoric, asylum seekers arriving by boat are described as ‘swamping’, ‘illegal’, ‘queue jumpers’, ‘terrorists’. ‘Stop the boats’ and even ‘Buy back the boats’ have become familiar slogans. The current Coalition Government response to boat arrivals is couched in militaristic jargon: ‘Operation Sovereign Borders’ suggests that Australia is at war with
asylum seekers. Ironically, as highlighted by Frank Brennan in the wake of the 2001 election played out around *Tampa* and ‘children overboard’, ‘an island continent nation like Australia enjoys the advantage of having secure borders’.\(^8\) We have secure borders, and an obsession with border control.

Such crisis-based language poses a social and theological problem. Maintaining fear serves the interests of those who already hold power, undermining the possibility of social change.\(^9\) Rhetoric of crisis dulls our ability to seek justice through acting with patience, discernment, and courage.\(^10\) Anxiety-based social interaction undermines Christian values such as peacemaking and generous hospitality, highlighting security and self-preservation at all costs.\(^11\) The so-called ‘emergency’ on Australian borders has now been in place for over a decade. And it is effective. Seeking asylum is a human right upheld by the UN refugee convention to which Australia is a signatory. However, the 2011/2012 Scanlon report on social cohesion found that most respondents believed that asylum seekers arriving by boat were indeed illegal immigrants.\(^12\) Identifying asylum seekers arriving by boat as ‘illegal’ suggests they have undertaken criminal activity. This, in turn, shapes assumptions about how they should be treated when they arrive in Australia.\(^13\) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has repeatedly criticised current Australian policy as inhumane and unsafe.\(^14\) Asylum seekers are denied opportunity to find sanctuary; community response to refugees is grounded in fear; the way that Australian policy treats refugees and asylum seekers bears witness to the lack of love for life our society holds. Moreover, the current policies regarding asylum seekers seem to deny Australia’s own chequered past of boat arrivals\(^15\). The state continues to be marked by the unfinished business of reconciliation between First and Second peoples.

Cavanaugh describes politics itself as ‘a practice of the imagination’.\(^16\) The question is then whether the Australian church’s inability to imagine alternative policy positions and praxis is caused by an underdeveloped theological imagination around what it is to be human and what it is to be the Church. If modern politics—and, by extension, the contemporary questions of borders, asylum, refuge, and belonging upheld by a nation such as Australia—was not ‘discovered but imagined, invented’, then there is possibility for re-imagining and re-membering. In addressing our own context, we can learn from those who have lived through earlier moments of border conflict and dehumanising policy. Karl


\(^14\) See, for example, ‘UNHRC reports harsh physical conditions and legal shortcomings at Pacific Island asylum centres’, 26 November 2013: http://www.unhcr.org/52947ac86.html

\(^15\) ‘We forget that the greatest number of unauthorised boats to arrive in a single day got here on 26 January, 1788’. Julian Burnside, ‘Alienation to Alien Nation’, *The Conversation*, 19 September 2013: http://theconversation.com/julian-burnside-alienation-to-alienation-18290


Barth is a theologian whose own political engagement and reflection on what it is to be human might reignite our imagination, helping us to think Christian-ly about those who seek sanctuary in our midst, even those who arrive by boat.

No humanity without encounter

For Barth, the nature of being human is determined primarily by the humanity of Jesus Christ. If real humanity is defined by the humanity of Jesus, there is no option to begin with or to seek out an abstract understanding of what it is to be human. Furthermore, if there is no humanity without reference to the concrete event of God in Jesus, then neither does humanity exist without reference to fellow human creatures. 'A human without the fellow-human will necessarily be abandoned as inhuman at the very first step'.18 We cannot be understood as solitary beings.

A human without their fellows, or radically neutral or opposed to their fellows, or under the impression that the co-existence of their fellows has only secondary significance, is a being which ipso facto is fundamentally alien to the man Jesus.19

For Jesus encapsulates encounter with the other, showing that to be human is to live with and for others.

'Humanity is the determination of our being as a being in encounter with the other human'.20 This encounter with others is at the heart of what it is to live out our humanity, as the creatures that God wills us to be. It is active, engaged, and full of agency. Yet it also involves recognition of our creatureliness: humility, self-awareness adjoined to empathy, and deep personal vulnerability. These characteristics resonate with the image of God we find in Jesus, particularly as expressed in such passages of Scripture as Philippians 2:5–11, to which Barth returns often.

I am being-in-encounter when I look an-other in the eye and am myself seen, allowing this same other to see into my eyes.21 I meet my fellow without imbalance, but with mutual openness to see and be seen.

To the extent that we withhold and conceal ourselves, and therefore do not move or move anymore out of ourselves to know others and let ourselves be known by them, our existence is inhuman.22

I cannot hold myself at arm’s length from my fellow, neither my friend nor my enemy. For in Christ

18 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, 545–46, London, T&T Clark, 2009, p. 26. Quotations taken from Barth’s work have been altered to reflect gender inclusive language.
19 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 24.
20 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 44. My emphasis.
21 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 46.
22 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 47.
God did not hold even our brokenness at arm’s length, but met us embodied in flesh, face-to-face.

I am being-in-encounter when I speak and hear, when I am spoken to and heard.23 The mutuality of speaking and hearing requires that I am open, honest, and vulnerable and also that my interpretation is open to question, clarification, and change. It will unsettle me to be addressed by my fellow, and I cannot remain silent, as this will be a form of abandonment. My companion will be similarly unsettled. This encounter cannot represent a kind of paternalistic sense that I have something to offer, without allowing my own defences to be overturned.

As long as I have not grasped that it is not just a matter of the other but of myself, as long as I think I can avoid hearing the other without harm to myself, I do not give a human hearing.24

Without mutuality and reciprocity in speaking and hearing, the encounter will not truly be a human dialogue.

I am being-in-encounter when assistance is mutual: when I both offer and receive assistance from the other. If we have seen, heard, and spoken together, then our meeting summons action.25 We will find ourselves called to stand alongside each other in solidarity, offering support and knowing how to accept the same. ‘My action is human when the outstretched hand of the other does not grope in the void but finds in mine the support which is asked’.26 The only alternative is an inhuman isolation belonging to a myth of self-sufficiency. Mutual assistance does not mean losing my own self through surrender to the other, or seeking to overpower the life of my fellow.27 Rather, I am made aware of the insufficiency of my isolation, of my inability to live without others, and of their corresponding need for me.

Finally, all this is to be done with gladness!28 This gladness is important. There can be no bland and objective neutrality in encounter. For joy is the life-blood of mutual human engagement.29 To encounter a person with joy, to engage them that they might flourish in life, is different to fulfilling their needs out of duty or guilt.30 Tolerance of the other is not enough. Encounter with gladness pushes further, to a genuine and mutual interaction. This means that as I—an Australian citizen—encounter an asylum seeker, I must be willing to play the role of stranger and guest as well as host. I must beware of stepping into colonial patterns of imbalanced power.

23 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 49.
24 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 54.
25 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 56.
26 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 59.
27 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, pp. 64–65.
28 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 60.
30 Snyder, Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church, p. 83.
In a togetherness which is accepted gladly and in freedom a person is neither a slave nor a tyrant and the fellow-person is neither a slave nor a tyrant, but both are companions, associates, comrades, fellows and help-mates.  

Here is freedom, for freedom means living as the creatures in community God intended us to be.

For Barth, these responses are based on Jesus Christ as the measure of humanity, but are not responses that are specifically Christian. Rather, they belong to the ‘creaturely essence’ of being human. For Christians, the depth of response is pushed further, for fellow human beings are recognised as those alongside whom we have sinned and for whom God’s grace has been extended. There is now freedom to love the other. How could I withhold my gaze from this other when God’s meeting has already brought us together? The ethic which belongs to this Christological anthropology is concerned with the value, dignity, and affirmation that God extends to all people in recognising them within the humanity of Jesus, and so in calling them to live humanly together.

The radical nature of such anthropology, its sheer counter-intuition, ought not be lost. Barth sets this radical anthropology against Nietzsche’s most scathing critique of Christianity: that what we have come to see as the ‘supreme and mature fruit’ of human development is confronted by the suffering man hanging upon the cross. This dangerous and unthinkable scandal is what we are now naming as the truth of what it is to be human.

Christianity places before the superman the Crucified, Jesus, as the Neighbour, and in the person of Jesus a whole host of others who are wholly and utterly ignoble and despised in the eyes of the world...the hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and captive, a whole ocean of human meanness and painfulness.

Imagine such an understanding underpinning the response of the Church to societal fear attached to those others from ‘wild zones’. Imagine if the Church ensured that such utterly despised ones as dehumanised boat people were kept in the gaze of a public and government who seek utterly to avoid such confrontation. In such simple action, Christians might enact their own humanity and call others to being-in-encounter.

Yet, Barth reminds us also that Christians often do not want to see human creaturely being in such terms.

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31 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 66.
32 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 69.
33 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 76.
35 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 38.
36 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 38.
A person is human in the fact that they are with their fellow-human gladly. But in Christianity there is an inveterate and tenacious tendency to ignore or not accept this; not to know, or not to want to know, this reality of humanity.37

I suggest such desire to be unencumbered from being-in-encounter is one entrenched in fear. The fear at the heart of the social fabric of contemporary western context is often of encountering difference, particularly difference embodied in suffering. Our own sense of self-preservation and control is called into question. Migration tends to cause strong reactions for people, raising questions of national security, identity, culture, jobs and resources.38 In the case of asylum seekers who are ‘out-of-place’, we are confronted by the reality that our globalised politics of nation states, identities, and borders is contested and contingent.39 The fear this arouses—of chaos overtaking order and a belief that there is not enough for all—stops us from engaging in encounters which would be a blessing, and would widen our ability to meet with God.

The great possibilities of human existence always remain the wider horizon that characterizes every human person and to which every human person is to respond. For in every human being we encounter God’s honoured partner.40

The challenge for the Church is to enter into the vulnerability of encounter we see in the cross, trusting that the reality of resurrection already permeates the world.

**Place, time and embodiment**

Being-in-encounter is concrete, particular, just as God’s entry into history in Jesus is concrete and particular. To be human is to live as ‘one whole person, embodied soul and besouled body’,41 embedded within a specific temporal and physical location. To engage with others, we must engage with their actual experiences, their physicality and their movement towards the future. We do not come from nothing, even though there was time before our being; we are not heading towards nothing, even though we shall die. We come from ‘the being, speaking and action of the eternal God who has preceded us’.42 Our life ‘remains within its confines’43 and within this allotted time and space we belong to God and to our fellow human beings. We cannot desire to cut ourselves off from others and still believe ourselves as connected to God as Father and Jesus as Brother.44 The Church bears witness to this, in the embodiment

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37 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 73.
38 Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church*, p. 5.
40 Krötke, *The Humanity of the Human Person in Karl Barth’s Anthropology*, p. 166.
41 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 121.
42 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 577.
43 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 576.
44 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 508.
of proclamation 'that the history of Israel and the history of humankind have attained their goal and end in Jesus Christ, and that this goal and end are now the priaus for every human life'.

Here, we consider the way states further confine time and space. The contemporary state claims rights over human bodies, a ‘right’ which Christians must reject. In terms of seeking asylum, Australia has been familiar with such claims since the famous declaration of John Howard during the election campaign of 2001, ‘We shall decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’. However, the Church is not constituted as a particular nation or race of people. It does not seek to take the place of the nation state.

Since the Church is ecumenical by virtue of its very origin, it resists all abstract local, regional and national interests in the political sphere. It will always seek to serve the best interests of the particular city or place where it is stationed. But it will never do this without, at the same time, looking out beyond the city walls. It will be conscious of the superficiality, relativity, and temporariness of the immediate city boundaries and on principal it will always stand for understanding and cooperation within the wider circle.

To be human is to be confined by particularity. But this confinement is not that of avoiding encounter with others, for this will deny the reality we have met in Jesus of what it is to be human. For Barth, there is a role for the church in reminding the state and political sphere about what it is to act with humanity. The bodies claimed by the state belong to the Creator whose own body is marked by crucifixion.

Nail marks in God’s hands, the particularity of time and space, invoke the need for a concrete, material response to fellow human beings, and indeed to the whole creation. Where inhumanity reigns, the church must bear witness to Christ and the true humanity found in Christ. More than that, the Church must seek to enact the concrete realities this entails. This is not to envision a world that is simply more ‘secure’ or ‘progressive’, but it seeks to embody God’s own faithfulness to the created world.

Whenever in this present time between the resurrection and the parousia one of these is waiting for help (for food, drink, lodging, clothes, a visit, assistance), Jesus Himself is waiting. Whatever help is granted or denied, it is granted or denied to Jesus Himself.

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45 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 584.
49 Kröte, ‘The Humanity of the Human Person in Karl Barth’s Anthropology’, p. 22.
51 Barth, Church Dogmatics III/2, p. 507.
Krötke names as a particular challenge the quality that this witness must bear: "The Christian community may never allow itself to be surpassed by anyone in its solidarity with real people".52

Barth, Australia and our refugee ‘crisis’

Perhaps one of the most radical ways that Barth’s theology can help the Australian Church frame a response to current asylum seeker policies and the negative rhetoric they entail is also one of the most simple. The entire thrust of the Church Dogmatics rests upon the centrality of Jesus in understanding both who God is and what the world is. To see Jesus’ humanity is to understand what it is to be human. Seeing Jesus’ humanity is to know ourselves as creatures unable to make sense of our particular time and space in isolation from our fellows. ‘It is because Jesus Christ is Neighbour, Companion, Brother and Counterpart that we are constituted as the beings that we are and knowable as such.’53 While in Christ this is true for all people, those who find themselves in Christ are called to embody reality in the midst. The Church simply cannot choose to live outside the humanity we meet in Christ. In Barth’s thought, ‘justice for actual human beings comes first’.54 We are not at liberty to hide behind abstraction. I cannot look abstraction in the eye, and experience its eyes seeing mine.

While the global movement of people has increased significantly in recent times, Australia hosts only 0.3% of the world’s refugees.55 Current migration, both voluntary and forced, tends to arise from mixed motivation, given interconnected economic, social, and political forces. Public discourse tends to limit these ambiguities, focusing instead upon forced migration and asylum seeking as a problem requiring a solution.56 This ‘solution’ is usually framed as benefit to the host countries, rather than protection for those seeking sanctuary.57 The mutuality key to Barth’s conception of being human is absent. In the words of Christos Tsiolkas speaking of Australia’s response to asylum seekers: ‘We have failed’.58

Groody specifically links solidarity as seen in Barth’s view of the incarnation with the language of migration.59 In Jesus, we see the Son of God making his way into the far country.60 “The verbum dei from this perspective is the great migration of human history”.61 There are obvious differences between the decision of God to live in the messy midst of humanity, and the fearful plight of forced migration.

57 Susanna Snyder, Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church, p. 61.
60 Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/1, p. 150.
However, more interesting is what those living in the ‘far country’ experience of God in God’s migration, and what ramifications this experience has in shaping thinking and response. We (humanity) have already rejected the migrant Son of God (in the crucifixion of Jesus). We have failed, yet we have been captured by God’s grace. Living out of this knowledge is it possible for the followers of the Way of Christ (Christians across time and space) to continue to reject further asylum seekers? Rather than furthering its negative connotations, ‘migration becomes a descriptive metaphor for the movement of God towards others in the human response of discipleship’.62

I remain uncertain as to whether my husband was correct about our prospective career change. However, Barth punctures the idea that reality is what fear-mongering politicians and media outlets want me to see. Reality is Jesus stretched out to meet us with grace. To be human must take its cues from this moment. To be as being-in-encounter will mean taking up the challenge to see and be seen, speak and hear, help and be helped by ‘currently the most destitute class among our body politic’.63 And it must be done with gladness. “The kingdom comes! The New Humanity approaches!”64 Australian Christians must decide which reality they will now live in.

63 Tsiolkas, ‘Why Australia Hates Asylum Seekers’.
64 John Deschner, ‘Karl Barth as Political Activist’, p. 63.