

# Dangerous vulnerability, threatening victims

## Scapegoating asylum seekers in twenty- first-century Australia

R J Dalziell

A dangerous and potent idea currently pervading public discourse is that refugees and asylum seekers pose a threat to Australian society. The gist of this widely promoted idea is that the victims themselves are dangerous. Connected with this idea is the notion that victims are morally suspect, manipulative, grasping, untrustworthy and a fiscal burden on the state.

This idea fosters the human capacity for scapegoating a minority by a misguided and largely subconscious majority's reaching for social bonding. But in fact it does the contrary, unravelling social cohesion, undermining Australia's success as a multicultural nation, harming our reputation in the United Nations as a country committed to human rights and undermining many of the virtues that Australians value—hospitality, generosity, tolerance and a fair go. It also fosters distrust of humanitarian commitments and replaces them with insularity, selfishness and fear.

In this essay I discuss how this dangerous idea of the 'threat of the victim' has gained currency in Australia in recent decades, and what fears may promote its circulation. I then turn to some cultural resources in the Western literary tradition which may be helpful in understanding this

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*Rosamund Dalziell is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University, Canberra. This article has been peer reviewed.*

phenomenon. In the final section of the essay I highlight some activities by Australians who continue to promote the importance of 'welcoming the stranger' in the context of a more humanitarian and considered national policy towards asylum seekers. I draw attention to prophetic voices and actions among people of faith alongside other dedicated people whose humanitarian commitments are secular.

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In August 2016 a young Somali asylum seeker in immigration detention on Nauru set himself alight and subsequently died. Federal Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Peter Dutton attributed this action, along with other lesser though serious incidents of self-harm, to manipulative behaviour, stating that: 'Asylum seekers have self-immolated to get to Australia.'<sup>1</sup> The Minister had previously asserted in May 2016 (shortly before a Federal election) that refugees would not 'be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English', making them a burden on social services and Medicare. At the same time he warned that 'these people would be taking Australian jobs, there's no question about that.'<sup>2</sup>

Leading international scholar in the field of religion and violence, the late René Girard, relates political and cultural representations of victims as threatening to the functional but concealed social operation of what he terms 'the scapegoat mechanism'. Girard's argument is that when a community, society or nation is facing a crisis with the potential to unleash violent conflict, stability can be maintained by identifying, persecuting or 'punishing' a selected individual or group of victims who can be blamed for the prevailing crisis. By framing victims as culpable, the violence of potential antagonists is deflected onto the scapegoats. As Girard explains in his seminal study, *The Scapegoat*, '[u]ltimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society.'<sup>3</sup> Skilled political leaders will succeed in convincing not only themselves but the majority under their leadership that the scapegoat is a threat.

In a recent *Eureka Street* article (19 May 2016), Perth-based writer Somayra Ismailjee explicates this persecution of asylum seekers in the Australian context:

Asylum seekers are subjected to both physical and abstract forms of regulation. While we detain, brutalise and police

their bodies, we also create barriers that are cultural, spiritual and psychological. Our xenophobia ensures that their cultures are framed as alien and their religions a threat, while physical borders are reinforced by a deeper divide rooted in notions of inferiority. The worth of an asylum seeker is never shown as intrinsically valuable, but expendable, through the policies we enact to keep them away at any cost.<sup>4</sup>

The Girardian scapegoat mechanism sheds light on the fact that many Australians perceive asylum seekers and refugees as a threat to the nation, when the latter as victims of persecution are arguably among the most vulnerable groups globally. Without the negative halo effect of the scapegoat mechanism this fear of the victim would be widely perceived as a strange reversal of realistic expectations about the disempowered predicament of asylum seekers. The crisis that produces the need for scapegoats is in part the global movement of refugees and displaced persons, which, according to the latest UNHCR figures, numbers 65.3 million people. Refugees from the conflict in Syria are flooding into Europe, and others are moving from impoverished and conflict-riven countries in Africa. A comparatively small number of asylum seekers from these and other recent and current sites of conflict (including Afghanistan, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Burma) seek to make their way to Australia. But as K Bradley and J Minns observe in a recent monograph chapter, 'since 1992, asylum seekers have increasingly been treated in a manner inexplicable in terms of their numbers.'<sup>5</sup>

A domestically based crisis, argue Bradley and Minns, stemmed from neoliberal economic reforms initiated in the 1980s, and, in the early 1990s, recession, high unemployment and anxiety about the future.<sup>6</sup> Broader opposition to immigration began to emerge at this time. However, it was not until 2001 that 'the politicisation of asylum seekers would reach its full potential' with the arrival of the *Tampa* with more than 400 refugees on board, rescued from a sinking Indonesian boat. The then Prime Minister John Howard introduced the system of offshore processing of asylum-seekers on Manus Island and Nauru, supported by Labor. Political rhetoric began to draw distinctions between 'legal' migrants and 'illegal' asylum-seekers, creating a permanent class of scapegoats whose management has strengthened elected governments.

In order to deflect criticism of inhumane treatment of people in offshore detention, successive Federal Governments have created a distinction between asylum-seekers who arrived by boat (irregular maritime arrivals) and over-stayers on short-term visas who arrived by plane. Scapegoating applies most intensively to boat arrivals; those who arrived after 1 January 2014 will never be eligible to settle in Australia.<sup>7</sup> As is now well known, these asylum-seekers are detained for extended periods—some advocates have used the term ‘warehousing’—on Nauru (the smallest island nation) and on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.

The main argument used to justify offshore detention is more or less utilitarian—that it functions as a deterrent to asylum seekers to pay people smugglers for passage to Australia on leaky boats, in order to prevent more deaths at sea. The prevention of deaths at sea is, on the face of it, laudable, given the drownings that have already occurred—some unseen, others, like the horrendous shipwreck off Christmas Island in 2010, in full view of helpless onlookers on shore. But Voltaire’s satirical aphorism in *Candide* on the execution of Admiral Byng in 1757 seems all too relevant: that atrocity was permitted because ‘it is good to kill an admiral from time to time, in order to encourage the others’—a sardonic observation on the scapegoat mechanism.<sup>8</sup> As Australians we must ask ourselves if it can possibly be good to inflict suffering on asylum-seekers in offshore immigration detention in order to ‘encourage the others’ (that is, other asylum seekers) not to take to boats. While successive governments have argued that yes, it is for the greater good, advocates often point to the immorality of deliberately causing suffering to people who have not drowned in order to prevent others from risking drowning. Alternatives do exist, including policies that Australia pursued in the late 1970s and 80s.

So let us consider some of the reasons why Australians, including many Christians and other people of faith, are able to be persuaded that asylum seekers as victims are dangerous and threatening. I shall also discuss what David Isaacs has termed the ‘moral distress’ that affects many Christians, humanitarians and other people of faith in the face of the suffering endured by asylum seekers in Australian immigration detention. I shall suggest some cultural and spiritual resources that may be helpful to people of faith in considering appropriate, humanitarian and faith-based responses to people seeking asylum.

## Fear of suffering as contagious

Fear of the unfortunate, together with fear of the stranger, has ancient origins, as Girard has comprehensively argued. Often one individual is characterised both as unfortunate and a stranger, his or her misfortune having resulted in exile or ostracism from their community of origin, as in the figure of Oedipus who is also disabled by a childhood injury intended to kill him.<sup>9</sup> Although the human fear of contagious diseases (as exemplified by historical ostracism of lepers) is now based on scientific fact, fear of contagion may also infect attitudes towards people afflicted by non-contagious diseases, people with disabilities, or even people who are grieving. Illness, disability, bereavement and death demonstrate human vulnerability and mortality, leading to fear of those whose suffering exceeds our own. The terrifying experiences of people fleeing persecution can be too difficult for others to comprehend, so an all too human response is to turn away. Another response is to blame the sufferers for causing their own suffering. Jesus in the Gospels is shown as frequently countering this mode of thought.<sup>10</sup>

Those with the skills, resilience and commitment to advocate for or assist seriously traumatised people may find themselves scapegoated in turn as 'bleeding hearts' or 'do-gooders' who lack an appropriate worldly wisdom or sense of the greater good. Worse than this, advocates have been accused of encouraging detained asylum-seekers to self-harm. *The Guardian* reported on 3 May 2016 that the 'immigration minister, Peter Dutton, has blamed refugee advocates for the suicide attempts on Nauru and Manus, alleging they are encouraging detainees to self-harm in the hope of getting to Australia.' Refugee advocates have unequivocally rejected these accusations, stating that the reverse is true. According to long-time refugee advocate Ian Rintoul, '[i]t's the advocates who are always urging people, people who are desperate, not to harm themselves.'<sup>11</sup> Theologian James Alison has written about the spiritual experience of occupying or sharing the place of shame in solidarity with one who has been scapegoated, as God does, so that the place of shame no longer exists.<sup>12</sup>

Manifestations of mental illness also have the power to disturb in ways that echo our predecessors' fearful scapegoating of sufferers, for example in early modern accusations of witchcraft against elderly women living alone with mental illness or dementia. A woman living with a difficult mental disorder in twenty-first-century Canberra reported being made fun of by neighbourhood children and called a witch. Not far from where I grew up

was a long-stay mental hospital, very much a closed institution until the late 1960s. School children made jokes about the 'loony bin' and exchanged stories about strange behaviour seen when spying at patients through the fences. In reality they were quite frightened about patients escaping, which occasionally happened. When the same hospital began developing a new culture of community support for patients in the 1970s, university students like myself who became involved in faith-based outreach projects looked back with mortification on thoughtless primary school joking.

There has been a revolution in mental health care in my lifetime. Public health education focuses on understanding and care for people living with mental illnesses in the community and in workplaces, rather than shutting them away for years in long-stay institutions. Suicide prevention programmes are constantly being developed and more resources called for. Organisations like Beyond Blue and The Black Dog Institute provide support for depression and anxiety sufferers. Churches and community volunteers undertake mental health first aid and community counselling courses. It is commonly agreed that all these activities are important, though more still needs to be done.

But when we turn to the immigration detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island, facilities funded by the Australian Federal Government, we find that these are operating virtually as 'mental illness factories'. Australian of the Year for 2010, psychiatrist Professor Patrick McGorry, called for the closure of Australian immigration detention centres: ' "You could almost describe them as factories for producing mental illness and mental disorder" ', he said.<sup>13</sup>

A number of reports have detailed and confirmed the mental suffering of detained asylum seekers, including teenagers and very young children. Among these are the Moss Review (2015) by former integrity commissioner Philip Moss, and the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) report, 'The Forgotten Children' (which refers to children in immigration detention in Australia).<sup>14</sup> After the AHRC report was released, President of the ARHC Gillian Triggs was subject to intensive public attack by then prime minister Tony Abbott and Minister for Immigration Peter Dutton, on the grounds that the report was politically biased. The United Nations special *rapporteur* on the situation of human rights defenders formally urged the Abbott government to stop attacking Gillian Triggs.<sup>15</sup> The attempt to silence or discredit Ms Triggs appeared to many observers to be a transparent example of politically motivated scapegoating.

The release of some 2,000 leaked incident reports known as the Nauru Files to the *Guardian* in August 2016 spelled out the daily horror both of the sufferers and the witnesses of the suffering of others as recorded by case workers. Self-harm is a daily occurrence—detainees, including young children, cut themselves, burn themselves with cigarettes, drink laundry detergent and attempt suicide by various methods. The detainees are already survivors of persecution, trauma, torture and exile, and to past sufferings is added this confinement and uncertainty about the future. This undermines the mental health of even the most resilient. And what is made even clearer by the Nauru Files is that the mental health community education that is ongoing in Australia has had no equivalent on Nauru. Guards at the detention centre camps and other Nauru residents are frequently described as failing to take action or even laughing at the mental health crises that asylum seekers manifest.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fear of neediness**

Western self-help manuals proclaim that ‘it’s OK to be vulnerable.’ What seekers after self-improvement desire is the self-confidence to accept personal weaknesses instead of concealing perceived failings behind a mask of competence. The promised payoff is greater trust in relationships and more opportunities for success. Psychology researcher and popular motivational speaker Brené Brown affirms: ‘What makes you vulnerable makes you beautiful.’<sup>17</sup> This is in stark contrast to the vulnerability of Isaiah’s suffering servant (53:2): ‘He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and forsaken of men.’ Identification with the suffering is not about beauty but shared humanity.

The vulnerability that is a consequence of fleeing war, civil strife and persecution, afflicting some 65.3 million forcibly displaced people according to UNHCR figures as of June 2016, makes basic human needs paramount—safety from harm, safe shelter, food and medical assistance, clothing.<sup>18</sup> If we are frightened by the physical and mental vulnerability of asylum seekers, and by the enormity of their suffering, we are also anxious about their neediness. They who have nothing may have the capacity to take from what is ours. Governments can play on these fears for political advantage, as we have seen.

## Cultural resources

Among the cultural resources available to us as we seek to understand attitudes to the vulnerable in contemporary Australia, much of relevance is to be found in the novels of Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo and George Eliot, among others. Biographer of Charles Dickens, Claire Tomalin, argued in a recent interview that '[f]ood banks, the lack of state support for children's services and the attack on the health service has made the work of Charles Dickens more relevant than ever before.'<sup>19</sup>In the novelists' representation of fearful and harsh responses to the predicament of the vulnerable and needy by social and religious institutions, communities and individuals, concern about the cost burden of the needy leads to a lack of compassion motivated by self-interest. In nineteenth-century Britain, for example, it was common for unwed pregnant women seeking help to be moved on from parish to parish in order to avoid the financial responsibility of supporting the woman and her child. The shaming of women in this predicament often had more to do with economics than sexual morality. The Australian Government on the other hand continues to seek other countries to settle refugees from Manus Island and Nauru in other countries, not so much for economic reasons as to keep the scapegoats in exile.

Imprisonment is also a major theme in many nineteenth-century European novels.<sup>20</sup> Charlotte Brontë, one of many distinguished nineteenth-century writers concerned with questions of justice and personal liberty, depicts in *Jane Eyre* (1847) the abuse and neglect of orphaned, unprotected and impoverished girls at Lowood School, where an avaricious clerical manager siphons off funds from the benevolent trust while justifying the cruel school regime with a distorted theology of humility. Brontë's accessible and much-loved novel, reflecting the novelist's deep commitment to Christian belief and practice, impressed itself on my mind because of its contemporary relevance to the issues I was grappling with in asylum seeker advocacy. I have turned to *Jane Eyre* to draw out a number of insights into freedom and scapegoating.

*Jane Eyre* is also a precursor of later novels that develop the trope of the closed world as a prison in order to examine human interactions, violence and scapegoating in an isolated community without broader accountability. There is much to be learnt about immigration detention centres from Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) in which an inexperienced, unsupported and emotionally unstable governess is employed to care for young children

on an isolated rural estate owned by a wealthy absentee relative. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) has a group of schoolboys marooned on a remote island with disastrous consequences. Camus's *The Plague* (1947) examines the dynamics of a town quarantined from all outside contact due to an epidemic.

The AHRC's 'Forgotten Children' report is evidence that the institutional abuse of children as depicted by Brontë can still occur. As a child Jane Eyre receives second-class health care, if any, while her aunt and guardian declares that Jane receives the very best, bringing to mind current controversies over the quality of health care for asylum seekers on Manus Island and Nauru. Jane is constantly beaten and abused by a cruel older cousin with no restraint or intervention: the adults are in fear and denial of his behaviour and Jane is in danger of being killed by the escalating violence. This resonates with testimonies about abuse of asylum seekers in immigration detention where no action is taken and perpetrators are not brought to justice, even when a detainee is killed. Similarly, as the servants take their lead from Jane's abusive aunt who is head of the household, so guards and local staff responsible for the care of detainees take advantage of the lack of accountability in a dysfunctional system, ill-treating asylum seekers or neglecting their needs. Like Jane Eyre, some of the detainees' children have been detained for most or all their lives. There is evidence that they are physically or sexually abused by guards or other detainees at school and in the detention centre. Men, women and children are subject to random violence. There is no effective prevention. The closed communities of Manus and Nauru resemble the two closed environments of Jane Eyre's early life, her cruel aunt's home and the isolated Lowood School. Both are island prisons from which the men, women and children detained there cannot escape.

Most detainees were scapegoated in the places where they came from. Many had their lives threatened. Their decision to travel to a place where they could be both safe and free demonstrates courage and resourcefulness. The young Jane Eyre did the same and has become a fictional icon for independent women. Like Jane Eyre and her fellow students at Lowood Institution, some detainees have illnesses that are not treated. As with Lowood, some get sick because of the unhealthy location and their condition is weakened by deprivation and the poor conditions in the centre. Some become mentally ill. And, just as the young Jane once contemplated starving herself to death, some embark on hunger strikes; others harm themselves in other ways and

for some the only escape seems to be suicide. Some of those who failed in the attempt were charged and imprisoned, as suicide was a crime on Nauru until 30 May 2016.

Although fear of contagion is more than economic in the paradoxical economics of current Australian asylum seeker policy, fears of scarcity are still played upon in maintaining the policy. There has been remarkable lack of scrutiny of the expense of maintaining offshore detention centres for asylum seekers, which far exceeds the cost that would be incurred in settling those determined to be refugees.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, offshore detention makes it possible to ignore the plight of the vulnerable and needy because they are not before our eyes—it is almost impossible for any Australian to travel to either Manus Island or Nauru. Charlotte Brontë demonstrated this technique of isolation in operation when her child protagonist Jane Eyre was despatched from the home of her purported guardian to a remotely located school where she was confined in both term times and holidays. Just as Jane Eyre's character was conclusively denigrated by her adoptive family as a justification for her exile and confinement throughout her schooldays, governmental disparagement of the character and motivations of asylum seekers underpins the policy of offshore detention of 'these people.' The appalling regime at Lowood School did in fact change after an epidemic took the lives of many of the students and an inquiry was held. However, successive inquiries have had little effect on the administration of Australia's offshore detention centres. 'The appalling situation that we now face in Australia,' conclude Bradley and Minns, is that asylum seekers have become the group that the main contenders for political power have found they can afford to scapegoat.<sup>22</sup>

### **'Moral Distress': some responses**

It was a full house for the whistle-blowers' forum at the Manning Clark lecture theatre of the Australian National University on 14 August 2016. Five hundred people filled the auditorium; another 100 were outside on video link. The first speaker, paediatrician Professor David Isaacs of Westmead Hospital and Sydney University, also runs a refugee health clinic in Western Sydney. After visiting Nauru in 2014 he spoke out against Australia's policy of offshore detention. Professor Isaacs told the meeting: 'I decided to become a whistle-blower while seeing children and their parents on Nauru and realising their utter helplessness to influence their own fate ... I felt the

only ethical thing to do was expose the horror of what was being done to them in our name.<sup>23</sup>

'Moral distress' was the phrase Isaacs used to convey the responses of concerned Australians to the conditions imposed by successive governments on asylum seekers in offshore detention. This response is shared by Christians with members of other faith communities and concerned Australians of no professed belief. I would like to highlight a number of responses to this experience of moral distress.

Despite widespread acceptance, the much-promoted dangers posed by asylum-seekers to Australia as a nation are significantly disputed. Humanitarian and advocacy groups, some churches and faith communities and their representatives, one political party (the Greens), some state premiers, socialist groups of the far left and one courageous member of the current Coalition Government, Russell Broadbent, continue to speak out against the ill-treatment of asylum seekers under current Australian government refugee policy. Signs and banners have proliferated in the public square. Melbourne's Anglican Cathedral displays a prominent banner in the city centre: 'Let's Fully Welcome Refugees.' The sign outside Gosford Anglican Church, with its pro-refugee messages and its outspoken rector Rod Bowers, have become well-recognised and celebrated in advocacy circles, the more so since a service of worship was disrupted by anti-Muslim protestors. During Lent this year, banners declaring 'Refugee Lives Matter' were erected by churches, schools and other faith establishments publicising the Palm Sunday Rally that was held in central Canberra. Advocates from faith communities marched under their banners at the rally of 3,000 people. Speakers at rallies throughout Australia advocating a more humane asylum seeker policy have included ordained people, bishops, canons, moderators, priests, pastors, rabbis and many lay people.

The Uniting, Lutheran and Catholic churches have published guides on refugee and asylum seeker issues that emphasise Christian teaching about welcoming the stranger.<sup>24</sup> The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce (ACRT) works intensively to 'promote a shared Christian vision of compassion and hospitality for asylum seekers and refugees.'<sup>25</sup> Most recently the ACRT coordinated a church-wide movement to offer sanctuary to asylum seekers in Australia who were under threat of being deported to Manus Island or Nauru. This received widespread media coverage. The Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C) has hosted many events focusing on

asylum seekers, including 'Refugees—What would Jesus do?'; liturgies for Refugee Week and an exhibition of art by refugee artists.

Individuals have also undertaken heroic actions. Brigidine Sister Jane Keogh, in her early 70s, completed a solo Advent vigil in 2015 on the lawns of Parliament House to advocate for humane treatment of asylum seekers. Sister Jane remained in the parliamentary triangle every day from 29 November until Christmas, in all weathers, with a folding chair, a small tent displaying a 'Welcome Asylum Seekers banner' and a place to sleep hosted by the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. Like the hermits of the early church, Sister Jane received many visitors during her vigil, with whom she shared her concerns.

Other courageous individuals include twenty-two year-old university student Jasmine Pilbrow, who protested the transfer and deportation of a Tamil asylum seeker to Sri Lanka on board a Qantas flight. She has been banned from the airline and in September 2016 was found guilty of interfering with an airline crew member for refusing to sit down during her protest. Melbourne Baptist pastor and former refugee Tri Nguyen walked from Melbourne to Canberra towing a model of the wooden boat that brought him to Australia, highlighting the welcome and hospitality that was offered to refugees earlier in his lifetime. Retired judge Jim Macken, at the age of 88, offered to do a 'body swap' with a refugee on Manus and Nauru so that he might live out his last years in their place.

### **Faith-based refugee action**

Significant collaborations are also taking place between secular advocacy groups and faith communities, as well as between Christians of widely differing traditions and theological positions. The Faith-Based Working Group within the secular Canberra Refugee Action Committee (RAC) is one example. Faith-based participants, including Catholics, Anglicans, Uniting Church, Lutherans, Quakers, Baptists and representatives of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu communities, both support and promote the advocacy and public education activities of the RAC. They coordinate rallies and vigils, provide speakers for public actions and churches, hold services in Refugee Week and make representations to members of parliament on asylum seeker issues.

## **Love Makes A Way**

I shall conclude with a remarkable story from Refugee Week, 2015. On a weekday morning some forty or so Christians of varying ages and denominations, all of whom were affiliated with the asylum seeker advocacy group Love Makes A Way (LMAW), quietly entered Parliament House in Canberra. They passed through security and into the marble foyer with its forest of blue-green pillars and two great stairways. Moving slowly into the centre, they clustered together in a tight spiral and began to sing, so beautifully that for a while the security staff seemed not to realise that this was not a scheduled event but a protest. Paraphrasing the well-known African-American spiritual, 'Where you there when they crucified my Lord?', their words echoed through the foyer: 'Where you there when they locked the kids away?'

Moving outwards to form a circle, they sat down on the cold marble floor, held hands and, with eyes closed, prayed silently. Some had removed their jumpers to reveal T-shirts proclaiming 'Kids don't belong in detention.' Among the group were a retired Catholic bishop, a Uniting Church minister in her 80s, a young couple with a baby, students, lay people, ordained people, two nuns in their 70s and some experienced leaders of the LMAW movement. All participants had undertaken training in non-violent civil disobedience.

Visitors to Parliament House, school groups with their teachers and Australian and international tourists watched with fascination while security staff and then Federal police observed the group and consulted with each other and with the LMAW media liaison officer. Meanwhile another LMAW member was filming the protest and relaying it to a colleague to post on social media. This group is media savvy and so a video of the Parliament House action is up on the LMAW website. The protest was trending for several hours and featured on ABC News 24, although major evening media coverage was scanty.

After 23 minutes security staff moved in and removed the protesters one by one, gently but firmly raising each person to a standing position and escorting them out of the building. The young family were left until last and treated with care. Some of the older protesters remarked afterwards that it was a great help to be assisted up from the floor.

I was watching the events unfold from the first-floor gallery, standing beside a short woman of professional appearance and a tall young man in a high-vis vest. As an elderly protester below was slowly raised to her feet,

I found myself in tears. The young man and his employer, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, were most concerned, asked me if they could help and offered me a cup of tea. Most embarrassed, I sobbed, 'but some of them are so old'. 'And so brave', murmured the senator.

Outside in the forecourt the protesters continued, kneeling on the mosaic parterre while the retired bishop read 1 Corinthians 13. No one came to remove them. It was cold, windy and raining. As I had chauffeur-ing duties for the group, I headed to my parked car and, looking back, saw them all gathered for a group photo before departing. None of them had been arrested—this time.

This was neither the first nor the last public action of LMAW calling for compassion towards asylum seeker from successive Australian governments. LMAW actions generally involve small groups of Christians from diverse backgrounds undertaking a peaceful occupation of the waiting rooms of the offices of Federal Government ministers and other Federal members. The first action was at the office of the then Minister for Immigration Scott Morrison in March 2014. A second action in Perth soon followed, with Christian clergy participating. By the end of 2014 the LMAW had organised 22 nonviolent civil disobedience actions throughout Australia. To date 31 actions have taken place in offices such as those of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Minister for Immigration Peter Dutton, Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop and Malcolm Turnbull both as minister and Prime Minister. 170 Christian leaders have been arrested. A recent action took place in Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's electoral office on 29 August 2016. Six Christian priests and pastors and a Catholic nun from Saint Mary Mackillop's Josephite order (Sister Susan Connelly) began praying for the closure of offshore detention centres in the wake of the leaked 'Nauru Files'.<sup>26</sup>

At each action the group submitted a request to the parliamentarian concerned, asking for the person in whose office they were waiting to speak to them about a timetable for the release of asylum-seekers—in particular the children—from immigration detention. When, as was usually the case, the parliamentarian did not appear, they remained in the waiting room praying and singing until the police were called to eject them. The group would then allow themselves to be escorted without resistance from the building.

What happened next varied according to the jurisdiction. Some were taken to the watch house, interviewed and released. Others were charged with trespass. The Anglican dean of Bendigo Cathedral and his group were

led away in handcuffs. One group in Perth, including female members of the clergy, was strip-searched, apparently under suspicion of concealing weapons. In the courts some were fined, while others were released without conviction and praised for their courage. Participation in a LMAW action is not undertaken lightly. For law-abiding Christians the possibility or actual experience of being arrested is traumatic. Participants in the loose coalition of concerned Christians that is LMAW make themselves dangerously vulnerable in advocating for the victims of Australia's harsh asylum seeker policy.

### **Girard's stereotypes of persecution**

René Girard identifies a number of 'stereotypes of persecution' based on cumulative evidence of how scapegoats are selected. It is useful to examine how these might apply to asylum seekers. Girard's indicators include physical vulnerability, social marginality and extreme youth. All asylum seekers are physically vulnerable to the threat of death from violence, accident, illness or lack of food, largely because they have lost any protective community or material resources. Some are victims of torture. Many asylum seekers are children or teenagers. Some are 'unaccompanied minors.' Some have parents who are mentally or physically ill as a result of what they have endured. Some are orphaned. Adults and children have lost any supportive community or extended family they once had. They have no financial resources, no home and sometimes no identity papers. They are culturally dislocated. Even when the rule of law applies to them, it may not be enforced. They have no access to the benefits of citizenship. As Girard theorises, a victim may be any 'individual who has difficulty adapting ... an orphan, an only son, someone who is penniless, or even simply the latest arrival.'<sup>27</sup> A victim may be anyone.

In Australian offshore detention, asylum seekers are called by number and not by name. But the imprisoned people who are still in reasonable physical and mental health know that their incarceration is unjust and that they are innocent of any crime, because to seek asylum is not a crime.

So where can people of faith and others with humanitarian concerns turn to find hope, comfort and example? Churches are often divided. Most local MPs toe the party line. Two Australian writers have offered encouragement by speaking out. Novelist and Christian Tim Winton spoke out at the Palm Sunday Walk for Justice for Refugees in Perth in 2015. He reminded his listeners: 'Jesus said: "What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world only to lose his soul?"' Winton then asked: 'What does it profit a people to

do likewise, to shun the weak and punish the oppressed, to cage children and make criminals of refugees?' These are truly dangerous ideas. Winton urges: 'Turn back my country ... truly we are better than this.'<sup>28</sup> At the Melbourne Writers Festival in 2016, novelist Richard Flanagan chose to read true stories from the Nauru Files in lieu of discussing famous writers. Flanagan said:

I suspect they will continue to be read in coming decades and even centuries when the works of myself and my colleagues are long forgotten. And when people read these stories, so admirable in their brevity, so controlled in their emotion, so artful in their artlessness—their use, for example, of the term NAME REDACTED instead of a character's actual name to better show what is happening to a stranger is not an individual act but a universal crime—then, I suspect, their minds will be filled with so many questions about what sort of people Australians of our time were.<sup>29</sup>

We also have the example of Pope Francis, who demonstrates loving and practical concern for asylum seekers and refugees. As Andrew Hamilton writes in *Eureka Street*, Pope Francis 'divests himself of the trappings of strength and goes about as an undefended human being.'<sup>30</sup> In other words, Francis makes himself truly vulnerable, yet communicates prophetically in words, actions and religious observance to the wealthy and powerful.

There are many prophetic voices such as novelists of today and earlier times, Pope Francis, the anonymous writers of the Nauru Files, the persistent advocates, the brave individuals. They may be found in places of worship and outside them. In turning to our sacred scriptures, let us listen to the prophetic voices recorded there, urging us to seek solidarity with the victims of war and persecution. And let us expose the dangerous idea that refugees and asylum seekers are a danger and a threat. They are people, just like us.

## Endnotes

1. Tom McLroy, '“Asylum seekers have self-immolated to get to Australia”: Peter Dutton', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/>

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