

Protagonist Corner

Resident Aliens—Of the First Kind

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Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon have made vivid the image of resident aliens as a primary metaphor for thinking about the Christian community's presence in contemporary North American culture. In doing so, they have captured in an imaginative and energizing way the New Testament's summons to the church to resist ultimate accommodation to a culture which would seduce Christians into an illusion. It is the illusion that our culture is a consistently reliable, safe place for a community centered in a purposively compassionate God and committed to the radical love of neighbor.

Their reclamation of the "resident alien" image also invites a fresh contemplation of the remarkably rich way in which that imagery echoes through texts in the Old and New Testaments. Such contemplation reveals almost immediately that its primal deployment in the Bible is not metaphorical-imaginative, but literal-descriptive. Throughout the Pentateuch one finds the repeated appeal for the inclusion of the "stranger-sojourner" or "resident alien" in the blessings and responsibilities of the community's life. Such a one in the midst of the community "shall be . . . as the citizen among you" (Lev. 19:34). The stranger is included in the polity of the community with its protections and responsibilities: "You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen" (Lev. 24:22). And what is true in the realm of general community relations is also true in terms of the community's worship and ritual: "Any alien residing among you who wishes to keep the passover to the Lord shall do so according to the statute of the passover and according to its regulation; you shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native" (Num. 9:14).

Moreover, in both the outworking of criminal justice and the definition of communal days of rejoicing, the resident alien is included. Whether in the distress of fleeing to a city of refuge (cf. Num. 35:15) or in the joy of festival (cf. Deut. 16:14), it is not only Israelites with their sons and daughters—but also the resident aliens and sojourning strangers—who are embraced by a social system which seeks rightly to regard the neighbor. In addition, the economy is expected to serve not only its "fully productive" members, but also to serve any whose circumstances do not allow them such luxury. Among these, along with Levites, orphans, and widows, are the ever-present resident aliens. Therefore the fields are not fully harvested but left for the needs of these members of the community (cf. Lev. 23:33); and a tithe of all produce in the third year is made available to them (cf. Deut. 26:12).

It is arguable that this is the persistent line of tradition that Paul uses to cap his list of evidences of Christian transformation: "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom. 12:13). In the concrete and personal sense, concern for the stranger in the midst of the community, for the resident alien, is a clear focus of the community-forming impulses of the people of God. Yet if that is the case, what are we to make of the deafening silence in the church as the United States enacted in the spring (and began to implement in the fall) of 1997 major changes to its immigration laws?

Unless we happen to have personal contacts with individuals affected by the sweeping changes, it is unlikely we even took notice of the legislation until a few news articles began highlighting it as the time for enforcement drew near. Even then, we likely have had our consciousness dominated by a television sound bite or two emphasizing the need for the U.S. to “control its borders.”

The burdens which the new immigration law appears to lay on resident aliens in this country are heavy indeed. Some who have legally been allowed to live in the U.S. for years, establishing families and means of livelihood, are required to leave both family and livelihood indefinitely as they return to countries of origin, awaiting decisions about permanent immigration. Others who have endured significant hardships to make their way to the U.S. simply because life cannot be sustained in their homelands find that they may indeed be persons without countries. The causes for this turmoil are certainly many-faceted, and the prospects for resolution are not easily conceived, much less implemented. But the startling recognition required of the church—of churches—is to admit how steadfastly we have pretended that it is “not our problem.”

Yet the persistent tradition of the biblical texts gives the lie to such an approach. Regard for the resident alien is writ large on the community consciousness of Israel and embedded in the Christian sense of transforming communal practices. That we have so easily overlooked the connection between core features of the redemptive story bequeathed to us and the recent immigration act suggests that we have lost touch with the motives for concern with the resident alien. They are several-fold:

1) The concern is motivated by divine utterance of a divine intention. Leviticus appends to the summons to concern for the stranger the qualification “...for I am the Lord your God” (23:22 and 24:22); and Deuteronomy describes the majesty of God in terms of the One “who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (10:18).

2) The concern is motivated by a sense of sharing in the substantive experience of resident aliens. Deuteronomy’s summons to “love the stranger” is grounded in the elemental fact that “you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (10:19). Whether in the oppression of Egyptian bondage or in the disestablishment of Babylonian exile, the social and communal status of resident alien was part of the collective, wounded memory which opened God’s people to such persons in its midst. Moreover, the psalms embody cries of a theological de-centering and disestablishment which adds spiritual to temporal pain accruing from such alien status. (cf. Psalms 39:12 and 119:19) And Ephesians adds a New Testament voice which expresses the pain of being a stranger apart from God’s embrace of us in Christ: “...remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

3) The concern is motivated by the promise of God’s presence within and for the community that embraces the resident alien. Jeremiah makes the prophetic affirmation this way: “...if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow ... then I will dwell with you in this place...” (7:6-7). Malachi utters the prophetic negation in counterpoint: “Then I will draw near to you for judgment ... against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts” (3:5). And Matthew combines both the affirmation and the negation in the dual claims that in welcoming/rejecting the stranger God’s people welcome/reject God present and dwelling with

them (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). Hebrew echoes the whole with its encouragement for hospitality to strangers “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2).

Careful readers of all these texts will rightly insist that they have *more* than only resident aliens in their purview. But the present concern is that they *do* have resident aliens in their purview, while we in the church rarely do. Why is it that we can allow a society to debate and decide the fate of resident aliens among us with so few Christian voices reminding us of the plain sense of our sacred texts in the matter? How can they be so obviously ignored by Christians in Sunday sermons, Bible studies, ethical deliberations, and public discussions? The review of scripture’s delineation of motives for embracing the stranger suggests the painful possibilities: a loss of contact with a God who speaks faithfully the divine intention; remoteness from any sense of social or spiritual exile which enables us to “suffer with” the alien; and a diminished sense of need to find ourselves in the presence of a God who dwells with and for us. In sum, the ease with which we overlook passage of immigration laws among us suggests that it is very difficult to imagine ourselves as “resident aliens” and very easy to forget where home really is.