Integral migration policy in ‘Fort Europe’: hospitality as a quest for shalom in Danish context

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This paper explores the challenge that migration poses to Europe, the rhetoric response among Danish politicians and civilians, and how a Danish church reflects upon meeting ‘the stranger’. Subsequently, these matters are discussed through theological reflections on Christian hospitality towards migrants, including refugees. It is argued that hospitality should be an integrated part of integral mission seeking shalom in the current Danish context.

Introduction

The challenges and consequences of migration into Europe are colossal. News and pictures of large numbers of people crossing the Mediterranean are touching, and call for a response. As representatives of the Danish Christian community, we respect politicians who have to make difficult decisions in this area. However, we are also concerned that current policies in Europe and Denmark are primarily designed to prevent migrants, including refugees, from entering our territory, rather than to utilize our social and economic resources to help people in urgent need. Thus, it is time for the church to step up and become engaged in the situation— in being, word, and deed.

Current Crisis of Migration in Europe

According to the 2014 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report, more than 219,000 illegal migrants crossed the Mediterranean last year. Half of these originated from West African countries, and the other half from Syria and Eritrea. The number is three times higher than in 2011, when the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ was at its highest. In 2014 approximately 3,500 men, women and children lost their lives in the attempt.

The grand total for the period 1993-2014 is at least 22,394 persons who died in their attempts to reach Europe. The European network UNITED for Intercultural Action announced this shocking figure on World Refugee Day.
on 20 June, and the number is accompanied by a detailed list of names and circumstances of their deaths. According to UNITED, this list of deaths can be attributed to the politics of migration in Europe.

The global refugee situation is alarming: the figure of 23,400 people becoming refugees each day in 2012, grew to 42,500 in 2014. Following this global explosion in refugees, the number of illegal migrants crossing the Mediterranean has risen dramatically, in the last three years, from 23,079 in 2012 to almost ten times as many, - 219,000 - in 2014. Conflicts are key to understanding the increase (Syria, Eritrea), but climatic changes and demographic pressures are also part of the explanation (Western Africa).

There is little hope that European politicians will be able to agree on an overall strategy for migration. In June 2015, the European Union Commission suggested that member countries receive 20,000 extra refugees annually, and that the 40,000 asylum seekers currently in Italy and Greece be redistributed among the European countries. This is unlikely to happen due to national politics in member countries: South European member countries are asking for help, but eastern European member countries are outright opposed, and northern European countries are reluctant to agree. The result is that while the current politics are dysfunctional, member states have blocked any real solution to the problems. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of desperate people continue in their attempt to reach Europe.

**Political response to migration in Denmark**

In 2014, a total of 638,000 Danes were migrants or first generation descendants of migrants, which is equal to 11% of the total population of 5,650,000 persons. In the same period 10,110 persons applied for asylum, 8,500 were accepted for asylum, 17,000 allowed work permits and 7,370 granted study permits.

Since summer 2014, there has been an intense debate involving the Social Democratic Party Socialdemokraterne and the centre-right Liberal Party Venstre concerning migration, and the debate has occasionally almost turned into a contest of which party would come up with the toughest policy towards migrants. From the side of the politicians, the hope has been to discourage potential migrants to Denmark. In contrast to what might be expected, voters have not been convinced by the rhetoric of Socialdemokraterne and Venstre,
but have continued and in fact increased their support of the nationalist, populist party Dansk Folkeparti, Danish People’s Party.

In the recent national elections in Denmark (18 June 2015), Dansk Folkeparti confirmed their stronghold among Danish voters with 21.1% of the votes, rising to become the largest party in the ‘blue’ block that is, among conservative and liberal parties - and the second largest party in the Danish parliament. These developments, in a small country at the Northern brink of the world, may not seem important. But we find that they are significant, as they can be read as harbingers of the situation in the Nordic region more generally, including Sweden, Norway and Finland.

Dansk Folkeparti has campaigned on three issues for the last two decades: anti-Muslim propaganda, a wider nationalist, anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric, and an anti-EU stance. They have projected themselves as the party defending the interests of elderly and economically marginalized people, securing welfare for this group. After the recent elections, the party has become key in forming a new government, nominating the leader of Venstre as Prime Minister.

When discussing rhetoric on migration and Danish politics, it is worth noting that Socialdemokraterne was the actual winner of the elections. With 26.3% of the votes, they cemented their position as the main party in Danish politics. On the face of it, Dansk Folkeparti and Socialdemokraterne might look like opposites: A populist, xenophobic party versus a traditional Nordic social democratic welfare party. However, if judged by the recent rhetoric, the two parties are not opposed to each other at all. They both played the xenophobic card in the election campaign. Socialdemokraterne pointed out that Eastern Europeans and ‘social dumping’ at workplaces, with contractors paying non-Danish employees less than the national Danish agreement, were a major problem, and Dansk Folkeparti pointed fingers at Arabs, Muslims and gypsies – people with skin colors other than white. What is more, both parties are intimately connected with the welfare state. That is, both parties conceive themselves to be defenders of the welfare state, and are operating according to the logic of that state.

What, then, are the similarities and differences between the two parties? As mentioned, they are both are closely connected with the logics and worldview of the (in)famous Scandinavian welfare state. Socialdemokraterne have been the 20th century architects of the welfare state in Denmark, organizing the
labors’ response to capitalism, demanding medical cover, education, unemployment benefits, etc. Historically speaking, the welfare state is thus a product of a particular form of capitalist society, modified by socialist ideas. Along the same line, Dansk Folkeparti promises to care for those disadvantaged by EU policies, which bring in cheap labour from other EU countries, and to ensure that even if workers lose their employment they can continue to be consumers. Now the welfare state can function only if there is strict control of who is eligible for benefits, and a high level of trust in public governance. The boundaries must always be clear and known: who is ‘us’ and who is ‘not-us’, but ‘foreign’. This is the xenophobic trait at the root of the welfare state, and therefore migration has become a key discussion point in the recent Danish election campaign.

This brings us to the final point in our discussion of current Danish politics on migration: The Scandinavian welfare state was initially conceived to be operating in nation-states. Naturally, the vast majority of the world’s population lived outside of these nation-states, and, thus, were not eligible for its benefits. The current situation with increased migration has therefore led to accusations that new immigrants are coming to feast on what is left of the Danish welfare state—an argument actually put forward by the Venstre leader, now Prime Minister! As a result, the Danish welfare state actually encourages xenophobia and racism, in a situation of global migration crises. Even more pointedly, support of the welfare state and xenophobic rhetoric have become one and the same agenda!

Reflections from a responding church

How should churches respond to the migration crisis in this political climate, where support of the welfare state and xenophobia has combined? We interviewed the parish pastor of a local congregation in Copenhagen, Denmark.

The church in case is Apostelkirken, the ‘Apostles’ Church,’ part of the Danish national church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. The church is located in Vesterbro, Copenhagen. The area is characterized by a mix of ethnic shops, hotels, cheap restaurants, expensive cocktail bars and sex shops, and its population of migrants, students, and young families are visible in the streets and parks. There is a lively congregation in the church, and in the course of the last ten years, a large group of Farsi-speaking peoples
from Iran and Afghanistan (some 50 persons) has joined the congregation. The result is an intentionally multi-ethnic congregation with ethnic Danish, Iranian and Afghan members, now numbering some 150 persons. There is a clear awareness within the congregation that gathers for prayer, sermons, catechism, and celebration of mass, that translation between Danish, English and Farsi is crucial. Members of the congregation have been involved in forming a liturgy that manifests and celebrates diversity and engages everyone.

In our interview with the church’s pastor, Niels Nymann Eriksen, he explains the theological thinking behind the congregational life by means of the story of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16). “We do not readily know the situation pictured in the story in our welfare state,” he says. “We do not see the poor Lazarus lying outside the gate of the rich man’s house. That is not because the division between the poor and the rich does not exist. Rather, the gate is located somewhere else.” Eriksen argues: “The barbed wire border fences are our ‘walls’ and the passport controls of Europe our ‘gates.’” A main point in the biblical story, according to Eriksen, is that the walls first protect the rich man’s luxurious life, but ultimately turn out to be a barrier which hinders him from reaching his brothers.

Now, what should the rich man in the biblical story have done? And how can this inspire our own action in a situation where the poor are lying at our gates? According to Eriksen, the biblical story is critical towards the rich man, not because he is rich but because he is passing Lazarus daily and actively ignoring his needs. He distances himself from Lazarus by walls, and distance fosters cynicism. The rich man could have encountered Lazarus actively, Eriksen argues. “His active encounter would have altered his cynicism, because proximity fosters empathy and understanding. The sin, which the rich man committed, was the sin of not being attentive of one’s neighbour.” What Eriksen advocates—for the rich man as well as for us who encounter migrants—is thus not a specific act but ‘attentive presence.’

Continuing this line of thinking, Eriksen argues that philoxenia (gr. Φιλοξενία, cf. Rom 12:13; Hebr. 13:2), the opposite of xenophobia, is the theological keyword for understanding and framing the practice found in Apostelkirken. “Without love, without devotion, no real understanding of the stranger is possible. At the same time and just as important, philoxenia becomes the litmus test on one’s view of the human: Is human dignity really
fundamental, independent of one's ability to contribute and to be an economic asset?"

"The biblical theme of philoxenia is continued in the mystical way that Jesus meets us as a stranger: Abraham met the Lord near the great trees of Mamre. Lot met the angels of the Lord in Sodom. Mary met Jesus after his resurrection, thinking he was attending the garden. The two men walking to Emmaus joined company with Jesus, not recognizing him until he broke the bread in their homes. Abraham, Lot, Mary and the two men open themselves up to the stranger and thereby encounter the Lord."

"Whereas the common human disposition is to love once you know, the opposite point is made in the Biblical scriptures: God loves and encounters us as strangers. From a human perspective, love of the stranger is a love of what you do not know. The strangers’ strangeness is not a characteristic, but a lack of characteristics; therefore, strangeness is synonymous with what is not known. Opening oneself up to the stranger is to open oneself up to what is the only commonality between oneself and the stranger, that is, a common humanity. Opening oneself up to the stranger is therefore to open oneself to shalom in the concrete and historical context of ours,” Eriksen concludes—drawing on his experiences with Apostelkirken being attentively present among immigrants in Copenhagen.

Migration and hospitality

In light of the preceding findings, we will argue in the rest of this paper, that the Christian tradition of hospitality embodies the kind of attentively present philoxenia, advised by Pastor Eriksen advises. Accordingly, hospitality should be an integrated part of Christian mission seeking shalom in the current Danish context. The argument will be based on Luke Bretherton’s deliberations on the issue of Christians’ response to refugees, and Christine D. Pohl’s explorations in hospitality and migration, among other themes.

The church must ‘contradict’ sectarian democracy

In his inspiring book Christianity & Contemporary Politics, Luke Bretherton, professor at Duke University, US, discusses the issue of refugees and how Christians should respond.
According to Bretherton, it is the political basis of their placelessness that defines somebody as a refugee. Thus, “the primary need of a refugee is political: it is for an arena of law and order.” However, from here it does not follow logically that any nation-state has a duty to care for this need. The claims of the existing citizens must be held up against the claims of the refugees. Bretherton finds an answer to this dilemma in a teleology, which he terms ‘Christian cosmopolitanism.’ In a Christian cosmopolitanism the good of a particular community is directed towards the good of humanity, which is directed towards God. Hence, “the telos of humanity... is a movement, via differentiation and development through history, to an eschatological fulfillment of creation.” Where there is no such eschatological telos, false forms of differentiation appear, as for example in nationalism. This is an intrinsic aspect of democracy discriminating in favor of its own demos, its own people. “Yet,” Bretherton asserts, “on a conception of the polity within the Christian tradition, there should be no necessary incompatibility between welcoming refugees and pursuit of the common life of the polity.”

This does not entail that there should be no borders or limitations:

The just political judgment to be made in relation to refugees is at what point the inclusion of more refugees threatens to destabilize any given area of law and order and not, as so many other responses to refugees suppose, the point at which either territorial integrity, ethnic or cultural homogeneity, or economics is threatened.

These latter factors are not without importance, yet they should neither be primary nor determinative. But, is that not to make law and order an end in itself, Bretherton asks? No, it is just to point out that it would be wrong not to exclude those who will destroy what refugees come to receive: law and order and a just polity.

As the need of the refugee is primarily political, the response cannot be confined to humanitarian work, as is the case with the UNCHR. Consequently, churches must also address the political level. Given the universal scope of the telos of the mission of God, and the catholicity of the church, churches are able to contradict the ‘sectarian logic of democracy.’ Thus, churches can formulate and embody a ‘contradiction’ to injustice. Bretherton here employs Saul Alinsky’s concept of ‘contradiction’ and his path-breaking ideas of ‘broad-based community organizing.’ According to Alinsky, “political actions... are simultaneously to declare the unjust way to
be untrue and to present a possible alternative through which all may flourish.” Thus, the church must both present a socially-embodied alternative to that of society’s unjust and ‘sectarian’ policies concerning refugees, and also publicly declare this position.

Bretherton contributes a most helpful analysis of the refugee situation and the churches’ possibility to respond through ‘contradiction’. We will now point to Christian hospitality as a way of life embodying such contradiction in relation to immigrants in general.

**Strangers welcoming strangers**

Christine D. Pohl, professor of Christian Social Ethics, Asbury Theological Seminary, US has written extensively on hospitality and applied it in relation to migration, including refugees. She says,

Current conditions of large-scale migration and globalization combined with heightened ethnic violence, desperate refugee flows, and a growing awareness of the limits of tolerance as a cultural and political response to difference invite a closer look at the practice of hospitality.

Pohl acknowledges the fear that might discourage even Christians from a welcome to migrants that seems to threaten rather than enhance our welfare. However, the Christian tradition has insisted that hospitality should first and foremost be extended to those most in need, regardless of their ability to pay back or contribute to their host community. It will take a church that dares to form an alternative culture to sustain this posture:

We will not be able to resist [the] instrumental valuing of people if we do not maintain some distance from the world and its institutions of status and power. Without some sense of our own alien identity and our connections to God’s kingdom, we will find it difficult to see people from God’s perspective and to offer generous welcome without concern for seeking advantage.

Two motifs in the Scripture support this approach: First, the people of God experience, continuously, the status of foreigners and exiles in the world. Second, they cultivate hospitality as a way of life, and thus become strangers welcoming strangers. In the early church, this hospitable way of life was expected of every Christian and every local church, as part of their identity and as an inevitable consequence of themselves being welcomed graciously by God.
Christian hospitality is always conducted from a defined place. Pohl considers the complex dynamic between inclusion and identity:

Life-giving communities are not completely open spaces... we also need to cultivate a distinct identity. We do not welcome people into neutral space... We welcome them into a story and a community with its expectations and demands.27

This is what sets Christian hospitality apart, offering something like a home or community, and not just a ‘hotel’ or ‘train station’. Yet, “there is an ever-present tension between maintaining a distinctive identity and welcoming strangers.”28 In parallel with Bretherton’s criteria for exclusion mentioned above, Pohl finds that in the Old Testament “the different responses to strangers seem to have been tied to whether or not they could threaten Israel’s covenantal responsibilities, identity, and unity.”29 Foreigners could only be included in the people of God if they did not threaten its loyalty to God. Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche communities, considers the same issue, stating that

the question for every person and community is how to remain rooted in the soil of one’s faith and one’s identity, in one’s own community, and at the same time to grow and give life to others, and to receive life from them.30

To be able to open up like that, we need an experience of the love of God and a sense of what unites all human beings.

Conversely, “communities are transformed by the people they welcome;” therefore, according to Pohl, hospitality “presses... communities outward.”31 Thus, parallel to Alinsky, Pohl stresses the necessary relation between embodiment of hospitality, and public engagement and proclamation of the gospel.32 From the OT and the early Christian tradition she concludes that “hospitality combined with attention to structural issues can help to shape a response to strangers that is adequate to the need.”33 Showing hospitality without addressing the structural and political level, on the contrary, may perpetuate injustice. Erin K. Wilson, director for the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain at Groningen University, Netherlands, stresses the same point. Refugees, the most vulnerable people of all, are victims of a “significant power imbalance... between the rights of the state and the right of the individual.”34 Therefore,

faithful hospitality not only includes welcome and provision of basic needs but also incorporates intervention in the form of protection and pursuit of
justice on behalf of the stranger or other who is the recipient of the hospitality.35

Fortunately, the faithful hospitality of Christianity and the other monotheistic religions has always included a commitment to seek justice. Therefore, the tradition of hospitality is a most helpful resource in responding to the plight of refugees today, according to Wilson.36

Finally, hospitality must never become a program or a strategy in mission. Rather we must share ourselves through the way we live, and inspire our families, churches, and mission organizations. Pohl says: “hospitality is not a means to an end; it is a way of life infused by the gospel.”37 Nonetheless, hospitality reconnects church and mission in a fully holistic or integrated way. However, we must add that this requires an enduring transformational process in committed Christian communities.

Our worldviews and character must be transformed
To be able to seek for shalom in relation to migration, churches must both form an alternative policy inside the congregations, and speak out publicly to the world. Forming an alternative policy will require restoring something like the ancient ‘household’, the extended family. In Protestant Christian tradition, one could think of the attempts of Bonhoeffer in Finkenwald as expressed in Life Together, or Vanier’s vulnerable L’Arche communities; that is, a relational way of life fast disappearing in Western culture.

The American Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas and several others have pointed to virtue ethics and the need for formative communities in the church.38 It is transformation in the church in the context of mission, that will direct Christians outwards towards improvements in society, as Andreas Østerlund Nielsen has argued elsewhere.39 Lee Roy Martin, from South Africa, says,

The practice of hospitality within a multi-faith context requires a transformation in our thinking about the Other. In fact, we must go deeper than our thinking; we need a transformation of our precognitive disposition, so that we are no longer suspicious of those who are different from us.40

Our thinking (our worldview) needs to be transformed from a national, democratic sectarianism to a universal, yet differentiated, vision of God’s creation and God’s mission. As local congregations we are part of the church universal. Christians from all over the world are our brothers and sisters.
Furthermore, all people are our fellow-humans created in the image of God, for whom we share responsibility, as they do for us.\(^{41}\)

Our precognitive disposition (our character) needs to be transformed from protectiveness and fear into hospitality. Pohl names it a “radical, costly reorientation of our lives.”\(^{42}\) Only God’s all-encompassing love welcoming us to be in Christ can transform us thus by the Spirit. In the parables of Jesus, God is revealed as the generous host that welcomes the stranger, the least and even his enemy to the great feast. Hence, our hospitality is an implication of us being received as strangers by God, who’s character is philoxenia (Eph 2,19; Col 1,21-22).

**We must receive those who reject the migrants**

Returning to the Danish context, following the recent elections, what should concern the church is not only the populist, nationalist politicians and the immediate threat they pose to refugees and asylum-seekers. What should concern the church also is all those who chose to vote out of nationalist concerns. We must consider: Who are they, and what made them choose to do so? As initially suggested, many may have done so, not out of calculated selfishness, but out of xenophobia: from fear of an unpredictable future, of what is foreign and unknown, of crime and terror; fear of the opaque European Union, and of the collapse of the Danish welfare-system. It seems that many Danish people feel vulnerable when confronted with forces of political, economic, and religious globalization. This may be due to the lack of a telos that will direct them towards an eschatological hope for a differentiated, yet united humanity. The tendency to close in on oneself out of fear is described movingly by Vanier:

The danger for individuals, groups, communities and nations is to close themselves off. This happens to the little child when it feels it is not wanted or loved. Its vulnerable heart is wounded... Families, communities and nations may experience this same process of closing up behind barriers and frontiers of self-protection... There is such a fear of difference, such a fear of losing one's identity.\(^{43}\)

The attempt to further one’s own interests at the foreigner’s expense, may not arise out of surplus, but out of anxiety. Thus it is indeed irrational if more well-off, well-educated, socially secure Christians look down upon those who express xenophobia. In the end, it will not serve the immigrants, nor the
mission of God, if the church seeks to join the political power-play on behalf of the migrants, in order to further its political agenda of a more welcoming foreign policy. The case of the migrants cannot be won by defeating those Danes who voted based on their anxiety. Rather, it can only be won by engaging those who would try to fence off Denmark from the wider world to protect themselves, and by receiving the migrants in order to heal their hearts— and ours.

The church’s response to the current migrant situation, however, is complicated by the fact that Danish nationalism makes use of the strong Danish national Christianity and the Lutheran Danish national church, called ‘the Peoples Church’, that still counts more than 75% of the population as its members. The government formed after the recent elections has declared in their government platform: “Denmark is a Christian country.” Thus, ‘national Christianity’ is stressed as part of being Danish and as an integral part of a Denmark that the politicians pledge to protect against Muslim immigrants. A strong heritage of misusing Luther’s so-called ‘doctrine of the two kingdoms’ to separate religion from politics, obviously does not prevent the current rhetoric among politicians, yet it discourages the People’s Church from taking action. Furthermore, as a national church, regulated by the state, with certain legal and political privileges— though without any real political power— the People’s Church seems inhibited from forming an alternative polity within itself, as well as publicly countering unjust political legislation and policies.

However, local congregations, for example Apostelkirken, take action on a local level and, to a lesser degree, on a public level as well. Such engagement must insist on welcoming and loving all kinds of strangers: migrants, including refugees from far away, the voters for Dansk Folkeparti, as well as those of us who feel alienated at times by our own defensiveness, selfishness and fear. This implies seeking to reconcile the seemingly conflicting plights and interests of people foreign to each other and to ourselves. Ultimately, we know of no better way to do this than by inviting all people to be reconciled with their fellow human beings in God and Christ (Eph. 2, 11-22). To do this, we need to form committed communities - a life together. We need to be formed and transformed by God’s story and God’s love towards the holistic and universal telos of the Mission of God, God’s final shalom.
Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the Danish political reactions to the migration situation in Europe. We have presented reflections from a church forming a policy of philoxenia as an intentional alternative to the spreading hostility towards immigrants. We have argued that such an attentive presence can be realized through Christian hospitality as a fitting response to God’s gracious welcome and to the plights of both immigrants and ethnic Danes marked by xenophobia and lack of telos. However, this requires that local congregations be willing and able to form committed and transforming communities, a “life together” in Christ.

1 As the focus of this paper is the issue of how to respond to the stranger and the strangers needs, we do not apply a definite definition of, or a sharp distinction between, the notions of “refugees” and other “migrants” (of which refugees is seen as a subgroup).


8 The reason that they are not continuing as ruling party is that their various allied parties did not get enough votes to form a majority ‘red’ block.

33 Pohl, Responding to Strangers: Insights from the Christian Tradition, 101. Pohl finds reason to state that hospitality will not meet all of the refugees’ and asylum seekers’ needs, yet “is a crucial component of any response;” thus she here seems to employ the term “hospitality” in a more narrow sense. Ibid., 83.
35 Ibid., 147. Wilson uses the term “faithful witness” to designate (monotheistic) religious motivated hospitality.
36 Ibid., 154.
37 Pohl, Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration, 11.
42 Pohl, Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration, 11.
43 Vanier, Community and Growth, 6.