

“Treated as Your Native Born”: Recovering A Theology of Belonging

by Aaron Tyler

Contemporary questions of community are compelling individuals, societies, and nations to consider and reconsider figurative and real borders of identity. What does it mean to be *us*? What does it mean to be *them*? What should it mean? What can it mean? How are we to understand ourselves apart from others? Who am I, and where do I belong? What are the pressures that compel and shape how societies and individuals answer these questions? In healthy communities, we can find affirmation and wholeness in our identity as human beings. In healthy communities, our idiosyncrasies and uniqueness as individuals are given deeper purpose as we are welcomed into relationship with others. Yet, communities are not immune to the socio-political and economic temptations of history. Conquest, imperialism, and colonization frequently have encouraged the construction of new borders and dimensions of community, compelling societies to build walls and dig deeper trenches of division for purposes of power, security, or retribution. Prosperity and poverty shape ideas of belonging, compelling communities to reconsider notions of equity and welcome. Of course, religion—its institutions, rituals, and beliefs—is also culpable insofar as it can divide communities with concepts and categories that attempt to locate people within—or beyond—certain parameters of belonging.

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What is clear in the Jewish and Christian scriptures—in the declarations, stories, poetry, and prophecies of humanity's encounter with divine and human “others”—is that these positive and negative pressures on communal belonging are not new; they are as old as human history.¹ These pressures are both expected and unpredictable. Human understanding of belonging is dynamic, always vulnerable to one's situational context in place and time. Yet, underneath and throughout the poetry, parables, and promises of Scripture is an immutable affirmation of the sanctity of the human being and human life, an affirmation that is often submerged below the limits of social relationships. This article offers a glimpse into that permeating affirmation. Through a brief

¹ These tensions are reflected even within the scriptures themselves. Besides passages advocating radical hospitality toward strangers and foreigners such as the ones explored in this essay are also found texts promoting Israel's treatment of “outsiders” with strategies of suspicion, expulsion (as in the decision recounted in Ezra 10 to send foreign wives and their children away so that the people of Israel might once again be found pleasing to God), or even outright extermination by God's command (e.g., Dt 7:2, 1 Sm 15:3). In other cases, foreigners are tolerated rather than welcomed into full participation in the life of the community, as when Mosaic laws proscribe Gentile access to some cultic practices and when the people of Israel after the Exile take concerted steps to preserve their own identity in relation to people from other nations. Passages such as Matthew 15:21-28 reflect an ambivalent attitude toward foreigners among Jesus's closest followers and perhaps even Jesus himself.

exegesis of Jewish and Christian scripture, this essay argues that the essential ingredient for communal stability is a regard for the humanity and personhood not only of one's self and members of one's perceived community but also of people beyond borders that might be extended to include the outsider, the oppressed, and, perhaps most radically, even the oppressor. Moreover, this paper endeavors to demonstrate, through a brief consideration of key scriptural texts, how these Abrahamic traditions call adherents to go beyond a confined theology of welcome or hospitality to embrace a more radical, inclusive theology of belonging: a theology that makes way for regarding the stranger as citizen, or, more perfectly, as a full and equal participant in community.

Constraints of Citizenship

The political systems of states and empires are fickle. Human governance is never static. Francis Fukuyama's late-twentieth-century speculation of the final triumph of liberal democracies would contradict the twenty-first-century reality of authoritarian and populist regimes actively (and, in some cases, successfully) competing for citizen allegiance.² History reveals the precarious place of citizenship within these competing and often mutually antagonistic systems of governance. The pathologies of civic citizenship are numerous, and these varied iterations are closely aligned with the nature and function of the polities to which citizens belong and how those polities situate themselves against rival systems of governance.

The pragmatic, juridical requirements for a process recognizing the state citizenship of a foreign non-citizen—i.e., naturalization—are diverse and malleable. There is no universal or global understanding of what it means or requires to “naturalize” as a citizen. Naturalization to political citizenship—beyond the civil conduits of birth, *jus sanguinis*, or marriage—requires a non-citizen to navigate an often precarious eligibility process, which can require criteria ranging from a determined length of residency in country; satisfying subjective indigenous metrics for “good character;” proving a comprehensive knowledge of the culture, history, laws, and language of the host state; to participating in ceremonies demonstrating civic, and perhaps cultural, loyalty. These conditional barriers to “naturalizing” enable the state (i.e., civic community) to preclude certain liberties, privileges, protections, and obligations to the outsider or non-citizen.

In essence, a society's laws attempt to enshrine regard and entitlements for citizens that are not legally available to the “stranger” or “foreigner.” Yet, despite this role of securing civic recognition in community, citizenship is also a problematic, incomplete term. Socio-political regard is real *and* rhetorical, and it is determined through consensus, not unanimity achieved through legal declaration alone. Such regard determines how a society legislates issues of equity, justice, and security. Laws change as power structures shift and compel new positions of regard. Human history makes one fact clear: citizenship is not coterminous with equality, justice, or opportunity. As Richard Falk articulates, “Citizenship has always been an uneven experience for the peoples of the world. . . . Citizenship, in general, expresses membership and the quality of participation in a political community. Its conditions can be specified by law, but its reality is a matter of politics and the rigors of experience.”³ De jure and de facto citizenship are not the same. De jure regard rarely comes close to de facto realities where disregard is common and citizens—in their political agency—are obliged to agitate for recognition and rights that affirm mutual esteem.

Civic or state citizenship cannot be equated to belonging as fully understood and partially realized within the Jewish and Christian faith traditions. Citizenship is a product of political purpose, power, and planning. It may have ideals rooted in principle, but it is essentially political and, thus, vulnerable to change. It provides individuals

2 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); his conclusions were modified somewhat in *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

3 Richard Falk, “The Making of Global Citizenship,” in *Global Visions. Beyond the New World Order*, eds. J. Brecher, J. B. Childs, and J. Cutler (Boston: South End, 1993), 39.

and communities a temporal, undulating platform for living out and thinking about the quality and sustainability of belonging together.

While citizenship may be the political reality the majority cherish and the immigrant seeks, citizenship does not represent fully the ideal for living together in a shared community. Consequently, this paper is not limited to religious thought on citizenship. It endeavors to go farther, asking how Jewish and Christian religious texts and thought challenge the political language and limits of civic citizenship and offer a more comprehensive and equitable understanding of belonging in and across communities. In situations where political borders are unclear and contested, neither a praxis nor a theory of belonging are readily discernable. Yet, that is when and where they are needed most. A theology of belonging does not state the obvious; it is not a theology for reinforcing the status quo. Rather, it is a theology of disruption. It is talk about humankind in relation to God in ways where “us” and “them” fall short of the telos of human oneness countenanced through Jewish and Christian scripture and the human story. A theology of belonging is not a political ideology, but it does have political implications. It is a theology that can influence and shape civil society through the grassroots work of houses of worship and congregations willing to advocate for and welcome immigrants in ways that include not only hospitality, but also a sense of participatory inclusion of all people as fellow human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Whether or not this ideal for living together can be realized in the context of the political is not clear; nonetheless, the theological clarity of such an ideal of belonging is necessary and, perhaps, prophetic.

From Welcome to Regard

Emphasis on welcoming the foreigner and stranger is clear and distinct throughout the Jewish and Christian scriptures. It is the textual bedrock for the theology and practical applications of hospitality for both Abrahamic traditions. Percolating through the Hebrew Bible is a call for Israelites to welcome and care for the stranger, the immigrant. Teachings and illustrations in the Christian Gospels and Epistles make clear that to welcome the outsider is to effectively welcome the Christ. For Jews and Christians, this call to welcome and care for the Other emerged from the story of creation and an empathic self-awareness of geographical and social dislocation.

Over ninety times in the Tanakh, a form of the Hebrew word *ger* is used in connection with community. This word is often translated as stranger, immigrant, resident alien, or sojourner. For the early Hebrew community, YHWH stresses particular protection and provision for three categories of people existing on the periphery—the widow, the orphan, and the stranger⁴—and calls the Jewish people to account through empathic self-recognition of their own story as strangers, sojourners, and exiles. Embedded in the stories and laws of the Torah was a requirement from God that the Hebrew people welcome the outsider into community in the same way YHWH welcomed them out of Egypt and into the land of divine promise. In other words, divine hospitality informed human and communal development. Self-identification as a sojourner was a primary motivator for the Jewish call to welcome the foreigner. Moses reminded the community often, as did the Prophets, to remember their own experience of wandering and exile as they considered the displacement of others. In Exodus 23:9, God made clear this expectation to Moses: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” In Egypt, the Hebrew people experienced the oppression of othering. Slavery, persecution, and dislocation were realities of their communal experience when in Egypt. Thus, this empathic self-awareness was used to set the people of Israel apart as different, as a community that would refuse the temptations of oppression and neglect that often arise when a group’s communal identity becomes associated with political power.⁵ God’s chosen people

4 See, e.g., Dt 10:18; Jer 7:6, 22:3.

5 See also Aaron Tyler, “Recognition and Restraint: Collaborating for a Just Peace Across the Abrahamic Traditions,” in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 23, no. 2 (2013): 191-193.

were challenged and reminded in prayer, prophecy, and legislation to show mercy and compassion toward the immigrant in a radical, atypical way, contrary to the civic notions of empire. YHWH's covenant community was reminded often of this requisite to welcome. One can read language like this declaration from Exodus cited above over thirty times in the Hebrew Bible.

YHWH not only reminded the covenant people of the demands of hospitality during their wandering, but also through the language of the Psalmists and minor Prophets. In a prayer of memory and reflection, the Psalmist cries, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry, do not hold your peace at my tears. For I am your passing guest, an alien [*ger*], like all my forebears."⁶ Recurrently, the people of Israel recall God's priority for the immigrant and oppressed: "The Lord watches over the strangers; God upholds the orphan and the widow, But the way of the wicked God brings to ruin."⁷ Written during a time when the Hebrew people had returned from exile to Jerusalem but were still under the colonial control of the Persian Empire, the prophet Zechariah urges the Israelites, "Do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien [*ger*], or the poor."⁸ Another post-exilic prophet, Malachi, relays the justice of YHWH to those who oppress or forsake the vulnerable: "Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien [*ger*], and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts."⁹ In periods of wandering, conquest, exile, and post-exile return, this reminder to welcome and care for the migrant was firmly planted in the mouths of the prophets and priests of God.

Hospitality toward the traveler was also a religious and cultural obligation for people and tribes of the Near East. We see this expectation in various stories throughout the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 18, for instance, YHWH appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre during the hottest part of the day. Looking up from his tent, Abraham saw three strangers standing nearby. He greeted them with a bow and asked the strange visitors to bless him with the opportunity to show hospitality. Together, Sarah and Abraham offered them welcome through refreshment and rest. Abraham washed their feet and offered them shade and food. The purpose and effect of such hospitality was human restoration.

This expectation to radical welcome continued in the New Testament Gospels. Jesus Christ compelled his followers to welcome the stranger, the outsider, and the immigrant. Portrayed in Matthew's Gospel as a refugee who was forced to flee Bethlehem with his parents and live as an immigrant, vulnerable to the hospitality of communities in Egypt, Jesus no doubt empathized with the plight of those living on the move and in the margins. Heralded within Christianity as the incarnation of the Divine, Jesus continued the radical welcome of God toward all creation, especially toward those whom the mainstream had neglected or forgotten.

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."¹⁰ This admonition comes from a crowd of community leaders observing Jesus's relational interaction with Zacchaeus, a tax collector for the Roman-governed province, an occupation that Jewish residents of the occupied communities of Palestine despised. Such people were anathematized and avoided. Yet Jesus not only welcomed but actively sought out the despised, the other, the stranger. He emphasized time and care for the widow, the sojourner, the outcast, and the religious other. His desire to be in community and relationship with outsiders and the outcast was counter-cultural. Such welcome was disruptive and threatening to the status quo of religious and civil society. Such welcome had the potential to upend the

6 Ps 39:12, NRSV.

7 Ps 146:9, NRSV.

8 Zec 7:10, NRSV.

9 Mal 3:5, NRSV.

10 Lk 15:2, NRSV.

established mores of community, creating insecurity with new ideas and new ways of encountering the stranger and even the “enemy.”

Jesus’s teachings called for a notion and practice of welcoming that radically reaffirmed the declarations of God to the Hebrew community. His message was not a new message, but one too often neglected in human history, now lived out for those who encountered God through YHWH’s Servant, through the incarnated words and actions of the Divine. A summation of Jesus’s life and expectation of welcome for his followers is provided succinctly in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’¹¹

In essence, Jesus embodied the outsider. His life symbolized that of the dislocated stranger—those whom society feared and scapegoated. He sought welcome and community with society’s despised. He challenged the limits of religious and political citizenship. He revealed how relationships are not predicated on race, social status, legal recognition, or perceived “goodness.” Rather, the welcome Jesus demonstrated was rooted more deeply than even the empathic self-awareness of his ancestors. His teachings and actions reach back to the beginning, to the creation story in Genesis and to the deeper truth of creation in the Torah. His socially radical approach toward relationships with others was rooted not just in memory of exile but in the underlying regard for human life as a sacred intention of creation.

Regard for the Stranger

As a noun, the Oxford English Dictionary defines regard as “liking and respect; esteem.” Respect and esteem describe well the theology of belonging. To “hold one in regard” is to respect and esteem the dignity of someone as a person. The character and outcomes of interpersonal and intercommunal relationships are predicated on regard. How do we regard one another? How do we regard ourselves? Our answers to these questions are always provisional and never static. The answers are constantly being analyzed and pursued anew through our lived realities, through the powerful filters of socio-political, geographical, and historical contexts. Our regard for another determines the general trajectory of interaction and how we understand ourselves in relationship with others. For tribal, cultural, or temporal reasons, hospitality and initial welcome may occur with a negligible requisite for regard. However, to welcome with the possibility for a new or renewed sense of belonging to emerge between citizen and stranger cannot occur without an unqualified and foundational regard between guest and host. If such regard is minimal, temporary, or absent, the potential for discrimination or conflict will increase.

The concept of regard for one another as human beings is well-defined in Jewish and Christian scripture, beginning with the early stories and symbols of creation. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” So begins the Hebrew Torah, explaining YHWH’s intentions and order of creation. First light was made distinct from darkness, followed by water’s separation from land. Vegetation and living creatures were then born from this life-giving new earth. When “God saw that it was good,” only then did the Creator welcome humankind in “our own image.” Humankind, in the formation story of Adam and Eve, was welcomed into life. Human persons were welcomed into community, a world flourishing with regard and sustenance from the Creator. They were welcome,

¹¹ Mt 25:34-36; 40, NSRV.

not out of obligation or entitlement. They were welcomed with intention, through their deliberate creation *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of God: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."¹² This welcome of the first human persons, this divine demonstration of hospitality, was rooted in the essence of their identity as human beings. This welcoming was not earned; it was not persuaded; it was not contingent. It was a consequence of human design, through direct intention of the creator and creation.

Recognizing the Creator's decision to fashion the human person in the divine image and with divine likeness holds significant implications for shaping communal behavior toward the Other in Jewish tradition. Rabbi Peter Haas offers insight into this foundational understanding through the illustration of a midrash on the book of Genesis from the early rabbinical period.¹³ In this midrash, emphasis is given to Genesis 5:1, which reads, "This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God." In the collection of legal midrash, *Sifra, Kedoshim*, Ben Azzai argues that these words regarding God's creation of humankind in the divine image represent the supreme commandment of the Torah. In contrast, Rabbi Akiva contends that the principle from the Torah, "To love your neighbor as yourself," is the supreme command from God.¹⁴ Yet, for Ben Akiva, "neighbor" is limited to the community of Israel, exclusive of the Other or "idolator." However, Simon ben Azzai's position universalizes the idea of "neighbor" through a recognition—via Genesis 5:1—that all persons are created in God's own image. This, he contends, is the greatest principle and is what guides, obliges, and grounds one's ability to "love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁵ As Rabbi Haas describes it, "the problem," for Ben Azzai, "is that one cannot be *commanded* to love another person. In fact, I think, for [Ben Azzai] the whole notion of love in dealing with another person is irrelevant. It is less important to love the other person than it is to treat the other as a fellow human being also created in the image of God, even if one does not have any particular emotional attachment to that person."¹⁶

In the *Bereshit* (Genesis) *Rabbah*, Rabbi Tanchuma recounts this debate and summarizes this idea:

Ben Azzai said: "These are the generations of Adam" is a great [the greatest] principle in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva said: This is a great principle of the Torah: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Thus, one should not say, "Since I am scorned, I should scorn my fellow as well; since I have been cursed, I will curse my fellow as well." Rabbi Tanchuma said, if you act thus, realize who it is that you are willing to have humiliated—"the one who was made in the likeness of God." Rabbi Tanchuma says, "If you do so, you should know who you are scorning—in the likeness of God He created him."¹⁷

The truth highlighted here is that regard toward another is not dependent on one's self-worth or on the perceived worth of those whom communities determine belong within the category of neighbor. The truth here is more radical in its understanding of regard. The impetus for regarding another as worthy of welcome and belonging is the simple recognition that each human being is created in the image of God.¹⁸ For Rabbi Tanchuma, to humiliate or disregard another is to disregard God, in whose image he or she was created. To love one's neighbor is essential,

12 Gn 1:27, NSRV.

13 Peter J. Haas, *Human Rights and the World's Major Religious Traditions* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 50-51.

14 Lv 19:18, NSRV. *Sifra, Kedoshim*, chap. 4:12.

15 *Sifra, Kedoshim*, chap. 4:12.

16 Haas, *Human Rights*, 51.

17 *Bereshit Rabbah*, chap. 24:7.

18 Haas, *Human Rights*, 51. See also David Horowitz, "The Fundamental Principle of the Torah," in *Shavuot To-Go*, ed. Robert Shur (New York: Yeshiva University, 2009), 26-32.

but the authenticity of such love depends upon the Jewish embodiment of the God-given regard ascribed to each person.¹⁹

Throughout the writings and stories of the Torah, God endeavors to work through and within the divisions human beings created, but not without regard for the original intention in and for human creation. The Jewish people are reminded in Leviticus 19 not only to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv 19:18), but to love the foreigner as if he or she was local to the Jewish community: “When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Lv 19:34-35). Remarkable in this passage is the expectation that the foreigner be regarded not as a visitor worthy of hospitality but as an equal member of society with the full entitlements and recognition afforded to the “native-born.” This declaration takes the community beyond the limits of hospitality and tolerance to a deeper, rudimentary place of recognition and regard. Regard them as *your* “native-born.” In essence, regard them as if they were citizens endowed with the same inherited legal and socio-economic rights and responsibilities you enjoy as your own birthright. This radically inclusive expectation is rooted in the divine intentions from the beginning to create human beings, not as distinct tribes, but *b’tselem Elohim*.

Consequently, belonging is mutual. The foundation of relationship is no longer power, but rather purpose in creation. The stranger, the immigrant possesses the same moral and civic categories of being human as do the native-born ones, where volition and agency are not deconstructed. The Hebrew story of Ruth captures this mutuality well. This ancient narrative takes place during a time of general geopolitical tension in the region, influenced by a long history of conflict and conquest. Constructs of “us” and “them” were formed and reformed according to the undulating pressures of tribe and empire. It was also a time when Moab and Israel are seemingly at peace—or, perhaps more accurately, in a state of temporary non-belligerence—and hence the movement of people is politically possible. Nonetheless, hostility to the immigrant was unpredictable and welcome was not an unyielding expectation.

Ruth represents the stranger in this Hebrew story, but her people—despite their history of mutual hostility with Israel—begin the narrative serving as hosts. Ruth is a Moabite. Her husband’s family is Jewish. With his father (Elimelech), mother (Naomi), and brother, Ruth’s future husband took flight from their home in Bethlehem-Judah to escape the consequences of famine. They sought refuge across the border, in Moab. They were vulnerable to the hospitality offered or withheld by Moabites. While there, Naomi and Elimelech’s two sons married Moabite women. For unstated reasons, Elimelech died, and his two sons died after living over a decade as refugee-immigrants in Moab. Widowed, and with knowledge that the famine had ended, Naomi decides to return to her “tribe” and gives her widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, her blessing to remain in Moab, remarry, and begin new lives. Through mutually respectful and compassionate dialogue, Orpah decides to remain a citizen of Moab. Ruth, with much conviction, decides to leave her home, renounce her guarantee of citizenship in Moab, and seek a new home, a new place of belonging in the foreign land of her mother-in-law, Naomi:

So, Naomi said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,

¹⁹ See also Tyler, “Recognition and Restraint,” 194. This idea is also captured succinctly in Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5, which reads: “For this reason, Adam was created singularly: for the sake of peace among people, that one may not say to his fellow, ‘My father was greater than yours.’ ... Again, to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He: for a human being may stamp a hundred coins with one stamp, and all of them will be alike; but the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, has stamped every human being with the stamp of the first human being, and nevertheless not one of them is like the other. Therefore each person is obliged to say: ‘The world was created for my sake.’”

if even death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.²⁰

The book of Ruth continues with the creative building of relationships, centered on agency, regard, and new conceptions of belonging. Naomi and Elimelech’s decision to immigrate to Moab and Ruth’s decision to immigrate to Bethlehem-Judah are pivotal to both the Jewish and Christian stories.²¹ Without that movement and subsequent willingness of communities to receive, welcome, and wholly integrate the immigrant, the Jewish and Christian narratives are incomplete. David, Israel’s uniting king, and his son, Solomon, descend from Ruth, a consequence of her decision to migrate. In the Christian Gospel of Matthew, the patrilineal roots of Jesus, the Christian Messiah, are traced back to this Gentile Moabite woman. Ruth’s life and decisions were critical to the lineage and continuation of the Hebrew and Christian narratives. For both traditions, YHWH is seen as condoning and working through these broader, cross-tribal experiences of belonging to fulfill the restorative plan for all creation.

Regard them as “native born.” This idea that “the stranger belongs” was rooted in the intention of creation. Throughout human history, social relationships have almost always fallen short of—and even strongly resisted—this full conceptualization of even the possibility of non-native belonging.²² The well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus shared with a teacher of the law, simultaneously revealed again and made new this foundational understanding of neighbor, whereby participatory inclusion in community and service was limited only to one’s foundational identity as a human person. The neighbor is the contextual “Other,” a Samaritan, and the injured, abandoned traveler is unidentified (the reader is uncertain of ethnicity, age, or economic status—he is described only as beaten and left to die. In this story, it was the “Other,” the Samaritan, “the one who shows mercy,” who illustrated the expanse of this universal understanding of regard for one’s “neighbor.” Reflecting back on this ancient teaching iterated from God throughout the Hebrew Bible, Jesus made clear to his listeners: “one’s neighbor was any human being in need and within one’s spatial proximity for care” and regard.²³

The first-century church, even as eyewitness to the radical way of welcome illustrated in the life and teachings of Jesus, apparently was unable, in its beginnings, to see the “religiously unclean” stranger fitting within the confines of the faith. Writing to early Gentile Christians in Ephesus, the author of the Deutero-Pauline letter to the Ephesians explains this expansive, rediscovered idea of belonging as filtered through the mystery of Christ and the mystery of faith:

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation....In former generations this mystery was not made known

²⁰ Ru 1:15-18, NSRV.

²¹ When Ruth first encounters Boaz—the wealthy Hebrew landowner and kinsman to Ruth’s deceased father-in-law, Elimelech—she refers to herself as *nokhriah*. This term is often translated as “foreigner,” and is therefore distinguishable from the word *ger*. There are varying translations of *ger*, ranging from “resident alien” to “sojourner” to “stranger.” The unifying thread of identity across these translations of *ger*, however, is of a non-citizen seeking relocation and residential equality from a position of vulnerability and tribal difference. In contrast, *nokhri(ah)* were generally understood as persons from another country or tribe beyond the juridical boundaries of the Hebrew Covenant who may or may not have been within the physical boundaries of the Israelite community and who had no intention, demonstrated desire, or need to disassociate socio-politically, religiously, or culturally from their country of origin. See, for instance, Michael Guttman, “The Term ‘Foreigner’ (nkry) Historically Considered,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926): 1. Ruth’s decision to refer to herself initially as *nokhriah* was likely an effort to emphasize to Boaz her Moabite origins, her lack of inherited rights, and her uncertainty of protection under Mosaic law.

²² Nineveh offers another remarkable illustration of contradiction rooted in regard. Jonah was unable to conceptualize the place of the “Other” within YHWH’s redemptive plan. The Jewish God of Abraham was calling Jonah to preach redemption to a people the Hebrew community historically had resented and distrusted. Resentment plagued and clouded Jonah’s ability to regard the Ninevites as worthy of YHWH’s shared mercy and regard.

²³ Tyler, “Recognition and Restraint,” 196. This famous passage is found in the tenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel (Lk 10: 25-37).

to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.²⁴

For Paul, it was clear, this mystery of belonging—of equal regard for all humanity—was in the heart of God before the world began.²⁵ This was the radical revelation for the early church, the realization that the message, mission, and gift of Jesus Christ was a reminder of what always was: all belong to God as reflections of the divine image.

Of course, through its historical development, the Christian church has succumbed to temptations of localizing and imperializing the sense of belonging that applies to “the stranger.” From the late fourth century forward, empire and Christianity became linked in contravening ways that compelled and coerced conversion, sanctioned unjust persecution and oppression under misguided and manipulated Augustinian typologies of “benevolent severity,” and created religio-political myths that could tolerate neither heretical perspectives nor traditions that challenged the status quo of those in power. Consequently, belonging was too often biased and tragically limited to those within the orthodox parameters of the Church. Yet, at the same time, the Church has illustrated on countless occasions its ability to welcome and regard the stranger in ways that are revolutionary, prophetic, and sometimes even in direct opposition to established social, political, and institutional norms.

In the post-resurrection Church, the idea of “native born” is essentially reframed and expanded to encompass the much broader notion of “human born.” This is the prophetic call both for the early and contemporary Church. There is no room within this radical theology for exclusion. To “welcome the stranger” does not end with the generous giving of temporal hospitality, but draws communities into a deeper sense of belonging, a belonging that is responsive to and reaching toward a mutual regard made clear through the designs of YHWH through creation from the very beginning.

Forming a Practical Theology of Belonging

People are on the move. People have always been on the move. As a consequence of war, poverty, oppression, or politics, people have moved and are still moving to survive—finding themselves uprooted and vulnerable to others’ welcome and regard. People are seeking new, non-native places for refuge, safety, opportunity, and belonging. The tragedy of constrictive civic nationalism is an inability to recognize and regard the immigrant beyond the framework established by the nation’s physical, legal, and prevailing ideological boundaries of citizenship as they are constructed in a given place and time. The subsequent citizen “dis-regard” or “mis-recognition” of the non-citizen that almost inevitably results precludes real opportunities for a deeper sense of belonging for the non-citizen. Furthermore, it also limits and even harms the citizens’ own potential for agency, relationship, and authentic liberty. Charles Taylor articulates well the consequences of “mis-recognition”:

[O]ur identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. ...misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need.²⁶

²⁴ Eph 3:1-6, NSRV.

²⁵ 1 Pt 1:20; Ti 1:2.

²⁶ Charles Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-26.

What does a theology of belonging look like within the oppressive realities of civic mis-recognition? There is no single answer. How to regard the non-citizen, how to live out this theology cannot be divorced from one's location in history. The challenges and opportunities for encounter are unique to each community and context. Yet, the foundational and prophetic expectation is timeless. One can act peacefully upon this foundation in practical ways, in political ways, in social and economic ways. Civic action at the state level is inherently problematic, due to the inherent contradictions of belonging associated with the conceptual limits of citizenship and the nation-state system—a system typically rooted in power, protectionism, and zero-sum perspectives of place and profit.

Nonetheless, citizens can act peacefully upon this foundational expectation for belonging as individuals, as local houses of worship, as global institutions, and as human communities. Arguably, practical application begins with self-awareness, such as devoting greater attention to how one engages the stranger. In communities positioned to offer welcome, transformation begins with asking new questions. Important questions worth considering internally and in conversation with others, might include:

1. Who am I? Where and how is one's identity as a person in community rooted? Identities are often impoverished by their limitations. I am American, for example. Or I am Texan. Or I am Protestant. Or I speak English. Yet, in reality, I am all those things, but not *just* those things. I am also a father, I am married, I am a traveler, and I am one who loves to fish, read, and hike. All these components, and more, make up who I am. The same is true for each member of the human race. Diversity is the essence of our identity. This is what Jewish and Christian scripture makes clear. Our sanctity and desire for community is rooted in our diversity of experiences and sameness in identity.
2. What role does the "Power of Place" have in one's conception(s) of belonging?²⁷ How do we view and understand what it means to be "home," to be "at home," or to be "away from home"? How do our answers to these questions differ and why?
3. What role do others play in determining our answer to the question, "Who am I"? How might the stories of Ruth, Jonah, Rahab, the Samaritan, or Cornelius inform and challenge one's perspectives on belonging? How might the stranger inform, influence, and deepen how I understand my identity and how I am understood?
4. How do we understand the word "stranger" or "foreigner"? What connotations or biases accompany these terms? In contemporary parlance, "stranger" is often a term used when mutual regard is either absent, contested, or not yet defined. Yet, this term is rich with sacred meaning and regard in Jewish and Christian scripture. How can this renewed awareness of regard for the stranger enrich one's perspective?
5. How might a broader perspective of belonging inform one's understanding of *caritas* or charity? From a perspective of economic or political power, there is pride in the idea of bringing rescue and hospitality. This *caritas* is critical and necessary, but it also has proven limited, and potentially destructive, if it fails to dignify and ascribe agency to and partnership with the stranger or sojourner receiving assistance or welcome.

Transformation in limited conceptions of community and belonging will begin with new behaviors, behaviors formed through renewed attitudes of welcome and regard. Over time, perhaps, these behaviors will create in local

²⁷ This phrase comes from Dr. Harm de Blij's *The Power of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). De Blij explores the ways in which one's "home" or "place" enable as well as inhibit "the world's march toward integration, mobility, and interconnection" (De Blij, xi, 6-7).

and global societies new habits of relationship, habits that better illustrate what it means to belong more fully and completely together.