

### **Inhabiting the Land**

Andrew M. Yuengert. 2003. Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute. Christian Social Thought Series. ISSN: 1531-4057. \$6.00 (paperback).

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This is a short volume about immigration. Specifically it is about the economic case for immigration as developed in Roman Catholic social teaching. The author specializes in the economics of immigration and is a prominent Catholic economist and for these reasons this is a book that will attract interest. It should also attract interest because the case it presents unambiguously supports the view that migration on grounds of economic initiative is a right. Whether that right should be exercised depends on an assessment of the universal common good. As a European Christian, I have to confess that I had never given very much thought to how Christian ethical teaching might offer a critique of contemporary restrictions on immigration into rich Western Europe. Indeed I was surprised to discover that Catholic social teaching, derived largely from the writings and encyclicals of the present Pope, was so unequivocal. Anyone arriving in Europe from another planet would be surprised too—Europe, including Catholic southern Europe, is currently a “fortress” stoutly and vigorously defended against economic in-migration. A similar conclusion might be reached from the purview of “fortress” North America, defending itself against the onslaught of economic migration from Central and Southern America.

And yet most prosperous Western nations have for much of their history, including recent history, sought to encourage economic migration. The prosperity of nations such as the United States and Australia is founded on waves of incoming migrant labor. Similarly during the immediately post-World War Two era immigration from the “New Commonwealth” countries of the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean was actively encouraged in order to solve the problem of excess demand for unskilled labor. Modern multi-cultural Britain is a product of these migration flows.

So have our politicians got things badly wrong when they argue from both liberal and conservative perspectives that immigration must be subject to tight restriction and should only be allowed on grounds of asylum rather than economic initiative?

What is the case for a right to migrate in Catholic social teaching? The author argues that it follows from the right to private property and the right to seek to sustain one’s family. The family’s rights take precedence over any desire on the part of the state to restrict economic initiative. Yuengert goes on to refer to John Paul II’s *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* which argues that

there is a right to pursue economic initiative. The date of this document (1987) is important—it was written at a time when much of Europe was still ruled by authoritarian communist states, founded on the principle that the economic rights of individual citizens were totally subordinate to the State (the State being co-terminus with the Communist Party). Few would deny John Paul II's important role in supporting the peaceful and popular uprisings that would over the following five years see the end of these tyrannies.

While the book explains this social teaching, many (Protestant) Christian readers would want to see the case also developed from the biblical source material. In particular some may find the emphasis on rights, without a clear articulation of corresponding duties, puzzling. Nevertheless an important conclusion, and one that can probably be supported from biblical source material, is that there is no ethical distinction between economic migrants and others. The Bible places a responsibility on the host people to welcome all sojourners in their midst.

So for rich, protected Western Christians, can we square this ethical stance with contemporary dominant political attitudes? In short the answer is surely no. Restrictive immigration policies might serve the partial good of the potential host country (although even this is contentious if those migrants have skills and talent that will in due course contribute to the commonwealth). However it is difficult to sustain the argument that such policies are in the universal common good, except in two circumstances. One of these is discussed by the author, the other is not. The first is the case where migration impoverishes the sending nation. However the author argues while sending countries may lose talented individuals (human capital), they often gain from the remittance of income back home. Many economic migrants do return to their home countries—family and cultural ties are sufficiently strong. The second is the case where immigration from a dominant language and culture risks the impoverishment of a fragile minority population in the host country. Yuengert does not discuss this risk. While such instances may be rare, they are not non-existent. French-Canadian Quebec and Welsh-speaking Wales are two examples that spring to mind. The latter is particularly familiar to the present reviewer. Wales is one of the smallest of the constituent nations that make up the United Kingdom. A century ago nearly all its population was indigenous and spoke the Welsh language as mother tongue. Now over 25 percent were born outside Wales (mainly in England) and the language and culture has only survived through expensive and controversial government intervention (which has resulted in a positive earnings premium to the possession of bilingual skills). A vocal political minority would like to restrict further in-migration, principally through intervention in housing markets. A workable definition of the universal common good in this case might be

very difficult to achieve.

Yuengert concludes that an analysis of Catholic social teaching on this issue leads to a profound challenge for policymakers—that of implementing an appropriate definition of the universal common good. A critic might dismiss this possibility as idealism—as in my example above. However the final chapter of this book attempts to explore the possibilities for a better definition of the common good (in the United States case) through the application of the Catholic principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. Following John Paul II, subsidiarity can be defined as the empowerment of lower order communities by higher order communities in pursuit of the common good. Immigration policies typically bring nation states into a position of conflict of interest. The principle of subsidiarity suggests that supra-national institutions (such as the United Nations) might establish principles of human rights relating to migration which “lower-order” nation-states would honor in the way in which they define migration policy. The political basis to the European Union is founded on the Catholic principle of subsidiarity—this has established the free movement of labor within the boundaries of the Union. However this has been achieved at a high cost for those who find themselves outside the borders. From the point of view of a potential Mexican migrant seeking economic opportunity across the fence that separates him from the United States, the costs are similarly high. In what sense then are rich European or American Christians truly loving their neighbors? Yuengert’s slim volume deserves to be widely read in the hope that it will challenge hearts and minds. ■