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Enfolding Immigrants: A Review of Beyond Welcome

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Abstract

"We cannot fail to see that our response to the least of these is our response to Christ himself."

Posting about the book *Beyond Welcome* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/enfolding-immigrants-a-review-of-beyond-welcome/>

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Disciplines

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In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

Enfolding Immigrants: A Review of *Beyond Welcome*

Chris Goedhart

November 1, 2022

Title: *Beyond Welcome: Centering Immigrants in Our Christian Response to Immigration*

Author: Karen González

Publisher: Brazos Press

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Pages: 161 (Paperback)

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This review is based on the pre-publication manuscript made available by the publisher.

Americans, even those far from any national border, regularly encounter immigrants. This is not surprising; the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 has admitted 3.1 million refugees into the U.S.¹ The Current Population Survey of 2022 estimates that 46.7 million immigrants reside in the United States.² Of these, the PEW Research Center estimates 10.5 million are unauthorized immigrants.³

These numbers and the actions—or inactions—of the federal government have contributed to anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia, both of which have a long history in the United States.⁴ A polarization of attitudes about immigrants even exists within the church. In a 2018 PRRI poll, 51% of white evangelical protestants favored passing a law preventing refugees from entering the United States.⁵

Within this context Karen Gonzalez, a Guatemalan immigrant, has written *Beyond Welcome* to help North American Christians make the immigrant front and center in their responses to immigration. While weaving her own experiences within an encompassing Biblical narrative, Gonzalez asks Christians—particularly white protestant Christians—to reexamine their understanding and practices.

Each of the book's three sections is designed to center the reader's responses. The first section, *Words and Myth*, illustrates how the use of language and words shapes our thinking and directs our understanding. Throughout the book, a vocabulary of immigration is presented and Gonzalez considers how its use impacts both the broader society as well as the immigrant community.

Do we expect immigrants to *assimilate* or to *integrate* with mainstream culture? Gonzalez suggests that by not pressuring immigrants to assimilate and by leaving room to integrate, we are respecting immigrant culture and thus centering on the immigrant. Do we think of 'good' versus 'bad' immigrants? Do we prefer and respond to those who are like us, have similar cultural values, who work hard, keep their heads down, don't accept public benefits, and never critique the U.S.? Do we reduce people to their legal status or prioritize laws and processes to keep from seeing ourselves in our neighbors? The actions we take, the words we speak, and the feelings we show influence those around us and reveal our deep need for one another.

The second section of *Beyond Welcome, The Bible and Belonging*, is designed to illuminate our cultural biases and our beliefs so we can objectively see things as they are. Is our reading and understanding of the Bible captive to and comfortable within our culture? Are we willing to accept our ethnocentrism and open to learning new ways of seeing faith in other contexts? Do American Christians see themselves as poor or alternatively as socially powerful with resources and a safety net? If we see ourselves as poor, our churches will prioritize the care of 'our own' rather than welcoming refugees and other immigrants.

Beyond Welcome powerfully applies the themes of several Biblical narratives: the Genesis 2 creation account, Rahab the prostitute, the parable of the sheep and the goats, and the parable of the good Samaritan. In the parable of the sheep and goats, Gonzales illustrates how Jesus takes on the identities of the poorest and most forgotten of his time. We cannot fail to see that our response to the least of these is our response to Christ himself. Gonzalez asks those in the dominant culture to be transformed by seeing themselves in those who live on the margins, in those who are refugees, in those who are 'illegal', and in others such as DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients.

I believe that readers will be most challenged by Gonzalez's explication of the Genesis 2 creation account, which presents humans as caretakers of creation (v.15). While other authors consider flourishing as derivative from the reciprocal relationship between humans and the land, Gonzalez urges the reader to see wider implications of all land belonging to God. This contrasts with the common view that land is a commodity to be bought and sold. A history of the Americas shows the conquistadors, Europeans, and modern corporations have claimed ownership over vast regions. Indigenous peoples were exploited, dispossessed, and enslaved. Gonzalez believes the repercussions of this history and more recent U.S. and corporate policies have led to the outpouring of migrants headed to the U.S.

The final section of *Beyond Welcome, Dignity and Departures*, considers historical patterns of emigration and immigration, displacements, and movements. One consequence of the curse, is that humans would search for place, belonging, and well-being. This consequence continues to the present as millions are displaced by intensifying droughts, fires, floods, and hurricanes.

The consequence of proclaiming that the land is for all will require costly and sacrificial remedies, including reparations for the countries of the South, standing in opposition to

Western empires, opening our arms wide to the 'Kin-dom' of God, and rejecting the narrative that some lives are more worthy than others.

In my opinion, this book is best suited for those intending to work with immigrants, and is unlikely to persuade those who oppose immigrants and refugees. *Beyond Welcome* can serve as a fine resource for discussion group for considering immigration, especially if immigrants are invited to enter that discussion.

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