Orientis Aura

Perspectives in Religious Studies

Migration and Theological Anthropology: The Plight of Rohingyas in Malaysia and the Response of the Church

Sun Ann Mak

According to the UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide was estimated at 122.6 million as of mid-year 2024[1]—almost twice the population of the United Kingdom.[2] One such phenomenon is witnessed through a people group called the Rohingyas from Rakhine State, Myanmar, who are known as one of the world's most persecuted minorities. Rohingyas have fled on foot or boat from Rakhine State into the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, where over a million Rohingyas live in rapidly deteriorating refugee camps.[3] Some have chosen to risk a perilous sea journey on human trafficking boats to Malaysia, the second largest host country of Rohingya refugees—as of end-February 2025, there is a registered total of 112, 320 Rohingyas (out of 192, 800 refugees/asylum-seekers) in Malaysia,[4] making them the largest refugee group.

This essay enters into conversation with a growing body of theological scholarship on migration[5] by focusing on the plight of the Rohingyas, and asking questions like: How does the plight and treatment of Rohingyas impact our theology and praxis regarding human dignity? Consequently, how could a better appreciation of theological anthropology—as enfleshed in

[1] UNHCR 2023, "Mid-Year Trends 2024". The definition for forcibly removed is people who are "forcibly displaced worldwide due to war, persecution, violence and human rights violations." This estimate figure can only have grown given the wars and persecutions that are ongoing in various regions of the world.

[2] On 8 October 2024, the Office for National Statistics reported a mid-year population estimate of 68,265,200 people in the UK in 2023.

[3] According to UNHCR's 2024 report, 40% of all stateless people, for whom data is available, are stateless Rohingya.

[4] More statistics are reported by UNHCR Malaysia n.d, "Figures at a glance in Malaysia". There are also Rohingyas in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, India, UAE. Some eventually resettle in third countries like USA, Australia, Canada, and UK.

[5] E.g., Ahn 2024, 4-11 surveys the many references to migration in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament; Campese 2012, 7–10 traces a history of how a theology of migration started to be formulated since the 1960s by the World Council of Churches; Groody 2009, 638-67 proposes four foundations for a theology of migration and refugees, and regards the borders and barriers in migration as windows into thinking about God, human life, and the Christian mission; etc.

the encounters of and with the Rohingyas—impact the Malaysian churches' response to the forced migration of these refugees to their shores?

I will divide the essay into three main sections. First, by surveying the realities of the Rohingya situation and migration to Malaysia. Next, we consider how Rohingya experiences inform our theological anthropology, that is, what it means to be humans created by God. Finally, I apply these theological reflections to the setting of Malaysia, drawing from locally derived values for a constructive "theology of *gotong royong*"[6] that might help answer the question of why and how the Malaysian church should respond to Rohingya refugees.[7]

Context of Migration: The Plight of the Rohingyas in Malaysia

It is crucial to canvass the historical developments that led to the forced removal of Rohingyas from their homes in Rakhine State, Myanmar. Rohingyas contend that their Muslim forefathers began to arrive in Arakan (modern Rakhine State) from the eighth century,[8] but Myanmar government officials claim the Rohingyas were only brought in as British colonial migrants from Bengal in the 19th and 20th centuries—Rohingyas maintain their indigenous and pre-colonial era presence whilst Myanmar officials insist the Muslims arrived during British colonial administration. The Myanmar government, military, and Buddhist nationalists refer to the Rohingya as 'Bengali' and as illegal immigrants with a dangerous political cause.[9] However, evidence demonstrate that Rohingyas were officially acknowledged as a legitimate

[6] The gotong-royong theology proposed towards the end of this paper serves as a thought experiment for the author. It is not an established or known theology in the region. The idea of recommending a theology that is derived from local Malaysian values is inspired by the Latin American and African theological concepts discussed in this essay.

[7] I investigate the above queries as a Malaysian migrant—currently studying in the UK with the intention of living in this country permanently—who knows the vulnerability and precarity of a foreigner in a host country. Last year, after an unexpected visa application rejection, I was told by the Home Office to leave the UK and was placed on immigration bail. I am also a Christian who is familiar with the Malaysian church. I have visited ElShaddai Centre, one of the largest Christian organisations in Malaysia that was founded in 2008 to reach out to displaced communities. For purposes of this essay, I have also conducted two respective interviews over Zoom with founders of Christian NGOs in Malaysia that work with Rohingyas—i) Andrew Ng of ElShaddai Centre in Klang and ii) Bud Valade of Caring Hearts in Penang.

[8] Lee 2021, 119. For more on the Rohingya's sense of ethnic nationalism and their history in Arakan, see Minar and Halim 2020, 115–44; Uddin 2020, 28–49.

[9] See further discussion on the problematic use of name in Cheesman 2017, 475; Lee 2021, 4; Ware and Laoutides 2019, xv. Aung San Suu Kyi suggested in 2016 a more neutral name, "the Muslim community in northern Rakhine State", to avoid the contention but a new label did not improve the situation and perception of the Rohingyas.

Burmese group during the 1948-1962 democratic rule;[10] this was overturned after the 1962 coup by "a xenophobic Buddhist nationalist military dictatorship."[11] Subsequent governments have also denied the legal status of Rohingyas.[12]

The statelessness, human restrictions, deprivation of education, discrimination, poverty, ethno-religious clashes, and periodic violence endured against Rohingyas continued for decades, but it did not attract global attention until the protracted state-sponsored crackdown on them in 2017.[13] The army attacked and burned down many Rohingya villages, looted the villages, raped women and young girls, publicly executed teachers for creating awareness of the situation, and mercilessly shot and burned adults and children alive.[14] These harrowing stories of "beheading, random firing, public raping, and plundering"[15] are told by survivors who witnessed those deaths, have been gang raped themselves, and have walked and hidden for days in the forest without food before arriving at the already overcrowded Cox's Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh.[16]

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[10] Burma is the name for pre-1989 Myanmar. Rohingyas in Bangladesh refugee camps assert that their parents and grandparents were recognised as citizens in the 1950s, often with old documents as evidence. Preceding the 1962 military coup, Rohingyas held passports and identity documents, had a right to vote in elections, and were counted as elected members of parliament. In fact, Rohingyas were free to vote until before the 2015 national election. For recorded stories and documentation to prove these assertions, see Lee 2021, 55-61.

[11] Lee 2021, 3.

[12] The 1982 Myanmar Citizenship Law excludes the Rohingyas from full citizenship, which left them stateless. Besides the drastic change post-1962 and the 1982 exclusion from citizenship, the political idea *taingyintha* or "national races" has been used to argue that Rohingyas should be excluded from membership in the country because they are not a national race group, but Rohingyas insist they too are *taingyintha* (not Bengali). Cheesman 2017, 461-83 cogently demonstrates how the centrality of *taingyintha* has surpassed even the concept of legal citizenship in Myanmar. Lee 2021, 75 points out that this is an unfortunate perpetuation of the 20th century British colonial legacy of using ethnicity as a census-marker; also Salehin 2024, 28.

[13] The Myanmar military defended their violence against the Rohingyas as a necessary and lawful counter-insurgency reaction attacks by Islamist militants on 30 police posts. See Ware and Laoutides 2019, 35-59 for an overview of events and clashes from 2012-2017 between the ethnic Buddhist Rakhines, Rohingya Muslims, the Arakan Army, and Burma military.

[14] According Médecins Sans Frontières 2017, at least 6,700 Rohingya, including at least 730 children under the age of five, were killed in the month after the violence broke out. Amnesty International's 2017 October report, gathered through witness accounts, satellite imagery and data, and photo and video evidence point to the same widespread and systematic attack in northern Rakhine State: "murder, deportation and forcible displacement, torture, rape and other sexual violence, persecution, and other inhumane acts such as denying food and other life-saving provisions".

[15] Soundararajan et al. 2024, 888.

[16] Though there is relative safety in the Cox's Bazar camp, there is insufficient food and no water, proper toilet, hygiene, sanitation, and electricity. They live in makeshift houses made of plastic, tarpaulin, and bamboo that would not weather the rainy season. For detailed accounts of the violence experienced in Myanmar followed by the suffering endured in the Cox's Bazar refugee camp, see Uddin 2020, 1-2; 138-65; 172-89; Soundararajan et al. 2024, 881-95. It is important to note that violence is also gendered, women are more vulnerable than men amidst the atrocities and may not recover from the physical and psychological trauma; consult Salehin 2024 for his work on gendered violence amongst the Rohingyas.

Genocide—the crime of all crimes—or ethnic cleansing is the main explanation for the sordid encounters and forced displacement of Rohingyas,[17] even though Myanmar's leader and human rights icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, denied at the Hague that the army's actions were genocide.[18] In that period alone, over 700, 000 Rohingyas fled from Rakhine State to Bangladesh, making it the largest forced migration in the region since World War II.[19] UN Secretary-General António Guterres remarked that it was the "world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare."[20] Today, there are more Rohingyas living in camps within Bangladesh than in Myanmar.

Amidst the dire circumstances in Cox's Bazar, some have decided to explore further lands for a better future, and Malaysia is a popular destination because of its Malay Muslim majority population. However, those who risk the boat journey may not make it to Malaysia alive;[21] they could be kidnapped, imprisoned in Thai border-detention camps, or experience sexual abuse on the sea journey, and even after arrival they will wait for years before being registered with the UNHCR.[22] Some on the boats are child brides, as young as eleven, sent off to marry Rohingya men in Malaysia twice their age whom they have never met.[23]

Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention,[24] which means the Malaysian government has no legislative framework for dealing with refugees. Government

[17] In the Rohingya situation, I think of ethnic cleansing and genocide as largely synonymous. Soundararajan et al. 2024, 881-95 argue through criminal ethnographic study of Rohingyas refugees in Bangladesh that their accounts of military violence and persecution by the Myanmar military amount to genocide against the Rohingya people. See also Alam 2018, 163–64, 174. Lieberman 2010 attempts to delineate the two terms: "[the] relationship between genocide and ethnic cleansing cannot be delineated in legal terms because there is no international convention that defines ethnic cleansing (42). Ethnic cleansing seeks the forced removal of an undesired group of groups where genocide pursues the group's 'destruction' [ ] extreme forms of ethnic cleansing overlap with genocide (45)."Based on my reading of the Rohingyas, the extreme ethnic cleansing by the military has led to genocide, especially because there are ethnic conflicts between the Myanmar military with other minorities too but they are not as large scale and egregious.

[18] Beake 2019.

[19] Lee 2021, 1.

[20] Tan 2017.

[21] Outcomes include being beaten to death, thrown into the sea, or succumbed to starvation.

[22] Sengupta 2018, 22–25 traces the Rohingya's risky sea voyages from Bangladesh to Malaysia and reports their motivations and hopes of heading to Malaysia. More stories of the perilous and lengthy boat journeys can be found at Jufrian 2025; Natarajan and Hossain 2020. According to Bud Valade, who runs an NGO for refugees in Malaysia, there is currently a three-year backlog for UNHCR registration. Médecins Sans Frontières 2024 estimates there are 200, 000 Rohingyas in Malaysia.

[23] Mustaffa 2024; Latiff and Harris 2017; UNHCR Malaysia 2015.

[24] According to the 1951 Refugee Convention (and 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees), refugees should not be returned to their country where they face threats or persecution.

policies towards refugees have been inconsistent and vary from time to time. They deport Myanmar refugees periodically;[25] in January 2025, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) expelled two boats ferrying about 300 Rohingyas south-west of Langkawi.[26] Rohingyas who successfully enter Malaysia and register with UNCHR have no legal status, right to work, nor access to the national education system.[27] It is not uncommon to hear of hate speech and hostility against Rohingyas, abuses and threats from Malaysians who think they should leave the country, and the sexual harassment of Rohingya women.[28] The Rohingyas' lack of rights, fear of deportation, and desperation for survival expose them to exploitation and extortion.

Six months ago, when I received an official letter from the Home Office that placed me on immigration bail, asking me to leave the UK almost immediately with a warning of potential detention and deportation, I felt a sense of vulnerability and helplessness not previously experienced. In the twelve days between receiving the letter and boarding the plane to leave—with no guarantee that I would be able to return to the UK—I lived in limbo. I had no immigration status, and no permission to work, study, or even drive legally. These acute emotions of fear and powerlessness were experienced despite having a roof over my head, fluency in English, a postgraduate degree, sufficient funds to purchase an air ticket to Malaysia and appoint an immigration lawyer, and a relatively stable country to return to. One can only imagine the sheer helplessness of a Rohingya who usually has minimal formal education and English proficiency, little access to legal advice, no financial support, and no assurance of receiving legal status in a foreign country.

[25] UNHCR Malaysia 2022.

[26] The Straits Times 2025. The two NGO founders I interviewed on Zoom believe that these will not be the last boats that try to come into Malaysia.

[27] UNHCR Malaysia 2023. With a UNHCR card, refugees can seek medical assistance at a 50% discount. Bud Valade of the Caring Hearts NGO emphasised that even with the 50% discount, refugees are still paying a considerably higher medical fee than an average local Malaysian.

[28] Rashid and Saidin 2023, 384–406 document Malaysians' amplified resentment towards Rohingya refugees on social media during COVID-19. Racism and discrimination against the Rohingyas spiked during COVID; amidst unemployment and loss of privileges, Malaysians called Rohingyas ungrateful, hypocritical, disrespectful, a social threat and dirty race, and illegal immigrants who should be sent home. See also Union of Catholic Asian News 2021.

The situation of the Rohingyas is not only divisive, degrading, and demeaning, but dehumanising. Intersectional justice—justice on various levels—is needed to restore to the Rohingyas' basic safety and human dignity. A survivor of the inhumane crimes thinks that:

> Rohingya lives are not *mainshor jibon* (not human life).
> *Het-ton ekkana hom achhe* (We are lesser than human beings).[29]

Nasir Uddin proposes (based on first-hand accounts of merciless murder, sexual violence, looting, and no legal status) that Rohingyas are reduced to a "subhuman" status.[30] On this note, we move on to interrogate how the Rohingya reality impacts our understanding of being human through the doctrinal lens of theological anthropology.

A Theological Anthropology: Rohingya Reality, *Solidaridad*, *Ubuntu*

The primary topic of discussion here pertains to theological anthropology; i.e., what it means to be human in light of the revelation that people are created by God, in God's image. In 2005, the World Council of Churches published Ten Common Affirmations on theological anthropology as a guide for reflection and action.[31] In this section, I adopt the ten affirmations as a framework to think about how the Rohingya reality illuminates, changes, or confirms these guiding principles on being human. It is appropriate to root our consideration of theological anthropology in the Rohingyas' lived experiences; as Latin American theologian Michelle Gonzalez states, the understanding of being human should always be "reinterpreted based on our sociocultural, historical, and political context."[32]

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[29] Uddin 2020, 2.

[30] Uddin 2022, 201-2 concludes that the Rohingyas are living a subhuman life based on these points: i) atrocious living conditions; ii) illegal object within legal structure of state; iii) homeless at home; iv) can be killed, raped, and burnt; v) a life deemed worthy of extinction.

[31] World Council of Churches 2005.

[32] Gonzalez 2007, xv notes that the focus of theological anthropology has tended to be "the supernatural orientation of humankind […] as imago Dei" but might end up ignoring the "very materiality of human life" (xvi). This essay brings to the fore the materiality of human life—the very frailty and brokenness of life as experienced by Rohingyas.

In the ten affirmations, i) no.1 and no. 2 declare human beings as created in the image of God and affirms human dignity, potentiality and creativity; ii) no.3 and no. 4 point to humans as being in relationship with God, each other, and all of creation—humans are created to love and be loved; and iii) no.5 to no. 10 acknowledge the problem of sin that can pervert, distort, and destroy what it means to be human, but these affirmations also point to eventual restoration and perfection of all things. We will discuss these three categories.

Imago Dei and Human Dignity

The foremost affirmation to uphold when considering issues related to migration is the recognition that every person is created by God and in the image of God. Therefore, human dignity should be experienced by all because *imago Dei* (that people are created in the image of God) affirms the worth and value of every human being. *Gaudium et spes* clearly explicates what it means to be human:

> Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious.[33]

Based on this definition, the Rohingyas are not treated as fully human because they scarcely have even basic rights and supplies of food, clothes, shelter, education, and employment. Nonetheless, it is pertinent to ask how Rohingyas themselves define being human and what they mean by dignity (*ijjot* in Rohingya).[34]

[33] *Gaudium et spes* 1965, par. 26. This is not dissimilar to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[34] That the subtitle for Holloway and Fan's 2018 report is '*Ijjot* is a huge thing in this world' suggests the importance of dignity for Rohingyas.

Two different research reports explore the meaning of *ijjot*, and they offer a bottom-up perspective of dignity as based on Rohingya culture, context, religion, etc.[35] Both reports paint a similar understanding of Rohingya dignity. Dignity for Rohingyas means: i) safety from violence; ii) owning their ethnic identity, iii) enjoying religious freedom; iv) being able to access education; v) having financial stability, and vi) living in social solidarity with one another.[36] Rohingya culture defines dignity in social, communal, and familial terms where people are in harmony and have respect for one another. When the reports on dignity are placed in dialogue with the first two affirmations of theological anthropology[37] and the definition in *Gaudium et spes*,[38] we see that the need for dignity is inherent in the Rohingyas but their realities in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Malaysia place them in the category of "subhuman"—they do not enjoy any of the six elements of Rohingya dignity.[39]

The dehumanisation and unequal treatment suffered by the Rohingyas are living examples of the problems highlighted in Daniel Groody's theology of migration. Groody highlights problems that arise when people define refugees as social and political problems, rather than actual persons; it is a "problem-person divide" when migrants/refugees are labelled as illegal or undocumented because it causes "asymmetrical relationships" and leaves refugees "vulnerable to control, manipulation, and exploitation [and] new forms of psychological colonisation."[40] If all are equal and labels are not placed on others because no one is more important than another (e.g., Gal 3:28), then every person—regardless of country of origin, religion, race, gender, etc.—should be treated the same.[41] To take humanity as created in the

[35] Kamruzzaman et al. 2022 insist the importance of hearing directly from the Rohingyas about their understanding of dignity because their views move away from a Western liberal insistence on socio-legal individual rights and freedom (1857-8), are a "contrast to the way in which dignity is depicted in the existing literature (especially in international charters for human rights)" (1868), and "challenge the dominant practice of applying a universal notion of dignity" (1870). This echoes Gonzalez's view above about reinterpreting the understanding of being human culturally and contextually. Defending the need for indigenous understandings of being human and the meaning of human dignity in Africa, Grillo 164-6 also maintains that researchers must take into account the diverse cultural contributions.

[36] Kamruzzaman et al. 2022, 1860–64; Holloway and Fan 2018, 7.

[37] See above World Council of Churches 2005.

[38] Gaudium et spes 1965, par. 26.

[39] A similar sentiment is found in Latin American migration. In Daniel Groody's interview with a Mexican migrant, he found that the most painful part is not the physical and life-threatening challenges on their travels to a safer land, it is demeaning treatment and degrading stereotypes that cut to the core of their personhood. "No wound cuts more deeply than the feeling that you are not even a human being, you are disposable, and that your life has little value, as if you are no one to anyone"; Groody 2015, 49-50.

[40] Groody 2009, 643; also Groody 2015, 49.

[41] Carvalhaes 2018 argues that immigrants are made in God's image and deserve the same treatment and consideration as full humans; documents to prove legality do not replace God's image that is already in the person of the refugee.

image of God is to oppose egocentricity.[42] When people take seriously God's image in others, the category of "subhuman" will cease to exist. On the note of equal treatment and the Rohingya's understanding of dignity as collective, familial, and communal, it is appropriate to turn to the topic of relationality in anthropology.

Relationality: Solidaridad and Ubuntu

According to affirmations nos. 3 and 4, human dignity includes relationship with others, just as God is relational.[43] The idea of relationality goes beyond the family to include neighbours and members of the community. Gioacchino Campese recommends that in Europe where most migrants are non-Christians who bring religious and cultural diversity, Christians should begin with hospitality.[44] The repeated biblical imperative to love our neighbour (Matt 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Rom 13:9; 13:10; 15:2; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8) and the radical story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) that unquestionably illustrates who a neighbour is should compel Christians to love refugees as neighbours.[45] Thus, a relational anthropology should include mutuality, empathy, solidarity, and diversity. These traits of relationality are further fleshed out in the Latin American concept of *solidaridad* and the African notion of Ubuntu.

[42] Studying the works of 17th century Mexican nun and theologian, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Gonzalez concludes that "humanity as created in the image of God is posed in contrast to an egocentric understanding of the self;" Gonzalez 2002, 19.

[43] In support, Gonzalez 2007, 118 believes, "personhood must balance autonomy and heteronomy, individuality and relationality."

[44] Campese 2012, 26–28. This would apply to the Muslim Rohingyas and hospitality shown by churches and Christians in Malaysia. However, if members of the host country view migrants as different and disconnected from them, migrants will not be treated as neighbours and peers in communion with the larger body (Groody 2015, 55).

[45] Copeland 2009 who focused his anthropological study on exploited, despised, and poor women of colour contends for "the need for authentic solidarity in word and in deed" and argues that "we can realize our personhood only in solidarity with the exploited, despised, poor 'other'" (89).

Solidaridad in Latin America[46]

The emphasis on solidarity is deeply rooted in Roman Catholic theological ethics and exemplified in Latin American lived experiences and theological work.[47] The 1967 *Encyclical Populorum Progressio* responds to the struggles related to migration by calling for solidarity whilst recognizing that nationalism and racism are obstacles to world solidarity.[48] It states that "the reality of human solidarity brings us not only benefits but also obligations"[49] and "it is a duty imposed by human solidarity and by Christian charity in the host nations" to welcome strangers and foreigners.[50] The 1987 Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis continues to define the "duty of solidarity" as seeing the "'other'… not just as some kind of instrument to be exploited at low cost… but as our neighbour, helper, sharer, on par with ourselves in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God".[51] The appeal to solidarity is extended to "Jewish people and Muslims… [and] the world's great religions.[52] These encyclicals set the tone for a solidarity that is for everyone and in partnership with all—regardless of religion, race, and nationality.[53]

The Catholic ethic of solidarity sits comfortably within Latin American culture since Latina/o communities hold a permeable boundary between family and non-family, which promotes solidarity beyond family and towards the larger good of the whole community or

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[46] The concept of *solidaridad* could have been influenced by the reform movement of the Philippines in Spain in the late 19th century. La *Solidaridad* was a Philippine newspaper that espoused reform views and demands from liberal Filipinos to their colonial master, the Spaniards. See Torres 2017.

[47] There are limits to the Latin American notion of solidarity. Solidarity may not be extended to all, especially women, the weak and oppressed, and queer folks. Althaus-Reid 2000, 89–91 critiques theologians who promote solidarity but who present a God "confined to systems of male domination and heterosexual constructs"; "theologians of solidarity did not want to show solidarity with victims of sexual persecution, some of them saying homosexuality was not their issue" (73). Even when showing solidarity within feminist studies, there could be a power imbalance. Rodríguez 2008, 199–226 shows that whilst Chicana/Latina women were writing in solidarity with Central American women, that solidarity is shaped by power, unequal hierarchical relationships, and power imbalance. Chicana writers are the protagonists and heroes whilst Central American characters recede into the backdrop. Rodríguez calls it an illusion and fiction of solidarity across the border.

[48] *Encyclical Populorum Progressio* 1967, par. 62.

[49] *Encyclical Populorum Progressio* 1967, par. 17.

[50] Encyclical Populorum Progressio 1967, par. 67.

[51] *Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 1987, par. 39. Note that in this pursuit of human development people are not to "impose on others one's own way of life or own religious belief" (par. 32).

[52] *Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 1987, par. 47.

[53] Pope Francis, in his message For the 140th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018 also declared that "solidarity must be concretely expressed at every stage of the migratory experience – from departure through journey to arrival and return."

society.[54] For instance, Sobrino and Pico developed a theology of Christian solidarity based on solidarity shown toward the church and the people of El Salvador: solidarity is not mere humanitarian aid, but a "mutual giving and receiving and bearing with one another."[55] They contend that "to be a human being is to be co-responsible with other human beings and especially with the poorest."[56] In other words, to be in a position of privilege and not offer help and solidarity is to present oneself as not fully human.[57]Cuban-American theologian Ada María Isasi-Diáz believes that solidarity instead of charity is the appropriate ethical behaviour,[58] because solidarity means to treat others and neighbours in a way that initiates dialogue between rich and poor, oppressed and oppressor.[59]Likewise, Mexican scholar Elsa Támez, advocates for solidarity and unity as the right response to oppression and injustice in the world, by using the wisdom of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes 4:1-12.[60]

Ubuntu in Africa

A related ethic to *solidaridad* is the concept of *Ubuntu* in Africa.[61] Ubuntu is applied to a wide variety of settings in African life—from promoting reconciliation and restoration at the Truth Reconciliation Committee (TRC) after apartheid by Desmond Tutu[62] and making

[54] Flores 2013, 68 argues that Latina/o anthropology stands apart from other anthropological approaches that emphasize the priority of the individual over the community. Whilst her claim would hold true when comparing Latina/o anthropology with Western anthropology, I argue it is an overgeneralisation to think all other approaches are individualistic too. African and Asian cultures, like Latina/o, are also communal over individualistic.

[55] Sobrino and Pico 1985, 5. These acts of solidarity include coming to El Salvador to visit and show concern to the suffering, sending letters of support, officially denouncing repression and persecution, sending material aid, and treating El Salvador as a neighbour (1-2).

[56] Sobrino and Pico 1985, 37.

[57] By this definition, the concept of solidarity sheds light on both i) the poor and persecuted (they are dehumanised) and ii) those in power but who restrain support (they fail to be fully human).

[58] Isasi-Díaz 1988, 9–11.

[59] Isasi-Díaz 1988, 32–37.

[60] Tamez 2000, 68–69.

[61] *Ubuntu* originates from the Bantu-speaking peoples, particularly in the Southern parts of Africa. African culture is diverse and complex as it includes peoples in a vast geographical area, nonetheless, it is arguable that the most abiding principle that reflects the very diverse African worldview is *Ubuntu*. See, however, Gade 2012, 484-501 for the different interpretations of Ubuntu that are identified among South Africans of African descent. See also Chimhanda 2013, 4-7 for a brief discussion of African Bantu Spirituality.

[62] The complexities related to Ubuntu and the TRC can have direct implications on the Rohingya genocide. The Ubuntu ethical imperative that one ought always to promote life and avoid killing (Kobe 2020, 5) is a clear statement against the atrocities done to the Rohingyas by the Myanmar military. The Rohingyas will, however, need to grapple with the question of true justice or amnesty and requirement for reparations if they adopt the principle of Ubuntu when the day comes for dialogue with the Myanmar government and military. According to Paul 2009, 134–35, some criticisms of the TRC are precisely about the question of requiring remorse and reparations from the perpetrators and wanting justice not amnesty.

decisions on welcoming refugees from surrounding African countries into South Africa to deciding whether to do sales and business with another party. It is "an African concept of personhood in which the identity of the self is understood to be formed interdependently through community,"[63] whereby the person ceases to exist without the community.[64] In short, an *Ubuntu* worldview says, "I am because you are", "a person is a person through other persons" and "I am related to others, therefore I am."[65] Thus, it is unsurprising that the understanding of "human dignity as found among traditional African societies […] tends to have a strong communal dimension."[66] From a Christian anthropological understanding, it means that only in full communion with others do humans truly bear the image of God.[67]

Archbishop Tutu describes the forgiveness at the TRC as inspired by the spirit of *Ubuntu* because he saw that *Ubuntu* would "humanize the oppressors in the eyes of the blacks and that a sense of common humanity would form."[68] *Ubuntu* was practiced when the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg responded to Zimbabwean migrants by letting them live in the church building.[69] Msabah Barnabé Anzuruni recounts the personal help he received as an asylum seeker, from strangers in the Maputaland forest when he made his way from the Democratic Republic of Congo to South Africa for university as a refugee; he calls it "a typical example of *Ubuntu*."[70] These examples of Ubuntu demonstrate that Ubuntu is not only "a

[63] Battle 2009, 1–2.

[64] Battle 2009, 76.

[65] Additionally, *Ubuntu* is based on a deep form of solidarity, not only with fellow humans but with the cosmos, because everything in the cosmos is united and connected. The interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, solar energy, water, oxygen, etc. is irrefutable. This coheres with an ecofeminist perspective. Beyond a solely anthropocentric sphere, an ecofeminist perspective of relatedness points to human connectedness that includes "the earth, with the physical, chemical, biological, and cosmic powers;" Gebara 1999, 84. Whilst adopting an ecofeminist theological anthropology is beyond the scope of this essay, the problem of the superiority of humans over non-humans is important to keep in mind when pondering interconnectedness.

[66] Grillo, Ndzovu, and Van Klinken 2019, 168. It is different from Western human rights thinking that begins with and centres around the individual person.

[67] Grillo, Ndzovu, and Van Klinken 2019, 172.

[68] Battle 1997, 47. Similar accounts of TRC and *Ubuntu* are found in Paul 2009, 113–39; Kobe 2021, 4. Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005, 225 add that *Ubuntu* is a philosophy of tolerance and compassion, which also embraces forgiveness; to "not to have capacity for forgiveness would be to lack *ubuntu*".

[69] Hankela 2014, 139f. The community-oriented, generous, and compassionate act was challenged when tensions grew between church members and Zimbabwean dwellers (see chapters 8 and 9). Nonetheless, it was the praxis of Ubuntu, an inclusive humanity, that opened the doors of the church.

[70] Msabah 2021, 75.

radical denunciation of selfishness, egotism, xenophobia,"[71] it also expresses Christian values of koinonia—of fellowship, community, participation, and the welcoming of strangers.[72]

A survey of the concept of *solidaridad* and philosophy of *Ubuntu* have shown many similarities in value, culture, and theological outlook of Latin American and African thinkers. African and Latina/o/x theologians have placed the doctrine of theological anthropology in communal and collectivist terms, which suits the Rohingya and Malaysian cultures (more than a Western concept or model would). The commitment to togetherness supports the "kin-ship" and "kin-dom" perspective of life (over a "king-dom" model that is potentially domineering and hegemonic). In these worldviews, solidarity is not only with people who look like us, but who appear "other". Through showing solidarity, interdependence, hospitality, and generosity to one another, we reinvigorate the imago Dei in every human being, regardless of nationality, class, race, gender, religion.

The above commitment to solidarity with migrants and refugees has been evident since the early years of Pope Francis' pontificate. In his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018, Pope Francis called for countries and people to treat migrants and refugees in four ways, more specifically, with four verbs: i) to welcome them into countries safely and legally; ii) to protect their rights and dignity; iii) to promote the inclusion of refugees, their employment, family reunifications, etc.; iv) to integrate migrants and refugees into the new host country without supressing their own cultural identity.[73] Why have these ideal ethics not been shown to Rohingyas, whether in their homeland of Myanmar or their host nations? It could be explained by the problem of sin, the topic to which we now turn.

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[71] Msabah 2021, 75.

[72] Msabah 2021, 88-91. Mnyaka and Motlhabi 2005, 228 also speak about strangers and foreigners made to feel welcome and to move with ease within the community in *Ubuntu* practice. According to Mnyaka and Motlhabi, some factors that contributed to a loss or dilution of the Ubuntu philosophy in African life are colonization, apartheid, and urbanization (232-235).

[73] *For the 140th World Day of Migrants and Refugees* 2018, 2018. In this message, Pope Francis expressed his "particular concern for the lamentable situation of many migrants and refugees fleeing from war, persecution, natural disasters and poverty."

Sin and Restoration

The role of sin within theological anthropology must not be overlooked; sin tarnishes the *imago Dei* and fractures relationships owing to selfish decisions. It is an issue stemming from a love of self above others and God.[74] In Eleazar Fernandez's work regarding confronting systemic evils of this era, he contends that the problem of classism, sexism, racism, and naturism[75] is rooted in bad anthropology, and these problems cause separation and subordination between people groups.[76] The sufferings of Rohingyas can be explained by bad anthropology that has led to hegemonic classism and racism against them. The mass killing and ethnic cleansing committed against Rohingyas as well as the experience of discrimination and exploitation in Malaysia bear testament to the consequences of life-destroying sin that continues to strip away human life and dignity.

Returning to the Ten Common Affirmations, we must not overlook nos. 9 and 10 that are assurances of the restoration and perfection of all things through the Body of Christ and with the help of the Holy Spirit. In the final section, we turn specifically to the Body of Christ in Malaysia, to investigate how the church is playing a part in the restoration of human dignity for Rohingyas in Malaysia.

From Doctrine to Praxis: The Response of the Church in Malaysia

The above examination of theological anthropology, conducted in light of the Rohingya experience, has highlighted the desperate need to i) affirm that refugees are made in the image of God and should be treated with dignity, ii) conduct life in a way that is similar to *Ubuntu* or *solidaridad*; and iii) repent from the sin of oppression, unequal treatment, and the labelling and dehumanising of others. Relatedly, Malaysian Christians and churches need to consider how they can care for victims of genocide and the largest refugee group at their doorstep. My personal experience with the Malaysian church and conversations with faith-based NGO

[74] Cortez 2010, 9 states that the problem of sin in theological anthropology causes the broken reality of human lives and human communities.

[75] Naturism is not recognising each person as a participant that forms part of the cosmos.

[76] For full discussion of the systemic evils, see Fernandez 2004.

workers and church clergy confirm that churches generally avoid Rohingya work,[77] fearful of getting into trouble with the authorities for proselytising to Muslims.[78] It is a complex scenario when religion and race are highly politicised in this Muslim country and where the proselytising of Muslims by other religions is prohibited by Malaysian federal law (a complexity I recall as a teenager)[79]. Whilst the situation and its potential consequences are real issues to grapple with, I present some examples from Protestant-run NGOs as well as the Malaysian Roman Catholic church to showcase different perspectives and responses.

ELShaddai (Klang) and Caring Hearts (Penang)

ElShaddai Centre was established in 2008 as a Christian-based humanitarian NGO to reach out to various refugee and stateless diaspora groups. They are based in Klang where 70% of Rohingyas in Malaysia live. The centre runs three women shelters (more than half the guests are Rohingya single mothers) and offers other support,[80] but their most resource-intensive service is education as refugees cannot access Malaysian government schools.[81] Faisal, President of the Rohingya Society of Malaysia (RSM), believes that "only through education can we promise a good future for our generation."[82] Another NGO in Penang, called Caring Hearts, started three learning centres in 2022 and continues to grow in numbers since there is another substantial Rohingya community in the area. The NGOs have been serving all refugee communities, but Protestant churches are reluctant to support them once they know Rohingyas

[77] Besides my own personal observations, I have spoken to two Christian NGO workers and three pastors who have all confirmed that most churches abstain from Rohingya work.

[78] I know of pastors who have reported incidents whereby Rohingyas have come to their churches to ask for help, but local police and Islamic authorities interpreted that as an act of Christian evangelism, hence, putting the church at risk of investigation and unwanted hassle. Churches and Christians in Malaysia have been more wary about being associated with Muslim outreach after the Christian pastor, Raymond Koh, was publicly abducted in 2017 and has since disappeared. He is known for his religious and humanitarian work amongst the Muslim community in Malaysia; Wong 2017.

[79] Once, I invited a classmate from Southern Thailand to my church. When my father realised she was a Muslim, he warned me not to invite her again for fear of investigation from the authorities.

[80] In our Zoom interview, Andrew Ng spoke about how these shelters serve as a safe home for women to feel supported and cared for. They hope that transformation in their lives can occur through this home community.

[81] In 2024, ElShaddai had over 1800 students across their learning centres, of which 9.29% are Rohingya ElShaddai 2024, "2024 Impact: Empowering Refugees & Diaspora Communities."

[82] ICMC. n.d. "Education: The Key to Success for Rohingya Refugees".

are involved.[83] Churches do partner with the NGOs to support refugees in Malaysia, but these are limited to non-Muslim refugees.[84]

Besides sometimes a simple lack of awareness that refugees are in their midst, the reservation of Protestant churches (mostly evangelical in nature) stem largely from the fear of attracting unwanted attention from the Islamic authorities. The dissonance also comes because whilst there is a prohibition against proselytization to Muslims, the evangelical outlook of the churches means that ministry work requires a growth in numbers through evangelism and successful conversion.[85] The contrasting approach from Catholic churches might indicate they have heeded the advice in *Encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (par. 32) not to "impose on others one's own way of life or own religious belief".[86] A healthy theological anthropology both liberates and compels the Church to love refugees and show them solidarity simply because they too are made in God's image and deserve to be treated equally, with dignity, whether Muslim or not. Moreover, both NGOs mentioned above are living testimonies of Christian groups working with Rohingyas without experiencing from Malaysia's Islamic authorities.[87]

Roman Catholic Response: ICMC, Caritas, and others

Taking a different approach, the Roman Catholic church advocates publicly for Rohingyas on top of directly providing assistance. Since 2010, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) in Malaysia has provided hotlines, shelter, financial, counselling, and education support for refugees.[88] The ICMC also actively opposes child

[83] I mention only Protestant churches because Protestant groups seldom work with Roman Catholic ones in Malaysia. We will see that the Roman Catholic response to Rohingyas differs from that of the Protestants.

[84] Three pastors (Methodist and Anglican) I spoke to said whilst their churches would pray for Rohingyas during Sunday service, churches are generally wary about working directly with Rohingyas.

[85] These sentiments are compiled from the Zoom interviews with the two NGO founders who reflected on their experiences with Protestant churches. The most direct support some Protestant churches have given is to allow ElShaddai's team to use their church buildings on the weekdays to run their learning centres for refugee students (which usually includes Muslim Rohingyas).

[86] Such an attitude frees up Catholic Christians to lend support to refugees and migrants without the overhanging pressure to convert them and risk the displeasure of the authorities.

[87] During our respective Zoom calls, Andrew Ng and Bud Valade shared their experiences of speaking with the local police and authorities who drop by to check their premises—there has not been harassment or danger. In fact, Bud Valade recalled a recent visit from the police who stopped by to investigate their venue, however, the police were supportive of the NGO's work when they realized they were doing good work. The Malaysian authorities are aware of the complicated relationship between the government, UNHCR, and refugees, so they appreciate these humanitarian efforts.

[88] ICMC. n.d., "Empowering Refugees in Malaysia".

marriage taking place within Malaysia's Rohingya Community[89] and partners with RSM to create gender-based violence awareness and promote education.[90] Also, the advocacy group Catholic Action Network (CAN) Malaysia organises workshops with the Rohingya Women's Development Network (RWDN) to draw attention to the plight of the Rohingyas.[91] In 2021 the Catholic bishops in Malaysia signed a statement opposing the deportation of Myanmar refugees; the High Court ordered a temporary halt to the deportation.[92] Caritas Malaysia, the charitable arm of the Roman Catholic Church, also attends to the needs of Rohingyas.[93]

When Rohingyas are seen as equals and neighbours not through merely a one-way giving of alms but by the Church showing true solidarity in a shared humanity, both Church and host country stand to gain a reciprocal relationship in which the Rohingyas are friends, bringing gifts to the hosts receiving them. Former President of Caritas Internationalis, Oscar Andrés Rodriguez, once mused that, "the problem lies in our failure to be the migrant's neighbour."[94] If that is so, the indigenous cultural values of Malaysia might prove useful for building a theological foundation to remedy the failure to be a neighbour.

Gotong-Royong and Malaysian Hospitality

Malaysians are well-known to be hospitable to their guests.[95] Playing off its "MH" designator code, in 2019 the national airline unveiled "Malaysian Hospitality" as its core brand identity, claiming that it draws from Malaysia's rich customs, heritage and traditions and "is about kindness passed from one person to another, regardless of our differences."[96]

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[89] ICMC. n.d., "Fighting Child Marriage in Malaysia's Rohingya Community".

[90] ICMC. n.d., "Education: The Key to Success for Rohingya Refugees". Unfortunately, ICMC has had to close down their offices in Kuala Lumpur and Penang on 28 March 2025 due to the termination of foreign aid funding by the US government; see Brima 2025.

[91] Union of Catholic Asian News 2021.

[92] Gomes 2021.

[93] Read Sulaiman's story at Caritas Malaysia. n.d., "Stories of the poor: Refugees".

[94] Groody and Campese 2008, xi.

[95] Pogadaev 2023 reports a story of a foreigner commenting on Malaysian hospitality.

[96] Malaysia Airlines. n.d., "Malaysian Hospitality".

Supposedly, "MH" is innate, ingrained in Malaysians as "it defines who we are – as an airline, and as a nation."[97] The spirit of hospitality is precisely what the Church can offer Rohingyas.

Furthermore, Malaysians are also shaped in the conception and practice of *gotong-royong*, a term common within the Malay Archipelago, which means working together to foster social solidarity (not dissimilar to *solidaridad* or *Ubuntu*). *Gotong-royong* most often refers to people (of any age, background or gender) working cooperatively to clean up a public place, but the spirit of *gotong-royong* is used in other situations where togetherness and unity are seen, including at Malaysia's General Elections.[98] In essence, *gotong-royong* is participation, collaboration, mutual aid and assistance, and cooperation within community.[99] ElShaddai held a "*gotong-royong* day" in June 2024 in conjunction with World Refugee Day, where locals, foreigners, and refugees joined hands to clean up various public places in the Klang area to showcase the contributions refugees can make towards Malaysia.[100]

Given the spirit of *gotong-royong* and Malaysian hospitality,[101] it seems *more* rather than less natural for Malaysian Christians to feel solidarity with, and display generosity to refugees in Malaysia.[102] The fear of Islamic authorities can be assuaged by the established work of NGOs and the Roman Catholic church.[103] More crucially, Malaysian churches need to know the theology that undergirds a change of behaviour towards Rohingyas. If churches embodied the commitments and praxes of the theological anthropology discussed above, human dignity can be restored to the Rohingyas; the church can reaffirm their inherent value and worth as persons created by God. If God, in the person of Jesus, has crossed the borders of heaven to

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[97] Malaysia Airlines. n.d., "Malaysian Hospitality".

[98] In 2022, for Malaysia's 15th General Elections, Malaysians living overseas had to coordinate and unite with fellow Malaysian strangers to bring their ballots safely back to the country in time for polling day. This act of unity and solidarity was called *gotong-royong*; see de Cruz 2022.

[99] Anthropologist of Islam, Bowen 1986, 545–61 traces the roots of gotong-royong and discusses its meaning and social significance.

[100] ElShaddai 2024, "Inspiring Community Spirit with *Gotong-Royong*."

[101] There is potential of developing them into a theological conception that is local to Malaysia.

[102] I am of the view that *gotong-royong*, *Ubuntu* or *solidaridad* are not dissimilar to the Methodist principles of social holiness, which I argue flows into social justice; see Walton 2019, 34.

[103] The Catholic church has historically shown herself more willing to stand against real or perceived societal pressures. E.g. Malaysia's Catholic Church (unsuccessfully) took the government up to the highest court in the land, suing them for a ban against the long-used word 'Allah' in their publications.

earth, then followers of Jesus should also live in a way that crosses borders of political, social, economic, and religious labels. As Carvalhaes boldly claims: "to become a sanctuary to all immigrants is not a choice for Christian churches, out of their possible abilities or rights, but rather a full demand, a material and discursive action".[104]

Conclusion

As a migrant and student of theology, I have consulted Latin American and African views of theological anthropology and shown that Rohingya migration (and genocide) affects the Christian doctrine of what it means to be human. The plight of the Rohingyas illustrates how tremendous suffering is afflicted on certain people when God's image is not recognised in fellow humans and when *solidaridad* and *Ubuntu* are not practiced. I argue the theological anthropology discussed here can empower the already well-positioned Malaysian Church to adopt a more generous solidarity, mutuality, and openheartedness (in the spirit of *gotong-royong*) towards Rohingya refugees, warmly welcoming them—even if not necessarily as siblings in Christ, as fellow sojourners bearing the *imago Dei*.

[104] Carvalhaes 2018, 13.

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