

**IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES:
THE POWER OF PERCEPTION IN THE
TREATMENT OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS**

IAMS Paper Proposal

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Today the world is witnessing an unprecedented number of international and internal migrants, constituting an estimated one-seventh of the global population. Concomitant to this migration has been a rise in xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric in receiving countries. Within this context, people who enter into other societies will be viewed through the lens of what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has called “social imaginaries.” As I am using the concept, social imaginaries refer to ways of “thinking about, speaking about, and organizing relations among and within human groups.” Some of these social imaginaries are quite well-established, such as “race” within most societies, whereas others are of more recent origin, or perhaps more recently reawakened is a better way of putting it. These social imaginaries reflect what social scientists refer to as in-group/out-group bias--the development of boundaries between “us” and “them,” with preference given to “us” and often the dehumanization and demonization of “them.” Immigrants, as often the most vulnerable people in any given society, are particularly susceptible to the dehumanization brought about by these social imaginaries.

Christians are also affected by the social imaginaries in their society, so must be able to identify them, reflect upon them biblically and sociologically, and be willing to be, as Andrew Walls put it, “out of step” with their own society when it comes to the (mis)treatment of the immigrants among them. In this paper I will address these issues, and propose a missiological way forward combining both theology and anthropology.