Surveillance and Social Justice – May 2017

Section 17. Borders

17.1 National borders are sites of particularly keen surveillance, especially if one is assigned to a category deemed risky, suspicious, or otherwise unwelcome.

17.2 The Old Testament contains sufficient endorsements of keeping watch on city walls or at gates to highlight the necessity of guarding against attacks. The shepherd analogy in the New Testament likewise affirms an appropriate defence of the 'borders' of the fold. Yet, there is a significant difference between a predominant disposition to embrace strangers, and an attitude that first and foremost considers others as a threat to be managed, even excluded.[1]

17.3 In this sense, borders become focal points around which a state's self-image and values are disclosed. Rigorous scrutiny of travellers is appropriate given the history of successful attacks upon aircraft, but unwillingness to acknowledge and address unjust scapegoating and discriminatory sorting is not. Surveillance that is welcoming is attentive to discrimination; rejecting surveillance has little regard for the misuse of the power to monitor. Another shepherding analogy familiar to hearers of Jesus' parables endorses the search for one missing rather than the overwhelming majority (here the 99%) having a monopoly on the shepherd's protective care (Lk. 15:4).

17.4 Borders are not confined to ports of entry but appear at multiple points in everyday life, whenever identification for authorised access to services or buildings is required. It is when people cross cyber-borders that they are made more visible. In a search for missing persons the police can make extensive use of such 'border-crossings' to trace someone's path from one CCTV coverage to another, or for example when they withdraw money from a cashpoint or use a form of electronic payment.

17.5 Prejudice on grounds of, for example, race, religion, gender, age, or socio-economic status can be played out through surveillance strategies. A young black man may well have a very different experience of being monitored to that of a middle-aged, middle-class white woman travelling through the cyber-check points of a busy retail park. Jesus' warning to those who judged by external appearances sits alongside the apostle Paul's radical vision of dismantled social divisions, which although a charge to the Church, overflows as a critique of prejudice more widely in society: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

17.6 Where people are categorised through big data their identity is at stake. Surveillance systems may deploy the power to name someone as a perpetrator on the basis of what people like them have done. Instead, it is God who gives a new name, new nature and a new future.[2] By making people visible at national and everyday cyber-borders, surveillance imputes identities at the same time as it demands identification. Attitudes of prejudice, fear and suspicion alter people's life chances. The process of accessing welfare benefits bring these to the surface to a profound degree.

See full report

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[1] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
[2] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 286.