

# Saying No: U2's response to the evils of the refugee crisis

Steve Taylor

Sometimes entertainment becomes not only political, but also theological. *Songs of Experience*, U2's fourteenth and latest album, splashed into Christmas stockings over the summer. The album debuted at Number 1 on the Billboard charts, making U2 the first music group to gain a Number 1 album in four consecutive decades. In the midst of commercial success, U2 has continued to engage social issues, singing 'No' to human evil in the world. *Songs of Experience* is no exception as U2 engage the evils around the European refugee crisis.

Evil is a strong word. Yet the Scriptures are clear. The greatest of God's commandments includes loving neighbour as yourself. Israel's laws emerged from the Exodus experience of being refugees, fleeing the tyranny of Empire in Egypt. Just as Israel in history experienced God's protecting love as refugees, so now in everyday life humans should express God's love, including to refugees. Anything less is to deny the Commandments.

On *Songs of Experience*, U2 engage the evil of the refugee crisis in a mid-album bracket of three songs. First, *American Soul* suggests that American values of unity and community need to apply to 'refugees like you and me / A country to receive us'. A second song, *Summer of Love*, longs for flowers to grow amid 'the rubble of Aleppo'. The hope, fifty years after a drug-fuelled, music-drenched Summer of Love in San Francisco, is for peace to descend on the West Coast of Syria in the Middle East. A third song is *Red Flag Day*. The title suggests a continuation of the beach vibe of Summer of Love while the lyrics remain focused on the consequences of Aleppo, Syria's largest city, becoming rubble.

The civil war in Syria resulted in an unprecedented refugee crisis. For more than 1 million people in 2015, this meant crossing the Mediterranean Sea, seeking safety in Europe. Deaths at sea rose to record levels, with more than 1,200 people drowning in the

month of April 2015. And so, in *Red Flag Day*, U2 address this evil: 'Not even news today / So many lost in the sea'. This is *evil-as-disinterest*, as the lost and the least disappear from our 24-hour news cycle.

For U2, the response to this evil is located in one word: 'The one word that the sea can't say / Is no, no, no, no'. It is easy to imagine the impact of this line performed live, Bono holding a microphone out to an audience, inviting them to sing, 'no, no, no, no'. It is a powerful lyric. Water, the sea over which refugees travel, can never speak. But humans can. Humans can sing that one word, 'No'.

... IS THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN FACT AN INVITATION FOR THE CHURCH TO SING 'NO', TO RESPOND TO EVIL BY ENTERING THE WATERS OF BAPTISM?

At the same time, having raised children, I am well aware of the limitations inherent in the simple word 'No'. It is often the first word learnt by a child, easy on the lips of a two-year-old teetering on a tantrum. So, when U2 sing 'No', what exactly are they asking us as humans to do?

U2 conclude *Red Flag Day* with the provocative line, 'Baby let's get in the water'. It reminds me of the baptism of Jesus. Every year in the Christian calendar, Christmas is followed by Epiphany and the birth of Jesus is placed in relation to God declaring love and pleasure as Jesus enters the Jordan waters. It is the way Jesus begins ministry, by getting in the water.

So is the refugee crisis in fact an invitation for the church to sing 'No', to respond to evil by entering the waters of baptism? *Physically*, in entering the Jordan River, Jesus expresses his obedience to God. This makes getting in the water the essential pattern of Christian discipleship, a way of saying 'No' to our own plans and 'Yes' to God's intentions. *Historically*, as Israel crossed the Jordan River, they were saying 'Yes' to living out God's

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commandments no matter in what country they found themselves living. This makes baptism an expression of 'Yes' to loving our neighbour. And *sacramentally*, baptism and communion are woven together in the Exodus story of the Passover, which involves Israel entering the waters of the Red Sea. This makes getting in the water an expression of solidarity with all those who decide to say 'No' to persecution and tyranny, whether in fleeing Egypt in history or in the rubble of Aleppo today.

Hearing U2's *Red Flag Day* and listening to the Gospel story of Jesus' baptism offer ways to respond to the evil of the refugee crisis. The single word of 'No' is filled with Christian content. Every red flag swim in this summer of love becomes a singing of 'No'. It means lobbying Parliament to 'Let them come'. It involves lighting candles as prayers of intercession for all those lost at sea, refusing to forget those forgotten by the news today. It means a welcome to the promised lands as we teach English classes and guide migrants around unfamiliar supermarkets.

We often view baptism in individual terms, as a personal choice to follow Jesus. What if it is also a call to mission, a way to respond to evil by getting in the water in solidarity with the refugee crisis today?



STEVE TAYLOR

is Principal of Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership in Dunedin, New Zealand, and author of *Built for Change*. He writes widely on theology and popular culture at [www.emergentkiwi.org.nz](http://www.emergentkiwi.org.nz).