

The Impact of Migration on Church Mission

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ABSTRACT: I deal with the topic of migration's impact on mission, mainly within European boundaries, due to the recent waves of immigrants coming from the Middle East. The vast majority of these people is non-Christian and is seeking to settle in a western country. Mainly, these countries are secular, postmodern societies, being already on the verge of losing their Christian identity. Thus, the phenomenon of migration could be perceived as a threat to the Christian heritage of this nation. On the other hand, migration could be seen as an opportunity for mission as well; thus, churches do not need to be sending out missionaries for, instead, people come into their own turf.

KEY WORDS: migration, mission, worldview, church.

Migration has always been a big phenomenon in the history of this world. For different reasons people leave their home countries to settle in others either for temporary or for good. Last year, however, the number of the refugees in the world has reached more than 65 million, which is the highest level ever recorded. After an increase of five million a single year, the number of people displaced by conflict—refugees, asylum seekers or those displaced internally—was at an estimated 65.3 million by the end of 2015. It is the equivalent of one in every 113 people on the planet, according to the UN Refugee Agency, and if considered a nation would make up the 21st largest in the world.¹

The year of 2015 is a stone mile as waves of immigrants reached the European continent, the most significant such phenomenon.

According to International Organization for Migration (IOM) 1,011,700 migrants came to Europe by sea and 34,887 by land last year, although the real number is estimated to be higher.² This amount to 1,046,599 immigrants. The statistics show that most of the immigrants come from Muslim predominant countries such as: Syria (50.2%), Afghanistan (20.2%), Iraq (7.1%) and some other countries from Middle East.

The impact of immigration on both the migrants and the citizens of the destination country is enormous. If one takes a quick look at what is happening in Europe, of the estimated 24 million migrants that were in the EU at the end of 2003, around 48.5% belonged to Christian Churches; a further 30.9% were Muslims and about 20.5% belonged to other religions.³ These new immigrants add to the total figures just mentioned as every year more and more sojourners come in the western world.

The integration of these newcomers is not an easy task. In many situations the newcomers do not embrace the culture of the destination country. Regardless of the reasons why they came in Europe, for most of them religion is central to their way of life and a crucial means of preserving identity as well as homeland connections. Even the less religious among immigrants often renew or revive their religious commitment as a vital part of dealing with alienation. In this case they take advantage of the economic facilities but disregard the spiritual values of the indigenous culture. Thus, the immigrants opt to develop separately, preferring to build their own religious edifices to create an environment where they could feel at home. In this case, the immigrant religious groups receive assistance from the locals, especially financial benefits.

Another possibility is when either the indigenous or the immigrants, who shared the same beliefs, are more numerous. In the first instance, the locals would assimilate the latter and would integrate them. This would be the ideal situation because on the one hand it fulfills the requirements of the Christian faith, which is an important internal question; and on the other hand, looking at the situation from a secular point of view, this approach is important for the integration process of migrants into society.

If positive religious integration takes place this could become a resource for the wider integration of migrants.

In the second instance, when the immigrants would be more numerous than the locals, they would revitalize that religious group. That can happen more often in the more secularized Europe. Hanciles captures very well the idea of integration and its impacts on the indigenous people: "Regardless of whether the cultural encounters that occur in migration are marked by coercion or by fruitful accommodation, the cultural groups involved are seldom left unchanged. The movement of peoples has the capacity not only to foster cultural diversity but also to significantly alter demographic, economic, and social structures. This capacity makes it a potent source of social transformation and an active ingredient in the great dramas of history."⁴

Time reveals what the impact of the immigrants upon the indigenous culture would look like in the European countries. It is not easy to foresee the development of the church, probably the most important factor to take into consideration is the condition of Europe as to its spiritual development.

Europe has become more and more materialistic while the immigrants have a strong sense of the supernatural, regardless of the expression of their religion. The question is whether the church would see the phenomenon of immigration as an opportunity to fulfill its mission or not? As we have already seen, change happens but the question is what direction this change is going to be? Is it going to be a revitalization of the church or a step further away from the European historical roots? Is Islam going to dominate Europe taking over the Christendom?

Though we cannot accurately anticipate the future, we could glean from what is happening in Europe and build a case scenario as to where the things are going. We shall look into the mission of the church and then into the two possible directions church might take in Europe.

The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church is given by her master, Jesus Christ, to preach the Good News of the Gospel to the whole world. Quite simply, the missionary impulse imbedded in Christianity's core message defies restraint. Already in the third century Origen attested that "Christians do not neglect, as far as in them lies, to take measures to disseminate their doctrine throughout the whole world."⁵

The 20 centuries of history have showed the truth mentioned above. Christians, throughout the time, have managed to let people know the *kerygma*, the core message of Christianity. But what about this current historical phenomenon of immigration? Would it be another occasion for Christians to bring about their mission? The context is not an easy one in the light of the attacks in France and Germany as well as the tensions in the other European countries.

This could be either that *kairos*, the opportune time, or, on the contrary, a big threat. There are two opposing perspectives on the effect of migration on church mission: one negative and the other is positive. The Economist captures this two positions: "On one hand, European churches and religious charities have played a prominent role in succoring migrants and campaigning for them to be treated decently. On the other, politicians on the nationalist right are beating the drum of Christian nativism; they have redoubled their warnings about the threat to Europe's long-established religious culture."⁶

However, as the same publication captures it, the Christian organizations know how to better understand the times:

Both in Italy and across Europe, branches of Caritas, a Catholic humanitarian agency, play a big role in advocating for migrants' welfare, even in contentious situations. The network's French arm, known as Secours Catholique, hands out food and blankets to the people who have camped out in the port of Calais, determined to reach Britain. Its English branch, CAFOD, is lobbying the government to take in more refugees from Syria and elsewhere. Caritas is also active among immigrants in Greece (see picture), even though Catholics are a small minority in that mainly Orthodox land. Greece is yet another country where the Christian response to migrants has been

conflicted; Ieronymos, the Orthodox archbishop of Athens, has called on compatriots to be generous to all newcomers, while the ultra-rightists of Golden Dawn (whose rhetoric ranges from Christian nativism to neo-paganism) claim to have plenty of secret supporters in the ranks of the church.⁷

A Gloomy Perspective

When the news about EU's commitment regarding the immigrants spread, many Christian leaders feared that this is going to be a rise of Islam. They also talked about the probability of terrorists being infiltrated among the immigrants. The attacks in France and Germany seem to confirm this very fact and added to the turmoil in these countries.

The biggest argument for this perspective lies in the worldview(s) most Europeans embrace. Sadly, the EU citizens do not adhere to Christianity wholeheartedly but rather hold on to a materialistic perspective on the world. In some instances, we read about those who abandoned the secular worldview and adopt some form of eastern spirituality while others, women included, converted to Islam. In many western countries church buildings were transformed into mosques and the European democratic systems fits well with the purpose of Islam.

Under the principle of political correctness, which is designed to protect and encourage the development of minorities, wherever they go and organized into communities the Muslims could access foreign funds in order to build mosques. This is the case with the prospective biggest mosque in Europe, authorized to be built in Bucharest.

Consequently, those view future of Europe in a more negative way have sufficient reasons why. They built their case mainly around what is been broadcasted and on the decisions the European officials are taking. From this perspective the things look gloomy.

A Positive Perspective

If we could change the lens through which we see things we might get a different perspective. For example, in this case, we could realize that the immigrants are human beings who left their countries due to major crisis and their needs could be met here. From the church mission perspective that could mean a shift in the paradigm of mission. Churches and mission agencies have invested enormously to send out missionaries to those countries that are closed to the gospel and now they are coming to Europe.⁸ Isn't that the biggest opportunity so far? The Christendom of western Europe, which was thought to be obsolete due to secularism could be challenged and, thus, revitalized by the flood of migrants.

In dealing with the immigrants, Christians need to take into consideration the specific biblical principles. The Lord had commanded His people to treat well the sojourners. Thus, they are to offer help in meeting the needs of both Christians and non-Christians. Agencies such as Caritas, Christian Aid and Samaritan Purse dedicated to this very end. Those organizations' workers were on the trenches, assisting the migrants from the very first time they landed and on the journey to the destination country as well as in the refugees' camps.

A second biblical principle is that human dignity must be respected regardless of the nationality or religion of the individual so Christians should love their neighbors, and in this case, they happened to be the immigrants.⁹ Such context is ideal for communicating the message of the Gospel.

Kirsten Grieshaber wrote an article on September 4th, 2015, entitled "At a Berlin church, Muslim refugees converting in droves"¹⁰. She analyzed a particular church from Berlin, in which the attendance grew consistently due to the contribution of the immigrants. A couple from Iran converted to Christianity and was baptized. The reporter digs into the reason why that couple did convert, advancing the possibility that this would make it easier for them to integrate into the German society. Indeed, motivation is not a factor one can control but this is happening all over Germany as the article concluded.

Conclusion

The migrants from Middle East pose quite a challenge for the church today in carrying out her mission. With all the difficulties I believe church could seize the moment and turn it to an opportunity for growth. Churches across Europe are already in this process and many others could take their examples. They just need to understand the times and to act accordingly.

NOTES

¹ Peter Yeung, "Refugee crisis: Record 65 million people forced to flee homes," *The Independent*, June 20th, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-migrants-world-day-un-a7090986.html> (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

² "Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond", An IOM Report on 2015, <http://doe.iom.int/docs/Flows%20Compilation%202015%20Overview.pdf> (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

³ Darrell Johnson & Alessia Passarelli, "Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses", Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe & Nova Research Centre, 2008. https://europeanmission.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/mapping_migration_europe2008.pdf (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

⁴ Jehu J. Hanciles, "Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Vol.27, No.4, October 2003):146–153, <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/issues/2003-04/2003-04-146-hanciles.pdf> (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

⁵ Origen, *Against Celsus*, OrthodoxEbooks, Book 3, Chapter 9, 912.

⁶ "Diverse, Desperate Migrants Have Divided European Christians", *The Economist*, September 6th, 2015. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2015/09/migrants-christianity-and-europe> (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Refugees in Europe—A Fence or a Bridge," European Evangelical Mission Association, <http://www.europeanema.org/refugees-in-europe-a-fence-or-a-bridge> (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

⁹ Darrell Johnson & Alessia Passarelli, "Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses", Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe & Nova Research Centre, 2008, https://europeanmission.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/mapping_migration_europe2008.pdf (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).

¹⁰ Kristen Grieshaber, “At a Berlin church, Muslim refugees converting in droves”, Yahoo News, September 4th, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/berlin-church-muslim-refugees-converting-droves-083020529.html?ref=gs> (Last accessed on July 10, 2016).