

Migration and the Church in Contemporary Europe

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ABSTRACT: One of the aspects which is growing in size and importance in the contemporary world, specifically, in Europe is migration. The 'old continent' is flooded with 'new people' who were 'far neighbors' until recently. This paper explores the way in which contemporary migration is dealt with by Europe, specifically European Union member countries. A significant input can be offered by the church in the migration issue, as the Bible has to say a lot about this phenomenon. This article aims to explore these aspects as well as suggesting that migration is, more than a challenge, an opportunity of service and witness for the church.

KEY WORDS: Migration, Europe, church, integration, refugees.

In recent years migration has become one of the main issues of concern for the international community because of the refugee crisis, which came to the front page particularly in 2015 with the 'exodus' to Europe. Nevertheless, migration is an inherent human experience as old as the race itself; also, migration is a far more complex phenomenon than the refugees—it includes the movements of people who choose to relocate for various reasons: economic, social, political. Especially within its daring project—European Union, Europe is one of the main desired destinations for migrants: high standard of life and freedoms in any possible area. In 2015 it became clear that the European states do not respond uniformly to the migrant issue, particularly to the refugees: some countries welcomed the refugees while others built fences to 'protect'

from them. Within EU the relocation of people is not considered international migration anymore given of the four fundamental freedoms of the Union; that is freedom of movement of people. However, the perception of the citizens of Western countries is far from being so open and welcoming; for example, one of the arguments used in the successful 'Leave' campaign for the 'Brexit' referendum was related to the issue of Eastern Europeans 'flooding' the UK taking away the jobs of the 'locals.'

European Union is weakened after the referendum outcome in the UK; it is still to be seen what how this will impact the principles of the Union (especially the much debated the freedom of movement within EU) and even its existence. But how do churches relate to migration? What have the churches done and what could they improve when dealing with the refugee crisis? In order to explore these issues, we will consider the phenomenon of migration in contemporary Europe, then we will look at migration in the Scriptures and theology in order to suggest some things that the church could improve or start doing in relation to migrants.

Migration in Europe

In 2015 the number of international migrants in the world was 244 million people, which is a growth of 41% compared to 2000; out of these migrants, nearly a third were to be found in Europe (76 million) and a third in Asia (75 million). For Europe, this is a significant number as it means that the percentage of the migrants out of the population is as high as 15%. Over this period of fifteen years, Europe has gained an average of 1.3 million persons per year. Without this influx of persons, the population growth rate on the continent would have been negative.¹ The United Nations report warns that although the population decline has been delayed and will probably continue to be slowed down, the ageing of the population is irreversible—which will eventually lead to a decline by 2050 and even worse by 2100.²

European Union has reported an immigration of 3.8 million persons in 2014 (the latest year with comprehensive data), while the

emigration was 2.8 million; it is virtually impossible to have precise figures on people actually coming in or leaving European Union as such, as these two figures include flows between the 28 EU Member States. However, working with the immigration figure, we learn that 1.6 million persons were not citizens of member countries, while 1.3 million citizens were changing their country of residence within the EU, 870 thousand were nationals returning to their countries and 12.4 thousand stateless people.³ The 1.3 million citizens moving within the EU are reflected in the nearly fifty per cent (13 countries out of the 28 members of EU) of EU countries which have reported higher numbers of emigrants than of immigrants. Significant is also the fact that the perception that the migrants from non-member countries are the majority of the people coming into Europe is not wholly accurate, the percentage being 42%.

The immigrants to EU in 2014 contributed to the decrease of the median age of EU: in the latter the median age was 42 years, while the median age of the immigrants was 28 years.

Among the migrants of a particular importance are the refugees; UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency reported that in 2015 65.3 million people have been forced to leave home; nearly a third of these people (21.3 million) are refugees of whom over a half under the age of 18; the rest of the people forced to leave home have found shelter within their own country. Nearly half of the refugees (around 10 million) are stateless, which means they are denied nationality and implicitly basic human rights (education, healthcare, employment).

Of the people who are displaced in the whole world, Europe is hosting 6%, while the Middle East and North Africa are hosting 39%; there is no European country among the top six hosting countries in the world.

The International Organization for migration reported 1,046,599 arrivals to Europe by land and by sea, while for the period January–July 2016 there are reported 278,201 arrivals and 3,151 dead or missing in the Mediterranean Sea.⁴ The number of the arrivals for the seven months of 2016 is considerably lower than the number for the equivalent months of 2015—less than half of the 610,516 persons in January–July 2015. One of the main reasons for this drastic decrease is the unfavourable attitude of Europeans

towards the refugees, who have been suspected to include ISIL terrorists.

European Union has developed a framework of policies and regulations concerning migration with the purpose of welcoming and integrating migrants of all types within the borders of EU. Some of the main legal mechanisms which regulate the complex issue of migration have been developed in the main treaties of EU or agreements such as Amsterdam (1999), Dublin II (2003), *Common Basic Principles on Integration* (2004), the programmatic *Zaragoza Declaration* (2010), the founding of *European Asylum Support Office (EASO)* in 2010 which seeks to implement *Common European Asylum System (CEAS)* and the courageous and practical *European Agenda for the Integration of third country nationals* (2011). EU is one of the main contributors to the work of international and European organizations which deal with migration, especially with refugees. All this, of course, does not guarantee an efficient integration of the migrants, first of whom are the refugees. As it has been shown above, due to the public pressure, the EU member states have responded to the refugee crisis at a much smaller scale. While the conflicts in the countries which are the exporters of refugees have not ended—for example, the top three countries which the refugees came from in 2015 were Syria (4.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million) and Somalia (1.1 million) ('Figures at a glance', UNHCR)—EU member states do not succeed in overcoming in the blockage caused by the overreaction of the public opinion towards the crime produced by some of the refugees, raising concerns on the infiltration of radical Muslims among those coming in Europe.

How are the churches relating to this challenge of migration, especially to the refugee crisis? How could they improve their involvement in the needs of the neighbor.

Migration in the Bible

Although an important social and, as we shall see, biblical phenomenon, there hasn't been a significant theological reflection on migration.⁵ In the last couple of decades, primarily because of

the international migrant crises in various parts of the world, there has been a growing interest in articulating a theology of migration.

Migration is indeed a concept imbedded in the biblical story—from its incipient phase in which Adam and Eve migrate out of the garden of Eden (Gn 3:23–24) to its completion in the disclosure of the New Jerusalem, the final destination for ‘migrants’ of all ‘tribes and races’ (Rv 21:1–4). It seems appropriate to agree with Hoppe who asserted that the Scripture is “a literary tapestry woven from the stories of migrants.”⁶

Andrew Walls suggests that in the Bible there are two paradigms of migration: one *adamic* and the other one *abrahamic*.⁷ In the former the migration is punitive being the result of the breaking of the Law of God and the way curse and suffering are avoided. In the latter migration is redemptive being the answer to a divine call to blessedness and communion with God. The two types are overlapping in the Scriptures, but the paradigm which prevails is the *abrahamic* one, as all those called to journey to the heavenly Jerusalem eventually reach their eternal destination.

But Scriptures do not only acknowledge migration as an essential human experience but also regard it as a condition of the people of God, as a matter of divine concern to the point of the identification of God with the migrants and even as a way to describe the divine *kenosis*. The people of God is formed while the Israelites were migrants in Egypt and then generation after generation the migrants in a fallen world respond to the divine invitation to join the redeemed family of God; in the New Testament we are reminded of a citizenship that is in heavens making the children of God mere migrants on the move. (Phlm 3:20) This image is drawn upon also in ‘Lumen Gentium, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church’, where the Council Vatican II speaks of the church in terms of people of God which is migrating: ‘the Church, while on earth it journeys in a foreign land away from the Lord, is like in exile.’⁸

God commands the Israelites to embrace the strangers, to love and care for them on the one hand because the ultimate ownership of all lands belongs to God himself (Lv 25:23) and on the other hand because the Jews had themselves been strangers in Egypt. (Dt 10:19) If these reasons fail to convince the nationalist and racist Israelites,

God identifies himself with the stranger by declaring his love for him or her. (Dt 10:17–18) The rights of the strangers are protected by divine command which, once broken, triggers the curse of the divine wrath. (Dt 27:19) The same care is requested by Jesus, whose identification with the stranger is complete: welcoming the stranger is to receive Jesus himself. (Mt 25:38, 40) This is why the hospitality (*philoxenia*: love of the stranger) plays such an important role in personal and corporate Christian life: embracing the stranger, the other, we receive his or her Maker and Sender.

Along the lines of Walls' paradigms of migration, we could speak of a third type—the Christic one; Paul speaks of Christ's journey which started from the heights of divine perfection (Phlm 2:6), went down to the abyss of death (Phlm 2:8) and then back to the initial glory and honor (Phlm 2:9–11) but this time raising up the ones who used to be 'children of wrath' (Eph 2:3, 6, 7). Christ comes into the world to redeem it but he is rejected as stranger (Jn 1:11)—the Creator becomes the stranger. Also, the earthly ministry of Jesus was the journey of an itinerant preacher rejected (Mt 8:20) and then condemned as a worthless stranger.

Toward a Theology of Migration

Daniel G. Groody offers a helpful tool to reflect theologically on migration taking firm steps towards laying down the groundwork for a theology of migration. He suggests that there are four foundations for a theology of migration: *Imago Dei*, *Verbum Dei*, *Missio Dei* and *Visio Dei*, corresponding to the classical theological themes of creation, incarnation, mission, and the vision of the kingdom of God.⁹

He starts by drawing on the understanding that any human being, including the migrant or the refugee, bears the image of God, and this leads to an imperative to define the migrant in relation to his or her Creator and to treat the migrant with dignity.

By *Verbum Dei*, Groody refers to the incarnation, which he regards as the strongest pillar for a theology of migration: 'The *Verbum Dei* . . . is the great migration of human history: God's movement in love to humanity makes possible humanity's movement

to God.”¹⁰ Exploring the implications of the divine kenosis with the climax in the crucifying of Christ, Groody develops some of the ideas of Karl Barth who speaks of the incarnation as “the way of the Son of God into the far country.”¹¹

The *Missio Dei* in which the church takes part is to restore the fallen human beings to a whole relationship to the Creator as well as within the humanity by creating a new community of equality, acceptance and love. This work of reconciliation entails the affirmation of all human beings, any possible barrier being taken down to foster a genuine togetherness.

The last concept Groody uses in his attempt to articulate shortly a theology of migration is *Visio Dei*. For the theologian this concept goes beyond the Kingdom of God as it will be revealed in the eschaton, by bringing it into the present, making it a reality for the new people of God.¹² The community of the redeemed is to live out the values of the Kingdom to fully come, and to promote these values into the wider society in order to connect it to the will that God has for it. In other words, it is not only the destination that counts, but the journey too. It is a transformative experience, an adventure to which the humankind is invited in order to fulfill its destiny.

The Role of the Church

As it has been shown, the reasons for migration make up a complex phenomenon as it includes economic migrants, refugees, temporary workers, wonderers, stateless people, lawful and lawful residents. Each category and each case should be treated individually. However, there some things the Church could do—in some cases it already does—but its involvement could be improved.

The Church as a Prophetic Voice in the Public Arena

In the highly technological world that we live in, the public arena can easily be dominated by voices which manipulate: the press, influential public figures, and powerful state structures of various types. The church is to make her voice heard with a positive message

about migration promoting ideas such as: migration is inherent to our human nature; it benefits the countries which welcome migrants by solving or at least alleviating the dramatic issues of demographic catastrophes and shortage of workforce. A continent such as Europe should be reminded that for centuries it was the greatest 'exporter' of migrants—from the Middle Ages up to twentieth century Europe has conquered land on virtually every continent¹³ and it has sent Europeans to all these places, generally to rule, to control. Some of the migration in Europe (especially in the UK and France) is related to this historical relationship to countries on other continents which used to be part of the according empires.

The prophetic aspect refers to the fact that the church should offer the positive perspective of the Scriptures on migration, sanctioning the states when they are careless with this issue. This mandate is not oriented only towards the often heartless states but also to the people of Europe: the inviolable principle of the dignity of each human being and the responsibility which derives from our capacity of stewards of what we have for our fellow human beings, these urge for a positive approach to migration.

The Church as the Conscience of a Society

The Church needs to call the society to the values of the Kingdom as the only way to accomplish peace, development and the well being of its members. Whenever values such as respect, love, care, compassion, hospitality, generosity, life are denied or deserted, the church should warn society in relation to the wrong way it is going.

The Church ought to be involved in asking those in power to promote laws and policies which seek the wellbeing of the migrants to that country as much as the wellbeing of the citizens of that country. Such an involvement was when, in 2001, Catholic and Protestant leaders emphasized the urgent need for the improvement of the conditions in which migrants were kept in a detention center near John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City; conditions which were allegedly worse than in prisons.¹⁴

The Church could also ask governments to work more thoroughly to improve situations in the migrants (especially refugees) exporting countries. One could argue on the role the powerful and influential western countries could have played in working beforehand to avoid some of the devastating conflicts in countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq.

Another area where the church can be a 'conscience' is in watching the way the states or EU structures are fulfilling their responsibilities; a commending enterprise along these lines is that of five European ecumenical organisations (The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), the Conference of European Churches (CEC), Eurodiaconia, EU-CORD, and ACT Alliance EU) which urged the European governments to implement the requirements of the treaties or laws with the purpose on acting for the well being of the refugees (Press Release No: 16/05, 17 March 2016 Brussels).

Migration: An Efficient Partner in Evangelical Mission

In his chapter 'Coming to Gath: Migration as Mission among Philistines', Robert Gallagher makes the point that in the biblical story of David's life, the forced migration of David facilitated a kind of knowledge of God to the pagan King Achish and to those under his influence; Gallagher suggests that means that migrants can be effective missionaries and that their stories should be considered when developing a strategy for missions.¹⁵

European migration has been done not only with a view to master new lands, but also by sending missionaries to all these new territories which were perceived as the perfect candidates for basic evangelism.¹⁶

Also, the reverse is possible and effective: migrants are experience uprooting, instability so they are probably more open to consider the message of the God who is meeting these needs.¹⁷

Therefore, the church should consider carefully each of its members who is migrating in order to equip and to send with the purpose of witnessing to the new life in Christ. While some churches suffer the loss of those who leave, a healthy understanding of the

concept of the Kingdom of God will help these churches be positive about the migration of her members.

Churches as Welcoming Communities for All Migrants

In a study sponsored by *The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe and World Council of Churches*, Darrell Jackson and Alessia Passarelli show that the churches are not succeeding at integrating the migrants in churches, less so in the ecclesial leadership.¹⁸ The low percentage of migrants integrated as church leaders into the adoptive communities where their faith represents the majority highlight a real need for integration. Churches should make room in all areas of church life to migrants, including leadership. The ecclesial community is to be a family which offers its support, care and love to all its members as well as migrants with the hope to integrate. Should the church fail in this area, then the capacity of the church to offer the help to all affected categories of people will be severely diminished.

Conclusion

Migration is one of the most significant issues faced by the contemporary world. Given its history as well as its present, Europe should have the internal resources to continue to protect its values and, at the same time, to serve the needs of its neighbours. As the challenges of migration are significant, the church could play an important role in the dynamics of the phenomenon in European Union. The church could draw much from the biblical story and bring her contribution to improving the reception and the integration of the migrants.. The church has a golden chance to serve the lowly, witness to the Gospel and have a lasting impact in a contemporary Europe which is running away from its Christian heritage.

Migration represents not only a challenge posed by migrants, but it is also a great opportunity for service and efficient witness.

NOTES

¹ “Trends in International Migration,” in *Popfacts*, no.4/2015 <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/populationfacts/docs/MigrationPopFacts20154.pdf> (Last accessed on August 5, 2016.)

² “World Population 2015,” *United Nations* https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/publications/files/key_findings_wpp_2015.pdf (Last accessed on August 4, 2016.)

³ Cf. “Migration and migrant population statistics,” *Eurostat* http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics (Last accessed on August 5, 2016.) See also “Figures at a glance,” UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html> (Last accessed on August 5, 2016.)

⁴ “Migration Flows–Europe,” *IOM* <http://migration.iom.int/europe/> (Last accessed on August 2, 2016.)

⁵ Gemma Tulud Cruz “Migration as Locus Theologicus,” in *Colloquium* (Vol 46, no.1/2014): 87–100.

⁶ Leslie J. Hoppe “Israel and Egypt: Relationships and Memory,” in *The Bible Today* 45 (July/August 2007): 209.

⁷ Andrew F. Walls “Migration and Evangelization: the Gospel and movement of peoples in modern times,” in *Covenant Quarterly* (February 1, 2005): 4–5.

⁸ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1:6 in Austin Flannery (ed.) *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1. (New York, Dublin: Costello Publishing Co., and Dominican Publications, 1996), 568.

⁹ Daniel G. Groody, *Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees* (Oxford: Church Mission Society, 2009), 644.

¹⁰ Groody, 648.

¹¹ Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, G. W. Bromiley (trans) G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (eds.) (New York: Continuum, 2004), 157–210.

¹² Groody, 660–3.

¹³ Walls, 16.

¹⁴ Cf. *Christian Century* (May 23, 2001): 13.

¹⁵ VanThanh Nguyen and John M. Prior (eds.) *God’s People on the Move. Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission*. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 29–45.

¹⁶ Walls, 16.

¹⁷ Samuel Escobar, “Migration: Avenue and Challenge to Mission,” in *Missiology: An International Review* (Vol. XXXI, No. 1, January 2003): 20.

¹⁸ Darrell Jackson and Alessia Passarelli, *Mapping Immigration, Mapping Churches’ Responses in Europe*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 90–101.