

WCC Theological Reflection on Migration

By Jennifer Riggs

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Preface

At the end of November 2007, I had the opportunity to participate in an experimental process being implemented by the World Council of Churches, called Platforms for Theological Reflection and Analysis. The first of those platforms focused on issues of migration. I spent four days with about 30 other persons from Protestant and Orthodox churches around the world reflecting from a theological perspective on case studies and our own experience with migrants. For a good portion of the time, we divided into three groups for discussion under the themes of:

- *Migration, God and Place;*
- *Migration, God and Humanity; and*
- *Migration, God and the Church.*

The thoughts and questions shared here come from those conversations and from papers shared with the platform from around the world. What is shared here is not meant to be seen as a unified, systematic look at the issue of migration from a theological perspective. It is simply pieces of conversation gathered together to provoke further conversation. The intent of the platform was not to produce any official documents but rather to bring people together from around the world to have these conversations in the hopes that that conversation would spread throughout the world.

By participating in this “Welcoming the World to our Doorstep” process you are extending that platform into your own community and furthering the theological discussions that are happening globally.

If you wish to read the papers submitted for the platform, you will find some of them at <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=4244>.

—Jennifer Riggs

Migration, God and Place

Whose land is it? If the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, doesn't that challenge the idea of nation states having authority over the land? Who owns the land? Who, therefore, owns the nation state? What kind of theology controls our behavior when it comes to the land? Do we have a theology of place? Doesn't our faith challenge a theology of place?

Is land a gift or a right? Is it to be held in common for the benefit of all or to be an exclusive possession? If land is a symbol of God's creativity and generosity, isn't the emphasis on interdependence and inclusiveness in God's creation and, therefore, in the land God created?

People need a sense of place, a sense of home. But is that necessarily a physical location? Aren't we a people who belong not to any particular country but to a heavenly city? Aren't we a pilgrim people passing through this world – sojourners seeking our home in God? Our attitude

to the land will be different if we feel we are passing through, rather than feeling settled and claiming the land for ourselves to have dominion over it. Where are our hearts? Are they committed to the land/nation or to living the way God wants us to live?

Why are we obsessed with security? Land is often seen as the basis of economic and personal security, and boundaries are secured against perceived or real threats to that security. What happens when human security is sought in land, wealth, possessions, status, power or other human institutions and when the desire for security is demonstrated in the refusal to share with others? Doesn't it result in migration, unjust immigration laws, and oppressive treatment of migrants? That lack of sharing with others is challenged by Christian faith.

As children we loved the game of musical chairs. We still play that game, grabbing up that which we think we need and forcing others to go without. The Christian community should be able to bring a powerful counter-cultural challenge to the false security of wealth/land because it is a community that transcends place? Or have churches bought into the individuality of society (me and my family first)? Have churches compromised their ability to speak truth to power by their support of structures of power and dominance, such as in their allegiance to nation states? Has the church chosen to stand on the side of nation states and the need for borders?

It is interesting that when the churches of the world gather together in WCC meetings we identify ourselves by our country, not as common followers of Christ. Around the world, we organize churches into national councils. Does our sense of being in the household of God have any priority over our nationality?

In our search for security, is it only the security of the country receiving migrants that we care about? What about the security of the arriving people? What about the insecurity that caused them to migrate? Is it idolatry when we set nations as the determining factors in benefits and material goods that people receive? Are the rights of the nation only for the citizens of the nation, or are the rights of the nation for the benefit of all persons within and beyond the nation?

In the Old Testament, land played a very important role. God formed man from the dust of the earth and gave man the responsibility of caring for the land. When Cain and Able fought over the land, the land cried out for justice. By the time of the Exodus the emphasis was on the land as a promised gift from God, even though the indigenous people who were on the land suffered as the Israelites took over the land. Was it God's will that the conquests happened? Did God set the stage for all the times throughout history when we have fought over the land?

If God is everywhere and our home is in God (so that our home is everywhere), why do we need to fight for land? Jesus had no where to lay his head on this earth, and if we are to follow Jesus is not our home also no where on this earth? Jesus crossed a border fleeing to safety in Egypt. Are we to regard borders as sacrosanct?

Did not the first Christians pool their possessions and punish those who held something back? In the New Testament the focus changed from the land to the relationship of people. Jesus focused on landless experience with a shift from a theology of victors of place to a theology of people living in human relationship.

Land is also a symbol of culture and identity, including language, social structures and norms. Migrants and more settled populations alike need to remember their own cultural identity and respect that of others. However, cultures often become falsely closed, viewed as possessions to be defended against "alien" influences, impervious to the challenges of faith, persisting in

unjust social norms that represent the false security that leads people away from God. Shouldn't culture, also, be understood as a common human inheritance, given by God to sustain and nurture all people?

A settled state of being is often taken as normative. Therefore, migrants are seen as problematic, whatever problems they are felt to create or actually suffer. A fixedness of mind, spirit and location may lead to a self-sufficiency that can separate us from God. Has Christianity bought into the theology of empire? Has Christianity failed to confront the powers that cause suffering? Have we failed to organize support of Christians suffering in the rest of the world? We make statements and pass resolutions, but we don't challenge the idolatry of nation states. If it is true that when one suffers, all suffer, shouldn't we be about the elimination of the suffering of others?

Migration, God and Humanity

The fact that humans are made in the image of God raises questions about how we can see the humanity of others and not just presume that God's image is what we see in the mirror. Shouldn't a theological understanding of our common humanity lead us to value one another even when others try to use differences to divide us? Shouldn't it also lead to a sense of interdependency? We are God's gift to each other. We are the family of God. Our common humanity calls us to celebrate diversity. If we see the other as abnormal, don't we deny part of our own humanity?

Is there an interconnection between our relationship with God and our attitudes, relationships, and behavior towards other people, whereby the quality of the one is always determined by the quality of the other? Or is our relationship with God such an exclusive personal experience that other humans play no part in it? A preoccupation in parts of the church with the "individual" may lead to a loss of our common identity as humans under God. Isn't the "we and them" kind of thinking a false reality that we live in? Doesn't the reality of God's creation call us to focus on "all of us?"

What is God's will for people? Is it possible that people are on the move because God wants people to intermix and come into contact with each other, to broaden their understanding of the whole family of God? Is it possible that migration to our country is God's way of forcing us to be a more open and receptive people? If so, why do so many people suffer exploitation in the new land? Why does part of the family of God hurt another part of the family of God? We in the church tend to accept the crises that go on around the world and blindly go on about our daily lives. Won't our failure to address the root causes of migration make it an issue forever? Don't Christians have a responsibility to address the root causes?

"Remembering" can be an important method of being in touch with our common humanity. Don't all of us have migrant roots? Remembering our roots can help us relate to those who are uprooted today. As people of faith, our migrant roots go all the way back to the Bible and the movement of God's people throughout the Biblical stories. If we look at scripture through the eyes of a migrant, won't we be better able to more clearly see the God of all creation? Won't it help us realize that we don't belong to a place, but to a family – the family of God? One of the gifts migrants bring us is an understanding that God is in the movement – not in the stability. Migrants are not abnormal; the settled are the abnormal. Migration is normative for the world God created and moves among today.

Every human being lives in the ambiguity of God's creation. Human life is constantly touched both by its goodness as well as by suffering. All excluded groups have certain experiences in common such as: poverty, suffering, marginalization, oppression, victimization, demonization, humiliation, rejection, violence, and discrimination. But have you noticed that they also have hope – in the form of resistance, celebration, solidarity, or a vision of a new society? The faith of migrants often grows on the move as they have an experience of the broader community. Those who suffer can build up in themselves a way of transforming that suffering so they overcome it. It is these experiences of hope that can inform new directions for the pursuit of just and inclusive communities. Isn't that a gift that migrants bring to the settled – a better awareness of hope and a new energy to be about efforts to form just and inclusive communities?

Isn't resistance to injustice, exclusion, discrimination, and derision as valid a form of spirituality as is piety? Resistance may take the form of subversive action in opposition to powers that oppress. It can also result in celebration of life in spite of the oppressors. Isn't grace the experience of God's love that inspires, directs and empowers the excluded to envision and work for transformation.

If one member of the body suffers, don't all suffer? Doesn't that mean it is a sin to participate in exclusion? Many persons involved in acts of exclusion tend to find fault with those who are excluded, rather than finding fault with the structures, culture, norms, beliefs, etc. which exclude them. Isn't each person of value because they are a creation of a loving God? Isn't love of God with all your heart, soul, and strength and love of neighbor as yourself the way to life in abundance? All humans have the capacity to give and receive love, though this potential is not always realized in personal relationships or in churches. How this love is expressed will vary in each context, but isn't community the context for the expression of this love "which binds everything together in perfect harmony"?

When it comes to God and humanity, the God of the Old Testament does not appear to be the same in dealing with humanity as does the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament is the giver of the law, but law gets used in oppressive ways by those in power. In the New Testament, however, the church focused on an understanding of Christ as the broken Jesus on the cross and the one who integrates the broken creation in the resurrection. Doesn't that focus lead to an understanding that Christ took upon himself the identities of those who are excluded and exploited? Doesn't that understanding of Christ expose the life-denying tendencies of certain cultures and structures that govern human relationships? The body of Christ suffers and longs for restitution and healing of the creation with childbirth pains because of the many ways that people exclude one another. Isn't Jesus the truest image of an inclusive God? God is always more generous, more inclusive and more mobile than we are.

Migration, God and Church

What makes churches different from the rest of society when it comes to issues of migration? Don't churches have a religious mandate that should inform their attitudes and response? Doesn't that mandate include:

- Respect for human dignity and rights;
- Love of neighbors;
- Protection of the vulnerable;
- Human beings as "citizens of the household of God;"
- Respect for conviction of others (since only God has the whole truth); and

- The universality of the Church?

Are there other things that make up that religious mandate concerning migrants?

Of course, the first step for the church is always to provide welcome. This first step is not always easy in today's world, but isn't it essential if we are to live out our faith? Didn't Jesus say welcome the stranger or "go away into eternal punishment"?

The provision of a welcome is the basic element of the gospel call. However, it can be argued that it is not enough just to focus on how churches can receive and welcome migrants. After all, this is often understood as assimilating them into the status quo of what our society already looks like. Isn't the gospel mandate to do more than just provide a welcome? Isn't migration a challenge to the churches to change to become what the gospel calls us to be – the Church universal? Migration challenges the church in the way it does and lives out theology, in respect to:

- The Body of Christ – Shouldn't migrants and settled Christians complement one another in the body rather than worshipping in separated communities? Does the presence of migrants enable a better understanding of brokenness and wholeness? Does the presence of migrants present a sign of the embracing of all humanity by the church?
- Mission – Don't migrants bring a renewal of the missionary vocation of the local church, not only having a sense of mission towards migrants but in receiving what they bring? By welcoming migrant pastors aren't we receiving missionaries?
- Relating to people of other faiths and ideologies – Don't migrants help churches encounter other faith communities and understand the nature of otherness, both the otherness of people and the otherness of God? Doesn't our understanding of God become less parochial when we come face-to-face with persons of other faiths who also worship God?
- Pilgrimage – Don't migrants help churches see themselves as pilgrim communities, being on the move and ready to change? Doesn't ministry with migrants challenge self-understandings of churches which see themselves as unchanging institutions?
- Baptism and identity – Don't migrants help us develop a concept of identity linked to baptism into Christ rather than identity linked to location or culture? Don't migrants help churches become aware of the risk of being closed entities with a static identity, instead of an identity marked by openness to otherness, openness to others who have also been washed by waters of faith?
- Eucharist – Aren't we all part of a vulnerable humanity in need of Christ's healing that comes through Christ's broken and poured out body? Didn't the first Eucharist take place in a borrowed room with all the temporariness that implies? Outside Christ there is nothing secure or stable on which we may rely.

The challenge of theological reflection on migration for the churches is not how to offer a Christian justification for a humanitarian response to those who suffer, but how to become communities which do not support the conditions that create migration and which are open to that which God gives them through welcoming migrants. How can the churches, who sometimes aren't even interested in a humanitarian response of welcome, be assisted in receiving the gifts from God that migrants bring and be proactive in addressing the root causes of migration?

Besides the need of churches to live out their religious identity, migrants also need to express and live out their religious identity. Their religious identity can be a tool they use for stabilization and avoiding marginalization. The loss of religious identity can lead to the loss of ethical values,

and those migrants will be even more disoriented and uprooted in the host society. This applies to migrants of all faiths. But particular issues arise when migrants have the same religion as a church in their host country. Isn't there a spiritual link with important theological implications for migrants and churches of the same religion? Aren't these migrants equal partners in the denomination with equal rights and duties, rather than guests? Isn't partnership and empowerment very different from patronizing assistance? How do we welcome people not only to our doorsteps but also into the power of the church, into leadership? How do we allow them to become more than just cultural entertainment for church dinners? How do we allow them to become more than just the recipients of our generous benevolence?

Scripture recognizes the reality of migration throughout the Old and New Testament. But haven't you seen people use scripture in order to justify rejection, oppression, and eternal condemnation on those that are deemed to be outsiders? The Bible contains stories of conquest and victory, displacement and victimization, light and dark. There are words of praise and lament, hope and despair, honesty and deceit, release and condemnation. We use scripture to view the word of God, but if we favor the writings of the victors and associate ourselves with those in power won't we use scripture against migrants? The people of God in the Old Testament had a tradition that emphasized hospitality towards strangers whom they encountered, but at the same time circumstances sometimes led them to exterminate their enemies, those they felt were opposed to the wishes of the God they worshipped.

It is easy to fall into that same kind of trap of using scripture to reinforce our beliefs today. With passports and credit cards in our pockets, we tend to take for granted the choices we are privileged to have. If we begin with ourselves and our own story we will more than likely proclaim a "god" made in our own image, rather than the God who stands with the oppressed and weeps at injustice. We will more likely stand against those who are not like us and blame those who are different, simply for being different. Blame has always been an excuse to avoid responsibility to be open to the other. Blaming the victim, rather than seeing the way we contribute to victimization is a sin it is hard to overcome.

When the church is truly the Church, won't it be open and welcoming? Won't it be inclusive in its membership and leadership? Won't it be overpowering advocates against oppression anywhere? Won't it be much different from what it is today?