

Making progress or perpetuating power? A look at (de)colonial approaches in theologies of migration

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What does it mean to “enact” the *imago dei*? The majority of theological work on migration is from the point of view of the host or receiving communities and their response towards newcomers. This results in an observer’s view of the challenges of migration not the experiences of migrants themselves. Is there an underlying bias in the language they choose that, even unwittingly, perpetuates a colonial mindset? Analyzing 105 theological articles, chapters, and books written about migration, this paper briefly considers the anthropological stances towards migrants present in these works. These are compared with theological anthropological stances. Then welcome or hospitality, which are described as the appropriate response to newcomers, are also considered in light of the anthropologies. These differences are juxtaposed with practices of churches in Greece variously involved with resettled migrants.

Introduction

Several theologians across the globe confront formal and informal migration systems. Identifying both strengths and injustices, theologians addressing migration attempt to offer a balanced view. Gemma Tulud Cruz addresses injustices faced by Filipina migrant workers in Asia and the Middle East who often face circumstances which deny their human dignity (Cruz 2010). Hagen Kopp gives a compelling description of the difficulties migrants face in the implementation of policies attempting to block passage across the Mediterranean even before the 2015 surge of migrants (Kopp 2015). Daniel Groody expanded his focus from the southern USA border, making a broader theoretical argument to address the injustices of systems that propose to control migration as divides that need to be crossed (Groody 2016). Theologians are engaged in identifying and confronting these systems, but is there an underlying bias in the language they choose that, even unwittingly, perpetuates a colonial mindset?

Contemporary studies on religion in migration continue to be framed using ideas like ‘religion as a

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barrier’ or ‘religion as a coping factor’ in terms of acculturation, betraying an underlying view of migration as a problem. Studies which consider religion a tool that helps or hinders acculturation tend to highlight the risks of migration while downplaying or ignoring positive aspects. One repeated bias is that migrants who adhere to religion represent a negative risk. One example of this is “Migration as Theologizing Experience” by John Corrie (Corrie 2014). In the article, he considers whether Christian migrants to the UK might have something positive to offer local churches. He begins with the acknowl-

edgement that migration is neither wholly positive nor negative. His conclusion at the end of the article is that Christian migrants and local Christians should worship in separate services in order to avoid attempts at reverse mission. Throughout the article, Corrie characterizes newcomers as powerless, weak, and lacking resources attributing some of this to the process of migration. At best, this conflates a system which is designed to keep newcomers in a position of powerlessness with the person experiencing the system (Corrie 2014, 13–14). At worst, it perpetuates a view of Western Christians as hosts who are more properly Christian than newcomers, echoing attitudes of a colonial past.

Theologians, while identifying systems of injustice also often communicate some variation of this underlying bias. The majority of theological work on migration is from the point of view of the host or receiving communities and their response towards newcomers. This results in an observer's view of the challenges of migration not the experiences of migrants themselves. A smaller number of theological works consider the perspective of migrants. By focusing on the experience of migrants, Gemma Tulud Cruz, for example, explores areas of agency as well as areas of powerlessness (Cruz 2010). While migration does pose challenges unique to moving between countries, in many of these writings it is not the circumstances which migrants face that are problematized, but the people themselves.

In theological writing, the general category 'migrant' is problematized, troubled, or at risk. Religion is deployed as an integration tactic or viewed as an opponent in the process of conforming to the host society's norms. Even when newcomers share the same Christian faith, there are moves towards separation (Corrie 2014, 19–20). Still, rather than focus on the content of texts, such as the one above, the focus of this paper is the underlying assumptions on the part of writers. To do that, 105 academic texts which focus on migration theology or migration and religion were selected for further review from a database search. Selection was based on searches of the terms 'theology and migration' and 'theologizing migration' which yielded 297 texts in ATLA, 143 of which were peer reviewed. Excluding texts in languages other than English, Biblical exegesis, and missiology left 105. These selected chapters, articles, and books were published between 2009 and 2018. They reflect attitudes before and after the so-called 'surges' of asylum seekers in 2014 in the USA and in 2015 in Europe, where the majority of the authors

reside. What underlying bias is apparent in the choice of language that continues to exert power?

'Migrant' – a broad term

When using the term 'migrant,' writers rarely identify as migrants themselves. One theologian rather self-consciously admits that although their own international background "demographically fitted" the category of migrant, they choose to "construe this period of my life differently" (Fredericks 2016, 12). So that even while editing a book on how to better define migration for the field of theology, this author was careful to make a distinction between their self and, the given example – a migrant crossing the southern USA border without papers (Fredericks 2016, 12). On one hand, this illustrates the point of the author that the term 'migrant' is broad. Yet, on the other hand, this distinction also betrays an underlying assumption that the author has the privilege to choose the label or disregard it. That choice is not offered to the subjects in the book. What was intended as acknowledgement that one person's story may be more difficult or may be differently motivated is swallowed by the exercise of privilege.

It may seem that acknowledging that there is a diversity of experiences in migration, each requiring their own descriptive labels, is necessary for sociological or administrative purposes. However, does this not serve to underscore differences in privilege instead? One group claims the ability to create, apply, redefine or reject the labels offered to them. The rest are labeled—othered. By unquestioningly adopting the label 'migrant' to delineate the less privileged group and then ignoring or labeling other migration experiences as expatriates or educational migrants or diplomats or so on, are theologians inadvertently adopting an ambiguous anthropology? At the most basic level, a migrant is simply a person who moves.

This unacknowledged assumption, that the unworthy who move are migrants while the worthy who move are something else, divides the powerful and the powerless, the conqueror and the conquered. How can theology 'de-link' the terminology of migration from the powerful systems that control and define it (Mignolo 2007)?

The task seems quite difficult when some theologians appear to agree that migrants have less human value. John Corrie asserted that the "reality is that



Christian migrants, especially refugees and asylum seekers, are not always in a position to offer very much from their position of powerlessness when they are struggling to survive day to day in a system which is doing its best to discourage them” (Corrie 2014, 13). This statement identifies the power imbalance in the system (which withholds power). Nevertheless, it begins with an assessment of a lack of value in the people themselves. Clearly, there are many challenges and struggles that migrants face, especially in systems with which they are not yet familiar. However, encountering challenge and struggle has no reflection on one’s value. This makes it all the more shocking to see a theological work characterize migrants as having little or no value.

The above perspective perpetuates the assumption that what someone has to offer is judged in terms of power or position. However, Jesus often turned conventional thinking on its head. He affirmed the value of persons in his healings although the system judged them to be of little value. Ross Langmead, in his discussion of migration, points out that “Jesus consistently broke boundaries and reversed the social order in affirming the human dignity and blessedness of those on the margins of his society” (Langmead 2016, 175). With a few exceptions, the overall pattern of ministry modeled in the gospels regularly emphasized this subversive power of affirming human dignity.

The experience of migration is a human experience. While every person who crosses an international border experiences that crossing differently, they share the experience of crossing a border as a human. One of the most difficult tasks in researching and writing about migration is defining the term ‘migrant’. In its legal sense, it is a broadly inclusive term. In current social and political discussions, the term is largely pejorative, indicating an unworthiness or deficit of some sort. In this article the term ‘migrant’ is used in its broadest sense, referring to migration as an experience.

Migration is defined as moving, not as moving in dangerous conditions. The assumption that all people who migrate through an airport do not experience danger, is untrue. The assumption that all people who migrate in large groups are unskilled and illegal, is also untrue. The truth is that privileged migrants may also live through or leave dangerous situations: an adolescent (expatriate) who was airlifted out of a natural disaster zone and suffers from survivor guilt; a group of siblings who lived through much of the war in the former Yugoslavia because

their parents were aid workers. Alternatively, some unaccompanied minors are chosen to leave their communities because of their high social status and level of education as those most likely to succeed in a new place. Doctors and lawyers also leave their homes in the middle of the night to flee violence. Medical problems, domestic violence, human trafficking, and scores of other issues affect migrants from all walks of life, all socioeconomic, educational and religious backgrounds. One person’s story of migration is not more ‘migrant’ because it was more difficult or dangerous. A ‘migrant’ is an administrative label. It cannot be a distinct sociological type because a ‘migrant’ is not a type of person.

It bears repeating, a migrant is not a type of person; they are simply a person with the experience of migrating. Migration is a process with a beginning, a middle, and an end. A migrant is a person who has an experience of that process of moving—*migrating*—from one country to another. While the vast majority of people on earth continue to live within the borders of the country they were born in, the number of people living outside the borders of their country of origin continues to grow. This happens due to a variety of reasons and situations. Yet a person who migrates is not a type of person who fits into a demographic category, personality or cultural profile. On the contrary, there are a variety of people on the move. This is why attempts to define people who move internationally have fallen short across many fields, not only theology.

Attempts to define people ultimately rely on an anthropological stance. Zwi Werblowsky, in discussing the field of comparative religions, suggested that the study of religion requires the scholar to be very clear about the philosophical anthropology underscoring their work (Werblowsky 1975, 155). In his view, the anthropological stance is the foundation of any study of religion. Therefore, before articulating what is or is not practiced, before suggesting what can or should be practiced by and for people who have migrated, it is important to lay a clear anthropological foundation. Considering the various stances on the identity of migrants, a closer consideration of the theological anthropology supporting theologies of migration is needed.

Anthropological Questions

Not all theologians writing on migration make clear their own anthropological stance. Daniel Groody

however, argues that it is necessary to reflect explicitly on presumed theological anthropology. He begins with the *imago dei*. The idea of humans being made in the image of God seems like it would be a common starting point. To explore how often this anthropology is used, a text search using NVivo of the 105 theological writings described earlier, revealed only four sources mention the Latin term *imago dei*. Claudio Carvalhaes uses the term 6 times in “Worshipping with the Homeless” (Carvalhaes 2016). Nico Botha (Botha 2013) and Giaocchino Campese (Campese 2012) each use it once to refer to the 2009 work of Daniel Groody. Daniel Groody himself uses the term *imago dei* as one bridge to four divides between migration and theology (Groody 2009). These four divides together make up Groody’s anthropological stance in his theology of migration. Since *imago dei* is a foundational principle, it is surprising that it is not utilized more widely. While not using the Latin, other authors do refer to an anthropological stance based on humans being made in the image of God, the English description of the term.

Altogether, 21 texts engaged with human dignity, the image of God, or *imago dei* in some way among the 105 works in this analysis. Among these 21 texts, the predominant point of view was European/North American (11), with one author from Eastern Europe, three from South America, two from Africa, and four from countries in Asia. While there is certainly more room to cultivate more diversity, this sample demonstrates the wide range of authors acknowledging the need to identify a theological anthropological stance. What is more surprising is that the majority of texts in this sample have chosen not to mention an anthropological stance explicitly.

Daniel Groody (2009) has offered the most clear and well-developed anthropology for migration theology in recent work. This is why others quote him. First, Daniel Groody’s four divides are briefly presented. Then they are considered with the anthropological stance of Michelle A. Gonzalez and then, Miltiadis Vantsos and Marina Kiroudi. Exploring a small diversity of viewpoints around the concept of Christian anthropology contributes to a more robust foundation. The insights of this exploration of theological anthropology are then applied to selected works from the twenty-one reviewed and analyzed texts on migration and theology.

The strategy of Daniel Groody’s 2009 article “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of

Migration and Refugees,” is to identify then offer bridges to four divides: problem-person, divine-human, human-human, and country-kingdom. These form his anthropological basis. Recognizing the complexity of relationships, Groody offers theological ‘bridges’ as a way to overcome the split. Admittedly, this description relies heavily on dualistic patterns rather than on considering an overall structure. Unfortunately, this starting point has not resulted in a conversation. Instead, authors seem to repeat just one of the four splits Groody identified, the *imago dei*, as the summary of an anthropological stance towards people who have migrated.

While Groody’s proposal offers a beginning, it is not a *fait accompli*. Regina Polak points out that Daniel Groody, along with other theologians, continues to refer to migrants as “others” or “aliens” (Polak 2015, 68). She acknowledges the difficulty in addressing the complexity of using terms such as ‘migrant’ while trying to avoid “strengthening their stigmatizing tendencies” (Polak 2015, 68). This need to acknowledge difference in a way that does not result in further stigmatization brings to mind the carefully structured anthropological stance of Michelle A. Gonzalez (Gonzalez 2014, 131–147). Beginning with hybridity in Latino/a theology as a foundational construction of identity, Gonzalez moves to embrace the hybridity of humans in general (Gonzalez 2014, 135). In this way, Gonzalez identifies the social—person hybridity as a common ground of difference between people rather than as a divide. From this awareness, she argues it is possible to acknowledge both positive and negative experiences as a way of relating with others, as well as a way of relating to the Incarnation (Gonzalez 2014, 136). Beginning her anthropology from a hybrid stance, Gonzalez allows for a range of personal and social locations that can be described as ‘Christian’ (Gonzalez 2014, 136). Gonzalez begins with difference as the starting point rather than similarity. In this way, her anthropological approach offers interaction with difference and complexity that leads to the realization that there is always difference. Rather than offering a singular ideal, Gonzalez argues for a concrete, embodied anthropology that acknowledges and embraces contradiction and difference.

At the other extreme is the concept that anthropology is best articulated in unity and oneness that presupposes a deep similarity. The Greek Orthodox ethicist, Miltiadis Vantsos, explains the practical application of the ethical theory of *imago dei* (Vant-



vos and Kiroudi 2007, 253). It begins with the supposition that since all humans are made in the image of God, they are entitled to human dignity. Greek Orthodox Christians are especially obliged to help meet practical needs of others, as they are able. While there is as yet no articulated Greek Orthodox response to migration, Vantsos, along with Marina Kiroudi, articulates the connection between philanthropy and an anthropological stance. In his explanation, human persons are made in the image of God and therefore also carry the likeness of God, the capacity to relate to God, and the opportunity to progress to a divine likeness (Vantsos and Kiroudi 2007, 253). Through these attributes, it becomes possible for humans to demonstrate compassion only because it is part of the identity of God (Vantsos and Kiroudi 2007, 253). The act of compassion overcomes distance between persons as a reflection of the compassion God demonstrated to humanity through the Incarnation. In theory, this line of thinking could be applied to any act of philanthropy although Vantsos limits his discussion to “the elderly, the orphans, and the poor” (Vantsos and Kiroudi 2007, 252). The discussion stops short of making an application of this philanthropic expression of God’s character, to migrants.

In either case, whether beginning from a uniform view of the image of God each person carries, or beginning from an embrace of diversity and difference, the expression of compassion is highly valued. In the 21 cases, this serves as a beginning of migration theology. The *imago dei* is the foundation of Christian anthropology and therefore, rightly, is the opening of the conversation. Yet that conversation must also acknowledge the creativity and diversity in Creation. Being made in God’s image does not necessarily imply a uniformity. Still, it is an anthropology that is itself shared by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant theologies.

Acknowledging a common principle, a common basis on which as Christians we build a response to other humans – all other humans – is just a beginning. Claudio Carvalhaes cautions that “[t]he *Imago Dei* is often invoked but rarely enacted as a given for Christians” (Carvalhaes 2018, 10). There is a disconnection between knowledge and practice.

***Imago Dei* and ‘Migrant’ in Practice**

While there is agreement over the existence of *imago dei*, its application is uneven. Currently theologies

of migration, in line with the majority of migration studies, adopt administrative labels as *definitional* labels. The administrative attitude towards labels often overtakes the theory of *imago dei*. Dorottya Nagy notes, “the nation state paradigm dominates research on migration in all disciplines”, admitting that theology is no different (Nagy 2016, 42). She questions whether it is appropriate or morally right to continue “essentializing human identities by using the labels of migrants and non-migrants?” in her theological writings about migration (Nagy 2016, 42).

Power is exercised between the one who decides about the terms of belonging, and the one who can belong. In constructing a practical theology of migration, this struggle also needs to be acknowledged. When Daniel Groody introduced how he relates *imago dei* with a theology of migration, he cautioned, “theological terms include a set of moral demands as well” (Groody 2009, 642). Yet, in the streets, the theory is having trouble finding its feet: not only at borders but also in the communities where migrants arrive.

Power becomes evident in the process of welcome. This was clear in the churches I observed while in northern Greece in February 2019. I was able to attend services at five different Protestant Churches while there. Before attending, I was either invited by a member or I called and arranged the visit with staff. They knew I would be visiting as a researcher before I arrived. However, as a white Westerner I did not expect to blatantly stand out due to my ethnicity. This would mean that any power exerted in the welcome would not be based on my ethnicity, but on my status as newcomer.

All the churches I observed had a coffee/snack time after the service where people could talk and interact freely. As an outsider, I could choose whether to observe or participate. In some cases, I was not invited to participate. This could have been due to my role as researcher. In one case, although I was invited to participate and was introduced to the small group of people, they all turned back to their private conversations. I was left alone in the center of the room. In three cases, I was made part of conversations. The differences in welcome extended to other newcomers as well.

In one church, there were no obvious outsiders or visitors, and certainly no migrants. The other four churches all had a mixture of migrants and locals. Three of the five churches were led by Western immigrants trained in the West. One of the immi-

grant-led churches talked about reaching out to migrants as a mission, denying their own immigration status. Migrants from a range of migration status (refugees, immigrants, expats) as well as locals attended the other two. One of the Greek-led churches held a special Friday night service so they could provide transportation for a group of refugees when they had leave from their refugee camp. Each church had its own personality and way of interacting with the diversity of people present.

Each of these churches would consider themselves a place of welcome. Some were places that not only explicitly spoke of welcome but made room in their regular activities to offer welcome to newcomers. Others were places that had clear, although unspoken, boundaries about who was welcome (and who was not). Although none of the churches addressed *imago dei* in their services, on their websites, they all agree that people are made in the image of God. As I prepared this paper and visited these churches, I began to wonder what does it really mean to “enact” the *imago dei*?

A Welcome for the Image of God

Many theologians offer the concept of welcome or hospitality as the appropriate way to receive migrants. In the sample of 105 texts on migration and theology analyzed, 47 mention either welcome and/or hospitality. Many of these take the position that hospitality or welcome are a form of reception predicated on the statement of Jesus that providing for hunger, thirst, shelter and clothing – even for strangers – is equivalent to serving him (see Matthew 25: 31–46). Hospitality is offered as both a duty and as the ultimate answer. Other authors engage with the idea that welcome and hospitality encounter limits and entail risk (Campese 2012; Fredericks 2016). Cláudio Carvalhaes engages deeply with Derrida’s concept of the negative sides of hospitality, while Ross Langmead and Giaocchino Campese both allude to Derrida’s concept of hospitality more generally. In each of the three writings, there are examples of positive experiences of offering and receiving hospitality. Yet, Carvalhaes acknowledges that offering hospitality is not always positive; it can be inconvenient and uncomfortable to extend hospitality to people who have recently arrived.

How does extending hospitality, whether the experience is positive or negative, embody an anthropological stance? If one takes the position that mi-

grants have nothing of value to offer, then one takes a paternalistic stance: the migrant is child-like and not capable of caring for their own needs. This betrays a modified *imago dei* that another human is not quite the equal image of God. This stance is embodied by distribution ministries that focus on providing items. While this may meet immediate needs of thirst, hunger, shelter, it can easily become a transactional model. The intention to meet physical needs takes precedence over meeting emotional or spiritual needs.

Conversely, there is the option to ignore those outside of the church, behaving as if by being born in another place, some humans do not carry the image of God. This stance is embodied by churches that think of ministry with migrants as an extreme good work done by only the most radical believers. The danger is that hospitality-to-difference is not enacted as central to the identity of the church. The church is only focused on meeting its own internal needs. Yet, when Jesus named “the least of these,” the phrase implies those who are on the margins, ignored by society. An inward focus entirely ignores the image of God in the margins.

A third option is to offer a greeting instead of hospitality; a cup of coffee but no conversation. This stance initially acknowledges the image of God in another but considers hospitality to be equivalent to welcome or to a greeting on the street. There is no intention to meet physical, emotional, or spiritual needs. There is no willingness to risk or move beyond the limits of normative social graces.

These options seem stilted and unsatisfying to me. They may address some immediate physical needs of thirst, hunger, clothing, or shelter. But they do not address the emotional thirst, the relational hunger, the comfortable habits, or the devotional shelter that so many people who have moved long for. Neither do these options address the deep spiritual thirst for living water, hunger for the bread of life, need for the covering of the Spirit, or longing for the shelter of the Most High.

What does an embodied, welcoming anthropology that embraces difference look like? In order to offer a more open hospitality, “one has to lose something: space, money, identity, language, etc., even everything altogether...” Carvalhaes challenges the borders of what hosts are expected to give (Carvalhaes 2010, 50). Such a completely open hospitality is radical. It is true that relationally engaging with others costs us something. It is not without risk, and hospitality is not always accepted. Truly offering an



open, welcoming hospitality to another person means a willingness, an openness to the risk, to the cost.

Consequences

Rather than theories or formulas, this article will close with acknowledging the consequences of ignoring an uncritical and confused anthropological stance. The first is the consequence to ourselves as theologians engaged with migration. Without critically addressing what gives humans dignity, one eventually becomes entangled in defending the mistreatment of other humans. The ease with which this occurs in both small and large ways, is in itself significant. Continuing to assume a paternalistic posture towards non-Westerners betrays the lingering effects of colonial thinking which is another consequence altogether.

Perpetuating confused anthropological stances becomes enacted in practice. Just as theologians need a clear epistemological foundation, so do Christian ministries and individual Christians. Engaging with the image of God as diverse and complex makes recognizing the image of God in a face unlike our own much more likely.

Finally, whether writing theology or cooperating in practical ministry with and for migrants, asserting a position of power devalues humans with an experience of migration. Instead, we are challenged to enact the generous likeness and presence of God among those on the margins of society; challenged to risk something in order to demonstrate welcome in tangible ways. Choosing descriptive language that balances power rather than perpetuating imbalance, challenges theologians who write about migration to rethink the terms we use and the way we employ them. It asks us to commit fully to acknowledging the image of God in all and thus risk losing the power of naming and labeling.

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