

# Reforming space: migrant agency and reimagining community and belonging

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In this article, I offer an examination of migration and its intersection with religion, focusing on (1) how increased migration disrupts the idea of the nation-state, (2) how migration expands our understandings of church and pastoral practice, and finally, (3) the ways in which migration raises key questions about what constitutes religion and religious work. Through the exploration of two case studies, one from South Africa and one from France, I seek to demonstrate that migration should not be conceived merely as liminal, or non-space, and that migrants actively construct social worlds through which they make sense of their life situations and ambitions for the future. Finally, I argue that focusing on migrants' beliefs and practices makes possible a greater appreciation of the agency of migrants in reforming religious spaces and their own mobile futures.

## Introduction

In recent years, scholars of religion and migration have agreed that migration has had a significant impact on the identities and compositions of the sending and host nations as well as on transit communities and settlements. The increased mobility of people, capital and ideas has also impacted the shape of churches and other religious institutions. These changes present pastoral challenges that not only reform the character and focus of confessional communities, but that have also begun to reform what can be considered religion or religious work. In this regard, I offer an examination of the significance of migration and its intersection with religion insofar as (1) increased migration disrupts the idea of the nation-state, (2) migration expands our understandings of church and pastoral practice, and finally, (3) migration raises some key questions about what constitutes religion, theology and religious work.

Thus, I will start with a broad, but brief, survey of how migration has, or is, reforming communities (nations), reforming churches and reforming religious practices. I propose to do this through explor-

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ing and problematizing two key turns in the field of religion and migration. The first is the idea of *migrant as victim*, insofar as the trope of migrant as victim continues to shape developmental, humanitarian and theological discourses related to migration, where focusing on the vulnerable operates as a prerequisite for certain brands of theological and pastoral engagements. Secondly, I propose to problematize the idea of migration as a *liminal state*, a *non-space*, an in-between space that people occupy as they move from one place to another. By challenging the idea of migration as non-space, I propose to demonstrate migrants' agency through highlighting how migrants create social worlds in





contexts of transition and migration. I will show how migrants use religion and social support networks to assert agency, not only through planning and imagining future migrations but also through re-inscribing and reforming religion and religious practices and beliefs within the non-spaces of migration—such as refugee camps, transition settlements or neighbourhoods, and transit centers.

## Reforming community

While migration has been a constant throughout human history, producing a wide range of diasporic communities, transnational networks and practices, it has only been during the past few decades that we have begun to theorise about migration (Vertovec 2009; Glick-Schiller 2005). This task has been made all the more urgent by legislation and policies that regulate and manage different forms of migration, for example through drawing stark distinctions between migrations for leisure, religious work, labor migration and asylum-seekers, with each being afforded different degrees of access to citizen's rights, resources, opportunities and protections (Carsens 2013; Wellman and Cole 2011).

What scholars like Asad (2003), Levitt (2004), Huwelmeier and Krause (2010), and Adogame and Spickard (2010) draw our attention to is that with the increasingly transnational movement of people, it is not only ideas about migrants and migrations that are changing, but also local economies, networks of belonging and religious beliefs and practices. While some scholars draw our attention to the mobility of religion across borders, they largely rely on the idea of religion as tradition—a fixed set of beliefs and practices brought from a migrant's place of origin to be unpacked at the points of settlement. Nevertheless, in the field of religion/theology and migration there are primarily two subjects of interest: (1) how migrants use and move with their religion and (2) theological and pastoral responses to migration through discourses of reception, incorporation and hospitality.

The first subject of interest consists of sociologists of religion and how they point to the uses of religion within the context of migration, whether to make meaning, cope with anxiety or build networks of belonging, information and exchange. Adogame and Spickard (2010), for example, express a general sentiment that when migrants move, they take their religions with them, while other studies focus on (a)

how migrants use churches and mosques as the primary sites for building social networks during and after migration (Baas 2012), (b) the extent to which religion serves as a resource for helping migrants to cope with the challenges of migration (Hagan and Ebaugh 2003), or (c) how migrants replicate religious traditions at various sites of settlement as assertions of cultural and religious identity (Levitt 2001, 2007; Huwelmeier and Krause 2010).

The second subject of interest can be referred to as theologies of migration and hospitality. These traditions are concerned with the theological and moral imperatives that underscore and motivate faith community responses to increasingly visible migrant populations and the failure of the state to adequately respond to changing geographies and demographics. Theologies of migration variously seek to incorporate a range of themes, such as hospitality (Groody and Campese 2008), the Church as a host that welcomes the stranger (Cruz 2010), the Church as a suffering body in a posture of solidarity (Rivera-Pagán 2012) and theological narratives of inclusion and incorporation (Baggio 2008).

Both analyses of migration rely on a few basic assumptions: first, they rest on the presumption that migrants and hosts share a common set of beliefs; secondly, they submit to and rely on the idea of the nation-state as stable, robust and homogeneous; thirdly, they replicate the notion of the migrant as victim, state-less and vulnerable. In view of these assumptions, I wish to pause and reflect on the victim-villain dialectic in migration studies. Recently, there has been increasing scholarship concerned with the coupling of migrants with crime (Collins 2007), meaning that migrants are routinely portrayed as villains and as a threat to social order, resulting in a prejudicial public stance against migrants (Mahalingam and Rabelo 2013, 26). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Goodey (2009) and Agergaard and Engh (2016) note that where the media or the public assume a humanitarian stance, migrants are routinely spoken of as victims of exploitation. Effectively, both positions result in the silencing and fetishizing of migrants as either victim or villain.

I suggest that religion, and faith communities, are particularly susceptible to the fetishization of victimhood (Anderson 2004; Naqvi 2007). Here, I draw on Marcella Althaus-Reid, who in her critique of liberation theology and political theologies argues that theology not only requires a redeemable subject—the poorest of the poor—but also that this



poor, marginalized subject should be domesticated and asexual. Althaus-Reid (2000) pointed to the way in which the idea of a vulnerable, licit, asexual victim defines much of liberation theology; and in the same vein, I suggest that theologies of migration are also not immune to the fetishization of victimhood. Similarly, feminist scholar and critical theorist Sara Ahmed (2000) argues that scholarship about humanitarian efforts concerned with migration tends to be fixated with the migrant as a victim. She argues that in advocating for humanitarian interventions, activists and humanitarian groups tend to script migrants as victims, and in so doing erase the possibility of imagining migrants as agentic, politicized and sexual subjects. Below, I argue that through further interrogating the victim-villain dialectic, we are able to not only consider the limits of theological scholarship in relation to migration, but also to reveal the ways in which migrants change and reform community—reforming geographies of belonging and belief.

## Reforming church

In this regard, I draw your attention to two case studies pertaining to religion in the context of migration. The first case study is the “makeshift” Eritrean Church constructed in the migrant encampment outside Calais, known as the “Jungle”. The settlement was home to 7000 people, and the church was reported in the UK *Guardian* newspaper as a “place of raw prayer and defiant hope”.<sup>1</sup> Although the fragile structure symbolizes the material manifestation of long hours of labor and migrant aspirations, most media reports focused on the persistence of hope and the impossible conditions people found themselves in (Sandri 2016). This focus on the squalid conditions of camps, and the hopeful but fragile structure, continued to fix migrants as victims; in doing this, most media reports overlooked the material and religious “work” that motivated this faith community to build the church.

The second case study is from South Africa, when in 2008, in response to widespread xenophobic violence, the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg opened its doors and welcomed hundreds of



people into the church as refugees from the violence beyond its doors. The African migrants who had experienced such violence quickly filled up the church—to the extent that bodies were “spilling out the doors”—as they sought refuge and shelter (Hankela 2015). In the accompanying image, you will note that the church was literally a place to rest, lay down one’s head and find shelter from the hostility. While Bishop Paul Verryn’s use of the church as a sovereign refuge from both the populist and state violence against African migrants was widely applauded, the institutional church soon grew impatient with the long-term nature of the occupation. Members complained that the use of the church as a social welfare center was understandable but costly (Mpofu 2015). Church members were particularly offended that the church had become a social world (from which they were excluded)—one in which migrants were settling down “permanently” and establishing an underground economy. This occupation had, according to some church members, changed the church beyond recognition; it had become a space they no longer recognized, could relate to or felt comfortable in.

1 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2015/aug/07/migrants-church-in-calais-place-of-raw-prayer-and-defiant-hope>



In both case studies, it is possible to depict the church as a site of exception because religious communities have had a long history of offering sanctuary and being afforded extra-judicial status (Logan 2003; Rehaag 2009) and also because the church in certain cases assumes a kind of sovereignty within the nation-state (Lechner 2007). However, both the Jungle Church in Calais (France) and the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg (South Africa) allow us to consider how a church as a sanctuary or sovereign space presents a counter-narrative to nationalist regimes of exclusion. These two case studies also point to how membership in a church and affinity with particular religious beliefs and practices ultimately disrupts the idea of the nation-state, which is premised on native-settler relations. Finally, both cases also show how religious work is being done in the liminality of migrant experiences.

Sadly, both of these religious sites and communities were removed and no longer exist in their previous locations or forms. What we should take away from these two case studies are reflections on how migration, though precarious and liminal, seems to disrupt and reform our ideas about what constitutes religion or religious work.

## Migration as a liminal and non-space

There has been increasing interest in idea of liminality in migration (Grau 2011; Hankela 2014), which is partly due to the recognition that complex social worlds are produced as a result of migration. Giorgio Agamben (2005) suggests that as a way of dealing with migration, the State has created “states of exception”—places and periods where migrants may live within a particular state but without enjoying the protections of the state. Thus, for Agamben “the state of exception is not a ‘state of law’ but a space without law”.

Loren Landau, reflecting on the African context, suggest that as “governments consciously suspend elements of their normal legal order to address crises they feel threaten sovereignty... [they] create categories of people within the national territory—refugees and undocumented migrants for example—who become alienated from their hitherto inalienable human rights” (2009, 3). Agamben (2005) refers to some of these places of settlements as *non-places*, liminal spaces between place of origin and place of settlement. It is precisely his denoting of the exceptional as a non-place that has drawn

harsh criticism. They suggest that Agamben’s work is too narrowly focussed on the force of bio power—framed by the media and policy rhetoric of “war on terror” and “refugee crisis” as circumstances that endanger the safety of the nation-state.

Agamben’s analysis is useful insofar as it not only shows how the state gives “legal form to what cannot have legal form”, but also because it opens the possibility for recognizing that transit centers for migrants or refugee camps as *productive* social worlds where people live, for a period, in zones of exception. I contend that narrow conceptions of a state of exception—as a form of rule outside the legal order—results in a failure to recognize the social world that exists within such supposedly liminal spaces. Drawing our attention to the embodied lives of migrants, Trygve Wyller (2014) has argued that while state and humanitarian organizations variously compete for control over the mobility of migrants, such a focus does not account for how often religious persons subscribe to and invoke a “sacred law” that allows then to imagine the migrant as other in a distinctly non bio-political manner. This allows us to view the case studies of the Jungle Church at Calais and Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg as a counter-narrative to the force of bio-political discourses of containment or expulsion (Landau 2009). This is possible because it draws on ideas of the Church as sacred and sufficiently sovereign to serve as a sanctuary for migrants (Logan 2003), and it makes visible the social world of migrants by allowing migrants to assert some agency in relation to their material needs and future ambitions.

The Johannesburg Central Methodist Mission differs from the state because it refused to classify migrants in simply legal terms, such a documented or undocumented. Hankela (2014) argues that under the then leadership of Bishop Paul Verryn, the church produced a counter-narrative to the state notion of migrants as either victims or villains, and instead placed them at the heart of its humanitarian and theological enterprise. Migrants who had been displaced by a hostile citizenry began to reconfigure the church space in order to attend to their needs for safety, economic security and possible future migration. Within this lifeworld of the church, migrants organised social services, educational support and health services. The subsequent disagreements between Bishop Verryn and the church leadership centered around the fact that the resident migrants had established an underground economy within the precinct of Johannesburg Central Methodist



Mission where they exchanged and traded skills, such as translation work, transport and protection services, hairstyling and the sale of consumable leisure goods like cigarettes and airtime for mobile phones. Venkatesh (2009), for example, argues that often such relations of exchange within a not-so-underground economy rely heavily on the illicit and extra-legal norms of acquisition and exchange—aspects of the occupation that outraged church members.

Thus, the lifeworld of the migrants not only displaced the primary congregation and their routine, but also their idea of what constitutes a church. Consequently, this ongoing occupation of the church disrupted ecclesial and theological orthodoxies about the sacrality of the sanctuary and the pastoral practice of the church as much as it undermined the state's effort to expel the migrants. Despite the fact that the last migrants were removed from the church in early 2015, following a protracted court battle with church leaders, for a period of time this community provided a counter-narrative on migration; and this pastoral practice reformed the church as an alternate site of exception through which migrants were able to assert agency over their lives and destinies.

## Migrant agency and the production of mobility

Scholars of migration have, in recent decades, developed increasing interest in the processes and practices through which migrants “sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, Glick-Schiller and Blanc-Szanton 1994, 6). Others, like Asamoah-Guyadu (2015), Huwelmeier and Krauss (2010), and Adogame (2014), argue that these relations are further strengthened by religious affiliations. What this suggests is that migration is not just about networks of movement, or about flows of person in various stages of settlement and transition *en route* to an imagined ideal destination, but is about deliberately maintaining connections to their homelands while simultaneously becoming embedded in their new places of residence (Glick Shiller 2005; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). This simultaneous embeddedness is sustained throughout migratory processes, in that it is not just a matter of linking “societies of origin and settlement”, but that migrants produce active social worlds in

the *non-place* of the refugee camps and transit centers, or in the Jungle at Calais and the Johannesburg Central Methodist Mission.

The Jungle Church is a good example of how migrants assert their agency through producing structures and symbols of meaning that (a) captured the shared interest and beliefs of those who lived within the Jungle Church, as well as (b) signalled migrants' refusal to accept and submit to the life-denying conditions of this supposed non-place. Once images of the Jungle Church circulated in the media, widespread attention was drawn to the plight of the migrants who lived within this dense square mile (Ibrahim and Howarth 2016). The physical structure of this makeshift church stood in stark contrast to the muddy, cold and austere field on which it was erected. While for many it represented the resilience and faith of the migrants who worshiped there, it was also the product of deliberation, careful planning and collaboration. This suggests that their shared religious practices and beliefs predated the building of the structure. Finally, through building this structure the Eritrean congregation asserted their link to communities of origin and also invoked transnational networks of shared faith and belief, transcending nationalist ideas about who belongs and who does not belong. So powerful was this affinity of shared belief that the BBC's religious program “Songs of Praise” televised one of its Sunday church service from within the Jungle Church. In support of the program, the religious community of Iona publicly asserted “People of Calais—God's good people—you do not sing alone”.<sup>2</sup>

It can therefore be argued that the makeshift church represented a vibrant and productive life among the religious Eritreans within the settlement. In this regard, it tells us (a) that migrants are active in mediating their shared experience of displacement and belief as the foundation of creating local networks of exchange and support, (b) that migrants are deliberately reproducing communities of affiliation, such as churches and cultural associations, and (c) that migrants are active in forging and maintaining transnational networks of faith that disrupt the idea of the nation-state through (religious) schemas of affinity, inclusion and belonging. I therefore suggest that these aspects of migrant lives become more visible when we move beyond the victim-villain di-

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/16/songs-of-praise-calais-migrants-common-link-christianity>



alectic and reimagine these case studies in terms of migrants' agency.

While I recognize that for many people migration is often imagined as the pursuit of liberty and modernity, it is my view that a narrow focus on the structural forces of migration obscures the *agentic* dimensions of migration. For example, Sherry Ortner (2006) argues that structures are not only macro-level phenomena related to socio-economic and institutional relations; they are also established, expressed, resisted and reconfigured in the micro-level interactions between social actors. Ortner (2006) helpfully distinguishes between "agency-as-power" and "agency-as-project"—the former is concerned with the domination of others and the resistance to domination, while the latter is seen as "a form of intention and desire, as the pursuit of goals and the enactment of projects" (2006, 153).

In the context of the Johannesburg Central Methodist Mission and the Jungle Church at Calais, I suggest that agency became manifest in those practices that resisted indignity, on the one hand, and those that showed how migrants navigate zones of exception to fulfil their migrant ambitions. In their article "Gendered Geographies of Power", Pessar and Mahler assert that "much of what people actually do transnationally is foregrounded by imagining, planning and strategizing" (2003, 817); hence, our understanding of agency must encompass the "mindwork" that emanates from the social and religious imaginaries of migrants. I have argued that in the case of the Jungle Church, deliberation, planning and collaboration predates the building of the makeshift church. Thus, migrants' structuring of their hopes and future desires should be seen as constituent parts of agency in the contexts of religion and migration.

The production of migrants' mobility incorporates both agency-as-project and agency-as-power as an intrinsic condition related to a migrant's own ambitions, ideas and intentional efforts for transnational movement (Engh, Settler and Agergaard 2017). The significance of such intentional efforts is best understood in relation to networks of affinity and the migrant's position within power geometries in different localities—including sites of exception. The deconstruction of the knowledge-power matrix and local power geometries, often analysed in terms of the victim-villain dialectic, makes it possible to analyse migrants' ability to acts as "initiators, refiners and transformers of these locations" (Pessar and Mahler 2003, 817).

Though focusing on the agentic dimensions of migrant lives, I hope to have shown how, in these sites of exception—despite xenophobic hostility in South Africa and the strict governance of migrant mobility in Europe—migrants resist erasure, create conditions for a meaningful life and build networks of support that transcend and disrupt the strictures of Agamben's *non-places*, such as migrant settlements or transit centers. As I have argued above, migrants at the Johannesburg Central Methodist Mission did not simply establish necessary relations of exchange through trading skills in translation, hair-styling, tailoring, and so forth; they also established a lifeworld that included relations of trust, knowledge exchanges and shared belief. Through these efforts, migrants reformed conditions within the church and society, and in so doing also reformed the idea of just what constitutes a church. In Calais, the construction of a makeshift Eritrean Christian church was not just a testimony to the resilience of the faithful, but also an effort to forge relations of affinity with the transnational body of believers—invite them to look into the situation at the Jungle Church, be outraged and bear witness to the indignities suffered by those who had otherwise been regarded as non-persons. So, while the migrants in Johannesburg disrupted the idea of what purpose a church serves through occupying and remaking a migrant social world within the church, the Eritrean efforts in Calais did the opposite insofar as they built a church structure that reproduced a community of believers locally and transnationally, and in so doing undermined nationalist fantasies about who belongs and who does not.

## Conclusion

However, an examination of these two case studies as zones of exception show how migrants use religion to stay connected to the places they leave behind, building networks of support at every point in their migratory lives and thereby forging new forms of transnational belonging (Levitt 2007; Getahum 2006, 189). What I have sought to demonstrate, on the one hand, is that for most migrants "religious faith offers stability and helps resolve tension" during their migration (Getahum 2006, 189). On the other hand, these case studies have shown that "religion provides migrants with a simultaneously local and transnational mode of incorporation that may configure them not as ethnics but as citizens of



both their locality of settlement and of the world” (Glick-Schiller 2009, 126). Here, migrants make use of religious beliefs and communities to support their migratory aspirations, while also resisting the dehumanizing force of surveillance, regulation and expulsion.

Further, what the discussion of these two case studies makes possible is the recognition that while Agamben and most scholars of religion regard migration as a liminal *non-place*, a focus on migrant agency not only reveals resistance to the victim-villain dichotomy, but also demands recognition that migrants are productive in forging social worlds that include new forms of incorporation, belonging and belief. These case studies help us recognize that migrants do not simply use religion as a way of coping with or navigating migratory processes, but that through their efforts to make meaning, migrants are reforming religion, religious work, authority and community in ways that disrupt both the nation-state and ecclesial orthodoxies.

This last perspective on migration and religion demands a reform of theologies of incorporation or integration—those discourses where the norm remains intact and migrants are placed at the margins. This necessitates questions about what kind of theology or discourse of religion emerges when migrant marginality and indignity are brought to the center of our scholarship. Finally, I have sought to argue that in producing room for extra-legal regulations and regimes to discipline migrants through sites of exception, or in the state’s efforts to discriminate between migrants as victim or villain, exceptional circumstances are also created for migrants to produce religious, social and economic practices that operate outside of normal civic and ecclesial traditions. Ultimately, I hope to not only have explored the ways in which religious beliefs, affiliations and practices shape migration, but also, significantly, how migrants’ expressions of their agency shapes our understandings of what constitutes religion, religious work and practice.

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