



Theologising about migration in Europe

An introductory talk by Rev Vaughan Jones at the first forum of the project held in Union Chapel on October 4th 2017.

Union Chapel

Union Chapel is an historic nonconformist chapel. It is Congregationalist and continues a significant Christian Puritan tradition of democracy in both church and state and of the separation of church and state. It, like other religious traditions, experienced persecution and repression, achieving emancipation, progressively throughout the nineteenth century.

Today it is a popular venue for music and arts, as well as home to a project for people experiencing homelessness.

The congregation which meets here is small. We are a 'remnant church', that is a church which is the heir to rich resources bequeathed by earlier generations but without the people who once sustained it.

We have a responsibility to use these resources as a space and a platform to amplify the Christian gospel, and particularly in relation to the Christian concern for social justice.

Theologising

There is a difference between theologising and a theology. Theologising is a process, which may not reach an end point. It is a conversation, between diverse people and their experience, between the theologisers and the texts and traditions which are at the root of our faith.

Theologising cannot take place in a vacuum apart from our diverse ecclesiastical stories, nor our varying experiences of the world. Those who welcome newcomers cannot theologise apart from those who experience migration and vice versa. Nor can we theologise within one academic silo, no matter how engaging that might be. Theologising must be rooted in how we experience the world and how we engage with that world.

Theologising is not the responsibility of the academic theologian but of the whole faith community. (I don't think that I am just articulating a Protestant 'priesthood of all believers' but it is a good tradition.)

Theological parameters

No Christian theology can exclude sacred texts. The Hebrew Bible, the Apostolic Witness, the intertestamental texts, the writings of the early Church mothers and fathers are essential sources. Our reading of the text, through the lens of migration studies, may refresh and deepen our understanding of both.

The story of the church is a story of migration. Christianity from the earliest times spread through the movement of people. Until the Middle Ages, it was not possible to call the church a European institution. It was more a story of Asia and Africa. However, with the rise of Islam and the decline of

local Christian communities, its centre of gravity was Europe-focused. But that is no longer the case as there is an explosion of church life in the southern hemisphere.

Literature on the theology of migration takes two distinct paths. Evangelical literature sees the movement of people as a dynamic tool of evangelism. It is Spirit-led and opening up new frontiers, re-evangelising Europe and using the diaspora as a route into conversion of people of different faiths. This is a rare example of a wholly positive view of migration although some may find its crude opportunism disrespectful of migrant agency.

The other, particularly Liberation Theology inspired writing from the United States, has a tendency to romanticise the migrant. Not only is he or she the saviour of the decadent West but a sacrificial victim protecting family, equipped with the charms of popular religion and a metaphor for our own spiritual journey.

We need a critical analysis, of the thinking so far and can only do that if we have the courage to step outside our own traditions and give permission for nuance and complexity which engagement with different tradition can illicit.

The literature begs an ethical question. Do we approach this as a humanitarian concern, motivated by Christian compassion? Or do we see it as the fallout of the fundamental contemporary justice challenges – the inter-related issues of climate change, violence and income inequality?

Bible

Can we read the Bible through the lens of migration experience and theory? Many see it as something of a revelation that the Bible is so close to the experience of people living through the challenges, particularly of forced migration.

There are divergent experiences, Adam and Eve are forced from Eden and Israel is scattered as a divine punishment. Whereas Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Miriam embark on journeys which are journeys of promise, in spite of everything.

The redaction of the Hebrew Scriptures took place in the light of the Babylonian exile, restoration and the Hebrew dispersion.

The Apostolic Witness is also the story of evangelisation through a mobile Apostolate and the vehicle of the Jewish Diaspora. It describes the transformation of the Temple from a physical to a metaphysical space. Christians are described as aliens and exiles.

The Bible is a living manual for living life as sheep among wolves, strangers and sojourners and citizens of heaven.

European Christian Identity

We are deeply aware of the decline of Christianity in Europe. In 1910 66% of Christians lived in Europe. On current trends, in 2050 only 15% will live in Europe while 60% will live in Africa and Latin America. But immigration is not the cause of Christian decline. In part the change is a product of rapid expansion in the South. Immigration is actually preventing an even more dramatic decline.

USA style culture wars are entering Europe, through effective manipulation. Identity politics are overriding traditional economic and social issues, poisoning community relationships. Christianity is being co-opted by the political right to foment hatred, with migration being put firmly at the centre of the picture.

We should ask whether we are witnessing a glass schism, an invisible apartheid, between remnant churches like this one, and the emerging new European churches whose origins lie in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Some of these 'new churches' like the Ethiopian Orthodox or the Indian Mar Thoma Syrian Orthodox have deeper roots than many European churches whilst others are part of the well-spring of independent churches, founded in revival. What is the nature of ecumenical relationships between brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ in this city? What can we do to build relationships within our church communities as Christian brothers and sisters? This involves facing up to the pains of division and suspicion in our churches.

Social Justice

We cannot overlook the phenomena of forced migration in this era of expanding global population, environmental degradation, vast inequalities of opportunities and resources, escalation of conflict and the power of weaponry.

Christians need to confront the eschatological question – what is the meaning within this historical moment? If the world is being led into confusion then how do we turn it around, how do we turn the world upside down?

Is it for us a matter of perception? Do we see the story from the underside of history in which the resilience of the diaspora, its creativity and ingenuity for survival are the real story, rather than the threat of an unceasing tide of humanity seeking to cross the Mediterranean, the deserts of Arizona or the Pacific crossings to Australia?

Is it the creation of new communities, new expressions of Acts Chapter 4, sharing possessions and the treasures of our separate stories in common? Is this what church congregations should be?

For the righteous remnants have to ask 'whose righteousness'. And the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America on the move may need to claim their Christian birth right in the continent which was once called Christendom.

Perhaps the fundamental question for all of us in embarking on a theologising process is – how can we turn the love, hope, compassion, zeal which emanates from the Gospel of Jesus Christ into hard hitting and realistic policies in the public sphere.

Ultimately, the goal of theologising is to refine, reshape and determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of our Christian praxis. The deeper and richer the conversation, with text, tradition and each other the wiser and more Christ-like will be our action.