



Theologising on migration in Europe

Union Chapel, as part of its Christian commitment to social justice, is aiming to work with others in developing relevant ways of theologising on migration in Europe. This paper outlines some preliminary thoughts on areas for exploration.

It is intended to:

- stimulate an initial conversation with a small group of people with relevant expertise;
- assist focus on the parameters of the project;
- encourage deeper thinking; and
- assist in shaping opportunities for wider discussions with migrant's faith communities, practitioners, academics, policy makers and concerned citizens.

Why do we need to theologise on migration in Europe?

Migration is a key feature of our contemporary world, given the ease of travel, the globalised economy and perpetual inequalities and conflict resulting in the large-scale displacement of peoples.

Migration is a faith issue because:

- the majority of migrants are also people of faith or with a cultural background within both the major religions and minority religious groupings. Some migrate explicitly because of persecution of their faith community;
- migration has a significant impact on the practice and experience of religion. Faith is a vehicle for maintaining and asserting cultural identity and a source of support and comfort. It mutates in its new context and impacts on the religious practice and experience of receiving communities; and
- migration can create disruption or conflict in communities with religious identity being exploited in a hostile and sometimes violent manner.

Migration studies are focused on the humanities through inter-disciplinary studies, incorporating sociology, politics, human geography, history, cultural studies, and economics. However, they may give insufficient attention to the dimensions of the experiential, ethical and spiritual. Theologising on migration in Europe has the capacity to add value to the current discourse.

Faith leaders from migrant backgrounds and people of faith working in the field of migration need hermeneutical and epistemological frameworks in order to process and refine their responses within a challenging social, economic and political environment.

The purpose of theologising on migration should be to inform and transform praxis and to move the policy debate forward by directing attention to questions of justice, community, responsibility and obligation. People who move from one country to another, for whatever reason, are subjects of their own destiny, regardless of the limitations placed upon them by external realities.

Theology places God and God's relationship with humanity and therefore the relationships of humanity within itself at the heart. Systems, institutions, push and pulls, stocks and flows,

communities and individual experience are the object of study within migration studies. Can theology turn the focus to new subject and present new dimensions through which migration dynamics could be better understood? This could enable both the self-actualisation of migrants and bolster community resilience.

[Key issues to be addressed in theologising on migration in Europe.](#)

Theologising on migration is at the service of both the church and the wider society. It should both inform Christian praxis and provide insights to inform the wider discourse and experience of migration.

Biblical studies

Biblical texts narrate a continuing story of migration as intrinsic to the faith experience. Consequently, it is possible to develop a theology with migration as a key interpretative tool for reading scripture. There is a wealth of material within both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Apostolic Witness which provides considerable insight and wisdom into the migrant experience. Migrants are adventurers in search of faith, pilgrims, and missionaries. They are forcibly displaced and freedom fighters.

Scripture talks of exodus, exile and journeying. These themes have been explored extensively. Less so is the theme of diaspora or scattering. And yet from the exile onwards, and particularly for the early church, the relationships between people who are at the centre in Jerusalem and those who live across the Middle East, Asia and northern Africa is another vital interpretative tool which could produce helpful insights into the contemporary church.

Diaspora is a core Jewish concept and fundamental to the story of the early church. Philo Judaeus claimed (at around the time of Christ) that there was a Jewish diaspora of around a million living in Egypt. And there was a continuing diaspora in Babylon even after the return (hence the Babylonian Talmud). James addresses his epistle to the diaspora and is an underlying theme in the Book of Acts.

The texts can also be viewed from a hermeneutic of suspicion. Already existing 'migration theology' literature reads scripture as a reinforcing particular perspectives on migration. However, we might ask whether the ancients' relationship with land is exclusive or inclusive or whether the liberation of some created servitude for others. We might also question colonial models of mission and how scripture has been misused. Have we sufficiently re-booted our European minds from a post-colonial, post-Christendom perspective to read the biblical experience?

There is considerable risk that emphasis on migration is used to legitimise the migrant experience and their place in society. Migrants need to be authenticated for their own actions not those of people who lived in excess of two thousand years ago.

We must avoid making scripture the ultimate book on migration. The questions is: in which ways can the scripture inform, help, and motivate Christian's praxis on migration dynamics. We must not allow our reading of scripture to nourish the division of the world in migrations and non-migrants.

Ecclesiology

Home and exile could well be another model of church which was not identified by Dulles in his well-known work. It raises questions as to the role of the Temple and the Jerusalem church, (later Rome) as providing an anchor for the diaspora. Where is home? If we are less fixated on the notion of a heavenly realm, what does it mean to be citizens of heaven? We can reference the use, in the Latin Middle Ages, of the pair of concepts in patria/in via (that is, at home vs. on the way) which stood for the state of the life to come vs. the state of the present life.

Migration changes the practice of faith. There are conversions, liturgical renewals, changes in the demographic of church goers and challenges to existing structures and authorities. There are various responses, tragically this is often an increasing segregation along racial and denominational lines. Some, however, see the presence of new faith practices and new Christian communities as part of growth process and an opening for evangelistic endeavours. There are two paths this can take. It can be the indigenous church slotting newcomers into their existing practices or an opportunity for a completely fresh start. The hope of some is that migration is the source of ecclesiogenesis.

Missiology

The missiological approaches to inculturation are challenged by the migrant populations in the northern countries. It is not possible to isolate the culture we intend to 'enculturate' within a mercurial cultural and inter-cultural context. Here we come up against a fundamental problem for this approach. Too often inculturation is an adoption of the more superficial components of culture – dress, music style and food. It might also be the toleration of popular piety but do we yet need to explore how faith can be an expression of a living cultural experience.

Evangelism also presents challenges when migrants come from a different faith or denominational background. Migration creates shifts not only in location but also mind-set. Is Christian evangelism sometimes an expansion of colonialism albeit with the 'heathen' coming to the missionary rather than the other way around? Some talk of the 'missionary boomerang' and there is a messianic trend in some migrant churches to see their mission as saving the countries which first sent them the Gospel. Are these new churches in the West repeating the mistakes of the missionaries who were part of the colonial enterprise?

Eschatology

Liberation theological perspectives identify the migrant as 'the poor' and as harbingers of a 'new humanity'. Whilst there is much to admire in the resilience and strength of migrant people of faith, there is much that needs critical scrutiny. Migration policy on a global level is failing and governmental institutions initiate and collude with the necropolitics of immigration controls. Non-governmental and international humanitarian organisations are also subject to criticism where their programmes intentionally or otherwise reduce the migrant to a recipient of aid rather than the subject of their own fate.

Migration is politicised to a lesser and greater extent in different European countries. The UK is at the extreme. Ethno-nationalism is a political dynamic which isolates minority communities and can be a cause of social, political and economic exclusion and expulsion. The challenges require a prophetic imagination which stretches beyond indignation and condemnation to visionary articulations of inclusive and open societies.

Much of this discourse fails to appreciate the diversity of migration. Migrants are not homogenous, whether in their educational levels, gender, age, abilities, sexuality, faith, denomination, or ethnicity. LGBT communities are very vulnerable in many countries of the world and so make up a part of exiled communities. Women are especially open to exploitation and this is recognised in the literature. But women's roles also change positively away from traditional cultures. This can create unexpected tensions both between the new comers and the existing church congregations and between newcomers.

There are also inter-generation issues as the children of migrants find features of the new cultural community more attractive than that of their parents. Some migrant communities come with a conservative theology, perhaps from a Catholic or Orthodox teaching or from the influence of North American evangelicals. This can be a challenge to the liberal churches who have a positive approach to homosexuality and gender.

Immigration is juxtaposed with emigration. There are countries, economies, as well as families who must continue without enterprising individuals. Where there is forced displacement it is often the democratic and brave leadership who are forced out of the country, depriving it of effective opposition. Skilled workers leave, sometimes to study or to work in more lucrative and promising environments. There is a consequential brain drain especially from Africa. Families are separated, children from their parents or grandparents. Modern communications enable more contacts than in earlier times and remittances contribute significantly to family and national economies. We are witnessing the emergence of highly significant transnational communities.

Migration often occurs as a product of conflict and can provoke conflicts in areas of massive demographic churn. Liberal responses from faith leaders can sound remote and unrealistic to people living through community change. Yet we are in possession of a rich theology of salvation, redemption, forgiveness and transformation. We lock this away in a quest for individual souls whilst failing to articulate its import into societal realities. Rather than repeating platitudes we might want to look at some of the grittier theological options

We need to find a way of understanding the movement of people within a broader eschatological framework. The individuals who move are part of a historical phenomenon, presenting enormous challenges. There is pain and shame in the experience of migration and in the responses to it. The Gospel is a story of an imminent and unrealised reign of a God who is both judge and saviour. Inserting this story into the story of migration should be able to expose injustices, the abuse of rights and assert the need for practical and fresh approaches coherent with Gospel values. A theology of migration needs to deep dive into the wells of the great thinkers not only of our age but also our theological archives. Theologising about migration in Europe will need to give concrete expression to an eschatological hope.

Spirituality

Much of the literature, particularly from Catholic and North American writers, values the spirituality of the migrant. Christian spirituality is rooted in the desert experience and in the notion of pilgrimage and the parallel with the reflections of those Hispanic migrants who have crossed the Arizona desert are moving. Popular spirituality thrives in migrant communities and is important to their resilience. So there is an intrinsic danger that apparently sophisticated Western mind-sets patronise or undervalue the religious expression of people who use simplistic language to describe a deep experience. We only need to remember how intellectual endeavour failed to hear the depth of meaning in Afro-American spirituals. We can explore the diversity of spiritualities within the diverse migrant experiences. We should also ask whether it is in spirituality that we discover our true commonality in our restless search for a God who beckons us to continually cross new borders.

Pastoral theology

Engagement with and within migrant's communities range from the direct humanitarian intervention to radical dissenting politics. At local level, pastors and NGO workers engage with complex immigration matters, detention and removals causing family separation, bereavement and loss, trauma recovery, gender-based violence, racial abuse, homelessness amongst other complex

presenting and suppressed needs. Working with vulnerable migrants requires skill and knowledge and has rightly created a range of specialist service, for the most part in the faith and community sectors. Part of the function of a pastoral theology is to equip these practices with the intelligence and wisdom needed to move from the immediate crisis intervention to longer term resolutions.

One unintended consequence is the tendency to 'other' the migrant. NGOs need resources and to evoke compassion. Churches draw upon a well of empathy and compassion. This draws our theology to identify the migrant as the stranger. Even the language of intercessory prayer with the nobles of intention can reinforce outsider status. We make strangers of our brothers and sisters thereby establishing a dysfunctional relationship.

Migration is problematized in popular discourse and social policy. In countering the excesses of authorities and the failure of national and global institutions to prevent widespread injustice, there is a pastoral duty to enable a prophetic voice to have a voice and a platform. Without pretending that there are straightforward and easy solutions, it is the role of the pastor and prophet to speak truth to power rather than reinforce subliminal and overt attacks on migrants and their communities.

A contextual and located theology

Much of the developed theological thinking on migration has taken place in the United States and is linked to the particular experience of migration. It also has a large Catholic dimension as there have been significant movements of people from largely Catholic countries. However, the recent highlighting of the movement of peoples in Europe both through the so-called 'refugee crisis' – labelled by some as a European crisis – and the rise of populism creates a sense of urgency to the question in Europe. Here in the UK as the country separates from its neighbours, there is a new urgency to maintain links with European partners as this is a transnational issue which requires transnational responses.

A contextual theology needs a socio-political, economic, cultural, legal and technical analysis. It also needs a location, which is complex. It is the places of departure, arrival and transit and all the complex interactions between them. A theology of migration has to be about relationship to land and place. There is a historical and political dimension. Migration has become a problematic issue because of the European design of the nation state and our history of colonialism and post-conflict settlements following the two World and Cold Wars. The inter-relationship between Christianity and national identity is a persistent feature even in contemporary discourse.

Inter-faith

Migration is also bringing faiths together as new encounters take place in neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces. There is a developing pattern of relationships between faith leaders and faith institutions. Inter-faith encounters are now experiential rather than just theoretical. It is an open question as to whether this is contributing to a transformation of communities and understanding or limited in import to liberal leaderships. And yet, the relationship between faiths is an urgent political question. If theology can contribute anything it ought to be this.

[Questions for further exploration](#)

Are there lessons to learn from past experiences and approaches to avoid?

Does the pastoral theology response to migration also need to hear the insight of the systematic theologian?

Are we witnessing an irreparable polarisation of the Christian family, or can we articulate and celebrate an emerging ecclesio-genesis?

Is there a danger of romanticising the migrant experience within Christian theology? Can we frame migration within the overall quest for justice and the transformation of the human experience? What is our eschatological understanding?

How do we discover a common identity as people of faith without negating our differences? Is there a missiological imperative in the formation of new identities and communities?

How do we develop a distinctively European theologising on migration, genuinely rooted in our own reflection on our changing European identities?

In which ways could we define research units for theologising on migration?

How could the praxis- mindedness be best captured in the research unit?

How could the comparative dimension be best articulated?

How could Europe's connectivity with other parts of the world meaningfully explored in theologising on migration?

Is it right to develop a Christian theology of migration in isolation from the reflections and experience of people of other faith backgrounds and heritage?

[Union Chapel](#)

Union Chapel is a non-conformist church with its own historic experience of social and political exclusion. It is well-known as an innovative, liberal church. It is a popular music venue and a centre for people experiencing homelessness.

Union Chapel engages with progressive thinking and is open to contemporary concerns of social justice. Our intention is to create a conversation with people of faith who are migrants, practitioners, policy makers, thinkers and concerned citizens.

Activities under consideration

- Build a bibliography/library of resources
- Small reflection and support groups for practitioners
- Hold a major conference at Union Chapel as the culmination/departure point for an in-depth conversation
- Use our website for occasional papers, reflections, liturgical materials and study materials for faith communities seeking to theologise on migration.