

## **A Theology of Strangers and Migration**

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**Abstract:** The image of God among people remain intact, only their relationship becomes distorted because of fallen-ness. Jesus crossed the divine to the human, the Jewish to the Gentile, the men to the women, and the healthy to the sick and was prepared to die for that. Giving in to the acts of xenophobia is an expression of cowardice and spinelessness.

**Introduction:** *Examining theological reflection in an age of migration, [Groody] focuses on four foundations of a theology of migration and refugees: (1) Imago Dei: Crossing the Problem–Person Divide; (2) Verbum Dei: Crossing the Divine–Human Divide; (3) Missio Dei: Crossing the Human–Human Divide; and (4) Visio Dei: Crossing the Country–Kingdom divide. As a call to cross borders and overcome barriers, migration is a way of thinking about God and human life and an expression of the Christian mission of reconciliation*. Among other contributors to the reflection of theology of strangers and migrant it is Groody (2009; 2004) and Botha (2013) who are much engaged in this presentation.

**Imago Dei: Crossing the Problem–Person Divide:** “The Judeo-Christian tradition,” as the U.S. Catholic bishops have noted, “is steeped in images of migration,” from the migration of Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden (Gen 3:23–24), to the vision of the New Jerusalem in the final pages of the New Testament (Rev 21:1–4). In the book of Genesis we are introduced to a central truth that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). This is not just another label but a way of speaking profoundly about human nature. Defining all human beings in terms of imago Dei provides a very different starting point for the discourse on migration and creates a very different trajectory for the

discussion. Imago Dei names the personal and relational nature of human existence and the mystery that human life cannot be understood apart from the mystery of God” (Groody 2009: 643).

Mind that the migration of Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden was because they were expelled for disobedience (Gen. 3: 20 – 24). Though expelled, they were accorded the dignity which is betrothed to humanity – the Lord God Made tunics of skin and clothed them (:20). Though from then henceforth their life outside the garden was going to be different from that inside the garden, the image of God in them was not taken away (5: 1 – 3; 9: 6).

Both men and women of all nations are made in the image of God. According to the theology of equality and gender: “Women and men are co-substantial, co-equal and co-existent just as the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit are in the God-head in the Trinity. Women and men are created in the image of the same God, as one flesh and one spirit (Gen. 1: 26 – 29; 2: 7, 23). Women and men are made of the same material substance. The choice of gender and human sexuality or sexual orientation is not a human privilege – meaning humans have no privilege of choosing their gender from conception. This applies to everyone migrant or host nationals.

Being human precedes what gender people are given from conception. In other words humans are human first before their given gender and sexual orientation. Gender is not essential to being human. All actions and thoughts informed by gender to define what is human are theologically baseless. All of us migrants and pilgrims are such secondary to being human made in the image of God.

Views that gender is worthy of being male against the worthlessness of being female which are informed by traditional culture and theology must be challenged. Men must wrestle with the idea that gender does not define what is human, but the principle of life or the Image of God does” (Ngoetjana 2015: 1 Unpublished).

“The expulsion from Eden of Adam and Eve, the original imago Dei, and their border-crossing into the land beyond, names the human propensity to move toward a state of sin and disorder (Gen 3:1–13). Sin disfigures the imago Dei, resulting in a fallen world that creates discord in relationships. The territory into which the Prodigal Son migrates and squanders all his worldly wealth (Lk 15:11–32) symbolizes this barren terrain; it is a place that moves people away from the original creative design into a place of estrangement from God, others, and themselves” (Groody 2009: 648).

Though Groody says sin disfigures the imago Dei, it seems it is the relationships that are disorientated. Seemingly, outside the Garden, Adam and Eve no longer relate from the perspective of innocence now that they know the difference between good and evil and are “like one of Us” to know good and evil” – says the Lord. The image of God seems to go on unabated even in the state of the fallen-ness humanity finds itself (5: 1 – 3; 9: 6). The image of God remains unscathed in every human being but the relationship between people change because of fallen-ness.

### **Verbum Dei: crossing the divine–human divide**

“The sojourn of the Verbum Dei into this world is riddled with political and religious controversies, many of which are connected to narratives about migration. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus enters the world amid a drama involving documentation (Lk 2:1–5). In Matthew’s account, Jesus and his family must flee a threat that endangers their lives, making them political refugees (Mt 2:13–17, a parallel to a foundational migration in biblical history, Exodus 1). In John’s Gospel, many have trouble believing in Jesus precisely because of the place from which he emigrates (Jn. 7:41–43, 52). In a fallen world, human beings find many compelling political, legal, social, and religious reasons to exclude—and reject—the migrant Son of God” (Groody 2009: 649).

The world over humanity is subjected to counting and documentation as it happened in the book of Number and during the times of Jesus. All the laws, protocol and charters that have to do with migration are political instruments Jesus had to subject to as well. But crossing the divine to the human must

have been an ordeal of humiliation and shame (Phil. 2) – of being obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross – a *Kenosis* experience.

Crossing the divine to the human also means being embedded into a context. The root from which the word contextualisation comes is shedding light on what it means. The word context, from which ‘contextualisation’ is derived comes from the Latin root ‘contextus’, which means, weaving together. The light which is shed shines clearly when one realises that contextualisation has to do with the whole of a given context woven together. In a single context are many people, experiences, regulations, institutions, sub-cultures, ideas, and things. All the uncountable components of a context have roles they play in shaping people, society, trends, history, culture, and ideas. Contextualisation looks at all that and brings out reasons and meanings for problems and answers. This is applicable to faith life and any other discipline of life. Jesus was in many ways a migrant who did not shy away to be embedded into a context in which he was meant to be born for the purposes of God.

How can we then discriminate against each other for our biggest context is the Universe? Our own planet and its continents are a geographical Mohorovicic discontinuity coincidence. Our national boundaries are just a convenience of political expediency and opportuneness. For example, they are creations of the corruption of the partition of Africa colonisation, Christianisation and so called civilisation of people of the third world? Jesus crossed the divine to the human, the Jewish to the Gentile, the men to the women, and the healthy to the sick and was prepared to die for that. Giving in to the acts of xenophobia is an expression of cowardice and spinelessness.

Karl Barth writes of “the way of the Son of God into the far country.” He does not explicitly use the term “migration,” but his reflections are a way of speaking of God’s crossing over into the dark territory of a sinful, broken humanity. What distinguishes the Christian God from other, false gods, Barth notes, is that they are not ready for this downward mobility, “this act of extravagance, this far journey.” Through the Verbum Dei, Jesus’ kenosis and

death on the cross, God overcomes the barriers caused by sin, redraws the borders created by people who have withdrawn from God, and enters into the most remote and abandoned places of the human condition. No aspect of a theology of migration is more fundamental, nor more challenging in its implications, than the incarnation. Through Jesus, God enters into the broken and sinful territory of the human condition in order to help men and women, lost in their earthly sojourn, find their way back home to God” (Groody).

### **Visio dei: crossing the country–kingdom divide**

The *imago Dei*, *Verbum Dei*, and *missio Dei* are all based on the *visio Dei*. The notion of *visio Dei* is based in large part on the Matthean beatitude, “Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). This blessedness has been debated throughout history, but two classic distinctions

67 Raymond E. Brown, *The Book of Deuteronomy: Introduction and Commentary*, *Old Testament Reading Guide 10* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1965). 68 Cathy Ross, “Creating Space: Hospitality as a Metaphor for Mission,” unpublished paper, October 16, 2007, available at <http://www.cms-uk.org/>

[Resources/CrowtherCentrehome/Missiologyarticles/tabid/191/language/en-GB/ Default.aspx](http://www.cms-uk.org/Resources/CrowtherCentrehome/Missiologyarticles/tabid/191/language/en-GB/Default.aspx) (accessed May 12, 2009).

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emerge in the tradition, namely, what is possible in this life (*in via*) and that of perfect happiness in heaven (*in patria*).<sup>69</sup> Put another way, Christian discipleship, while situated within the citizenship of the *patria* of this world, ultimately is grounded in citizenship of, and movement toward, the *patria* of the next. In addition to pledging allegiance to a particular country, the *visio Dei* brings out that one’s ultimate obedience is to God alone, which leads one beyond any national and political boundaries to ultimate fidelity to the kingdom of God. Meister Eckhart adds that the goal of Christian life is not so much to seek the *visio Dei* in heaven as to see things in this life as God sees them.<sup>70</sup> Our focus here is how this vision takes root in human history, how

it influences social transformation, and how it transfigures the way we understand migrants and refugees.<sup>71</sup> A theology of migration seeks to articulate a renewed vision of God and human life as it is lived out between the eschatological horizon of faith and unbelief and a historical horizon of justice and injustice. Augustine

69 Bernard McGinn points out that throughout the tradition *visio Dei* holds in tension two apparently contradictory biblical claims: some texts affirm that God can be seen (Gen 32:30; Isa 6:5; Mt 5:8); others deny it (Gen 32:30; Exod 33:20; Mt 11:27; Jn 1:18; 6:46; 1 Tm 6:16; 1 Jn 4:12). Like *imago Dei*, *visio Dei* is also much debated throughout history, particularly about how the vision of God deals with the relationship between this life and the next. Innocent III spoke of three kinds of vision of God: corporeal, veiled, and comprehensive. “The corporeal vision belongs to the senses; the veiled to images; the comprehensive to the understanding” (Innocent III, Sermon 31, PL 217, coll. 598–96). McGinn traces the various ways in which this concept has been considered throughout the tradition by writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Dionysius, Eriugena, Gregory of Nyssa, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart. McGinn notes that, even though many debate the relationship between *visio Dei* in this life and the next, there is general agreement that the vision of God is the goal of Christian life. My focus here is to examine the social implications of such a vision. See Bernard McGinn, “*Visio Dei*: Seeing God in Medieval Theology and Mysticism,” in *Envisaging Heaven in the Middle Ages*, ed. Carolyn Muessig and Ad Putter with Garth Griffith and Judith Jefferson (New York: Routledge, 2007) 15–33; see also McGinn, “Visions and Visualizations in the Here and Hereafter,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2005) 227–46; and McGinn, “Seeing and Not-Seeing: Nicholas of Cusa’s *De visione Dei* in the History of Western Mysticism,” in *Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance*, ed. Peter Casarella (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2005) 26–53. 70 Bernard McGinn, “*Visio Dei*: Seeing God in Medieval Theology and Mysticism” 24–27. 71 The notion of *visio Dei* is integrally related to evangelical poverty. For more on the relationship between poverty and the direct awareness of God, and

poverty as a response to material prosperity in medieval society and the purification of self, see David Linge, “Mysticism, Poverty, and Reason in the Thought of Meister Eckhart,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 46 (1978) 465–88.

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believed that love and vision go together in the pursuit of justice.<sup>72</sup> Because Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxis emerge out of an understanding of God and God alone, the *visio Dei* shapes people’s ethical dispositions and offers a new way of perceiving the *imago Dei* in those whose dignity is often disfigured by dehumanizing stereotypes and demeaning public rhetoric. In its care for all, especially those most in need, the church not only goes beyond borders but unites itself with those on the other side of them, giving expression to its interconnectedness as the body of Christ. In imitation of its founder, the church serves all people regardless of their religious beliefs, their political status, or their national origins. The *visio Dei* comes into focus in the person of Jesus Christ and the kingdom he proclaimed. The kingdom of truth and life, holiness and grace, justice, love, and peace brings people into a different kind of social and ethical territory.<sup>73</sup> It is based not on geography or politics but on divine initiative and openness of heart, leading to a different kind of vision of the current world order, where many of the first are last and the last first (Mt 19:30; 20:16; Mk 10:31; Lk 13:29–30). Jesus clearly taught that many of the values and metrics people employ to measure others will be inverted and that the excluded will be given priority in the kingdom. The kingdom calls people into movement, making church members exiles on earth, strangers in this world, and sojourners en route to another place.<sup>74</sup> The word most frequently used for sojourner in the New Testament is *paroikos*, from which is derived the English word “parish” (Eph 2:19; 1 Pt 2:11). In Philippians 3:20 Paul describes Christians as living in this world but carrying the passport of another world: “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” The author of Hebrews speaks of the journey in hope toward a different place: “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come” (Heb 13:14). In the mids

### **Missio dei: crossing the human–human divide**

The missio Dei is to restore the imago Dei in every person through the redemptive work of the Verbum Dei. The universal message of the gospel is directed to all nations and all peoples, and it is concerned with all aspects of human beings and the full development of every person.<sup>52</sup> The church, through the power of the Spirit, takes up the Great Commission of Jesus by migrating to all nations, proclaiming the Good News of salvation, and working against the forces of sin that disfigure the imago Dei (Mt 28:16–20). In addition to the foundational ministries of Peter and Paul, tradition holds that such missionary endeavours led James to migrate to Spain, Phillip to Asia, and Thomas to India.

**Pastoral Circle:** “In terms of the logical coherence of the praxis cycle some measure of context or social analysis is as indispensable as insertion. The praxis cycle debunks any notion of a theology which draws a straight line between the text of the Bible and the context we live in. Put differently, the use of the praxis cycle as a theological method, reveals wariness of theological constructs which feed into the assumption that good theology is a good application of the text of the Bible to any given situation. The praxis cycle challenges theology to gravitate from a linear reading of the Bible to a mediated understanding of the text. One such mediation is context or social analysis” (Botha 2013).

### **“God as a migrant, God the refugee**

Attempts of emerging proponents on a theology of migration at metaphorically describing God as a migrant God or a refugee God go a long way in locating the language about God in the context of migration. In order to avoid such depictions of God to serve as lullabies for poor, dislocated, struggling migrants, a dialectical interpretation is necessary. In many different senses the God of the Bible is a migrant God. This is first and foremost born out in his migration from a non-accessible light to creation. In Christ Jesus He became incarnated, pitching his tent in the neighbourhood. A Christological perspective on migrants and migration is indispensable for a creative

dialectical theological-missiological understanding of migration. In his brief, but incisive article, Askevold (2008:47-49) portrays Jesus as a "wandering Aramean", arguing that all human beings are sons and daughters of the Aramean. In telling the story of the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus by showing how Jesus himself had to flee from persecution, he provides us with a handle on a dialectical analysis: "Every migrant", says Askevold, "carries the face of Christ, and this compels us to act in a way that protects this innate dignity" (:49). On the one hand a Christological perspective on migration reveals how Christ identifies with migrants, having been one himself, not as an economic migrant, but as a refugee. On the other hand the identification de-stigmatises migrants and affirms them in their dignity. In a similar vein, Saman (2008:53-59) depicts Jesus Christ as an asylum seeker, refugee and migrant. In a fascinating way he introduces what could be seen as a marvellous piece of narrative theology the way he describes, analyses and interprets the migration story at the very beginning of the New Testament. He points out that Jesus was not merely a migrant, but an alien who "came from heaven (the outer limits of space - although he did tell us the kingdom is within) and took the form of a human being to become for us the Refugee Christ" (:53). Central to the unfolding migration story of Jesus Christ is the notion from Luke 9:58 that "the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head". Once again the dialectic here is that of awkwardness, of being destitute on the one hand, but the paradoxical truth is that this very refugee brings salvation" (Botha 2013, Article)

"The need for a theology or Missiology of migration has amongst others triggered the rediscovery of the Bible as a book of stories. One of the major narrative trajectories in the Bible is the story of migration. In a very rich manner this trajectory unfolds in Askevold's (2008:47-49) brief article titled *We are all sons and daughters of a wandering Aramean* and Saman's (2008:53-59) piece titled *Jesus Christ: Asylum Seeker, Refugee and a Migrant*, already referred to in this article. Of note in the Biblical stories on migration are the Abraham narrative, the exodus from Egypt and the story of the "Holy

Family". There are many more to add in terms of Bible characters facing migration, such as the narrative of the Babylonian captivity in terms of both the exile and the liberation from exile of the people of Israel. A very creative perspective on migration would be the identification in the New Testament of Christians, the disciples of Jesus Christ as people of the Way or as *paroikia* or strangers or aliens in the letters of Peter, for example. There is a constant trajectory of the church as being underway, as gravitating to a new land, as being on a quest for a new city as in Hebrews 13:14. It is the story of a remarkable journey with its numerous challenges and setbacks on the one hand and here and there the unfolding of the most exciting adventures and of stumbling upon unseen territories" (Botha 2013, Article).

### **"An intercultural and interreligious theology**

That a theology of migration would *inter alia* be an intercultural and interreligious theology feeds into the very basic reality that human migration, if anything, is the encounter between cultures and faiths or religions. In South Africa migration has become the meeting place between cultures from different African countries like Somalia and as far afield as Pakistan which account mainly for the encounter between Muslims and Christians as well as adherents to the ATR" (Botha 2013, Article).

### **"Crossing the borders of our own minds**

*Despite the difficulties immigrants undergo in crossing the border, perhaps the more difficult borders to cross today are the borders of our own minds, especially those that guard our deep-seated biases and prejudices, and those we put up when we encounter someone we consider to be totally "other." Mexican immigrants bear some of the worst of the stereotypes in today's society. They are often looked at as illegal, non-taxpaying leaches who suck dry the funds of the local communities while they sell drugs, commit crimes and take jobs away from Americans. Some even lump immigrants into the same category as terrorists, without ever realizing that the terrorists of September 11th came in with legal visas and never even came through the southern border. Nonetheless, in the popular mind immigrants are perceived as a menace to the common good and the preservation of "American" culture. (People who make*

*this argument fail to realize that European-Americans took away “American culture” years ago, culminating in the last battle at Wounded Knee against the Sioux Indians in 1890.)” (Groody 2004)*

**“The relationship of immigration to revelation**

According to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, immigration is not simply a sociological fact but also a theological event. God revealed his Covenant to his people as they were in the process of immigrating. This Covenant was a gift and a responsibility; it reflected God’s goodness to them but also called them to respond to newcomers in the same way Yahweh responded to them in their slavery: “So you too must befriend the alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).” (Groody 2004).

“While border reform does not mean naively opening our borders to everyone, as if there were no need to take into account other political and socioeconomic factors, the church does put human life at the forefront of the discussion. A community of faith reflects on the fact that when it comes to commerce, we have borders that are becoming more and more open. When it comes to labor, however, we have borders that have become more and more restrictive. In brief, we have created a society that values goods and money more than human beings and human rights, which contradicts the biblical narrative” (Groody 2004).

“Jesus in his life and ministry went beyond borders of all sorts—clean/unclean, saintly/sinful and rich/poor—including those defined by the authorities of his own day. In doing so, he called into being a community of magnanimity and generosity that would reflect God’s unlimited love for all people. He called people “blest” not when they have received the most but when they have shared the most and needed the least. Christians, as such, distinguish themselves not by the quantity of their possessions but the quality of the heart, which expresses itself in service. Above all, this quality of the

heart is measured by the extent to which one loves the least significant among us". (Groody 2004).

"The immediate reasons for the complex reality of human migration differ widely; its ultimate source, however, is the longing for a transcendent horizon of justice, freedom and peace. In short, it testifies to an anxiety which, however indirectly, refers to God, in whom alone humans can find the full satisfaction of all his expectations." (in Groody 2004).

My aim in this article is to reflect critically on the mystery of God in an age of migration, which is a way of thinking about the gospel message in light of the sign of the times (Groody 2009: 641)

### **Kenosis**

"Another paradoxical dimension of the mystery of the incarnation is that, while human migration tends toward an upward mobility and the greater realization of human dignity, divine migration tends toward a downward mobility that is even willing to undergo the worst human indignities (Phil 2:5–11). Scripture depicts the movement of a people toward a promised land, but God's movement is just the opposite: it is an immersion into those territories of human life that are deprived of life and prosperity. God migrates into a world that is poor and divided, not because God finds something good about poverty and estrangement, but because it is precisely in history's darkest place that God can reveal hope to all who experience pain, rejection, and alienation" (Groody 2009: 650).

"The downward way of the Verbum Dei leads ultimately to the cross.<sup>47</sup> The kenosis of Jesus is God's radical risk of movement into the broken territory of human life, with potentially cataclysmic consequences if it fails. For many compelling reasons, numerous migrants and refugees reframe their own story in the light of Jesus' journey. Leaving their homelands, undergoing dangerous journeys, and taking up residence in a foreign land not only entails emptying

themselves but radically surrendering everything they own, without any assurance that what they lose will come back to them.<sup>48</sup> The cross is the ultimate expression of God's self-giving love, God's solidarity with those who suffer, and God's power at work amid human struggle and weakness. The notion of the crucified God and the crucified peoples is a topic that requires in-depth consideration beyond the scope of this article, but this notion is a central dimension of a theology of migration and has tremendous implications for those who are forcibly displaced, especially for addressing the inner wounds that migrants and refugees experience" (Groody 2009: 651).

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