

**THE THEOLOGICAL CUM ECCLESIOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO
MIGRATION AND REFUGEE CRISIS**

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Abstract

Movement of people from one place to the other has become the other of the day because of several reasons all pinned to importance attached to life. Life is the first and most precious gift of God to man and to save this life, man is free to take shelter wherever it suits him. Unfortunately, the present situation of affairs in Nigeria drives citizens out of the nation imbedded with the loss of human life. Today, Nigerians are facing severe life challenging issues that threatens the existence of life. Most Nigerians if given opportunity would prefer migration as the only solution to the recent political and religious crisis, unemployment, insecurity and sub-standard of living. These ugly situations in the country have made migration a necessity and not a choice. This paper studies and ventilates migration so as to bring to the open why Nigerians are migrating exponentially. It then goes further to examine the Church's stand on migration, the role the Church is playing to ameliorate the situation. The Church's longstanding teaching drawn from natural law is examined and the result shows that the Church recognizes the nation as an extension of the human family. Hence, no man is a stranger on earth because God is common father of all. Nations are advised to address the conditions that make citizens to begin to consider migration as a solution; leaders should make their home countries livable for their citizens. Going further, from the backdrop of Genesis 12:10, the Church asserts that when the need arises, man is free to save life wherever it suits him.

Keywords: Migration, life, theology, refugee and crisis

Introduction

The movement of people from their place of 'origin to a destination, or from a place of birth to another destination across international borders' is a severe contemporary issue (Skeldon 2013). Likewise, there are also people who migrate from one community or town within the same country (IOM 2015). The earlier movement refers to international migration, whereas the second movement refers to internal migration. This implies that migration has both 'internal and international' features (IOM 2015). In other words, international migration is a voluntary or non-voluntary 'movement of people across borders to reside permanently or temporarily in a country other than their country of birth or citizenship' because of political, social, economic, natural disasters or climate change factors (United Nations Human Rights 2015). Every person who migrates from his or her place of birth to another destination across international borders is referred to as a migrant. The foregoing definition of international migrants includes refugees, victims of human trafficking as well as documented or undocumented migrants. In addressing the subject of 'migrants in transit', Gilmore (2016), maintains that migrants is an umbrella concept as she employs it to represent all people who have a lack of citizenship attached to their hosting countries in common.

IOM (2015) presents a penetrating picture of the extent of international migration as a serious contemporary issue which the international community cannot afford to ignore. It states that: "the number of international migrants worldwide has continued to grow rapidly over the past fifteen years reaching 244 million in 2015 up from 222 million in 2010 and 173 million in 2000" (p. 1).

Likewise, in the *Global Challenge of Managing Migration*, Martin (2013) states that from 1980 to 2010, the number of international migrants has increased by 117 million. In 1980, the number of international migrants was 103 million, which increased to 220 million by 2010. Furthermore, Martin (2013) and the United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2013) reported that 'the number of international migrants increased from 220 million to 232 million by 2013'. Martin (2013) continued to estimate that the number of international migrants is most likely to reach 400 million by 2050. In both confirming and magnifying the extent and gravity of the issue of international migration, the IOM (2014) pointedly reported that 'approximately one in seven people are migrating every day'.

Migration confronts both migrants and migrants' hosting nations with various challenges. On the one hand, migrants face discrimination in various forms. Some hosting nations do not recognize the foreign qualifications of migrants which result in migrants accepting low-paying jobs in order to survive in their new homeland. This is usually done by adjusting the human rights of migrants through labour policies which favours the civilians of the hosting nations at the expense of migrants (Bose 2014; Datta et al. 2006). Furthermore, migrants encounter the imposition of burdensome migration regulations (i.e. hosting nations' tightening of their borders and onerous visa requirements) by the hosting nations as a means of discouraging migrants to enter in their country (Chelius 2014; Gilmore 2016; Rajendra 2014; Ridsdel 2014; Sazonov 2015). On the other hand, the migrants' hosting countries face the following challenges:

- (1) The cost of resettling and integrating migrants (Boundless 2015; Nie 2015; Thomsen 2016)
- (2) The increment of the rates of unemployment (Rivera-Pagán 2012)
- (3) The dilution of their native cultures (Corhen & Sirkeci 2011; Tan 2012)
- (4) Threats from the refugees' opponents (Pakoz 2016)
- (5) The suspicion that migrants, particularly refugees, are intertwined with terrorism (Louw 2016; Plucinska 2015).

The surfacing problem is that although the existential challenges of both migrants and hosting nations are real and the international community cannot afford to ignore them, theology has been lowly participating in shaping the discourse of migration (Groody 2009a; Heimburger 2015; Jackson & Passarelli 2016). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that there are no ecclesiological-theological responses and approaches to migration challenges.

Although there are ecclesiological-theological responses and approaches to migration challenges, it is apparent that these responses are lacking in numerous ways. Hence, this article seeks to critically assess some theological-ecclesiological responses and approaches to migration challenges in order to identify lacunae for further exploration in Christian ministry engagement. In order to accomplish this objective, the researcher will focus on migration issues within theological discourse.

Migration Issues within Theological Discourse

Migration is a serious theological issue because Christianity itself and its foundational doctrines draw significantly from a history that has a clear thread

with migration. In this regard, a considerable number of scholars (Campese 2012; Groody 2009a, 2013; Rivera-Pagán 2012) and the church councils (Catholic Church Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil 1981; the Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 55. 2004) have concurred that both the Old Testament and New Testament clearly assert migration as a biblical concept.

These scholars and church councils subscribe to a theological position that states that we are all migrants, starting from Adam to us (cf. Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 55. 2004). It is in Genesis 3 where the original migration of mankind emerged as a result of Adam's rebellion against God and was expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gn 3:1-24). In their expulsion from Eden, Adam and Eve migrated into another land in form of judgment. Thus, in linking Adam's expulsion from Eden as the first migration idea in scripture, scholars are bringing the doctrine of creation and the fall to bear on the biblical notion and philosophy of migration.

However, in reversing the Adamic migration by recreating a new person for himself, God called Abraham to leave his home in order to inherit the promised land of Canaan (Gn 12:1-3; Groody 2013). This shows us that in God's large salvific purposes, Abraham migrated in form of blessing to dwell in foreign lands which God was to give to him and his descendants (Gn 12). In this way, the notion of Adam and Abraham's migration is juxtaposed. On the one hand, Adam's migration was in form of punishment and destruction, whereas on the other hand, Abraham's migration was particular and universal in nature. The particularity of Abraham's migration was in form of receiving particular blessings for him and his descendants, while the universal aspect of his migration lies in bringing people back to eternal fellowship with God (Torrance 2008). This scriptural notion of migration is intensified when Israel, the descendant nation of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, migrated to Egypt as well as their return to the Promised Land. This aforementioned migration was a pattern for the entire life of Israel in the Old Testament. Given this:

... the theme of migration is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. From the call of Abraham to the exodus from Egypt and Israel's wandering in the desert and later experience of exile, migration has been part of salvation history. (Groody 2009c)

Likewise, the Catholic Church Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (1981) claims that:

Israel is a country which has been deeply marked by the drama of migrations. Its history has been enriched by this experience and contains important elements which can shed light in the present day reality of migration. (p. 178)

That is, the notion and philosophy of salvation in the Old Testament is 'migration bearing'.

Furthermore, the New Testament speaks about the incarnational mystery of God and Christian life from a migration perspective (Campese 2012; Matovina & Tweed 2012). The former denotes that the migration position of the church is anchored in the mystery of the incarnation in which the infinite, eternal and transcendent God (in and through Jesus Christ) came into our estranged territory in order to save and bring us back to our eschatological homeland in which we will experience full reconciliation between God and us, as well as man and man (Groody 2013). Nagy (2015) corresponds with Groody, Matovina and Tweed, and Campese when he affirms that a proper understanding of migration as a metaphorical expression of the incarnational mystery of God will result in one's 'deeper understanding' of the nature of God and his relationship with the world. The latter denotes that the migration position of the church is embedded within the fact that Christians are biblically ascribed as migrants by scriptural texts that describe believers as aliens or strangers in the world (1 Peter 2:11 and Heb 11:13-16; Campese 2012; Groody 2009a; Matovina & Tweed 2012). Given this, the comprehension of migration as a descriptive metaphor for the incarnational mystery of God and the Christian life is central in configuring migration as a serious theological concern for the church.

Consequently, Aymer (2015:1) understands migration as a theological issue by viewing the New Testament as a diaspora space. She arrived at her conclusion about the New Testament as a diaspora space after a thorough examination of the New Testament books. She argues that the seven unquestionable letters of Paul were written by him when he was in diaspora, instead of his homeland (Aymer 2015). The four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), Acts and the three epistles of John are mainly identified in the scholarly world as written by some exiled anonymous authors after the siege of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire (Aymer 2015). In substantiating her case, she argues that the letters to Hebrews, 1 Peter and James were written within a diaspora space because the authors of these letters identify their audiences as people in exile or aliens.

Furthermore, without building a strong case, she simply identifies the letter of Revelation to have been authored by John while in exile (Aymer 2015). Therefore, Aymer (2015) encapsulates migration as a theological concern for the church because 'the majority of the New Testament authors wrote as migrants (on the road, in exile, on the move) and that their writings constitute sojourners' truths, and thus diaspora space'.

Given the aforementioned discussions, it can be affirmed that both the Old and New Testaments present the notion and philosophy of migration as interconnected with the aspect of God as a migrant and the self-identity of Christians as pilgrims on the way. Thus, Christians are expected to shape the migration debate because the fundamental twin doctrines of Christianity (the incarnation and Christian salvation) rest on the notion and philosophy of migration. However, the arising problem is that although other disciplines such as 'economics, politics, geography, demography, sociology, psychology, law, history, anthropology, and environmental studies' are at the center of shaping the emerging field of migration studies, theology is at the margin of the migration debate (Groody 2009a). Campese (2012) and Jackson and Passarelli (2016) observe that theological reflections on migration are immature. Jackson and Passarelli (2016) continue to note that there is very little that has been done to develop migration theology programmes; hence, in-depth theological reflection and programmes should be developed across the spectrum starting with undergraduate programmes. Groody (2009a) and Heimburger (2015) added that theology has been on the periphery of shaping the emerging field of migration as if it does not have anything to offer. The low participation of theology in shaping the emerging field of migration is a serious theological concern because theology and its fundamental doctrines of salvation draws largely from the notion and philosophy of migration (Campese 2012; Groody 2009c, 2012, 2013; Matovina & Tweed 2012; Nagy 2015).

Various Ecclesiological-Theological Responses and Approaches to Migration Challenges

Pastoral Care of the Migrants

Heyer (2012), Snyder (2012), Tan (2012), Adogame (2013) and Matovina and Tweed (2012) are but a few examples of scholars who focus on practical responses from a pastoral care that is limited to a particular social context. Matovina and Tweed focus on Mexican and Cuban exiles; Tan focuses on the Asian context; Adogame focuses on African migrants in diaspora; Snyder focuses

on migrants (particularly asylum seekers) in British social contexts and Heyer focuses on Latin American migrants in the United States. The prevalent practical response for many of these scholars is a call for the hosting nations and Christians to accommodate migrants (particularly refugees) as well as standing alongside them as they encounter various challenges. For instance, Heyer (2012) as a representative voice criticized America for its complicit systems that create the conditions which cause many people to engage in unlawful migration. Heyer (2012) further recognizes that the complicit systems of America subject Latin American women to sacrifice their sexual purity for survival in the United States. There are many unreported sexual abuse cases involving migrant women in work places because they are scared of being deported.

In bringing the Roman Catholic social teachings and the theological discussion of the analysis of sin to bear on migration challenges, Heyer (2012) advances the church as locus for transformation. She calls both the church and the nations at large to employ incarnational and conflictual solidarity as dimensions of solidarity which can save the world troubled with globalisation. The former refers to American churches and America as a nation to identify with many Latino Americans in their various challenges (Heyer 2012). The latter calls nations to fight with conflicting forces which prevents the attainment of incarnational solidarity (Heyer 2012). Heyer (2012) concludes by bringing the notion and philosophy of migration as a metaphor for Christian pilgrimage at this Christian interim period that 'migrants serve as witness to enduring hope'. In this way, Christians' hospitality towards fellow pilgrims provide 'eschatological glimpses' of the now but not realised Kingdom of God (Heyer 2012). In view of the challenges that migrants face, this theological approach represented by Heyer is a useful approach; nonetheless, it is clear that this approach lacks wider application as it focuses on selected contexts.

Theological Motif and Ministry Praxis From Narrow and Single Biblical Texts

Snyder (2012) is the representative of the theological response to migration crises which focuses on migration theological motif and ministry praxis from narrow and single biblical texts. Snyder (2012) calls the churches in Britain, and Britain as a nation, to accept migrants based on the biblical texts of Ruth (a Moabite woman) and the gospel narrative of the Syro-Phoenician woman in Mark 7:25. Snyder (2012) discusses Ruth as a woman who went into a foreign land by faith and was welcomed by Boaz. This resulted in Ruth's inclusion into the foreign nation of Israel (cf. Ruth 4:11ff.). In substantiating her point, Snyder (2012) linked

Ruth's story to the Syro-Phoenician woman, whom by faith had approached Jesus so that she could heal her child who was tormented by evil spirits (Mk 7:25). In connecting Ruth's plight to those of the Syro-Phoenician woman, Snyder calls migrants to have faith, as well as calling Christians and the citizens of the nations to welcome strangers (Snyder 2012). In further underscoring her appeal for the churches and nations to be hospitable to migrants, Snyder employs Ruth, by locating the significance of Ruth in the lineage of Abraham which stretches to Jesus, as a classical example on foreigners' contribution in building a foreign nation.

However, the weakness of this approach is that it is both unsystematic and incomprehensive, therefore, unable to make a compelling theological basis for the acceptance of migrants by Christians. In other words, the unsystematic and incomprehensive aspect of Snyder's approach can possibly result in failing to alter the mindset and actions of the targeted audiences. This is because Snyder does not engage with various biblical texts in the New Testament (e.g. Mt 25:31-46; Heb 13:2-3) which provide Christians with a robust theological basis for accepting migrants - particularly strangers (Sagovsky 2014). Even though Snyder's theological approach is useful, it is also true that it challenges us to construct a systematic-comprehensive theological approach which draws on the whole council of God's word as a means of establishing a better theological basis for Christians' inclusion of migrants particularly refugees.

Israel as a Paradigm of how Native Christians and Hosting Nations should Treat Migrants

In response to the migration crisis, Matovina and Tweed (2012), Rivera-Pagán (2012) are using an approach that focuses on Israel as a paradigm of how native Christians and hosting nations should treat migrants. That is, Israel as a covenantal nation of God is taken as an example of how local communities and the churches of the hosting nations should treat migrants in their homeland. In taking Israel as a model of churches and nations' response to migrants, these scholars perceive God's command for Israel to love the foreigners in their land as a dominating response which the church and hosting nations have to exhibit in the current migration crisis (Bedford Strohm 2008). This understanding is rooted in the experience of the salvific history of the nation of Israel (Bedford-Strohm 2008). Israel has experienced the pain of being a stranger in its captivity in Egypt, and therefore, it was supposed to treat foreigners in the way it would have

wanted to be treated herself (Lv 19:33–34; cf. Dt 10:19–20, Ex 22:20, 23:9, cf. Matovina & Tweed 2012; Bedford-Strohm 2008).

Bedford-Strohm (2008) emphasizes that the Israelite community was commanded to love strangers among them in the same way they love themselves (cf. Lv 19:33–34). In saying this, Bedford-Strohm (2008) is moving towards his affirmation that the churches and nations are to act likewise as a means of ending discrimination, xenophobia and the exploitation of migrants. That is, just like Israel, God commands equality between migrants and the citizens of the hosting nations; therefore, migrants' hosting communities and native churches are to act in a reciprocal manner. In developing an ethics of empathy, Bedford-Strohm (2008) demonstrates how the commandment of Leviticus 19:33–34 is promoted by God in the subsequent comprehensive summary:

Firstly, the commandment is emphasized as comprehensible and accessible from Israel's own experience: 'You know how it feels to be foreign and discriminated against. Therefore treat the foreigner just like you would want to be treated if you were in the same situation!' Secondly, the reasoning for the commandment culminates by referring to God Himself: 'I am the Lord your God'. I adopt the cause of all foreigners just like I. (p. 41)

Bedford-Strohm (2008), Matovina and Tweed (2012) and Rivera-Pagán (2012) represent theology in a way which recognises the teachings of the Old Testament about how Israel is to relate to strangers or foreigners among them. It is agreed that Israel was commanded by God to love the strangers among them as they love themselves. However, a point of contention, concerning the current nations experiencing migration crises, is that there is a tendency to directly apply Israel's manner of dealing with the foreigners. This is problematic because Israel was a theocratic and covenantal nation of God, which is distinct to any other nation. Israel was a distinct nation and has a particular relationship with God. For instance, it was a priestly nation chosen by God as his instrument of salvation to the whole world. This clear distinction begs for bridges in bringing Israel as a model of response for non-theocratic nations encountering migration challenges at the moment.

Catholic Church's Response to Migration

The Church has always defended migrants' rights, endorsing the right to free movement, family reunification, and the respect for immigrants' cultural,

linguistic and religious rights. The universal destination of the earth resources and the need for an international cooperation constitute the basis for the Church's social teaching concerning migration. Faced with new challenges such as the illegal migration flows, the Church advocates respect for fundamental human rights and calls upon international norms capable of regulating the rights and duties of each person, with the aim of preventing one-sided decisions that cause harm especially to the low-income and poor people. She protects illegal immigrants through political advocacy and by running an extensive legal and charitable network in their favour. The Church's social teaching on migration remains an unfinished task at the level of reflection. But through her teachings, the Church continues to sensitize public opinion and legislators by keying ideals so that the fundamental rights of each person may be respected and upheld everywhere and in every circumstance.

Benedict XVI (2010) recalls that "The Church's presence among migrant people is maintained constantly through the years, achieving significant results at the beginning of the last century. One may recall the memory of blessed Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini and St. Frances Cabrini" (p34). With the explosion of the modern phenomenon of migration, the Church, at least in her official documents, has given ample proof to be attentive and close to people forced to leave their country, by suggesting and implementing numerous religious and charitable activities for them. This choice of a practical nature has marked many of her operations in the 19th and 20th centuries. Leo XIII (1891) states

Neither one believes that the attentions of the Church are so wholly and solely aimed at the salvation of souls, to overlook what belongs to the moral life on earth. She wants, and gets it mostly; the working class emerges from its unhappy state, and improves its living conditions (p.23)

The Church does not reduce the immigrant to a receiver of charitable services, but emphasizes his personal dignity. Even though the commitment to the welfare and the pastoral care in favour of these people is important, the official documents of the Church soon begin to address the phenomenon of human mobility in more general terms by developing, over the years, some guidelines which will, later on, bring about a social doctrine in this field of migration. However, so far, no documents of the Church and even less moral theologians offer us a systematic treatment of the rights and responsibilities towards forcibly displaced persons. Pius XII is a witness of the tragedy of World War II and the

subsequent flight of millions of people from their lands. He introduces some forceful considerations on migrants' rights.

Conclusion

From the forgoing, theology should dialogue with the current challenges that migrants encounter. Reactive ministerial and ecclesiological models that respond to the challenges of migrants should be developed. Hence, advancing a useful intercultural theology of migration. Theology has to dialogue with current forms of arising issues. An emerging problem indicates that while theology is expected to dialogue with migration, scholars observe that theology has been peripherally participating in shaping the discourse and responses to migration crises. Notably, Groody (2009) observes that other disciplines such as 'economics, politics, geography, demography, sociology, psychology, law, history, anthropology, and environmental studies' are at the centre in shaping the emerging field of migration studies while theology is on the side-lines. This lacuna is indeed of theological concern. The above-mentioned lacunae indicate a challenge to place theological reflection of migration on the theological agenda.

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