Introduction

Migration is defined by UNESCO as ‘the crossing of the boundary of a political or administrative unit for a certain minimum period of time. It includes the movement of refugees, displaced persons, uprooted people as well as economic migrants…International migration is a territorial relocation across nation states.’ (www.unesco.org)

Migration into, from and within Europe has had a profound affect on the continent’s culture and history from its earliest days (Hall, 2000; Guerinna, 2002, p15). A migrant in Europe could be a wealthy Asian, American or Russian businessman; a Pilipino au pair or Polish construction worker, an African or Burmese asylum seeker or a trafficked teenager. They may be coming to find work or a better quality of life, to be reunited with family members, or to escape persecution or environmental disaster (Jackson and Passarelli, 2008, p5).

Some countries, for example, the UK, have a history of migration into, as well as from, the country. Others, such as Italy, Spain and Greece who typically experienced emigration, now find themselves challenged by the presence of European and non-European migrants in their midst (Itano, 2010).

For the purposes of this paper, migrants are immigrants to or between European countries. We reflect on how the relationship of a migrant to their host country is described theologically, particularly relating to integration or assimilation. In addition, we explore the idea of integration from a theological perspective and the implications for Christians – migrant and non-migrant – living and working in a European context.

1. The relationship of a migrant to the host country

The presence of immigrants in Europe divides public opinion. 54% of respondents to a Eurostat survey said that ‘immigrants enriched the cultural life of their country’ (EU, 2007, 69). Slightly less (46%) felt immigrants competing for jobs with the indigenous population increased unemployment in their country. And 50% of Europeans believe their country has too many immigrants (Peters, 2009).

Integration is ‘the process of inclusion of immigrants in the institutions and relationships of the host society’ (Boswick and Heckman, 2006, p1). Politically, the EU is committed to the integration of migrants, reflected in part by Franco Frattini’s comment ‘there can be no immigration without integration’ and the commitment of €825 million between 2007 and 2013 to aid integration (Goldirova, 2007).

1.1 Assimilation versus Multiculturalism

The International Organisation for Migration places integration in the middle of a continuum spanning assimilation to multiculturalism, stating that assimilation expects migrants to ‘adjust entirely to the values and the rights system of the host society’ (IOM website). Boswick and Heckman add that assimilation means ‘disregard[ing] the values and practices of their countries of origin’ (2006, p7) and as such it is a one-sided process (2006, p4).

Singaporean Ravi Chandran leads a large international church in Denmark (Sullivan, 2007). He describes assimilation as ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’.
In the mind of the foreigner, especially one who has come to a new culture, assimilation is giving up the way you think and your values, and adopting the host’s values. The Romans went all over the world and conquered. The mindset you communicate when you say “when in Rome...” is basically going back to colonisation, particularly for African and Asian migrants. They feel “I have come to your country and you want to colonise me?” (Chandran, 2010)

Chandran (2010) adds that one of the dangers of demanding assimilation is that the migrant will react against the demands to give up their value systems by retreating into their own subcultures and refusing to interact in meaningful way with the host culture.

Alternatively countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden have advocated a multicultural approach. (Main, 2006,p2; Peter, 2006). According to the International Organisation for Migration, a multi-cultural society aims to allow diversity, equal rights and equal opportunities to migrants, at the same time allowing them to keep a cultural affiliation to their country of origin.

In practice however, multiculturalism can create tensions when the migrant’s values are in direct opposition to those of the host country, for example sharia law being set up in British towns (Carey, 2010).

In fact, neither approach has proved successful – indeed Main (2006,p2) reflects that although France and the Netherlands are at opposite ends of the assimilation-multiculturalism spectrum, both have experienced ‘similar problems with immigrant unrest and deepening cultural divides, and violence has erupted in both countries’.

1.2 Integration – long-term and multi-dimensional

Chandran (2010) pictures integration as a partnership, with the host and migrant cultures (or individuals) ‘meeting sort of in the middle of the bridge, where they take time to understand the journey each one has taken.’

The Global Commission on International Migration frames integration as a ‘long-term and multi-dimensional process’. Both migrants and non-migrants need to be committed to the process and respect each other, and prepared for the naturally occurring changes in the perceptions and cultural structures of each society as a result of integration. (GCIM, 2005, p44, cited by Jackson 2009).

The EU is developing a Common Agenda for Integration based on eleven Common Basic Principles (CBP) for Immigrant Integration. Recognising the two-way dynamic of integration, the principles include ‘frequent interaction between immigrants and Member state citizens’. For the immigrant, some knowledge of the host society’s language, history and institutions is seen as ‘indispensable’, and they are required to make ‘efforts in education’. The host society should allow migrants and non-migrants equal access to institutions and protect ‘the practice of diverse cultures and religions’ (EU, 2004,p17).

However it must be noted that while Integration Policy appears to be directed towards third-country nationals, from beyond the EU’s borders (EU, 2007,p3), much of the migration in Europe is between EU countries (Jackson and Passarelli, 2008,p14).

1.3 Measures of integration

The Migration Integration Policy Index uses over 100 policy indicators to measure integration. Its latest report, MIPEX II (2007), measured how well policies relating to integration in labour market access, family reunion, long-term residence, political participation, access to nationality and anti-discrimination helped promote integration. Overall, each policy area was found to be only halfway to best practice, with Sweden scoring the highest across all six areas, and the only country to favourably promote integration.
During their 2009 EU presidency, the Swedish government proposed identifying some common indicators across the EU of ‘what makes integration work’, aiming to make measuring the success of EU integration policy possible. So far these include work, education, social inclusion and active citizens (Kvam, 2010).

2. Theological reflections on the relationship between migrants and their host countries

The Council of European Churches has designated 2010 as the European Year of the Churches in Migration. Many individual Christians, churches and organisations across the continent work with migrants, and many migrants themselves are Christians.

Bearing in mind that ‘theology cannot unilaterally dictate specific policy’ (Spencer, 2004, p125), undertaking theological reflection can help us “develop a biblical mind by means of which [we] might evaluate modern value statements and explore how the appropriate biblical foundations might be translated into policy” (Spencer, 2004, p35). In addition, our theological understanding of migration will naturally inform our actions as individuals, churches and organisations, and our decision to promote, amongst other things, assimilation or integration.

According to Nagy (2009, p201) the migrant’s theology is often autobiographical, arising out of their life-experiences. The theological reflections of a non-migrant are defined as ‘reaction theology’ because they are formulated in response to ‘the different manifestations of migration in their midst’ (Nagy, 2009, p219). The theologies described below show aspects of both perspectives.

2.1 Victim

Some migrants are victims, fleeing intolerable persecution or poverty, or trafficked to Europe against their will. While the EU’s Integration Policy recognises that ‘promotion of fundamental rights, non-discrimination and equal opportunities plays a crucial role in the context of integration’ (2007, p6), irregular migrants can also be at the mercy of EU migration and asylum policies which ‘remain focused on keeping [them] … out of the EU and removing those who are present rather than ensuring their rights are protected’ (Pop, 2009).

When you consider the migrant as a victim who is poor and oppressed, the Bible has plenty to say about how Christians should act on their behalf (Leviticus 19.33,34; Isaiah 1.17; Isaiah 58.6; Matthew 25.35-40). The concept of looking after the poor and oppressed is known as diaconia and according to Nagy (2009, p220) is the rationale behind the work of many organisations to migrants, whether Roman Catholic, Protestant or ecumenical. The Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe, for example, is involved in lobby and advocacy work for the rights of migrants and refugees. (www.ccme.be).

The 1996 World Council of Churches Resource book states that migrants are ‘symbols and reminders of an unjust and unmerciful world and the church is called to act on their behalf to build a new community that points towards the Kingdom.’ (Nagy, 2009, p225) Using Isaiah 65.17-25 and Eph 2.19, they actively encourage inclusive communities that bring the migrant into community within the household of God, as a foretaste of the Kingdom to come.

It is right that Christians should be involved in seeking justice for the oppressed and marginalised, including immigrants within society. In doing so, they are following Christ’s example (John 20.21); bearing witness to a living faith through their deeds (e.g John 14.21; James 2.18) and potentially bringing about transformation of society (Escobar, 2003, p248).

Commenting on the WCC’s theology on migration however, Nagy (2009, p226) says ‘WCC’s theologies on migration continue to operate from the perspective of the non-migrant being there to serve the migrant who they see as victims,’ who are on the margins. Unless the
actions of the non-migrant lead to the empowerment of the migrant, an unequal relationship could occur, potentially hindering the integration of the migrant into society.

2.2 Stranger

In contrast to that of victim, the description of a migrant as a ‘stranger’ describes most immigrants – whether they arrived business class to an international airport, or hanging on to the underside of a lorry.

Strangers can also be defined as the ‘other’ who, according to Guerrina (2003,p5) have shaped European identity. Modernity sees the stranger as a ‘major irritant’, because they cannot be categorised as either friend or enemy.

Modernity’s response to the disturbing presence of strangers has been typically to adopt one of two strategies: assimilation or exclusion.... However modern societies have not succeeded in either....the central question is no longer how to get rid of them, but how to live with and handle the difference in every day life. (Jackson and Passarelli, 2008,p10)

Many Christians turn to the biblical idea of ‘strangers’ to give them a framework for dealing with the ‘other’ in their midst.

2.2.1 The Old Testament and the alien

Leviticus 19:33-34 is clear that rather than being irritated by strangers (also translated alien), we are to love them – a command repeated 36 times in the OT. (Spencer, 2004,p73) ‘When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.’

The Israelites were encouraged to remember they were once strangers themselves and told to treat the migrant as ‘one of your native born’. Aliens were not allowed to be discriminated against on the basis of their cultural identity; God’s punishment against other nations described in the prophets was due to the values these nations displayed, rather than the fact they were ethnically different. (Spencer, 2004,p110)

However, in order to be fully accepted, the alien needed to be committed to the Covenant (Exodus 12.48,49) – which could be interpreted as moving closer to assimilation than integration. According to the Torah, the noikrim were independent individuals living in Israel with little desire to join Israel. They were treated differently and had less privileges than the gerim – dependant and vulnerable foreigners who were expected to live by the same ethical principles as the people they lived with, such as keeping the Sabbath and taking part in festivals (Spencer, 2004,p86,94; Jackson and Passarelli, 2009,p21).

Nagy (2009,p239) warns against taking the OT command out of its setting, and interpreting it in a contemporary context: ‘love for the alien does not mean tolerance and acceptance of all that and who the person is, on the contrary it means a love which becomes active as soon as the alien enters the country with the aim to “make him or herself one of us”.’

Ruth the Moabitess is an example of a ger who says ‘My God will be your God’ (Ruth 1:16). Jackson and Passarelli (2004,p21) use this story as an example of integration, stating that in this case ‘assimilation is neither sought nor urged’. However if Christians view integration as saying ‘my God will be your God’, a religious Muslim or Hindu might disagree and be more likely to opt for exclusion and marginalisation in their own sub-culture.

2.2.2 The stranger as guest

Hospitality is another way of ‘loving the stranger’. Christ suffered the ‘alienation that comes with being a stranger’ (Hancles 2003,p150). He was ‘rejected and despised by men’ (Is 53,3), having ‘came unto his own, but his own did not receive him’ (John 1.11).
Biblical culture expected hospitality, from Abraham entertaining angels in Genesis 18 to the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. The idea of the stranger/migrant as guest is often used as the basis for encouraging people to offer hospitality to migrants – whether it is hosting international students, or local churches allowing migrant church groups to use their buildings for meetings. The implication, based on Matthew 25.40 and Hebrews 13.2 is that by offering hospitality, you are by proxy, entertaining Christ or at the very least, being open to a divine encounter. (Huston et al, 2003, p29)

Implicit in the idea of being a guest is that of temporary residence. This is a reality for some migrants, for example seasonal or guest workers, businessmen and international students. (Huston et al, 2005; Jackson and Passarelli 2009, p7; ). They, along with others who can return home easily are less likely to feel the need to integrate. ‘The Pole who goes to Ireland today doesn’t have the same pressure to adapt as one who came to New York a century ago.’ (Anon, 2009)

But for many migrants, going home is not an option. ‘The question of migration is not always if ever a question of paying a short visit, but is a permanent component of contemporary social reality’ (Nagy, 2009, p242). What happens if we see migrants only as guests - and they outstay their welcome?

Guests always remain the visitor and therefore the ‘other’ – they are not hosts, who belong to the area and allow the guest onto their territory (Nagy 2009, p242). If the guest misbehaves – for example when a migrant church meeting in a state church building is too noisy or loses the keys - the response is all too often neither assimilation or integration – it is modernity’s other response of exclusion (Lund, 2009).

2.2.3 No longer strangers

Another theological approach to strangers is to see them as ‘no longer strangers, but fellow citizens in God’s kingdom’ (Eph 2.19). Contrary to popular opinion, the majority of migrants to Europe are Christians. For indigenous Christians, the migrant stranger is a fellow brother or sister in Christ, and should be treated as such – even though this is difficult to work out in practice (Appleton, 2009)

Can the idea of ‘no longer strangers’ be used with non-Christian immigrants? Perhaps. Our common ground is that we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1.27), all sinners (Rom 3.23) and Christ died for all (Rom 3.24). ‘How differently we might view people if we might truly recognise, as Jesus did, the image of God in each and every person in those who are different, in those we may not understand, and in the stranger who lives among us’ (Thacker and Clark, 2009).

2.3 Migrant as neighbour

Love of the neighbour is emphasised in both the OT and NT (Leviticus 19.18, Luke 10.27). In a very physical sense, the migrant may be your neighbour, living next door or in the next street. In many areas, having communities of migrants living nearby is unwelcome (Peters, 2009) so Christians showing love and compassion can be very powerful (Caleb project, 2009, p30).

The story of the Good Samaritan is often quoted when talking about migrants. The usual interpretation is that the Church is the Samaritan and the victim is the neighbour – in this context the migrant – who we should help. Nagy (2009, p256) points out that the person helping is also the neighbour. She references Matthew 7.12, which says you should do to your neighbour as you would have them do to you. ‘Such a command presupposes a profound knowledge about the other from both sides’ (Nagy, 2009, p256) – something that can only occur when time is taken to get to know each other.

She also suggests another translation of the original Leviticus command – to ‘love your neighbour because he is like you’, which ‘indicates a common ground of similarity as the
starting point of any encounter.’ Viewing migrants as more like you than different and taking time to get to know them could help to create the bridge that Chandran (2010) talks about, where dialogue and integration can take place.

However, while the migrant is like you, differences will eventually surface. It is important to recognise the tension between the migrant as ‘other’ and the migrant as ‘like you’. Integration is not only about focusing on the similarities and ignoring the differences, but about working through the differences and coming to a common understanding, as part of the ‘dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation’, outlined by the European Union (EU, 2004,p17)

2.4 Migrant as Exile

Sixty-nine refugee-assisting NGOs across Europe work together as the European Council on Refugees and Exiles to promote ‘a humane and generous’ European asylum policy (www.ecre.org). The theology of exile has been developed particularly by Latin Americans migrating to North America and living through the experience of feeling dislocated and not at home (Nagy, 2009,p204).

The story of the Jewish people in exile and their laments recorded in the Psalms and elsewhere (for example, Psalm 137 and Lamentations) are an important part of exile theology. Through reading these scriptures, the non-migrant can also enter into the experience of the exile. In addition, all Christians can identify with the exile’s experience of being ‘strangers in the world’ (1 Peter 1:1).

With regards to integration however, Bruggeman (1997, cited in Frost, 2006,p9) warns that the danger of exile is to ‘become so preoccupied with self that one cannot step outside oneself to re-think, reimagine and redescribe larger reality’. As integration requires effort on the part of host and migrant to adjust to the other, the danger of a theology of exile is to create a self absorption that stops the migrant from relating with the host society, holding on instead to their own cultural expressions.

In Jeremiah 29.7 (NIV), the Jewish exiles were encouraged to ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’ This does not infer a rejection of their own culture, but instead a call for to interact with the host culture – fitting well with the EU’s common basic principles for immigrant integration.

Some Christian migrants also interpret this verse as a call to the evangelisation of the nation in which they now reside, as explored below.

2.5 Missionaries – and people to be evangelised.

‘When people move, they carry their ideas, beliefs and religious practices with them…the migration movement was – and still is a prime factor in the global spread of world religions, notably Islam and Christianity’ (Hanciles, 2003,p146).

Huston et al (2005,p10) state that ‘the movement of peoples in our world is part of God’s purpose, from the Garden of Eden onwards’. Acts 17.26-27 is often quoted as being part of God’s plan to help people hear the gospel through migration (Caleb Project, 2009,p2; Chandran 2010).

God has ‘determined the times set for [men] and the exact places where they should live…so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.’

Hanciles (2003,p150) says, ‘Many African Christian who have recently migrated to Europe, generally to find work, consider that God has given them a unique opportunity to spread the good news among those who have gone astray.’ However, one of the challenges is that migrant churches are often mono-ethnic, where they reach other migrants, rather than engaging cross-culturally (Appleton, 2010; Clarke, 2007).
Through coming to Europe, migrants from countries closed to the Gospel are able to hear it – often from other Christian migrants, and can be more likely to respond (Lund, 2010; Caleb Project, 2003). According to Huston et al (2005,11) the gospel is not bound to any one culture. Christians from many different cultures help to create an integrated community, with ‘new forms of cultural expression, with a fusion of different cultures, which will enable people of all backgrounds to draw near and follow Christ.’

While this kind of integration is possible – particularly in international churches in large cities where many different nationalities worship, this viewpoint is more about mission than integration. Nagy (2009,p231) points out that with this approach, ‘it does not matter whether somebody belongs to the category of the migrant or non-migrant. What matters is to belong to the category of those who have “heavenly citizenship”.’

In addition, if we see migrants solely as evangelistic targets, we can fail to recognise the increasingly diverse religious landscape in Europe. ‘Christian churches must realise that they are no longer the only ones to occupy the place of religion in society’ states a report by the Council of Europe (Vöcking, 1999,p14)

One of the principles they suggest to improve integration is to engage in inter-faith dialogue, vital to improving ‘mutal awareness, understanding and respect’ (Vöcking, 1999,p20). Through the creation of dialogue however, opportunities for sharing the gospel may arise.

3. Theology of integration

Given that the above are primarily theologies of migration, is it possible to find a specific theological basis for supporting the integration rather than assimilation of migrants into a host culture – i.e. is God pro-integration, and should his Church be as well? I would suggest yes, using the pictures of the Trinity and the worshipping Church in Revelation, and the example of the early Christians. While there is much that could be said about the integration of migrant churches into the European church context, this short discussion will focus on integrating the migrant into the host culture in general.

3.1 The Trinity

According to Trinitarian theology, the Godhead exists as three distinct persons, working in harmony together. For example, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit in John 15.26; the Spirit is sent out from the Father, but testifies about Christ. But the Father, through Christ, brings reconciliation to all mankind (Col 1.20) – whether we are near, or far away (Eph 2.17). The fact that reconciliation is part of God’s nature and plan for mankind should act as an incentive for us to work towards the reconciliation of migrants with their host culture, though integration.

3.2 The worshipping church in Revelation

Revelation 7.9 provides a picture of nations, tribes, peoples and tongues all worshipping the risen Saviour in a vision of ‘infinite diversity in perfect unity’ (Huston et al, 2004,p12). These categories are mentioned seven times in Revelation. This suggests that the differences between peoples are not obscured even in heaven, and each is worshipping God as themselves. If God does not expect people to give up their ethnic identity, even in heaven, should we expect people to do so when they come to our country? But just as Christ longed for the church to be one (John 17.23) through integration, people from diverse backgrounds can also see themselves as ‘united’ while maintaining an individual identity.

3.3 The early church

At Pentecost, the gospel was preached in many different languages – although the hearers were mostly proselytes in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival who had assimilated with the Jewish culture (Acts 2.5). Even when the church was scattered through persecution, the early believers preached only to the Jews (Acts 11.19). It took Peter’s dream in Acts 10 for the church to wake up to the fact that God the ‘Gentiles might hear’ the Gospel because they
too received the Holy Spirit and God 'makes no distinction between us and them' (Acts 15.6-8).

But should the Gentile Christian – as ‘other’ – be forced to assimilate? Some of the early Jews thought so, insisting that Gentile Christians were circumcised and followed Jewish laws. A council in Jerusalem needed to be called in order to clear that issue up (Acts 15) and Paul’s letters, for example Galatians 1-2, Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10, make it clear that Gentile Christians were not required to become Jews. They had to change some of their customs – for example not eat meat with blood in it, but Jewish Christians were to respect the different cultural expressions of their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ (Acts 15.23-29). The numerous calls to ‘love one another’ in the New Testament epistles are a recognition that love – because the differences in personality, background – and culture – doesn’t come easily.

4. Conclusion

Theologies of the migrant help describe the relationship between migrant and host culture. However, these theologies tend to be framed in relationship to the migrant as ‘other’ or ‘different’. Integration, pictured as people meeting on a bridge and taking time to get to know each other infers a sense of equality and reciprocity. Our theologies of migration may reinforce the ‘us’ and ‘them’ and a feeling of superiority on the part of the non-migrant who is helping the migrant, thus preventing them meeting as equals. In addition, they could allow acceptance only when the migrant becomes ‘like us’ rather than ‘other’?

In contrast, a specific theology of integration recognises difference. It is based on an understanding of the co-equal relationship of the Godhead as Trinity, and the call of all men, regardless of their background, to God. He accepts each other’s differences – and the Church is called to do the same. In Revelation, there is a unity centred around worship of the Lamb that acknowledges what we have in common (redeemed through Christ) but allows for infinite diversity of identity in tribes, peoples, nations and tongues. Despite pressure from Jewish Christians for Gentile believers to assimilate, both Jews and Gentiles had to accommodate one another – an important part of integration.

In Europe’s post-Christendom culture, immigration and the integration of the ‘other’ is one of the biggest issues facing society. Through a deep theological understanding of the integration of migrant and non-migrants, and putting it into practice at the level of individuals, local churches and Christian organisations, we can prophetically model what it means to be ‘truly integrated communities’ (Showell-Rogers, 2009, cited in Jackson, 2009).

References


Bibliography

Websites


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