

What role does religion play in the migration process?

Dr. Annemarie Dupré

The role of religion in the migration process can be looked at from many different angles. I shall concentrate on the role of Christian churches, and my affiliation with the Protestant minority churches in Italy will be reflected on in my contribution.

I approach the topic of religion in the migration process from a Christian point of view, but I also keep in mind the situations of other religions. Christian churches in hosting countries have to deal with brothers and sisters who immigrate from other countries, but Christians must also relate to migrants with different religious roots. I shall develop two questions on the theme: “what is the role of Christian churches in this context?” and “where is religion playing a role in the life of migrants?”

Religion and community

Religion plays a role in different levels of community life. It can simply be a very personal issue of the spiritual life of an individual; it may be an aspect of community building or even the basic reason for community life as it is difficult to live the Christian faith without a congregation. At the state level, religion can be looked at in different ways: it may be an instrument for political and social cohesion or it may be left completely in the private sphere. Religion can also become a major cause of conflicts within a state. All three of these aspects play a role in migration processes. There are individual implications, but community life and the internal cohesion within a country may also be influenced by this factor.

Religion and the individual

For many people, religion is a component of their personal identities; a specific creed is part of a person’s life. The teachings, traditions and habits of a specific religion will influence these people in their behaviour, approaches to situations and relations to each other. A person’s value system is often based on religion. Religion can be an important part of the cultural capital of an individual, and if a person migrates to another country he or she will carry these elements of faith. Even if all material possessions are lost, this religious capital will remain with the migrant.

Religion can become an important part of the identity of a migrant, even if she or he had



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little interest in religious matters before leaving his home country. When found in new situations without family and social links and when individual migrants feel the need to defend their identities, religion becomes essential.

Depending on what the person will find in the host country, religion will become a positive or negative element in the personal integration process. Will religion become an isolating force or a possibility to find a sense of belonging? Faith and religion may be instruments of opportunity, leading towards the formation of a transnational identity. The migrant may find a way to define a new identity made out of components from both societies. This would not be a summary of two cultures but something new, which could be important for both societies. An open and tolerant receiving society where local faith communities also practise these values is a precondition for the development of this identity. The integration process can only work if it is mutual and both parts are actively co-operating.

Religion may play a role in many parts of daily life; religious convictions and rules influence the life of a believer, even health and health care are affected. For example, migrant women may find it difficult to access health services because of their religious education. The education of children depends widely on religious values, as does family life. The well-known conflict between first and second generations in migrant communities is also a consequence of this. Religious laws influence the working conditions, the rhythm of the workday and free time; clothing and food rules may not allow people to work in certain places. The question of equal rights for men and women may create critical situations.

Religion and community life

Often religion is not only a personal conviction; the believer may be asked to participate actively in community life as an unavoidable part of their faith. If these believers migrate abroad, they will put much energy into finding or rebuilding some kind of faith community to live out their beliefs.

Religious migrant communities can have a positive or negative role in the integration process. They may

provide a migrant in the first phase of integration a feeling of home and belonging, giving a sense of security and mutual support. But if these communities are closed and/or marginalised by the hosting society, creating a ghetto-like situation, this could be counterproductive for the integration process. Parallel societies may rise and communication between the host society and that of the migrants could become difficult. On the other hand, if such a community is an open or mixed community with migrant and indigenous members and a common faith is the binding link, this may become a bridge, and allow a smoother integration process.

Finally, religious communities have an important role in directing migration movements. Migrants often choose the country or even the town they would like to live in because of religious links. They may know that in a certain city there is a community which professes the same creed and where it will be easier to feel at home and to receive support. In this way, religion may even become a pull factor for migration. I'm thinking, for example, of the migration of Christians from the Middle East.

Religion and state

As long as a society was considered homogeneous, governments did not consider the question of religion a priority (although no society has ever been completely homogeneous). Migration has always existed. Today, migration is a structural factor of all states and all must cope with heterogeneous societies. With the events of 11th September in New York, the religious question has become an issue in migration politics.

The role of religion within the legal system and the functioning of a state is very different in the various parts of the world. There can be total division between religion and state, or there are other states where religion is a dominant factor for legislation and functioning of all parts of the state. In between these two solutions there is a large spectrum of diverse approaches to the question. Problems may arise if migrants who come from one system must cope with the opposite situation in the host country. An example could be a person or a whole community which comes from a state with Sharia law and will now have to live in

a secularised state of the industrialised world. The religious needs, the strong convictions and values the person is carrying may create conflicts with the legislation and the way of life in the host country. Social cohesion may be at risk. This becomes even more important if religious institutions of the country of origin continue to influence the life of migrant communities in a country of immigration (a fear many European countries today feel obliged to take into account).

As we saw before, religion can be important for all parts of daily life and legislation, and public administration will have to keep this in mind. The public health system may be affected. Labour legislation needs to consider the issue. In schools and all educational institutions, the problem may arise. The availability of religious schools is also of basic importance for some faith communities. Commerce and industry may be influenced by consumer behaviour based on religious rules; the same may be said for cultural and scientific work.

In summary, migrants need opportunities to express and to live their religious creed. This can be a tool for stabilisation, avoiding marginalisation. The loss of religious identity will lead to the loss of ethical values, making migrants even more disoriented and uprooted in the host society. Similar religious communities of the host society and of the migrant communities should promote exchanges and sharing, becoming bridging tools for integration in order to avoid marginalisation and frustration which may lead to radicalisation. The religious communities of the host society may be enriched by the contributions of migrant religious communities. Intercultural experiences can be eventually transferred into other sectors of social life. The so-called social capital, of basic importance for social cohesion, will be incremented if the religious factor of migration movements is governed correctly. All components of society and governments have to work together to pursue this aim.

Why should churches feel the need or the wish to become active in this field?

Churches are faith communities and, as such, have a religious mandate which makes them act. The basis of the Christian mandate is the Bible and from this text Christians elaborated their code of conduct through a theological process. As far as migrants are concerned, there are precise rules which Churches should respect. I mention some of these.

All human beings are created by God and their human dignity must be respected in any case and in any situation: Christians should love their neighbour as themselves. Migrants may become neighbours. In both the Old and New Testament, we are again and again invited to receive and to protect the “stranger”, the migrant, the refugee. All human beings are “citizens in the household of God”, meaning they are equal and have rights and duties like citizens—they are not only guests. Christians are convinced that there is a total truth, but only God is the owner of it. Human beings have only a partial insight of this truth. Therefore, Christians must respect the convictions of others, even if these do not correspond to their own. The Christian faith has both a universal and personal approach; we believe in the Universal Church and also that individual spirituality is part of a personal faith. Both aspects are part of the Christian identity.

Two points of view on the role of churches

On the basis of their creed, churches may be involved in the field of migration in different ways. In order to protect human dignity, rights and freedom, churches become active parts of society, similar to other social actors. Churches also act as faith communities, which have common creeds with certain migrant communities. Church life may be changed by the arrival of migrants.

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Churches have the responsibility to defend migrants' and refugees' rights. Churches are part of civil society; they cannot live in spiritual ghettos. This responsibility within the society and the state makes them active players and they are co-responsible for social cohesion. They must be involved in advocacy for the respect of human rights and the dignity of all human beings. They should do this in the same conditions as other parts of the society and should not claim a privileged status—this is at least the position of many Protestant churches. Working for issues of social and economic justice, they cannot distinguish between migrants of their own faith and those belonging to other creeds. This works in two ways, in advocacy work on migration and asylum policy and in legislation and solidarity programmes to support individuals.

Advocacy

As far as migration policy is concerned, churches must monitor and lobby decision-making processes in order to promote a correct migration policy which respects values such as human rights, solidarity, burden sharing and non-discrimination. I am aware that I'm speaking out of a typical western industrialised world view. In many parts of the world, churches do not have the possibility and freedom to act like this.

The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is committed to advocate at the European level, mainly with the European Union and the Council of Europe. For several years CCME has worked together with other Christian organisations and churches on fair conditions for forced return measures, in order to insist on the respect of basic rights of migrants and asylum seekers. CCME prepared a document with 12 basic criteria for a correct migration and asylum policy. It opposed the EU Directive on family reunification, which does not respect the rights of children and the right to live in a family. Anti-discrimination and the fight against human trafficking measures also have been important parts of CCME's commitment.

Speaking on religious issues, churches will also have to lobby and monitor religious freedom, not only freedom for their own communities but also for the freedom of

other creeds and faith communities. Churches must insist on correct legislation on religious freedom. There must be full respect for religious minorities, even if these are not Christian. In this context, the debate on common values is raised, focusing on the question of how far faith communities can push their right to promote certain religious rules which may seem incompatible with basic values in the host community. A balance must be found between the religious freedom of a certain community and the basic values and freedom of all other citizens and communities which the state must protect.

Solidarity and supporting individuals

In Europe, churches promote their own programmes of mutual support for migrants in order to facilitate integration and to give them full access to equal rights in all parts of civil life. They run programmes on housing, education and access to the labour market, and offer counselling, legal assistance, leadership trainings and support for migrant associations. They promote language schools and courses for vocational training and support refugees who wish to study at universities. They run homes for refugees and for unaccompanied minors, for mothers with small children and other vulnerable groups. They protect women who became victims of trafficking and violence.

Uniting in Diversity – Being Church Together

Many migrants are Christians; a particular question arises when migrants and refugees confess the same creed as a church of the hosting state. In this case, we do not speak of assisting migrants for social needs or giving them legal assistance in order to defend their rights. This link is totally different; it is a spiritual link with important theological implications.

Migrants who are Christians and belong to our churches are not guests but equal partners, although our churches are

not always aware of this reality. We have a large opportunity; in church we can meet on equal footing, knowing that before God there are no differences among us, no privileges, no human hierarchy. Economic, social or cultural disparities should not be of any importance; we are partners with equal rights and duties. This is the basic understanding of churches and may sound nice. Nevertheless, this is not always reality. Speaking from a European point of view, I know that our churches in the host countries do not always behave according to this affirmation. We often continue to handle the issue as a question of patronising assistance and do not face the deeper questions of partnership, empowerment and common responsibility. The indigenous Christians have to share with the migrant Christians, but migrants also have to take full responsibility for community life, for both migrant and indigenous members. Both sides have to work to overcome prejudice. The host community can no longer pretend privileges, nor can the migrants continue to behave like victims.

Migrant churches are questioning our identities as churches. The missionary process starts to be inverted. It is no longer primarily going from North to South, but Christians from the Southern hemisphere often have a strong missionary attitude towards the secularised and industrialised world. It is not always easy to accept this. A migrant Christian who desires to be a guest in my community is heartily welcomed, but if he or she wishes to be a full member, participating also in decision-making processes, problems arise. If these migrant Christians wish to change our liturgy or to introduce new theological thinking, many European churches get into difficulties and may try to stop the process.

A similar process is taking place within the Christian churches in Europe and in European society as a whole. How can we live together in a multi- or inter-cultural context? Churches have an even bigger responsibility to aid integration processes; this is part of our creed: "...no longer guest but citizens..." as St Paul writes (Eph. 2,19). Churches must find ways to make this a reality.

Summary

In summary, it can be said that churches and all faith communities of receiving countries have a role to play in the migration process. They can become a bridging tool between different cultures and communities. If they do not live up to this responsibility, however, if they are exclusive or dominant, if they are not sharing values, power and goods, they may contribute to a negative process of alienation, frustration and marginalisation of migrants.

The migrants themselves also have responsibilities. If they choose to create separate congregations with strong tendencies to isolate themselves, to avoid contact with the host society, this isolation may lead to a ghetto situation from where mistrust and xenophobic attitudes may rise in the host community.

In order to allow faith communities to play this important role of bridge building positively, states will have to guaranty correct legislation on migration and asylum issues and on religious freedom. A balance must be found between the needs of all faith communities, the respect of the freedom of all citizens, and the values that are considered fundamental for the dignity of human beings and the functioning of civil society.

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