Religion, Migration, Syncretism and Secularization

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Abstract: Migration is viewed as a natural social phenomenon. Reasons for migration and responses to migration may vary. Much research in recent times has been done on migration. This contribution approaches migration from a theological perspective and tries to emphasize the way Christian communities should view the entry of migrants into a community. The way the church should respond to migrants entering a community is discussed by way of three possible perceptions of migrants, either perceived as a threat, an asset or an opportunity. Migration may result in the continuation or discontinuation of beliefs by the migrant. The discontinuation of religion may be expressed as syncretism or secularization. Christian communities ought not to perceive the presence of the migrant as an entity needing assistance or object of conversion. Christian communities should also see migration as an opportunity for indigenous Christian communities to reflect on their own identity and attitude towards expressing inclusivity.
Keywords: migration, hospitality, stranger, threat, asset, identity, scapegoat, syncretism, secularization, inclusivity

Citation suggestion: Beyers, Jaco. "Religion, Migration, Syncretism and Secularization". *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2021): 50-56.
https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2021.10.08.

1. Introduction

Early human existence was nomadic. Travelling from one location to the next in search of better living conditions and sustenance was normal human behaviour. Only later in human cultural development did signs of permanent settlements appear. As the settlements increased, so did communities infringe on one another's terrain, putting stress on limited food and water resources. When human settlements are in close proximity, survival becomes a threat. Migration would be a logical human response when faced with external threats to identity or physical survival. During the past 25 years, a growing amount of people have participated in mass migrations. The number of people migrating has doubled from 100 million to almost 200 million people in the last two decades. It is estimated by Groody[1] that one out of every 35 people around the world is now living away from their homelands. With the increase of the phenomenon of migration, so did the number of publications, as a result of research on the relatedness of migration to theology increased (compare the comprehensive bibliography discussed by Frederiks)[2]. The publications of Gemma Cruz,[3] Elaine Padilla and Peter Phan and Daniel Groody are important to mention in this regard. This is besides the numerous research reports that frequently appear on the matter of migration and refugees. Migration became one of the main topics of discussion at the tenth meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Busan, Korea, in 2013, discussing the phenomenon and how the church should respond. The theme of the 2013 WCC meeting was "God of Life, lead us to Justice and Peace," an appropriate endeavor as a response to migration.

As to the definition of migration, some vagueness remains. Even though the terms are used often, definitions of 'migrant' and 'migration' are rare.[4] The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migration as "a definite physical move from one location to another," with the implication that the location refers to countries.[5] The criteria, however, as to when relocating from one country to another can be labelled as migration is unclear: the length of stay, nationality of person relocating, the reason for relocating, and the country of birth of parents are all considerations.[6] The question also needs to be asked, who is giving the label of being a migrant,

others or the one relocating? The label 'migrant' can easily become a stereotype and pejorative term indicating a social class in society – an unwelcome visitor tapping into already scarce resources - easily inciting xenophobia. This becomes clear when subcategories for the term migrant are considered. Terms like privileged migrant, temporary labor migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee[7] distinguish types of migration. Migration as the relocation of people functions on many different levels. The relocation of people can refer to (or a combination of) spatial, conceptual, social or functional migrations. There may be various reasons for migration, either due to forceful removal, the effect of colonization or seeking refuge from oppression. To be human is to expand our borders, whether physically or spiritually.

This contribution wants to present theological and socio-ethical perspectives on migration. In the biblical world, migration was a common phenomenon. People were often displaced either due to natural disasters or through human intervention. Drought, famine, disease, floods, fire, and earthquakes all caused people to leave one place behind and search for refuge in a different location. Human interventions through invasion (either military or colonization), enslavement, trading or banishment due to guilt of bloodshed were all reasons why people were displaced, voluntarily or by force.

The biblical stranger referred to as a *geir* in the Hebrew language (compare Exodus 12:19, Deuteronomy 23:8) and *skenos* in Greek (compare Matthew 25:35) had a specific status among the people of Israel. A sojourner refers to any stranger living in the land of Israel unable to indicate a blood relation to the Israelite people. When becoming a stranger or sojourner in the land of Israel, one lost all civic rights; no right to possess property, not permitted to marry or partake in any cultic activity or administration process of justice. A stranger in the land of Israel was dependent on survival at the mercy of the local inhabitants. Israel is constantly reminded of their own history when they were strangers in a foreign land.[8] This forms the base for the command directed at Israel to treat the strangers among them with care.

The presence of the stranger among people was and still is today a common phenomenon. When migrants enter a new location (either a new country or an urban environment), they leave a life behind. Migrants carry "baggage" with them. Migrants transport many different elements with them. Migrants bring with, their culture, religion, social and economic potential, trauma and fear, a worldview perhaps different to the local inhabitants' understanding of reality. The result of any migration is the introduction of diversity. The receiving culture may react in different ways towards immigrants. Reactions may range from polite disinterest, acceptance, curiosity, abuse, adversity to the extremity of aggression and violence. Within one community, all these reactions may be present at once. What is true of the biblical environment is true of today: the stranger is among us, and we react in many different ways.

The ways in which the migrant expresses identity can differ. This contribution not only investigates the treatment of the migrant by others but how the migrant reacts religiously to a new environment. This study implies that there are two main ways of reacting to a new environment: the migrant continues with a religious identity, or the migrant alters a religious identity. An altered state of religious identity can include conversion to a new religion, syncretism as a mixture of religious identity or secularization. First, the response to the presence of the migrant is discussed before investigating how the migrant reacts religiously to a new environment.

2. The Status of the Stranger

2.1 The Stranger as a Threat

Of all the possible reactions as to the presence of a stranger, it is human to react to foreigners with suspicion. Everybody not familiar with a society can be viewed as a potential threat. In communities with limited food and water supply, the presence of a stranger is easily viewed as an additional mouth to be fed; someone using up limited resources. In a community of abundance, the presence of a stranger is not necessarily viewed as a threat to the limited resources. A stranger may then be regarded as a spy, seeking weaknesses that enemies can exploit.

The presence of a (itinerant) minority within a community may be considered a threat. Compare the discussion by Agbiji and Etukumana[9] on the xenophobic response to migrants in an African context. People have victimized and condemned minority groups over centuries. Jews, Christians, witches, heretics all have been persecuted based on public belief. These persecutions cannot always be justified, although there might be many reasons for persecuting others. René Girard (1986:32) provides some insight as to the status societies assign to minority groups among them, whether religious or ethnic. Girard is trying to find the meaning of violence against others based on the concept of the scapegoat derived from interpreting the Book of Leviticus. He, however, examines the scapegoat from a typical mythological point of view. Why people commit violence against the scapegoat is defined along the lines of mythology.

The stranger may physically look different from us: perhaps in physical appearances or exhibit characteristics unique to a particular ethnic group. The clothes may appear foreign to a local community. Physically, the foreigner stands out in the crowd. Besides physical appearance, there exist cultural and spiritual differences between heterogeneous groups, different languages, beliefs, worldviews, or customs. The meaning of actions, gestures or rituals may be unfamiliar to the local community. Even if the cultural or geographic origin of the foreigner is known, they may still be treated as a stranger. The "well known stranger"[10] among a community may already conjure stereotypes and biases against foreigners.

A foreigner can behave in an unfamiliar, perhaps unacceptable way within the host community. Such behavior or even innocent gestures might be deemed improper behavior. Girard[11] argues that there rarely exists differentiation between moral and physical behavior. Morality is embodied in the body

of the perpetrator. The offence is part of the body - the offence is ontologically the essence of an individual.[12] The result is that even upon the most minute offence, a society will rely on its imagination to create a monstrosity.[13] Human imagination prevents us from looking at reality. This leads to a distorted presentation of the stranger as the evil among us who needs to be contained to prevent the threat to what is considered their own identity.

Once the stranger is portrayed as evil, it becomes easy to blame everything that goes wrong in society on the stranger. The victims – in this case, the itinerant minority migrant - become scapegoats.[14] A scapegoat is someone who is innocent but is presented in society as having committed a grave offence. This results in the collective polarization of society against victims. Polarization prevents victims from proving their innocence.[15] Society can easily be manipulated by prosecutors in condemning the victim.[16] Hatred towards the immigrant is mainly built on caricatures and mythological ideas, creating the impression that the presence of the migrant is a threat requiring action.

All the crimes persecutors accuse the perpetrator of can be traced back to myths.[17] In inter-cultural animosity, it will help to investigate the underlying myths upon which the hatred towards the stranger feeds. This hatred leads to racism and xenophobic reactions, often resulting in calls to violence or acts of violence.

This scenario abounds in the rhetoric on the presence of migrants in the USA and certain communities in Europe. In South Africa, examples of xenophobia abound. Frederiks[18] indicates that research on migration lacks evidence from non-Western communities, especially from Africa. Compare the publication by Landman[19] that addresses in a limited scope the effect of labor migration in an African context. Also, compare the work by Settler and Mpofu[20] on migration in South Africa. Also, see the research done by White[21] discussing migration in Ghana. Also compare the research by Agbiji and Etukumana[22] as well as niche research by Dube.[23] There, however, is still a gap in research on migration in Africa.

2.2 The stranger as asset

The stranger can, in a social context, be viewed as a social and economic asset. The stranger becomes a comfortable source of labor that will do all the work the indigenous members of society do not want to do. As the stranger depends on the charity of the members of society, he/she will have to perform all duties expected of him/her as refusal may result in expulsion. This leads to an opportunistic advantage to the host and causes the stranger to have his/her human rights trampled.

This results from viewing humans in economic terms, either as a workforce or as consumers of goods. This is especially true for migrants moving to an urban environment. In a highly industrialized society formed by the economic principles of capitalism, the minority foreigner who enters such a society can easily fall into this trap. Max Weber[24] is known for his accusation directed towards the capitalistic West, formed by Calvinistic principles of the piety of hard work. Weber[25] concludes that Calvinism, a Protestant stream in Christianity, provides the seedbed for a capitalist economy. This can be based on the emphasis given to texts such as 2 Thessalonians. 3:6-12, calling Christians to work hard. In the Christian community, those who are lazy should not share in the food (2 Thess. 3:10). In a multi-cultural society, views on labor may differ so widely from the culture of the migrant that it may be easy to accuse members of Western communities of pleasure-seeking, self-focused consumers of goods. In this endeavor to enrich oneself, trampling on the right of fellow human beings can easily be justified in the name of more profit. Migrants can be abused as cheap labor and simultaneously be viewed as a market where cheap surplus goods can be dumped. This is a typical scenario fitting within the colonial context.

2.3 The stranger as opportunity: A theology of hospitality

Theologically considered, there is an appeal on Christian communities to treat the stranger among them in a certain ethical way. One of the main social cornerstone institutions is the family. In the biblical world, the way in which people related to one another was through family ties. With no family relations, one was delivered at the hands of others for protection and sustenance. "The stranger" in biblical times refers to someone who could indicate no family relationship within a community. A stranger would typically be a slave set free, a prisoner of war, a migrant seeking refuge in another community due to famine or danger in his/her own country, a travelling trader or a pilgrim.

A stranger/ foreigner/ migrant/ someone unable to indicate a blood relation to a family living in Israel had the status of a stranger, and therefore, had no right to own property or participate in cultic events.[26] In this environment, the Old Testament comes with a message from God prescribing to the people of Israel not to neglect the orphan, the widow or the stranger (Deuteronomy 27:19; Jeremiah 7:6; Zachariah 7:10). These three groups were perceived as categories of people dependent on the charity of society for survival. It was not an act of altruism to care for those in need in society, which would include strangers; it became a command from God to love the stranger (Deuteronomy 10:19). Social justice for Israel entailed protecting and caring for the stranger. In the New Testament, this command is alluded to in different contexts. Jesus alludes to this command when He depicts Himself as a stranger among Israel, who did not care for Him (Matthew 25:35). The implication is the suggested command to care for the stranger, implying the care for widows and orphans. The call for hospitality is part of the characteristics Paul, and early church leaders implore Christian communities to exercise (compare Romans 12:13; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9 and Hebrews 13:2). In each case, the Greek word *filoksenia* is used as a reminder of how Christians conduct themselves and even as a characteristic required of Christian leaders. It is not always clear as to whom this hospitality should be extended to. Merely to say to "all people" may be interpreted as only to fellow Christians. Hospitality is seen here as an expression of the command to love thy neighbour and can be interpreted

as to include all people. Hospitality should be understood in terms of acts of kindness in the way in which Jesus explains to His disciples (compare Matthew 25:34-36) how people should take care of one another within the kingdom of God: giving food and drink, providing clothing, accommodation for the stranger, tending the sick, visiting the prisoners. These are acts of kindness extended to all people in need.

In light of these theological considerations, it becomes clear that the presence of the stranger becomes an opportunity for Christians to practice unneighborly love - hospitality. The stranger becomes the object of Christian charity and hospitality. Frederiks[27] indicates that the concept of hospitality is a topic growing in importance theologically and ecclesiologically. To treat the migrant in a hospitable way cannot be reduced to merely a soup kitchen or polite inter-cultural or inter-religious exchanges. Frederiks[28] emphasizes that hospitality includes reflection by the indigenous churches on identity and inclusiveness. The local church must consider their own actions and attitudes towards migrant communities.

Migration brings strangers to our doorstep. The biblical command to love thy neighbor cannot be interpreted only to refer to love towards those who are similar to us. The parable of the Good Samaritan (compare Luke 10:25-37) illustrates how the borders between love for the familiar and love for the stranger and even the enemy is broken down. The Lucan theology emphasizes the inclusive love of God towards all, especially the marginalized (i.e. strangers, women, children, sinners and Samaritans). In the Old Testament, there are prescriptions as to how to treat the stranger. The stranger should be treated with dignity and respect. The command of God also applies to the stranger. Compare the command that even the stranger not be allowed to work on the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:14).

Groody[29] emphasizes that the stranger (foreigner) should be seen as a human being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and be treated accordingly. The human dignity of strangers should be maintained by not referring to migrants in an undignified manner, i.e. as illegal aliens.[30] Christians should note the need for strangers (migrants) living among them. Groody[31] suggests Christians migrate closer to the need of the migrant. By expressing Christian love and hospitality, we are all migrating closer to God[32], as God migrated to humanity through his incarnation.[33]

Christians can easily resort to see the migrant[34] as an object needing conversion. This is not an act of hospitality to try and convince the migrant to convert to the religion of the local community. This is an expression of exclusivism, portraying religions as unequal with the understanding that revelation and salvation only come through Christianity. Compare Knitter[35] for a discussion of exclusivism as a way in which Christianity engages with other religions. Knitter prefers to name exclusivism as the Replacement model, indicating that the argument of this position is that all religion is unbelief[36] and should be replaced by the only true religion, namely Christianity.

God expects those who believe in Him to express His command of love towards the neighbor. This requires Christians to not only acknowledge the migrant but also note the needs of the migrant and act upon the needs identified. The biggest need of the migrant is not to receive admonition on unbelief and guidance to conversion and salvation in Christianity. Christians ought to commit to acts of kindness towards all human beings, irrelevant of their status. Kindness towards the migrant may include that Christian communities reconsider their own identity and the way they express inclusivity. Acknowledging the presence and need of the migrant is a sign of true inclusivity.

3. Migration, Syncretism and Secularization

Ways in which people may react to the presence of the migrant have been discussed. Now our attention will turn to how the migrant may react to a new environment. It has been indicated by researchers that religion plays an important role in the individual and communal lives of migrants.[37] How the migrant reacts to a new environment regarding religious affiliation differs from context to context. It becomes clear that there are mainly three ways migrants may react once in a new environment: conversion to the local religion, continue with their own religious identity or alter their own religious identity. Continuation with a religious identity may have to do with the religious motivation for migration. Schreiter[38] identifies religion as one possible reason for migration. Religion can be an identity marker assisting the migrant in establishing an identity within the new context.[39] When adapting to the new environment, a migrant may find religion as an identity marker, setting the migrant out as unique among the local inhabitants and assist the migrant in identifying with a similar faith community in the new context. Religion in this manner becomes a bridge to integration in a new environment. Religious communities can become what Frederiks[40] refers to as a "surrogate family" to the migrant, easing the transition into a new context.

Frederiks,[41] however, indicates how in some communities, religion can become a barrier hindering integration into a new environment. This may happen when the migrant finds no relatable religious tradition in the new context or where the new community is unresponsive towards any religious tradition. This appears to be true, especially in a European context. The continuation of a religious identity appears to happen when migrating to a familiar cultural environment, or at least an environment accommodative of a foreign religion. In an accommodative or similar religious context, migrants can maintain their religious identity or even adapt to the local hybrid form of the religious tradition. Religion can contribute to a smooth transition into a new cultural environment, and therefore, religious affiliation may be maintained.

Several Christian migrants adapt to local forms of Christianity once they migrate to new environments. It can, however, happen that migrants belong to a different tradition as the local hybrid form of the religion. Migrants, although belonging to the same religion, may feel excluded or

threatened by the local version of the religion.[42] The diversity of traditions within Christianity or Islam may serve as an example of differences within a religion.

As to the discontinuation or alteration of religion in a migration context, there appear to be two possibilities: syncretism or secularization. Frederiks[43] refers to research done on the decrease of religious participation in migration. It appears that first-generation migrants have more need of maintaining a religious identity. The second or third generation of migrants have different religious needs. The decrease in religious needs is due to more emphasis on secular needs, such as finding a house and a job in a new context.[44] When a receiving context is averse towards religion or a particular religion, migrants tend to disassociate with their religious affiliation. This is especially true of hostility towards particular religions. In such cases, migrants either dissolve their religious affiliation or continue to practice it in secrecy or adapt to a different religious identity. McGill[45] indicates how migration can change the Christian identity. In reacting to the social context, one ends up in due to migration, one's self-perceived identity is determined.

Secularism may be defined in different ways. Paas[46] identifies the following categories for interpreting secularization: Differentiation, Rationalization, Privatization, Pluralization and Individual loss of faith.[47] Migrants may experience a loss of personal faith due to entering a hostile religious environment. The opposite may also occur as migrants may find religion to provide certainty and stability during the migration process. To adapt to a new context, migrants may want to fit in. Relinquishing religion may be a way of adapting to a new multi-religious context.

The altered religious identity either ends up as a syncretistic form or a secularized form. Here syncretism does not refer to an illegal or unwanted mixture of religious elements but rather refer to the assimilation of religious elements in a natural and symbiotic fashion. In this regard, compare Sundermeier's[48] distinction between symbiotic and synthetic syncretism, where symbiotic syncretism refers to the gradual and consensual exchange of religious concepts between parties. To adapt to a new environment, migrants may assimilate with local customs and beliefs. Hybrid forms of religion may exist in the country a migrant moves to. To fit in, the migrant may adapt to the new context. This phenomenon is observed among migrant workers moving from rural to urban areas. A mixture of the rural traditional form of religion is incorporated into a different religion found in the urban environment, resulting in a hybrid form of religion practiced with no concern. In this regard compare the research presented by Manona[49] and Njwambe et al.[50] Although migrants keep a spiritual connection with traditions at places of origin, they still adapt to an urban environment by adopting changes in terms of language, clothing and beliefs.[51] This may result in a multi-religious belonging or a syncretized form of belief. In an African context, this phenomenon is apparent among migrants from rural areas where the traditional form of a religion is still practiced. In the city, migrants are exposed to new religious expressions. The result may be a duality in terms of traditional and new religious elements co-existing side by side.

What is clear from existing research is that there are no blueprints warranting prediction as to how migrants may react to a new environment. Frederiks[52] reminds us that migrant reactions to new contexts vary. What can, however, be assumed is that migrants may continue with religious affiliation, or for many possible reasons, discontinue religious affiliation? The discontinuation is expressed either as syncretism or secularization.

4. Conclusion

Migrations are part of human existence. The stranger among us requires a response, as does the migrant respond to the new environment. The response of the community to which the migrant relocates too, can either be animosity, ignorance, or hospitality. The middle ground is a safe haven as there the existence, the presence and the need of the stranger are ignored. This is much the same way the Levite and priest reacted to the presence of the wounded man beside the road (Luke 10:25-37). Animosity is perceived as the appropriate reaction when one feels under threat. Removing the stranger from my presence by whatever means will remove the threat. The stranger can indeed be blamed as the scapegoat for all misfortune befalling a community, and therefore, providing a reason to rid society of the stranger.

The Christian reaction should, however, be to recognize the needs of the stranger as an opportunity to exhibit divine love through acts of kindness. By expressing love and kindness towards the stranger, the human dignity of the stranger is maintained. This implies that showing acts of kindness to those in need does not become an opportunity to attempt converting people in need. That would be trampling on the dignity of strangers. Christians have the command to love. Should people through the experience of this love want to know more about Christianity, it is by the grace of God that their hearts and minds are opened up to the gospel. Christians should keep on expressing the love of God to all humans, no matter what their political, economic or social status may be.

What becomes clear from this investigation is that understanding the context is crucial in understanding the migrant reaction to relocation. The migrant may react to a new environment by adopting a secularized view of religion or by incorporating different religious elements in their religion, resulting in a syncretized form. The reasons for secularization or syncretism depend on the context in which the migrant enters.

Christian communities should utilize the occurrence of migration as an opportunity to reflect on their own identity and attitude towards expressing inclusivity.

Notes:

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11. Ibid., 34.
12. Ibid., 36.
13. Ibid., 35.
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24. M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. T. Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003 [1958]), 36.
25. Ibid., 43.
26. B. J. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 192.
27. Frederiks, "Religion, Migration and identity," 24.
28. Ibid.
29. Groody, "Crossing the Divide," 645.
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31. D. G. Groody, "Theology of Migration: A New Method for Understanding a God on the Move," *America* 204, no. 3 (2011): 18-20, 18.
32. Groody, "Theology of migration," 19.
33. Ibid., 25.
34. Ibid., 26.
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36. Ibid., 25.
37. Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, and Identity", 13.
38. R. Schreiter, "Spaces for religion and migrant religious identity," in *Migration: Challenge to Religious Identity, Vol 5* (Kriens Brunner Publishing, 2009), 155-170. 169.
39. Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, and Identity," 14.
40. Ibid., 17.
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42. Ibid., 17.
43. Ibid., 14-15.
44. Ibid., 15.
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