Beyond Barriers, People Move:
Towards a Theology of Migration
Luis N. Rivera-Pagán

“To survive the Borderlands
You must live sin fronteras
Be a crossroads.”
Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza
Gloria Anzaldúa

A homeless migrant Aramean

The Bible’s first confession of faith begins with a story of pilgrimage and migration:
“A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as
an alien” (Deuteronomy 26:5). We might ask, did that “wandering Aramean” and his
children have the proper documents to reside in Egypt? Were they maybe “illegal
aliens”? Did he and his children have the proper Egyptian social security credentials?
Did they speak properly the Egyptian language?

We know at least that he and his children were strangers in the midst of a powerful
empire, and that as such they were both exploited and feared. This is the fate of many
immigrants. In their reduced circumstances they are usually compelled to perform the
least prestigious and most strenuous kinds of menial work. Yet, at the same time they
awaken the schizophrenic paranoia typical of empires, powerful and yet fearful of the

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1987), 217.
stranger, of the “other,” especially if that stranger resides within its frontiers and becomes populous. More than half a century ago, Franz Fanon brilliantly described the peculiar gaze of so many white French people at the growing presence of Black Africans and Caribbeans in their national midst. Scorn and fear are entwined in that stare.

The biblical creedal story continues: “When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the . . . God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction . . . and our oppression” (Deuteronomy 26:6). So important was this story of migration, slavery, and liberation for the biblical people of Israel that it became the core of an annual liturgy of remembrance and gratitude. The already quoted statement of faith was to be solemnly recited every year in the thanksgiving liturgy of the harvest festival. It reenacted the wounded memory of the afflictions and humiliations suffered by an immigrant people, strangers in the midst of an empire; the recollection of their hard and arduous labor, of the contempt and disdain that is so frequently the fate of the stranger and the foreigner who possess a different skin pigmentation, language, religion, or culture. But it was also the memory of the events of liberation when God heard the dolorous cries of the suffering immigrants. And the remembrance of another kind of migration, in search of a land where they might live in freedom, peace, and righteousness, a land they might call theirs.

We might ask: who today might be the wandering Arameans and what nation might represent Egypt these days, a strong but fearful empire?

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Dilemmas and challenges of migration

The United States undergoes a significant increase of its Latino/Hispanic population. In 1975, little more than 11 million Hispanics made up just over 5 percent of the US inhabitants. Today they number approximately nearly 58 million, around 16 percent of the nation, its largest minority group. Recent projections estimate that by 2050 the Latino/Hispanic share of the US population might be between 26 to 32 percent. This demographic growth has become a complex political and social debate for it highlights sensitive and crucial issues, like national identity and compliance with the law. It also threatens to unleash a new phase in the sad and long history of American racism and xenophobia, one that, following the Sri Lankan novelist Ambalavaner Sivanandan, might be termed “xeno-racism.”

Two concerns have become important topics of public discourse:

1. What to do regarding the growth of unauthorized migration? Possibly about a quarter of the Hispanic/Latino adults are unauthorized immigrants. For a society that prides itself of its law and order tradition that represents a serious breach of its juridical structure.

2. What does this dramatic increase in the Latino/Hispanic population might convey for the cultural and linguistic traditions of the United States, its mores and styles of collective self-identification?

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5 As quoted in Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church* (Farnham, Surrey, UK/Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 93.
Unfortunately, the conversation about these difficult issues takes place in an environment clouded by the gradual development of xenophobic attitudes. There are signs of an increasing hostile reaction to what the Mexican American writer Richard Rodríguez has termed “the browning of America.” One can clearly recognize this mind-set in the frequent use of the derogatory term “illegal alien.” As if the illegality would define not a specific delinquency, but the entire being of the migrant. We all know the dire and sinister connotations that “alien” has in popular American culture, thanks in part to the sequence of four Alien [1979, 1986, 1992, and 1997] films with Sigourney Weaver fighting back atrocious creatures.

Let me briefly mention some key elements of this emerging xenophobia:

1) The spread of fear regarding the so-called “broken borders,” the possible proliferation of Third World epidemic diseases, and the alleged increase of criminal activities by undocumented immigrants. A shadowy sinister specter is created in the minds of the public: the image of the intruder and threatening “other.” These days that fateful specter is promoted by the President of the United States himself.

2) The xenophobic stance intensifies the post 9/11 attitudes of fear and phobia regarding the strangers, those people who are here but who do not seem to belong here.

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7 Robert W. Heimburger, God and the Illegal Alien: United States Immigration Law and a Theology of Politics (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36: “Today the term ‘alien’ conjures up extraterrestrial life forms, perhaps threatening or monstrous”.


Surveillance of immigration is now located under the Department of Homeland Security. This administrative merger links two basically unrelated problems: threat of terrorist activities and unauthorized migration.

3) Though U.S. racism and xenophobia have had traditionally different targets – people with African ancestry the first (be they slaves or free citizens), marked by their dark skin pigmentation; foreign-born immigrants the second, distinguished by their particular language, religiosity, and collective memory - in the case of Latin American immigrants both nefarious prejudices converge and coalesce\textsuperscript{10} (as was also the case with the nineteenth century Chinese indentured servants, which led to the infamous 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act).\textsuperscript{11}

4) There has been a significant increase of anti-immigrants aggressive groups. According to a report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, “‘nativist extremist groups’ – organizations that go beyond mere advocacy of restrictive immigration policy to actually confront or harass suspected immigrants – jumped from 173 groups in 2008 to 309 in 2009. Virtually all of these vigilante groups have appeared since the spring of 2005.”\textsuperscript{12}

5) Proposals coming from the White House, Congress, states, and counties have tended to be excessively punitive. Some examples are:


a. A projected excluding wall along the Mexican border (compare it to Ephesians 2:14, “Christ . . . has broken down the dividing wall”).

b. The criminalization as felony not only of illegal immigration but also of any action by legal residents that might provide assistance to undocumented immigrants.\(^\text{13}\)

c. Draconian legislation prescribing mandatory detention and deportation of non-citizens, even for alleged minor violations of law. Arizona’s notorious and contentious Senate Bill 1070 is a prime example of this infamous trend. It has been followed by Alabama’s even harsher anti-immigrants legislation (House Bill 56), soon to be cloned by other states.

d. Proposed legislation to curtail access to public services (health, education, police protection, legal services, drivers’ licenses) by undocumented migrants.

e. Some prominent right-wing politicians, including the actual President, have suggested the possibility of revising the first section of the fourteenth amendment of the US constitution.\(^\text{14}\) Their purpose, apparently, is to deprive the children of immigrants of their constitutional right of citizenship. A campaign against the so-called

\(^{13}\) This was one of the most controversial sections of the “Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005” (H.R. 4437), a bill approved by Congress but not by the Senate. Several religious leaders expressed their objection to it. The Los Angeles Roman Catholic cardinal archbishop Roger Mahoney, in an article published March 22, 2006 in The New York Times under the title “Called by God to Help,” asserted that “denying aid to a fellow human being violates a law with a higher authority than Congress — the law of God” and warned that the priests of his diocese might disobey the bill in case it would be finally approved.

\(^{14}\) The first sentence of that section reads as follows: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside.” The second sentence of that same first section has also become center of attention of another key dispute in the US: whether its tenets of “due process of law” and “equal protection of the laws” preclude any legislative prohibition of gay marriage.
“anchor babies” has been part and parcel of the most strident xenophobic campaign in years.

f. A significant intensification of raids, detentions, and deportations. This is transforming several migrant communities into a clandestine underclass of fear and dissimulation. Some legal scholars have even suggested that the United States is becoming a “deportation nation.” It brings to mind the infamous Mexican deportation program, authorized in 1929 by President Herbert Hoover. That program led, according to some scholars, to the forceful deportation of approximately one million people of Mexican descent, many of which were, in fact, American citizens.

g. Congress has been unable to approve the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), that would provide conditional permanent residency to certain deportable foreign-born students who graduate from US high schools, are of good moral character, were brought to the U.S. illegally as minors, and have been in the country continuously for at least five years prior to the bill's enactment, if they complete two years in the military or at an academic institution of higher learning.

The xenophobia and scapegoating of the “stranger in our midst” has resulted in the chaotic condition that now plagues the immigration system in the United States, judicially, politically, and socially. All recent attempts to enact a comprehensive

immigration reform have floundered thanks to the resistance of influential sectors that have been able to propagate efficaciously fear of the “alien.”

The increasing support that such phobic anxiety against the “outsiders” within the frontiers of the nation seems to enjoy among substantial sectors of the American public brings to mind Alexis de Tocqueville’s astute critical observation: “I know no country in which there is so little true independence of mind and freedom of discussion as in America… In America, the majority raises very formidable barriers to the liberty of opinion.”

From a clash of civilizations to a clash of cultures

In this social context tending towards xenophobia and racism, the late Professor Samuel P. Huntington wrote some important texts about what he perceived as a Hispanic/Latino threat to the cultural and political integrity of the United States. Huntington was chairman of Harvard’s Academy for International and Area Studies, and cofounder of the journal Foreign Policy. He was also the intellectual father of the theory of the “clash of civilizations,” with disastrous consequences for the foreign policies of George W. Bush presidency.

In 2004, Huntington published an extended article in Foreign Policy, titled “The

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17 Matthew Soerens & Jenny Hwang provide a succinct and precise summary of several failed attempts to enact a comprehensive immigration legislative and juridical reform in their book Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 138-158.


Hispanic Challenge,” followed by a lengthy book, Who are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity. The former prophet of an unavoidable civilizational abyss and conflict between the West and the Rest (specially the Islamic nations) became the proclaiming apostle of an emerging nefarious cultural conflict inside the United States. Immersed in a dangerous clash of civilizations ad extra, this messenger of doom prognosticated that the United States is also entering into a grievous clash of cultures ad intra.

American national identity seems a very complex issue for it deals with an extremely intricate and highly diverse history. But Huntington has, surprisingly, a simple answer: The United States is mainly identified by its “Anglo-Protestant culture” and not only by its liberal republican democratic political creed. It has been, according to this historical reconstruction, a nation of settlers rather than immigrants. The first British pioneers transported not only their bodies, but also their fundamental cultural and religious viewpoints, what Huntington designates as “Anglo-Protestant culture.” In the formation of this collective identity, Christian devotion – the Congregational pilgrims, the Protestantism of dissent, the Evangelical Awakenings - has been meaningful and crucial. This national identity has also been forged by a long history of wars against a succession of enemies (from the Native Americans to the Islamic jihadists). There is a certain romantic nostalgia in Huntington’s thesis, an emphasis on the foundations of American culture and identity, in their continuities rather than its

20 Foreign Policy, March/April 2004, 30-45.
evolutions and transformations.

But the main objective of Huntington is to underline the uncertainties of present trends regarding his nation’s collective self-understanding. After the dissolution of the Soviet threat, he perceives a significant neglect of the American national identity. National identity seems to require the image of a dangerous adversary, what he terms the “perfect enemy.” The prevailing trend is supposedly one of a notable decline and loss of intensity and salience of US awareness of national identity and loyalty.

Then, supposedly, emerges the sinister challenge of the Latin American migratory invasion. It is not similar to previous migratory waves. Its contiguity, intensity, lack of education, territorial memory, preservation of language, retention of homeland culture, national allegiance and citizenship, its distance to Anglo-Protestant culture, its alleged absence of a Puritan work ethic, makes it unique and unprecedented. This immigration constitutes, according to Huntington, “a major potential threat to the cultural and possibly political integrity of the United States” (FP, 33; WAW, 243). This Harvard professor has discovered and named America’s newest “perfect enemy” . . . the Latin American immigrant!

Huntington’s discomfiture is intense regarding the encroachment of Spanish in the American public life. He calls attention that now in some states more children are ominously christened José rather than Michael. This increasing public bilingualism threatens to fragment the US linguistic integrity. Linguistic bifurcation becomes a veritable menacing Godzilla. He neglects altogether the economic causes for the Latin American migration - its financial and social benefits both for the sending
(remittances)\textsuperscript{22} and the receiving nations (lower wages for manual jobs).\textsuperscript{23} He does not seem to have any concern regarding the process whereby they become new \textit{douloi} and \textit{μέτοικοι}, helots at the margins of society, in a kind of social Apartheid, cleaning stores, cooking meals, doing dishes, cutting grass, picking tomatoes and oranges, painting buildings, washing cars, staying out of the way . . .

Obfuscated by Huntington are the consequences of the present trend among metropolitan Third World diasporas towards holding dual citizenship. An increasing number of Latin American nations now recognize and promote double citizenship, a process that leads to multiple national and cultural loyalties and to what Huntington classifies, with a disdainful and pejorative tone, “ampersand peoples.” Dual citizenship, he rightly recognizes, leads to dual national loyalties and identities. Huntington perceives this trend towards dual citizenship and national fidelity as a violation and disruption of the Oath of Allegiance and the Pledge of Allegiance, essential components of the secular liturgy in the acquisition of the United States citizenship.

He seems to suggest stricter policies regarding illegal migration, stronger measures to enforce cultural assimilation of the legal immigrants, and the rejection of dual citizenship. This perspective would not only be utterly archaic; it might also become the

\textsuperscript{22} Dilip Ratha, “Dollars Without Borders: Can the Global Flow of Remittances Survive the Crisis?”, \textit{Foreign Affairs}, October 16, 2009, “[R]emittances are proving to be one of the more resilient pieces of the global economy in the downturn, and will likely play a large role in the economic development and recovery of many poor countries” (http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65448/dilip-ratha/dollars-without-borders).

\textsuperscript{23} This is a serious flaw in many ethnocentric critiques of immigration issues according to Francisco Javier Blázquez Ruiz, “Derechos humanos, inmigración, integración”, in José A. Zamora (coord.), \textit{Ciudadanía, multiculturalidad e inmigración} (Navarra, España: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2003), 86, 93.
theoretical underground for a new wave of xenophobic white nativism.\textsuperscript{24} The train has already left that outdated station. What is now required is a wider acceptance and enjoyment of multiple identities and loyalties and, if religious compassion truly matters, a deeper concern regarding the burdens and woes of displaced peoples. The time has come to prevail over the phobia of diversity and to appreciate and enjoy the dignity of difference.\textsuperscript{25} For, as Dale Irvin has asserted, “the actual world that we are living in... is one of transnational migrations, hyphenated and hybrid identities, cultural conjunctions and disjunctions.”\textsuperscript{26}

Do the Latino/Hispanics truly represent “a major potential threat to the cultural and possibly political integrity of the United States,” as Huntington has argued? Whether that is something to lament, denounce, or celebrate depends on the eyes of the beholder. Maybe, just maybe, it would not be such a negative historical outcome if the Latino immigrants prove in fact to be that dramatic and decisive “major potential threat to the cultural and political integrity of the United States.”\textsuperscript{27}

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\textsuperscript{24} A substantially more nuanced and intellectually complex analysis of the different aspects of immigration in the United States is provided by Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, \textit{Immigrant America: A Portrait} (third edition revised, expanded and updated) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{25} Jonathan Sacks, \textit{The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations} (London: Continuum, 2003).


\textsuperscript{27} Yet, at least Huntington recognizes the critical urgency of the substantial Latin American immigration for the cultural and political integrity of the United States. Cornel West, in another key text published in 2004, remains cloistered in the traditional White/Black American racial dichotomy and is unable to perceive the salience and perils of xenophobia and nativism as a chauvinistic reply to immigration. Cornel West, \textit{Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism} (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). Is there any possible conceptual manner of bridging the concerns of the African American ghettos, struggling against color-coded racism, and the growing Latino/Hispanic barrios, facing an insidious
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Migration and xenophobia

Migration and xenophobia are serious social quandaries. But they also convey urgent challenges to the ethical sensitivity of religious people and persons of good will. The first step we need to take is to perceive this issue from the perspective of the immigrants, to pay cordial (that is, deep from our hearts) attention to their stories of suffering, hope, courage, resistance, ingenuity, and, as so frequently happens in the wildernesses of the American Southwest, death. Many of the unauthorized migrants have become nobodies, in the apt title of John Bowe’s book, disposable people, in Kevin Bales’ poignant phrase, or, as Zygmunt Bauman poignantly reminds us, wasted lives. They are the Empire’s new μέτοικοι, doulai, modern servants. Their dire existential situation cannot be grasped without taking into consideration the upsurge in global inequalities in these times of unregulated international financial hegemony.

For many human beings the excruciating alternative is between misery in their third cultural disdain? Both communities suffer of lack of recognition of their genuine human dignity, which should imply more than mere tolerance for their distinctive cultural traits, of socio-economic deprivation and political powerlessness. An always complex and difficult to achieve dialectics between cultural recognition and social-economic redistribution might be the key clue for solving this dilemma. Cf. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange (London & New York: Verso, 2003). Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe emphasize these dialectics in the preface to the new edition of their famed text, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics (2nd. ed.) (London: Verso, 2001), xviii: “One of the central tenets of Hegemony and Socialist Strategy is the need to create a chain of equivalence among the various democratic struggles against subordination. . . to tackle issues of both ‘redistribution’ and ‘recognition’.”


world homeland and marginalization in the rich West/North, both fateful destinies intimately linked together. According to Michael Dillon, “the global capitalism of states and the environmental degradation of many populous regions of the planet have made many millions of people radically endangered strangers in their own homes as well as criminalized or anathemized strangers in the places to which they have been forced to flee.”

The situation has painfully aggravated, with tens of thousands of children and teenagers fleeing poverty and violence from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, or Mexico, daring to survive the gangs of human traffickers, the so-called “coyotes,” to, at the end of that arduous and dangerous pilgrimage, face detention, contempt, and deportation in the southern frontier of the United States. Their dreadful situation has truly become a humanitarian crisis of epic dimensions.

Will the Latino/Hispanics, during these early decades of the twenty-first century,
become the new national scapegoats? Do they truly represent “a major potential threat to the cultural and political integrity of the United States”? This is a vital dilemma that the United States has up to now been unable to face and solve. We are not called, here and now, to solve it. But allow me, from my perspective as a Hispanic and Latin American Christian theologian, to offer some critical observations that might illuminate our way in this bewildering labyrinth.

**Xenophilia: towards a biblical theology of migration**

We began this essay with the annual creedal and liturgical memory of a time when the people of Israel were aliens in the midst of an empire, a vulnerable community, socially exploited and culturally scorned. It was the worst of times. It became also the best of times: the times of liberation and redemption from servitude. That memory shaped the sensitivity of the Hebrew nation regarding the strangers, the aliens, within Israel. Their vulnerability was a reminder of their own past helplessness as immigrants in Egypt, but also an ethical challenge to care for the foreigners inside Israel.\(^{33}\)

Caring for the stranger became a key element of the Torah, the covenant of justice and righteousness between Yahweh and Israel. “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:33f). “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”

(Exodus 23:9). “The Lord your God is God of gods… who executes justice to the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:17ff). “You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns… You shall not deprive a resident alien… Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord redeemed you from there” (Deuteronomy 24:14, 17-18). The twelve curses that, according to Deuteronomy 27, Moses instructs the Israelites to liturgically proclaim at their entrance to the promised land, include the trilogy of orphans, widows and strangers as privileged recipients of collective solidarity and compassion: “Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice” (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The prophets constantly chastised the ruling elites of Israel and Judah for their social injustice and their oppression of the vulnerable people. Who were those vulnerable persons? The poor, the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners. “The princes of Israel . . . have been bent on shedding blood… the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you” (Ezekiel 22:6f). After condemning with the harshest words possible the apathy and inertia of temple religiosity in Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah, in the name of God, commands the alternative: “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness . . . And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow” (Jeremiah 7:6). He went on to reprove the king of Judah with harsh admonishing words: “Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and
righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow… If you do not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation” (Jeremiah 22:3,5). The prophet paid a costly price for those daring admonitions.

The divine command to care for the stranger was the matrix of an ethics of hospitality. As evidence of his righteousness, Job affirms that “the stranger has not lodged in the street” for he always “opened the doors of my house” to board the foreigner (Job 31:32). It was the violation of the divinely sanctioned code of hospitality that led to the dreadful destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-25). The perennial temptation is xenophobia. The divine command, enshrined in the Torah is xenophilia - the love for those whom we usually find very difficult to love: the strangers, the aliens, the foreign sojourners.35

The command to love the sojourners and resident foreigners in the land of Israel emerges from two foundations. One, has already been mentioned – the Israelites had been sojourners and resident foreigners in a land not of theirs (“for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”) and should, therefore, be sensitive to the complex existential stress of communities living in the midst of a nation whose dominant inhabitants speak

34 Sodom’s transgression of the hospitality code was part of a culture of corruption and oppression, according to Ezekiel 16:49 - “This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” The homophobic construal of Sodom’s sinfulness, which led to the term sodomy, is a later (mis)interpretation. Cf. Mark D. Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

35 José Cervantes Gabarrón, “El inmigrante en las tradiciones bíblicas”, in Zamora, Ciudadanía, multiculturalidad e inmigración, 262.
a different language, venerate dissimilar deities, share distinct traditions, and commemorate different historical founding events. Love and respect towards the stranger and the foreigner is thus, in these biblical texts, construed as an essential dimension of Israel’s national identity. It belongs to the essence and nature of the people of God.

A second source for the command of care towards the immigrant foreigner is that it corresponds to God’s way of being and acting in history: “The Lord watches over the strangers” (Psalm 146:9), “God… executes justice for the orphan and the widow and loves the strangers” (Deuteronomy 10:18). God takes sides in history, favoring the most vulnerable: the poor, the widows, the orphans and the strangers. “I will be swift to bear witness… against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 3:5). Solidarity with the marginalized and excluded corresponds to God’s being and acting in history.

How comforting would be to stop right here, with these fine biblical texts of xenophilia, of love for the stranger. But the Bible happens to be a disconcerting book. It contains a disturbing multiplicity of voices, a perplexing polyphony that frequently complicates our theological hermeneutics. Regarding many key ethical dilemmas, we find in the Bible often times not only different, but also conflictive, even contradictory

36 This periscope deserves to be quoted in its entirety: “The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (Psalm 146:8-9).
perspectives. Too frequently we jump from our contemporary labyrinths into a dark and sinister scriptural maze.

In the Hebrew Bible we also discover statements with a distinct and distasteful flavor of nationalist xenophobia. Leviticus 25 is usually read as the classic text for the liberation of the Israelites who have fallen into indebted servitude. Indeed, it is, as its famed tenth verse so eloquently manifests: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” But it also contains a nefarious distinction: “As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families... and they may be your property . . . These you may treat as slaves” (Leviticus 25:44-46). And what about the terrifying fate imposed upon the foreign wives (and their children) in the epilogues of Ezra and Nehemiah? They are thrown away, exiled, as sources of impurity and contamination of the faith and culture of the people of God. In the process of reconstructing Jerusalem, “Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate the growing presence of xenophobia,” as the Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek has highlighted. He immediately adds: “Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate the beginning of the establishment of a religious tradition that

37 This text is inscribed in Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell, a venerated US icon.

38 For a sharp critical analysis of the xenophobic and misogynist theology underlining Ezra and Nehemiah, see Elisabeth Cook Steicke, La mujer como extranjera en Israel: Estudio exegético de Esdras 9-10 (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial SEBILA, 2011). Snyder contrasts what she terms “the ecology of fear,” exemplified by the banishment of foreign wives (and their children) in Ezra and Nehemiah, with an “ecology of faith,” as expressed in the stories of Ruth, a “Moabite woman,” and the Syro-Phoenician mother that implores Jesus to heal her daughter. Susanna Snyder, Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church, 139-194.
leaned toward traditionalism, conservatism, exclusivity, and xenophobia.”39 Let us also not forget the atrocious rules of warfare that prescribes forced servitude or annihilation of the peoples encountered in Israel’s route to the “promised land” (Deuteronomy 20:10-17). These all are, in Phyllis Trible’s apt expression, “texts of terror.”40

The problem with some evangelically oriented books like Matthew Soerens & Jenny Hwang’s Welcoming the Stranger and M. Daniel Carroll R., Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible41 is that their hermeneutical strategy evades completely and intentionally those biblical texts that might have xenophobic connotations. Both books, for example, narrate the postexilic project of rebuilding Jerusalem, physically, culturally and religiously, under Nehemiah,42 but silence the expulsion of the foreign wives, an important part of that project (Ezra 9-10, Nehemiah 13:23-31). The rejection of foreign wives in Ezra and Nehemiah does not seem too different from several modern anti-immigrants xenophobia: those foreign wives have a different linguistic, cultural, and religious legacy - “half of their children . . . could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair” (Nehemiah 13:24-25).

This conundrum is a constant irritating modus operandi of the Bible. We go to it

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42 Welcoming the Stranger, 85, 98; Christians at the Border, 83-84.
searching for simple and clear solutions to our ethical enigmas, but it strikes back exacerbating our perplexity. Who said that the Word of God is supposed to make things easier? But have I not forgotten something? If something distinguishes the tradition is its Christological emphasis. What then about Christ and the stranger?

Clues to address Jesus’ perspective regarding the socially despised other or stranger can be found in his attitude towards the Samaritans and in his dramatic and surprising eschatological parable on genuine discipleship and fidelity (Matthew 25:31-46). Orthodox Jews despised Samaritans as possible sources of contamination and impurity. Yet Jesus did not have any inhibitions in conversing amiably with a Samaritan woman of doubtful reputation, breaking down the exclusion barrier between Judeans and Samaritans (John 4:7-30). Of ten lepers once cleansed by Jesus, only one came to express his gratitude and reverence, and the Gospel narrative emphasizes that “he was a Samaritan” (Luke 17:11-19). Finally, in the famous parable to illustrate the meaning of the command “love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:29-37),” Jesus contrasts the righteousness and solidarity of a Samaritan with the neglect and indifference of a priest and a Levite. The action of a traditionally despised Samaritan is thus exalted as a paradigm of love and solidarity to emulate.

The parable of the judgment of the nations, in the Gospel of Matthew (25:31-46), is pure vintage Jesus. It is a text whose connotations I refuse to reduce to a nowadays too common and constraining ecclesiastical confinement. Jesus disrupts, as he loved to do, the familiar criteria of ethical value and religious worthiness by distinguishing between human actions that sacramentally bespeaks divine love for the powerless and
vulnerable from those that do not. Who are, according to Jesus, to be divinely blessed and inherit God’s kingdom? Those who in their actions care for the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and incarcerated, in short, for the marginalized and vulnerable human beings. But also those who welcome the strangers, who provide them with hospitality; those who are able to overcome nationalistic exclusions, racism, and xenophobia and are daring enough to welcome and embrace the immigrant, the people in our midst who happen to be different in skin pigmentation, culture, language, and national origins. They belong to the powerless of the powerless, the poorest of the poor, in Franz Fanon’s famous terms, “the wretched of the earth,” or, in Jesus’s poetic language, “the least of these.”

Why? Here comes the shocking statement: because they are, in their powerlessness and vulnerability, the sacramental presence of Christ. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger [xénox] and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me” (Matthew 25:35). The vulnerable human beings turn out to be, in a mysterious way, the sacramental presence of Christ in our midst.

This sacramental presence of Christ becomes, for the first generations of Christian communities, the corner stone of hospitality, philoxenia, towards those needy people who do not have a place to rest, a virtue insisted upon by the apostle Paul (Romans

43 See Clark Lyda’s and Jesse Lyda’s moving documentary, The Least of These (2009).

44 Regarding Matthew 25:31-46, I am in accord with those scholars, like Cervantes Gabarrón (“El inmigrante en las tradiciones bíblicas”, 273-275) who interpret “the least of these” as referring to the poor, dispossessed, marginalized and oppressed, and in disagreement with those who limit its denotation to Jesus’ disciples, like M. Daniel Carroll R. (Christians at the Border, 122-123).
12:13). When, in a powerful and imperial nation, like the United States of America, its citizens welcome and embrace the immigrant, who reside and work with or without some documents required by the powers that be, they are blessed, for they are welcoming and embracing Jesus Christ.

The discriminatory distinction between citizens and aliens is broken down. The author of the Epistle to the Ephesians is thus able to proclaim to human communities religiously scorned and socially marginalized: “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens” (Ephesians 2:19). The author of that missive probably had in mind the peculiar vision of post exilic Israel developed by the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel emphasizes two differences between the post-exilic and the old Israel: the eradication of social injustice and oppression (“And my princes shall no longer oppress my people” – Ezekiel 45:8) and the elimination of the legal distinctions between citizens and aliens (“You shall allot it [the land] as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. In whatever tribe aliens reside, there you shall assign them their inheritance, says the Lord God” – Ezekiel 47:21-23). This was not merely theological speculation. Ezekiel experienced himself the tragedy of being an immigrant. He was one of the


46 There is an instance in which Jesus seems to exclude or marginalize strangers. When a woman, “Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin,” implores from him healing her daughter, Jesus declines. But her obstinate, clever, and hopeful response impresses him and leads him to praise her word of faith (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30).
countless Israelites who suffered forced deportation after the violent invasion of Israel by the Babylonian military forces. Exile and diaspora were the fate of the people of Yahweh and the source of Israel’s sacred scriptures.47

**An ecumenical, international and intercultural theological perspective**

We need to countervail the xenophobia that contaminates public discourse in the United States and other Western nations with an embracing, exclusion-rejecting, perspective of the stranger, the alien, the “other,”48 one which I have named xenophilia, a concept that comprises hospitality, love, and care for the stranger. In times of increasing economic and political globalization, when in a megalopolis like New York, Chicago, Dallas, or San Francisco many different cultures, languages, memories, and legacies converge,49 xenophilia should be our duty and vocation, as a faith affirmation only of our common humanity, but also of the ethical priority in the eyes of God of those vulnerable beings living in the shadows and margins of our societies.50

There is a tendency among many public scholars and leaders to weave a discourse that deals with immigrants mainly or even exclusively as workers, whose labor might contribute or not to the economic welfare of the American citizens. This kind of public

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50 “Xenophilia is commanded us: the neighbor whom we are to love is the foreigner whom we encounter on the road.” Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 268.
discourse tends to objectify and dehumanize the immigrants. Those immigrants are human beings, conceived and designed, according to the Christian tradition, in the image of God. They deserve to be fully recognized as such, both in the letter of the law and in the spirit of social praxis. Whatever the importance of the economic factors for the receiving nation (which usually, as in the case of the United States, happens to be an extremely rich country), from an ethical theological perspective the main concern should be the existential well-being of the “least of these,” of the most vulnerable and marginalized members of God’s humanity, among them those who sojourn far away from their homeland, constantly scrutinized by the demeaning gaze of many native citizens.

One of the key concerns energizing and spreading the distrust against resident foreigners is fear of their possible consequences on national identity, understood as an already historically fixed essence. We have seen that anxiety in Samuel P. Huntington’s assessment of the Latin American immigration as “a major potential threat to the cultural integrity of the United States.” It is an apprehension that has spread all over the Western world, disseminating hostile attitudes towards already marginalized and disenfranchised communities of sojourners and strangers. These are perceived as sources of “cultural contamination.” What is therein forgotten is, first, that national identities are historical constructs diachronically constituted by exchanges with peoples bearing different cultural heritages and, second, that cultural alterity, the social exchange with the “other,” can and should be a source of renewal and enrichment of our own distinct national self-awareness. History has shown the sad consequences of
xenophobic ethnocentrism. There have been too intimate links between xenophobia and genocide.\textsuperscript{51} As Zygmunt Bauman has so aptly written, “Great crimes often starts from great ideas… Among this class of ideas, pride of place belongs to the vision of purity.”\textsuperscript{52}

The United States tends to play the role of the Lone Ranger. Yet, migration and xenophobia are international problems, affecting most of the world community, and have thus to be understood and faced from a worldwide context.\textsuperscript{53} The deportation of Roma people (Gypsies) in France and other European nations is an unfortunate sign of the times. Roma communities are expelled from nations where they are objects of scorn, contempt and fear, to other nations where they have traditionally been mistreated, disdained, and marginalized. They are perennial national scapegoats, whose unfortunate fate has for too long been silenced.\textsuperscript{54} It would also do good to compare the American situation with that prevailing in several European nations where in the difficult and sometimes tense coexistence of citizens and immigrants resonate the historically complex conflicts between the Cross and the Crescent, for many of the foreigners happen to be Muslims, venerated of Allah, and thus subject to insidious

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\textsuperscript{53} Malise Ruthven, “What Happened to the Arab Spring?” \textit{The New York Review of Books} (July 10 2014/Vol. LXI, No. 12), 74: “Of Qatar’s population of 2.1 million, 85 percent are listed as ‘foreign residents.’ Many of these are construction workers from South Asia who work under poor conditions and suffer high casualty rates.”

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kinds of xenophobia and discrimination.\textsuperscript{55} Deportation has become a substantial and cruel dimension of public policy in the United States.\textsuperscript{56}

Migration is an international problem, a salient dimension of modern globalization.\textsuperscript{57} Globalization implies not only the transfer of financial resources, products, and trade, but also the worldwide relocation of peoples, a transnationalization of labor migration, of human beings who take the difficult and frequently painful decision to leave their kin and kith searching for a better future. We are in the midst, according to some scholars, of an “age of migration.”\textsuperscript{58} Borders have become bridges, not only barriers. For, as Edward Said has written in the context of another very complex issue, “in time, who cannot suppose that the borders themselves will mean far less than the human contact taking place between people for whom differences animate more exchange rather than more hostility?”\textsuperscript{59}

The intensification of global inequalities has made the issue of labor migration a

\textsuperscript{55} Giovanni Sartori, \textit{Pluralismo, multiculturalismo e estranei: saggio sulla società multietnica} (Milano: Rizzoli, 2000). Sartori perceives Islamist immigration as irreconcilable with, and thus nefarious for, Western democratic pluralism. His thesis is a sophisticated reconfiguration of the multisecular adversary confrontation between Christian/Western (supposedly open, secular, and liberal) and Islamic/Eastern (allegedly closed, dogmatic and authoritarian) cultures, a new reenactment of what Edward Said famously named “Orientalism.”

\textsuperscript{56} Bill Ong Hing, \textit{American Presidents, Deportations and Human Rights Violation: From Carter to Trump} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

\textsuperscript{57} A task to which not enough attention has been devoted is the advocacy for the signature and ratification by the wealthy and powerful nations of the 1990 “International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families,” which entered into force on July 1, 2003.


crucial one.\textsuperscript{60} It is a situation that requires rigorous analysis from: 1) a worldwide ecumenical horizon; 2) a deep understanding of the tensions and misunderstandings arising from the proximity of peoples with different traditions and cultural memories; 3) an ethical perspective that privileges the plight and afflictions of the most vulnerable, as “submerged and silenced voices of strangers need to be uncovered”\textsuperscript{61}; and 4) for the Christian communities and churches, a solid theological matrix ecumenically conceived and designed.

The churches and Christian communities, therefore, need to address theologically this issue from an international ecumenical and intercultural perspective.\textsuperscript{62} The main concern is not and should not be exclusively our national society, but the entire fractured global order, for as Soerens and Hwang have neatly written: “Ultimately, the church must be a place of reconciliation in a broken world.”\textsuperscript{63} In an age where globalization prevails, there are social issues, migration one of them, whose transnational complexities call for an international ecumenical dialogue and debate. As Susanna Snyder has so aptly written, “a transnational issue requires transnational

\textsuperscript{60} Some scholars, for example, argue that the North American Free Trade Agreement, which came into force on January 1, 1994, created havoc in several segments of the Mexican economy and deprived of their livelihoods approximately 2.5 million small farmers and other workers dependent on the agricultural sector. The alternative for many of them was the stark choice between the clandestine and dangerous drug trafficking or paying the “coyotes” for the also clandestine and dangerous trek to the North. Ben Ehrenreich, “A Lucrative War,” \textit{The New York Review of Books}, Vol. 32, No. 20, 21 October 2010, 15-18.

\textsuperscript{61} Susanna Snyder, \textit{Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church}, 31.

\textsuperscript{62} Raúl Fornet-Betancourt, ed., \textit{Migration and Interculturality: Theological and Philosophical Challenges} (Aachen, Germany: Missionswissenschaftliches Institut Missio e.V., 2004); Jorge E. Castillo Guerra, “A Theology of Migration: Toward an Intercultural Methodology,” in Groody and Campese, \textit{A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey}, 243-270

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Welcoming the Stranger}, 174.
responses and transnational, global networks such as churches could therefore be key international players.”64 One goal of that world-wide discursive process is the disruption of the increasing tendency of developed and wealthy countries to emphasize the protection of civil rights, understood exclusively as the rights of citizens, vis-à-vis the diminishment of the recognition of the human rights of resident non-citizens.65

We must also keep in mind another crucial factor: streams of migration are diversifying and strengthening Western and Northern Christianity. According to Brian Stanley, professor of world Christianity at the University of Edinburgh, “The great migrations movements... both diversified and even strengthened the Christian presence in northern-hemisphere societies... Migration thus brought to Europe and North America not simple marked interreligious plurality but also greatly enhanced Christian denominational and cultural diversity, with a new infusion of spiritual vitality...”66

Pope Benedict XVI rightly reminded the global community, in his 2009 social encyclical Caritas in veritate, of the urgent necessity to develop an international, ecumenical, and theologically humane perspective of migration:

“[M]igration . . . is a striking phenomenon because of the sheer numbers of people involved, the social, economic, political, cultural and religious problems it raises . . . [W]e are facing a social phenomenon of epoch-making proportions that requires bold, forward-looking policies of international cooperation . . . We are all witnesses of the burden of suffering, the dislocation and the aspirations that accompany the flow of migrants . . . [T]hese laborers cannot be considered as a

64 Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church, 205.
65 Fernando Oliván, El extranjero y su sombra. Crítica del nacionalismo desde el derecho de extranjería (Madrid: San Pablo, 1998).
commodity or a mere workforce. They must not, therefore, be treated like any other factor of production. Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.” (Caritas in veritate, 62)