

Migration and Religion in a Globalized World

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IOM

What role does religion play in the migration process?

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This theme can be looked at from many different angles. I shall concentrate on the role of Christian churches, and more specifically I will base my reflections on experiences made within the work of the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME). CCME is representing European Protestant and Orthodox Churches who are active in advocacy and integration work with migrants and refugees. The issue of religion finds in CCME a collocation in the programme “Uniting in Diversity”. I myself belong to the Protestant minority churches in Italy and this affiliation will be reflected in my contribution. I shall develop two aspects of the theme given to this panel:

- I. where is religion playing a role in the life of migrants.
- II. What could be the role of Christian churches in this context?

I. Where is religion playing a role in the life of migrants?

Religion has a role at different levels of community life:

- it can be simply 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.

- At states level religion can be an instrument for political and social cohesion or on the opposite a state chooses to leave religious issues completely in the private sphere. It can also become a major cause of conflicts within a state.

All three aspects may play a role for migration processes. There are individual implications, but also community life and the internal cohesion within a country may be influenced by this factor.

1) Religion and the individual:

a) religion and personal identity:

for many persons religion is a component of their personal identity. A specific creed is part of the life of persons. The teachings, the traditions and the habits of a specific religion will influence these people in their behaviour, their way to approach situations and how they relate to each other. The personal value system will be based on the religion the person belongs to. Religion can be an important part of an individual, and even if such a person will migrate to another country he or she will carry with her these elements of faith. Even if losing all material possessions this religious capital will stay with this migrant.

It is known that religion can become an important part of the identity of a migrant, even if he had rather little interest in religious matters until leaving his home country. In the new situation, having left behind family and social links and feeling the need to defend his identity, religion becomes an important factor. It depends on what the person will find in the host country if this part of identity will become a positive or negative element for the personal integration process. Will religion become an isolating force or a possibility to find a sense of belonging. Faith and religion may become an instrument and opportunity to experience a transnational identity. The migrant may find a way to define for him a new identity made out of components from both societies. This would not be just a summary of two cultures but something

new, which could be important for both societies. Precondition for this is an open and tolerant receiving society, where also the local faith communities practise these values.

b) religion may play a role in many parts of **daily life**:

religious convictions and rules influence the life of a believer nearly in all parts of daily life: health and health care are affected. For instance migrant women may find it difficult to access health services because of their religious education.

The education of children depends widely on religious values, so as the whole issue of family life. The well-known conflict between first and second generation 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.

2) *religion and community life*:

often religion is not only a personal conviction; the believer may be requested to participate actively in **community life**, as **non-renounceable part of** his faith. If these believers migrate abroad they will put much energy into finding or rebuilding in the host country some kind of faith community where to live their faith.

Religious migrant communities can have a **positive or a negative role within the integration process**. They may give to the migrant in the first phase of integration, a feeling of home and belonging which will give him or her a sense of security and mutual support, but if these communities are closed and/or

marginalised by the host society creating a **ghetto** like situation this could be contra-productive 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 even a mixed community with migrant and autochthonous members, where a common faith is the binding link this may become a **bridge**, and allow a smoother integration process.

Finally the religious community has an important role in directing migration movements. It is known that migrants often choose the country or even the town they aim to because of having religious links in that place. They may know that in a certain city lives 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 instance at the migration of Christians from the Middle East.

3) religion and state:

As long as **society** was considered **homogenous** Governments did not consider the question of religion a priority although no society has ever been totally homogeneous. Migration has always existed. Today migration is a structural factor of all states and all must cope with **heterogeneous** societies, and latest 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 with her 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.

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. I only mention the whole issue of religious schools, which are for various faith communities of basic importance. Commerce and industry may be influenced by consumer behaviour based on religious rules; the same may be said for cultural and scientific work.

Reassuring these reflections it can be said:

- 1) migrants need to express and to live their religious creed. This can be a tool for stabilisation, avoiding marginalisation, meanwhile the loss of religious identity will lead to the loss of ethical values and these migrants will be even more disoriented and uprooted in the host society.**
- 2) Similar religious communities of the host society and of the migrant communities should promote exchange and sharing, becoming like this a bridging tool for integration, avoiding marginalisation and frustration of migrant faith communities which may lead to radicalisation. CCME is**

working in this direction with its programme “Uniting in Diversity- To be Church Together”

- 3) The religious communities of the host society may be enriched by the contributions of migrant religious communities. Intercultural experiences can be experienced and 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 the society and governments will have to work together to pursue this aim.**

II. What could be the role of Christian churches in this context?

a) 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 a book, the Bible and from this text in a theological process Christians elaborated their code of conduct. As far as migrants are concerned there are precise rules which Churches should respect. I mention some of these.

- 1) human dignity must be respected in any case and in any situation
- 2) Christian should love their neighbour and migrants may become neighbours.
- 3) migrants must be received and protected
- 4) all human beings are “citizens in the household of God”, that means they are equal and have rights and duties like citizens, they are not only guests or “Gastarbeiter”.
- 5) 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 conviction of others, even if these do not correspond to their own.

6) The Christian faith has at the same time an universalistic approach, believing in the Universal Church, and on the other hand the individual spirituality is part of a personal faith. Both aspects are part of the Christian identity.

b) The role of churches can be looked at from two points of view:

On the basis of their creed churches may be involved in the field of migration in different ways:

- 1) In order to protect human dignity, rights and freedom churches will become active parts of the society, similar to other social actors.
- 2) churches will also act as faith communities, which have their creed in common with certain migrant communities.

1) churches as active players in the society defending migrants' and refugees' rights:

Churches are faith communities and as such feel like responsible parts of the organised civil society. They cannot live in a spiritual ghetto. This responsibility within the state makes them active players as far as social cohesion is concerned. They intend to 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 for a privileged status - this is at least the position of many Protestant Churches -. Working for issues of social and economic justice they will not distinguish between migrants of their own faith and those belonging to other creeds.

They will work in two directions:

- aa) advocacy work on migration and asylum policy and legislation.
- bb) solidarity programmes to support individuals.

aa) advocacy:

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

Representing the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe - CCME - I could mention our commitment to do advocacy work at European level, mainly with the European Union and the Council of Europe. Recently we worked together with other Christian organisations 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 is not respecting the rights of children and the right to live in a family. Anti-discrimination measures have been an important issue of our commitment, so as the fight against trafficking.

Speaking on religious issues churches will also have to lobby and to monitor on 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, also if these are not Christian. In this context the whole debate on common values and on how far faith communities can push their right to promote certain religious rules which may seem not compatible with values which are perceived basic in the host community. A balance must be found between religious freedom of a certain religious community and the basic values and the freedom of all other citizens and communities which the state must protect.

bb) solidarity and support to individuals:

In Europe churches promote their own programmes of mutual support for migrants in order to allow their integration and full access to equal rights in all parts of civil life.

They run programmes on housing, education, access to the labour market, counselling for migrants and refugees, legal assistance and empowerment by leadership training and support to migrant associations.

They promote language schools and courses for vocational training, support refugees who wish to study at university.

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.

***c) churches of the host societies in collaboration with Christian migrant churches
“Uniting in Diversity – To be Church Together”:***

A particular question arises when migrants and refugees confess the same creed as a church of the hosting state. Many migrants are Christians. In this case we do not speak of assisting migrants for social needs or giving them legal assistance in order to defend their rights. The link is here 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 in our churches. This is important to state, although our churches are not always aware of this fact.

It is a big opportunity that in church we can meet on equal footing. There economic, social or cultural levels should not be of any importance. We are partners with equal rights and duties. This may sound nice and is the basic understanding of churches.

Nevertheless the reality is not always like this. Speaking from a European point of view I know very well that our churches in the host countries do not always behave according to this affirmation. We very often handle the issue still as a question of patronising assistance and do not face the deeper questions, so as partnership and empowerment.

Migrant churches are questioning our being church. 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 industrialised World. It is not always easy to accept this. A migrant Christian who accepts 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.

Within the Christian churches in Europe a similar process is taking place as in the European society as a whole. How can we live together in a multi- or intercultural context? Churches have probably an even bigger responsibility in finding ways, as this is part of their creed. "...no longer guest but citizens..." is said in a letter of S.Pauls (Eph. 2,19). Churches must find ways to make this a reality.

Lets have a quick look at what is happening in European Churches. At the end of 2003, following the dossier of Caritas Italia, there were ca. 24 million migrants in the European Union. About 48,5% of these belong to Christian churches, about 30,9% are Moslems, about 20,5% belong to other religions.

The European churches are approaching the situation in very different ways:

- in some countries the local churches choose the way of separate development: Migrant churches grew and are in some countries now the majority churches.

- In others the phenomena was only seen as a question of assistance. Migrant churches started to develop and the local churches supported them often financially without trying to build up a real mutual understanding and exchange.
- We find a particular approach in local minority churches so as the Protestant churches in Southern European countries: for instance in Italy where Protestants are a very small minority. Migrants are today at least half of the Protestants, present in Italy. Migrants are worshipping in all Italian Protestant churches. In many communities migrants are the majority, often more than 60%. The Italian Protestant churches found themselves in a totally new situation and must live up to this. These churches must face the question how migrant believers can become fully equal members of the local churches. How can cultural and theological differences become a resource and not a reason for conflict in a multi- or intercultural community?

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Also in the Italian Protestant churches various models of cohabitation, sharing and learning from each other are experienced.

It may be still too early to judge which one is really reaching the aim of an intercultural community where all parts find their correct placement and will have equal rights, where empowerment of all parts will become a reality.

- many migrant Christians prefer to build their own churches where they may live their faith as they did at home. They may use their mother tongue and reproduce their religious traditions. This is a model specially, first generation Christians often choose. It certainly gives a sense of belonging and offers a feeling of home, but if the links with the rest of the society are weak it may not be very helpful for the integration process.
- The model of the mixed congregation where local people and migrants worship could be another approach, which can lead to very different results:

- the local church is promoting a process of assimilation and insisting that migrants accept to live their faith exactly in the same way as local people do. This will produce a loss of identity and values of one part of the congregation.
- the other possibility would be that all parts of the congregation try to grow together learning from each other, developing something new. This would correspond to the Christian believe in the Universal Church where all are equal and have equal rights and duties. It would be a model of empowerment of all members, of real partnership. This is the model Italian Protestant churches are actually aiming for. It is a very challenging aim and we have still a long way to go. Nevertheless Christians have a big responsibility. To be successful in reaching this objective of a faith community where each member has equal rights and possibilities is of double importance: on one side it means to fulfil the requirements of the Christian faith which is important looking at the question from the inside, but looking at the situation from a secular point of view this approach is important for the integration process of migrants into our societies. If positive religious integration takes place this could become a tool for the whole integration process of migrants. Churches or other faith communities of the receiving countries could become important bridge-makers where a positive value exchange could take place. Values of the secular society, so as democracy, human rights and active participation could be transferred by this channel, so as important inputs from the migrants could find their way into the receiving society, so as community sense, mutual support and solidarity, cultural contributions and other expertise.

1) Summarising it can be said that churches and all faith communities of the receiving countries have a role to play in the migration process. They can become a bridging tool between different cultures and communities, but if they are not living up to this responsibility, 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.

- 2) **In order to allow faith communities to play this important role positively the states will have to guaranty a correct legislation first of all on migration and asylum issues and second on religious freedom where a balance can be found between the needs of all faith communities, the respect of the freedom of all citizens and the values, considered fundamental for the dignity of human beings and the functioning of the civil society.**