

Strangers and sojourners as all our fathers (I Ch 28: 15).

Towards a receptive, inclusive and global ecumenism.

Extraños y forasteros como todos nuestros padres (I Ch 28: 15). Hacia un ecumenismo receptivo, inclusivo y global.

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**Abstract:** This article intends to address the issue of migration in its relation to the religious realm of these two first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, within the framework of a fundamental practical theology. By using sociological data as our basic platform to see which changings and challenges are at stake in nowadays world, we shall move towards a theological analysis of those categories related to human migration from a biblical and a theological perspective. Considering the developments of ecumenical theology as well as of interreligious dialogue of the past decades, our main aim is to reflect briefly on the principles that must mould a Christian attitude towards ethnic, social and religious differences.

**Keywords:** Ecumenism, Non-Christian Religions, Globalization, Pluralism, Political Theology, Dialogue.

**Resumen:** Este artículo pretende abordar el tema de la migración y su relación con la religión durante las dos primeras décadas del siglo XXI, en el marco de una teología práctica fundamental. Al utilizar los datos sociológicos como causa básica con el objeto de conocer los cambios y desafíos que están en juego en el mundo actual, nos proyectaremos hacia un análisis teológico de las categorías relacionadas con la migración humana desde una perspectiva bíblica y teológica. Nuestro principal objetivo es reflexionar brevemente sobre los principios que deben moldear una actitud cristiana hacia las diferencias étnicas, sociales y religiosas, teniendo en cuenta los avances de la teología ecuménica y del diálogo interreligioso de las últimas décadas.

**Palabras clave:** Ecumenismo, Religiones no cristianas, Globalización, Pluralismo, Teología política, Diálogo.

**Summary:** 1. New landscapes in the religious context(s) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. 2. Transcending theological and anthropological boundaries/categories. 2.1.Nomadism (or the sojourning faith). 2.2. Pilgrimage (or the faithful nomadism). 3. Globalization in ecumenical perspective: final remarks.

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**Sumario:** 1. Nuevos escenarios en el (los) contexto (s) religioso (s) del siglo XXI. 2. Trascender fronteras / categorías teológicas y antropológicas. 2.1.Nomadismo (o la fe de residencia). 2.2. Peregrinación (o el nomadismo fiel). 3. Globalización en la perspectiva ecuménica: observaciones finales.

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## 1. NEW LANDSCAPES IN THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT(S) OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

No one can honestly deny that the religious landscape of our times is changing. It is no longer possible to think religion in terms of nations, civilizations or cultures. It is true, however, that religious traditions are made of cultures, civilizations, and nations as well. For that reason, when people move to other countries, religions also move along with them, and consequently with their cultural features and national identities. Wherever there is migration, *God is [also] on the Move* (Bazzell, 2017).

Nevertheless, the religious experience of our days has largely broken those *natural* boundaries in which institutional and historical religions always saw themselves framed in. The process of *globalization* has largely contributed to this changing of the religious landscape (Kessler, 2017).

Despite a different approach, Samuel P. Huntington stated more than two decades ago that the next conflicts would be of a different nature from what humankind had experienced until then:

World politics is entering a new phase, and intellectuals have not hesitated to proliferate visions of what it will be – the end of history, the return of traditional rivalries between nation states, and the decline of the nation state from the conflicting pulls of tribalism and globalism, among others. Each of these visions catches aspects of the emerging reality. Yet they all miss a crucial, indeed a central, aspect of what global politics is likely to be in the coming years.

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battles lines of the future. (Huntington, 1993: 22)

The most important element of this hypothesis is the fact that the American scholar is deeply convinced of the complex meaning of

*civilization*. At a certain point, we can evaluate his statement as some sort of accomplished prophecy, if we look at his reasoning, and if we compare it with the time we live in.

The thesis within the hypothesis is that conflicts shall emerge from the differences between civilizations (*Ibid.*: 25). As we well know, Huntington points out six reasons (*Ibid.*: 25-28):

1. These differences are fundamentally basic, centennial and even millennial, and among them religion plays a very important role, along with language, history and tradition;
2. Because the world is becoming a smaller space, the interactions between civilizations will increase, and thus will potentiate reactive affirmation or reaffirmation of the correspondent sense of belonging to one or another;
3. The social impact of modern economy has been making people to move more intensely around the world; as a result, the sense of belonging is moving towards a different kind of collective identity, being that religion emerges as a powerful source of «identity and commitment that transcends national boundaries and unites civilizations» (*Ibid.*: 26);
4. The differences between the West and the East parts of the world are now under a process of exchange of worldviews and lifestyles; Huntington calls it *de- Westernization* of the West (*Ibid.*: 27);
5. The major fault lines are not ideological or political any longer; the American scholar clearly states that religion is at the very centre of the most powerful element when it comes to identity and sense of belonging: «Even more than ethnicity, religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people. A person can be half-French and half-Arab and simultaneously even a citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half-Catholic and half-Muslim» (*Ibid.*);
6. Finally, the emergence and increasing of economic regionalism, as well linked to ethnicity or culture and religion, like for instance «the Economic Cooperation Organization, which brings together ten non-Arab Muslim countries: Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan» (*Ibid.*: 28).

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Regarding the religious landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is something going already under change. If we look at the statistics, we can clearly see that within three decades the number of Muslims in the world will be nearly the same as of Christians, which means that the cultural hegemony of the old Christendom is coming to an end. From then on, it will be very hard to hold the theory of a Christian worldview as something dominant in most of the Westerners' minds.

In April 2015, the Pew Research Center released a report on the *Future of the World Religions: Population Growth Projections 2010-2050* (Pew Research Center, 2015). According to this report, the religious landscape of our world shall be different in a time lapse of three decades:

As of 2010, Christianity was by far the world's largest religion, with an estimated 2.2 billion adherents, nearly a third (31%) of all 6.9 billion people on Earth. Islam was second, with 1.6 billion adherents, or 23% of the global population.

If current demographic trends continue, however, Islam will nearly catch up by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Between 2010 and 2050, the world's total population is expected to rise to 9.3 billion, a 35% increase. Over that same period, Muslims – a comparatively youthful population with high fertility rates – are projected to increase by 73%. The number of Christians also is projected to rise, but more slowly, at about the same rate (35%) as the global population overall.

As a result, according to the Pew Research projections, by 2050 there will be nearly parity between Muslims (2.8 billion, or 30% of the population) and Christians (2.9 billion, or 31%), possibly for the first time in history. (PRC, 2015: 7)

Nonetheless, what is important for theology are not the numbers, but rather what they may come to mean and thus to challenge the theological discourse itself. It is important however to underline the fact that the changing religious landscape of our world does not only attain the relations between Christians and Muslims; but the energetic growth of Islam and the consequent loss of Christianity's majority are the expression of an inevitable changing reality.

Facing this, we must try to rethink our discourse, not in terms of doctrinal assumptions, but rather in a way that everyone can peacefully «live together while remaining diverse» (Rezvan, 2011). From a Christian

perspective, we think that the most important thing to do is to reflect on the categories that legitimate a pluralistic theology of a possible dialogue with Non-Christian Religions.

Due to migration processes, once that one of the products of globalization is the encounter between religious traditions (Aebischer-Crettol, 2001: 118), we do believe that the anthropological and theological categories that better defines the identity of Christianity, and at the same time allow a theology of inter-religious dialogue, are in fact the biblical elements of a 'Pilgrim God' and a 'Sojourning People' (Käsemann, 1961; John, 1985).

## **2. TRANSCENDING THEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES/CATEGORIES**

To have or not to have: this seems to be a permanent dilemma for every human being. However, the spiritual and religious inheritance of both Judaism and Christianity asserts that the deepest and most important human quest is to figure out the answer for another existential question: to belong or not to belong.

Saying that we live on the road, and therefore belonging to a Promise, means that one belongs to nowhere because nothing belongs to no one, and thus, everything is part and parcel of a wider horizon of relationship and care. In this way, the whole world as *oikos* is that place of relationship that God, the human being and every single creature inhabit. Consequently, this is what makes every human being a wanderer in search of truth, peace and love (Francis, 2017).

Indeed, it seems that the Pope Francis' voice has been one of the most lucid and prophetic in these last couple of years. I see his statements regarding the actual situation of our world as of an acute intelligence. I do think that his interventions in the public sphere are prophetic. And finally, I believe that what he says concerning the by-products of globalization are a challenge, in first place, for a coherent formation of Christian self-consciousness.

His last message for the celebration of the World Peace Day is, in these terms, impressive, and which I will take as my inspirational motto:

As he looked to the Great Jubilee marking the passage of two thousand years since the proclamation of peace by the angels in Bethlehem, Saint John Paul II pointed to the increased numbers of displaced persons as one of the

consequences of the “endless and horrifying sequence of wars, conflicts, genocides and ethnic cleansings” that had characterized the twentieth century. To this date, the new century has registered no real breakthrough: armed conflicts and other forms of organized violence continue to trigger the movement of peoples within national borders and beyond.

Yet people migrate for other reasons as well, principally because they “desire a better life, and not infrequently try to leave behind the ‘hopelessness’ of an unpromising future.” They set out to join their families or to seek professional or educational opportunities, for those who cannot enjoy these rights do not live in peace. Furthermore, as I noted in the Encyclical *Laudato Si’*, there has been “a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation”.

Most people migrate through regular channels. Some, however, take different routes, mainly out of desperation, when their own countries offer neither safety nor opportunity, and every legal pathway appears impractical, blocked or too slow.

Many destination countries have seen the spread of rhetoric decrying the risks posed to national security or the high cost of welcoming new arrivals, and thus demeaning the human dignity due to all as sons and daughters of God. Those who, for what may be political reasons, foment fear of migrants instead of building peace are sowing violence, racial discrimination and xenophobia, which are matters of great concern for all those concerned for the safety of every human being.

All indicators available to the international community suggest that global migration will continue for the future. Some consider this a threat. For my part, I ask you to view it with confidence as an opportunity to build peace. (*Ibid.*: 2)

## 2.1. Nomadism (or the sojourning faith)

Nowadays, restless travellers for different reasons are those who walk a hundred miles with a backpack, a sleeping bag, and a notebook for memories. Born in time and place, raised up with the Promethean projects of the modern age, they are disappointed with their lot on the one hand, or drawn onwards for what can be, on the other hand. Since the beginning of creation, man has travelled across mountains, rivers and oceans looking for a better way of life. Nonetheless, however blessed with things to settle, the *unlimited desire* to travel is still in his veins, for he remains restless and cannot stop. Ontologically speaking, stopping would be the death of him, because sometimes to stop is literally to accept death.

In fact, the human being is not a slave of nature, but rather a free child of Grace. He will always be as brought forth from the future, due to its

penetration in the egg of our *cosmicness*, i.e., «the Word became flesh, he lived among us» (Jn 1: 14). Unlike the biological pattern of generations in Genesis (cf. Gn 4: 1-5: 32), the metahistorical Abrahamic story presupposes an invitation or promise, a different sort of generation: «Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country I shall show you» (Gn 12: 1).

Gn 12: 1-3, which speaks about God's invitation to Abraham, is the beginning of the patriarchal narratives. The biblical studies, almost until the seventies, used to be unanimous in dating this period back in the beginning of the second millennium B. C. From the seventies onwards, the dating consensus began to be called into question with the *theory of Heidelberg* (Couto, 2003: 50).

However, the following years of biblical studies claimed that there is a difference between the patriarchs and the Mosaic Yahwism religion (Westermann, 1987). The latter is very well expressed in the Bible, beginning in Ex 3 (Couto, 2003: 200). For the Portuguese scholar António Couto, some inconsistencies arise in the seventies' critique as soon as the difference of the patriarchal religiosity emerges. If those modern theories are, which strip the patriarchal narratives of historical value as being nothing but a mythical projection of Israel's experience in the exile and post-exile periods, are correct, so such narratives should have different features.

In accordance to António Couto, one could formulate those inconsistencies in the following questions:

- If Abraham is a type character tardily created, how could one understand the presence of his name, common in the Ancient Near East on the one hand and non-existent in the rest of Scripture on the other hand?
- If Abraham is a type character tardily created, how could one understand that he not only performs worships in different places and altars but also plants sacred trees in Beersheba (Gn 21: 33), completely at odds with the law of Dt 12: 2-5 and 16: 21?
- If Abraham is a type character tardily created, as well as all the patriarchs, how could one understand their condition of *resident strangers* (cf. Gn 23: 4) and not of occupants?
- If Abraham is a type character tardily created, how could one understand the abyssal difference between his social and religious environment and the one of the historic Israel, described by the Books of Judges and the Books of Samuel?

However hard to date the period of the patriarchs, one could still assert its historicity which takes place before the Mosaic Yahwism. This becomes important in so far as we can determine a cultural, social and religious difference between the *patriarchal period* and that of the historical Israel.

Nonetheless, the patriarchal narratives are narrated from Israel, which introduces them in a new context. Yet we could say that, despite that difference, there is continuity in discontinuity clearly expressed in Ex 6:2-3, when «God spoke to Moses and said to him, ‘I am Yahweh. To Abraham, Isaac and Jacob I appeared as El Shaddai, but I did not make my name Yahweh known to them». For that reason, it is possible to assert that «the God who guided the uncertain steps of the Patriarchs was the prime mover of the Exodus and of the following history of Israel as well» (*Ibid.*: 184). This awareness of continuity in discontinuity will last until the New Testament (Cf. Heb 7: 4; 11: 8 ff. Cf. Jn 8: 39; cf. Rm 4; cf. Ga 3: 7).

Whether directly or not, the awareness of Abraham’s fatherhood in faith reveals a deep traveller dimension, as we can read in Ga 3: 7: «Be sure, then, that it is people of faith who are the children of Abraham», for faith involves at least inner movement, but never smooth accommodation.

This is, to some extent, the awareness expressed in the I Book of Chronicles: «For we strangers before Thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers» (I Ch 29: 15). But the *status viatoris* of the patriarchs’ religious consciousness is closely related to what was their *modus vivendi*. Therefore, to understand the patriarchal religiosity one cannot dispense the correlative sociological understanding.

Strangers and pilgrims were the patriarchs, whose activity of pasturing made them live a sort of semi-nomadism, walking slowly at the pace of the children and the flock (Gn 33: 13-14). We say semi-nomadism, for their way of life was not the nomadism of the desert, because, there, the animals would not survive, nor even the sedentariness of the farmed lands, into which they would not go to avoid conflicts with the settled peoples:

«The patriarchs identify themselves as semi-nomads. They are not willing to occupy or conquer the farmed lands or the city-states. It is on this basis that they can have a harmonious relationship with the sedentary populations. The conflicts and fights will happen later, at the time when the “future” Israel wants to occupy the land» (Couto, 2003: 190).

These patriarchal stories are thus prior to the occupation of lands.



In this way, the environment of harmony is the enabling context for a calm and friendly encounter with God. Therefore, the relationship between God and the patriarchs takes place in a scene of friendship and familiarity. This is so true that Jacob will say: «the God of my father has been with me», in Gn 31: 5. In the same way, God speaks to Moses: «I am the God of your ancestors», he said, «the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob», in Ex 3: 6. If this were the kind of relationship the patriarchs had with God, similar features would assume their religiosity: no shrines, no priests and no scheduled feasts (*Ibid.*: 194). It was a matter of a religion with a clear familiar atmosphere (*Ibid.*: 193). This is the great difference between the religion of the patriarchs and that of the Mosaic Yahwism, as different was from the Ancient Near East, whose religious structures were clearly symptoms of a sedentary lifestyle. The faith of the patriarchs is based upon a same theological vein: the promise of a Land and offspring.

Sedentary life leads to possession, independence and self-sufficiency. Anchored in the patriarchal faith, the spiritual history of Israel could be described at the same time as a historical experience, which becomes existential sojourning and vice-versa. It is certainly possible to see, in Scripture, the permanent calling that God makes to his people. Nonetheless, this is quite clear in the word addressed to Abraham: «Leave your country, your kindred and your father's house for a country I shall show you» (Gn 12: 1). Since Abraham, the interpellation is personal. With him «God enters into relationship not with figures or ideal types who stand for all humanity, but with a particular individual, family, clan, or people» (John, 1985: 7). God invites him to a journey, showing him, a new and broader horizon made of Promise and Blessing (Gn 12: 1-4a).

The line of biological offspring of the previous chapter is not interrupted but rather begun in a different way. One could say, «the pilgrim God thus enters the life of an ordinary human being, with the result that the horizons of his human's existence are widened to infinity» (John, 1985: 14). Yet this departure implies full confidence because God makes him go towards a Promised Land – a path not previously marked out – in the dark uncertainty of the road. In this way, what God offers to Abraham is «a life like his own, a life on the road, a wayfaring life» (*Ibid.*: 15). The leading exponent of trust occurs at the time of the sacrifice of his son Isaac (Cf. Gn 22: 1-18). His immediate response to God's demand shapes faith as a «walking by the hand of God» (Torres Prieto, 1996: 37).

This awareness of relationship with God will last until Jacob when, close to death, says: «the God in whose presence my fathers Abraham and

Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd from my birth until this day» (Gn 48: 15).

Promise and travelling consciousness are therefore the two sides of the same coin. In that is latent the fundamental difference between the patriarchs and the surrounding cultural and religious environment, for whom the «deities were linked to places – mountains, rivers, cities, regions – whereas the god that speaks to Abraham is a god who is not tied down to one spot. This god is a sojourner god, a pilgrim god» (John, 1985: 13). Thus, states Victor Maag:

«Nomadic religion is a religion of promise. The nomad does not live within the cycle of seedtime and harvest, but in the world of migration. This inspiring, guiding, protecting God of the nomads differs quite fundamentally in various respects from the gods of the agrarian peoples. The gods of the nations are locally bound. The transmigration God of the nomads, however, is not bound territorially and locally. He journeys along with them; he is himself on the move» (Maag, 1959: 139-140).

Promise, unlike accomplishment, implies dynamism, for it is defined by the line in permanent tension of what will be (*futurum*), of that horizon solely accomplishable in the tension that holds a relationship and never gives rise to possession or despotic domination feelings. The Promise is therefore the *sine qua non* condition which makes possible its very accomplishment, because to own God or the Land is nothing else but illusion and destruction of its most authentic potentiality, i.e., receiving thankful the gift.

For Israel, the Land was clearly property of God: «Cross over the country Yahweh has settled, there where Yahweh's Dwelling now stands, and settle among us» (Jos 22: 19). This is the patriarchal faith. Because of his «resident stranger» condition, the biblical man owns nothing. Nothing belongs to him apart from the possibility of accepting the gift of God's familiarity at his *oikos*, in harmony and respect, knowing that no part of land can reach, unless that one which is place of relationship: «My birthright, my cup is Yahweh, (...), You will teach me the path of life, unbounded joy in your presence, at your right-hand delight forever» (Ps 16: 5a. 11).

This is the biblical consciousness that the sole inheritance is the relationship with the God who inhabits the world and makes it a spiritual ecosystem (Moltmann, 2005: 18).

## 2.2. Pilgrimage (or the faithful nomadism)

In the dawn of humankind, and for a long time, the way of human being's life was roughly sojourning. Progressively, and with the development of agricultural activities, sedentary lifestyles would be consolidated. However, despite the emergence of this new existential and socio-cultural mode of life, nomadism would not disappear completely. Somehow, it would give way to a kind of middle term: semi-nomadism. So, it was that, even today and in times of seemingly sedentary societies, we continue to witness the perpetual movement not only of individuals but also of entire communities. If is not the legitimate demand for better economic conditions of life, it is the no less legitimate escape from insecurity and fear (Oliveira, 2013; 151-152). Based on these primitive movements of human communities there was, as it continues to be, the motivation of a clear need for survival and adaptation to reality. Therefore, despite being sedentary, humanity has in its structure a sojourning dynamism.

I do not think it would be necessary a detailed investigation of cultural expressions of all times to acknowledge how this dynamics of movement, journey or pilgrimage meet this deep desire for the full realization of the human being. I do not consider abusive to think of Homer's *Odyssey* in this way, or if we think that the element of the journey is central in countless moment of the literary and cultural production of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I think of Jack Kerouac and his *On the Road* (Kerouac, 2008), the story set in motion of an authentic cultural revolution, or Somerset Maugham and his *The Razor's Edge* (Maugham, 1992), the story of an inner pilgrimage and a journey.

I also think of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (McCarthy, 2007) in the same way that John Steinbeck and his *Grapes of Wrath* comes to mind, a true exodus to California which the narrative describes as the promised land, where milk and honey shall flow.

I think of Clive Staple Lewis and his *Pilgrim's Regress*, especially when the sojourner is defined by the daily thirty miles (Lewis, 1981: 26).

How can one not think that is in his motorcycle trip that Che Guevara *converts* to the utopia that would come to consecrate him mythically?

How can we not think of the *Straight Story* (1999) by David Lynch which tells of the long journey an old man takes in his lawnmower to reconcile with his ill brother?

How can we not think of the *La Grand Voyage* (Ismaël Ferroukhi, 2004), one of the most impressive films I have seen recently, which tells a story of a pilgrimage to Mecca and the reconciliation journey between a father and his son?

How not to think of Bob Dylan's 1963 lyrics?

«How many roads must a man walk down  
before you call him a man? »

In the year of 1943, the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel wrote the following: «Perhaps a stable order can only be established if man is acutely aware of his condition as a traveller» (Marcel, 1978: 153). I think it would not be too bold to reformulate this aphorism in terms of inter-religious dialogue from a Christian perspective: *Perhaps a peaceful order, or the inter-religious dialogue, can only be established if religions, and especially Christianity, are acutely aware of their sojourning condition and identity.*

### **3. GLOBALIZATION IN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE: FINAL REMARKS**

Globalization is an ongoing and inevitable process. For those who can read history without any sort of prejudice, this is a process as old as humankind, however now much faster than in other times (Oliveira, 2013: 151-161). For its part, migration is closely linked to this process, and so enabling the encounter of cultures, peoples and religions. Samuel Huntington stated that this process would cause a *clash of civilizations* (1993).

In his recent message for the 2018 World Peace Day, Pope Francis said that his firm conviction was that, rather than a threat, we should look at this encounter of civilizations *with confidence* and *as an opportunity to build peace* (Francis, 2017: 2). I share this conviction, and saying that to see ourselves as Christians as a sojourning people moving towards the Kingdom of God, which is «justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit» (Rm 14: 17), is to contemplate this truth and try to make it a little more visible in this world.

Therefore, to welcome migrants and refugees, whatever their religious beliefs might be, to work for justice and peace, and thus to promote inter-religious dialogue are authentic ways of proclaiming and making concrete the universal message of brotherhood given to us by the Good News of

Jesus Christ. To do that, it is necessary to reshape the way we think and formulate inter-religious dialogue, which should be thought in terms of a receptive, inclusive and global ecumenism, *trying to live together in peace while remaining diverse* (Rezvan, 2011: 12-14).

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