

## A Pilgrim People: Essays on the *Church in an Age of Global Migration*

JENNIFER L. AYCOCK\*

*Church in an Age of Global Migration: A Moving Body*. Edited by Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston, and Agnes M. Brazal. Pathways for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. vi + 266 pp. \$100.00 (cloth).

In the early months of the new administration, a federal appeals panel ruled against reinstating President Donald Trump's travel ban, widely criticized as targeting Muslims and more broadly preventing already vetted refugees from entering the United States. Alongside the judiciary's ruling, protestors gathered at airports and resettlement agencies, and immigration attorneys, university administrators, and tech firms have taken to airwaves, op-eds, and grassroots engagement to decry and work against the ban. Yet, for many immigrant and refugee communities spanning the globe, such precarity defines the realities of migrant life.

The edited volume *Church in an Age of Global Migration: A Moving Body* invites scholars, practitioners, ecclesial leaders, community activists, and pastors to turn their attention to the theological, ecclesial, and pastoral possibilities born of migrant lived realities. In his 1978 study of early twentieth-century American immigrant communities, historian Timothy L. Smith asserted that ethnic consolidation among European immigrants correlated with religious affiliation. Challenging more static notions of religion, and more secular fixations on nationality and ethnicity, Smith further asserted that as immigrants navigated cultural and social changes, they theologized their way into and through their new context. In other words, they brought their theological categories and ritual practices to bear upon questions of identity, behavior, belonging, and envisaging a new future. In his 1980

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\* Jennifer L. Aycock is a doctoral student in the Graduate Division of Religion in World Christianity, with a focus on African Christianity, at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

critique of Smith, James Bratt suggested instead that migration created opportunities to reflect on behavior, not on theology. Further, Bratt argued that patterns of religious continuity were just as prevalent as those of discontinuity.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I suggest that *Church in an Age of Global Migration* takes up both Smith's initial argument and Bratt's critique to help us think more critically about theological method and sources, ecclesial assumptions, and pastoral practice in an era marked increasingly by mass movements of people.

Introducing the edited volume, Susanna Snyder suggests that migration serves as the "*via ecclesiae*, or a way of gatherings of those called out" that requires the church to be renewed and refashioned as the Body of Christ in solidarity with and as a pilgrim people (p. 11). The volume confronts unitary, neatly bordered, imperial narratives of church. It sidelines initiatives generated by Global North churches to survive and retain power, instead excavating how the church lives and thrives as a multivalent people on the move. The volume suggests a plurality of theological sources as well as queries static ecclesial structures and liturgical practices that inhibit participation of the entire Body of Christ across the world today. In short, the collected essays utter a robust call to the church to embrace migrant agency and capacity as preeminently crucial for ongoing and vibrant ecclesial life and witness.

The authors sustain a unified if not variant discourse to these ends by retrieving historic theological resources, reflecting on contemporary experiences of migration and attendant ecclesial and liturgical practices, and troubling institutionalized and inflexible ecclesial structures that do not sustain a pilgrim church. The book's tripartite structure clarifies these emphases. In part 1, "Denominational Visions of Migrant Ecclesiology," four contributors draw upon Catholic, Reformed, Orthodox, and Pentecostal theologies to recover traditions assumed as static or un-confronted by migration. Gioacchino Campese notes that Pope Francis's contemporary engagement among migrants more clearly embodies a Roman Catholic Church as mission (p. 29). Joshua Ralston employs a social-historical method to reread Calvin in order to challenge mainline traditions to reenvision themselves as "catholic and dispersed" (p. 42). Maria Hämmerli explores

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy L. Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity in America," *American Historical Review* 83 (December 1978): 1155–1185 and James D. Bratt, "Religion and Ethnicity in America: A Critique of Timothy L. Smith," *Fides et Historia* 12 (1980): 8–17.

the implications for Orthodox Church structures and its ethnic identities in becoming a new kind of church, and Néstor Medina considers the “stories of hope and struggle for life” that Latina/o Pentecostals in the borderlands confront as otherwise overlooked and dehumanized migrants (p. 72).

Following these denominational lenses of analysis, contributors in part 2, “Reimagining Traditional Ecclesial Tasks,” demonstrate the central task of putting theologies to work in local communities conditioned by migration. The authors sustain a discursive set of reflections on traditional ecclesial and liturgical practices of repentance and confession; conversion, discipleship, and evangelization; pursuits of wisdom and truth; the sacraments; pastoral care; and advocacy and resistance. The essays subvert assumptions about who needs converting (p. 94) and the content of witness (pp. 152–154), as well as problematize notions of space constructed by wealth and power (p. 134). They describe some of the ways the church is indeed answering Susanna Snyder’s call in her introduction “to be responsive” rather than avoidant of migration’s ecclesial implications, by engaging “with this developing migratory context in depth and with nuance” (p. 3).

Daniel Chetti summarizes the thrust of part 3 on “New Ecclesial Structures,” as he suggests that churches conditioned by migration suspend the “traditional perspective” of ecclesiology with “an accepted standard of doctrine and theology, a defined role of clergy, administration of Sacraments, or the function of the laity” (p. 211). Each author explores what ecclesiology as reciprocal and responsive can be in churches led by, constituted by, or listening in solidarity to immigrants. For example, Moses Biney’s transparent analysis of the relationship between the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and the Presbyterian Church (USA) demonstrates the proclivities that prevent ecclesial transformation through migration (pp. 239–254).

This volume contributes a number of methodological and conceptual tools to the growing literature on migration, mission, and ecclesiology. First, the authors adopt borders as another of the conceptual “new frontiers for theology” described by Gemma Tulud Cruz.<sup>2</sup> Thus, out of this conceptual apparatus, the volume provides explicit ecumenical and transnational foci, recognizing that migration requires transformation and transgression of boundaries within which

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<sup>2</sup> Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Theology as Conversation: *Sensus Fidelium* and Doing Theology on/from the Margins,” *CTSA Proceedings* 70 (2015): 63.

the church has been theologically, ethnically, and institutionally conditioned and confined (Joshua Ralston, p. 40). As Néstor Medina describes it, “congregations are reinventing what it means to be church . . . in the borderlands” (p. 73).

Second, the volume attends to the intersectional nature of church, a spiritual *polis* within and across which gender, race and ethnicity, class, culture, and religion implicate its theological questions, structures, and practices. As a complement to their conceptual lens of borders, the authors utilize theoretical and methodological intersectionality broadly conceived to engage the lived realities generated within borderland hybridity. Methodologically, the essays use social history, scripture, church documents, space/place theories, ethnography, case studies, material culture, and oral histories as sources for theologizing migrant experience.

Third, the editors and authors thematically employ solidarity to critique the tendency to think of church as serving immigrants rather than being renewed as a migrant church (Susanna Snyder, p. 4). The authors primarily, although not exclusively, assert “migrant” as the primary identity that animates the life of the church. Thus, the church should be understood *as, with, or among* immigrants, not as *toward*. Kristin E. Heyer powerfully encapsulates the volume’s themes as she writes, “Refugees and migrants make moral claims on the church as sources of theological transformation. . . . Considering migrants as passive beneficiaries or burdens fails to appreciate their agency and contributions” (p. 93). The authors vividly demonstrate that theologies, practices, and structures must reflect solidarity, mutuality, and reciprocity, as Joshua Ralston summarizes: “Ministry with migrants and refugees in North America, then, should extend itself beyond political debates . . . and begin to cultivate long-term commitments to acts of friendship, mutual learning, shared worship, and genuine exchange” (pp. 47–48).

The volume could be more comprehensive in two ways. First, Daniel Chetti’s chapter on migrant domestic workers provides the lone analysis on the pastor as migrant, and he focuses primarily on their mission, tasks, and methods. Yet, the demands upon pastors who are migrants themselves require more sustained reflection. Their constant crossing of borders—spiritual, cultural, linguistic, and material—on behalf of others generates fatigue little explored in current literature. Second, the volume originates in theologies and practices among members of the World Council of Churches that reflect

particular denominational imaginations and orientations. Thus, while the essays expand beyond the limits of the WCC, the volume lacks a strong voice outside of WCC-related perspectives. The Global Diaspora Network affiliated with the Lausanne Movement, the Christian Community Development Association, or the International Fellowship of Mission as Transformation readily come to mind as potential dialogue partners within broadly conceived evangelical iterations of church as mission.

As a final note, the occasional use of “reverse mission” reveals a tension across how mission is conceptualized in the text (pp. 31, 225, 241). The term contradicts Snyder’s initial category of *ekklesia* as “gathered and called out” (p. 12), a poly-local dynamism shaping the global church. In contrast, reverse mission as a concept assumes a center from which followers of Christ move out into the world, diminishing the realities that migrants are necessarily already on the move carrying their faith with them. Thus, to claim sightings of reverse mission may engender oversight of the nature of the missionary impulse that migrant communities historically demonstrate, in contrast to the often racialized and territorialized legacies of Western initiatives.

Although the cost of *Church in an Age of Global Migration* strikes one as prohibitive for a general readership, this book should nonetheless be widely embraced by scholars, educators, pastors, and church leaders, whether in a congregation, community, or classroom. For those fatigued by endless discussions about building maintenance or implementation of business management principles, this volume troubles such preoccupations of the church.

Further, as our political life is increasingly fragmented by xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric and policies, the essays remind us that the church will be known by its love, and by its realization that we are all sojourners on the way with Christ. Why and how we will gather and worship and live as such remains the work to increasingly take up as our witness. Journalists and politicians repeatedly describe migration as the defining characteristic of this century. Our current headlines tell us this is so. We would do well to heed such pressing realities as opportunities to renew our pedagogies, scholarship, and training of ministers for a pilgrim church. Perhaps of greater import, as the essays suggest, we would do well to reenvision the Body of Christ as a gathering on the move, practicing faith at the margins of power.



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