
Images and Their Power in the Developing of a Theology of Migration: The Reality of Latin American Migrants in the U. S.

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Introduction

I want to start my essay by thanking the Rev. Dr. Kathleen Billman along with the colleagues and staff who organized this issue of our journal *Currents in Theology and Mission* to celebrate our colleague the Rev. Dr. Gordon Straw for his many contributions to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and theological formation for religious leaders. I am also interested in participating in this celebration for I knew my colleague Gordon by joining him and others in the struggles within the ELCA to strive for a more inclusive church body. I was his academic advisor during his advanced studies at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and want to celebrate his critical and creative academic contributions as a Native American scholar in the United States.

The promise and challenge of images

During the first week of August, 2018, one of my former students, the Rev. Dr. Carmelo Santos, who resides and works in the city of Washington, is the pastor of a congregation there, and teaches at Georgetown University, made a presentation to the Theological Educators organization of the ELCA, in which he addressed the subject of *Notes for a Neuro-Lutheran theology of Migration*. Carmelo, who received his theological education at LSTC with a special focus on theology and science, working on the issue of pneumatology and science of the brain, began his presentation by addressing the issue of images.

In his presentation, Carmelo pointed out that, in the multitude of human experiences, images have the peculiar characteristic of awakening emotions that can lead to certain practices. In politics, for example, and especially when exploring the topic of migration, images can arouse both the fear of what is foreign or unknown, as well as the mobilization of eager voters and uneasi-



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ness to win an election. In the same way, there are images that can move people to compassion, and drive them to mercy and justice. Images do not always have to be visual, although in most cases they are. In fact, for each of our senses, corresponding images are given, which is the way in which our nervous system receives and represents reality to itself; but these are not passive impressions that are placed in our brain as if it were a flat tabular receptacle. On the contrary, these constitute active productions of the human brain under the influence of language and its cultural context. What is of utmost importance is that images do not always work consciously and that is what constitutes their power to impact



and move us to action.

In theology, images work to evoke the divine, not as a visible object, but as the unfathomable mystery that brings us from the deepest sight of reality, in powerful ways of shaping the way we perceive and act with other individuals.

In his speech for the graduation of our students a few years ago,¹ Dr. Luis N. Rivera Pagan pointed out that the first confession of faith in the Bible begins with a history of migration and pilgrimage,

“... My father was a wandering Aramaic who went down to Egypt and lived there as a foreigner” (Deut 26:5, CMTB²)

Or, in another version,

1. Luis N. Rivera Pagan, “Welcoming the Stranger,” special address for the graduating class of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago on May 17, 2009, in the Roman Catholic church St. Thomas the Apostle in Hyde Park, Chicago, Illinois. The next section of this presentation is a personal adaptation of this address.

2. *The Bible: The Word of God for All* (Texas: World Center for Bible Translation, 2005), 150.

“... My father was a wandering Aramaic who went to Egypt and went to take refuge there” (Latin American Bible³)

You might ask, did that Aramaic “wandering and foreigner” have the proper documentation to reside in Egypt? Could he have stayed beyond what was stipulated legally in his visa? Did he and his family have the credentials corresponding to “Egyptian social security”? The little we know is that he and his family were foreigners in the context of a powerful empire; and that, as such, they were exploited and subjected to fear. This is the crossroads at which most migrants find themselves. In the reduced conditions where they are usually found, they are forced to carry out less prestigious and more menial tasks. But at the same time, they awaken the schizophrenic paranoia typical of empires, which are powerful, though fearful of the foreigner, of the other, especially if that foreigner resides within their borders, and becomes densely populated.

The biblical story of affirmation of faith continues:

3. *Latin American Bible* (Madrid / Navarra: Ediciones Paulinas y Editorial Verbo Divino, 1972), 202.

“The Egyptians mistreated us, oppressed us and imposed hard servitude. Then we called YAHWE, God of our parents and YAHWE listened to us, saw our humiliation, our hard work and the oppression to which we were subjected” (Deut 26: 6).

This conviction of faith would be solemnly recited every year in the Thanksgiving liturgy of the harvest festival thus, restoring the memory of the afflictions and humiliations suffered by a migrant people, foreigners in the middle of an empire; the memory of a hard and arduous work, of the contempt and disdain that is frequently the destiny of the outsider and foreigner, who has a different racial pigmentation, language, religion, or culture. But is also the memory of events when God listened to the painful cries of the suffering immigrants. It is also the memory of another type of migration, in search of a land where they can live free, in peace, and justice.

We might ask, who would become the Aramean wanderers today, and what would be the nation today that would represent Egypt, a powerful and fearful empire?

The United States of America is currently experiencing a significant increase in its Latinx population. The number of the Latinx population today comes to about 47 million, which means about 15 % of the total population of the nation. Some projections estimate that in 2050 its portion of the total population of the United States may reach 26 to 32 %. This demographic growth generates a complex political and social debate, as it highlights the delicate issue of national identity and cultural norms. It also threatens to unleash a new stage in the sad and long history of American racism.

Unfortunately, the conversation on this issue takes place in a



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cloudy environment due to the gradual development of xenophobic attitudes. One can perceive signs of growing hostile reaction to what the Mexican / American writer Richard Rodríguez described as “the browning of America.” The spread of fear related to what has been called the “breaking of borders,” the possible proliferation of epidemic diseases of the “Third World,” and the alleged growth of criminal activities by undocumented immigrants. A grim and sinister spectrum is created in the minds of the public: the image of the annoying and menacing “other.”

This negative prognosis intensifies with the attitudes of phobia after September 11 in relation to foreigners, those people who are here, but who do not belong here. Immigration surveillance is now located under the Department of Homeland Security. This administrative fusion unites two fundamentally unrelated problems: the threat of terrorist activities with unauthorized migration.

One can clearly recognize this mentality in the frequent use of derogatory terms such as “illegal aliens” referring to immigrants who lack the required documents to reside in this country; as if illegalities define their entire identity.

In this social context, Samuel P. Huntington, the late University of Harvard Professor for International and Area Studies, and intellectual father of the theory of the “clash of civilizations,” has written about the notorious consequences for the failed policies

of the last Bush presidential administration. In 2004 he published a dense and extensive book under the title *Who are we? The challenges to the national identity of North America* [*Who are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*]. The previous prophet of the theory of an inescapable abyss and of the conflict between the West and the rest of the world now generates the theory of an emerging and perverse cultural conflict *within* the United States of America.

The national identity of the United States seems to be a very complex matter because it has to do with an extremely



complicated and diverse history. However, Huntington has, surprisingly, a simple defining scheme: The identity of the United States is mainly identified by its “Anglo-Protestant culture and not only by its democratic and republican political creed. In the formulation of this collective identity, Christian devotion has been crucial. The English pioneers transported not only their bodies, but also their fundamental cultural and religious views. The United States has been a nation of colonizers, not just immigrants.

This national identity has also been forged by a long history of wars against a succession of enemies (from native peoples to Islamic jihadists). National identity seems to require the image of a dangerous adversary, which Huntington describes as the “perfect enemy.”

According to this reading, both Christianity and war have been the historical sources for the social construction of American national identity. These have provided rituals, symbols, and crucial ceremonies for the fixation of a collective sense of community loyalty.

However, after the dissolution of the Soviet threat, Huntington perceives and regrets, according to his perspective, the deterioration of the intensity and prominence, both of the American national identity and of his loyalty to it.

That is when the Latin American migration invasion arises.

* This is not similar to previous migratory waves. What makes it unique and unprecedented is its contiguity, intensity, lack of education, territorial memory, constant return to its mother earth, preservation of a different language, dual citizenship, retention of traditions and loyalties to its native country, its distance to the Anglo-Protestant culture, and its alleged absence of a Protestant work ethic.

Huntington’s restlessness is intense in relation to the intrusion of Spanish into the public life of the United States. * He draws attention to the threatening situation that now in some states a greater number of children are baptized with the name of José instead of Michael. Many corporations, before any procedure, provoke the preselection: “English or Spanish?” This growing bilingualism threatens the fragmentation of the linguistic integrity of the United States. This linguistic bifurcation takes the form of a truly menacing Godzilla.

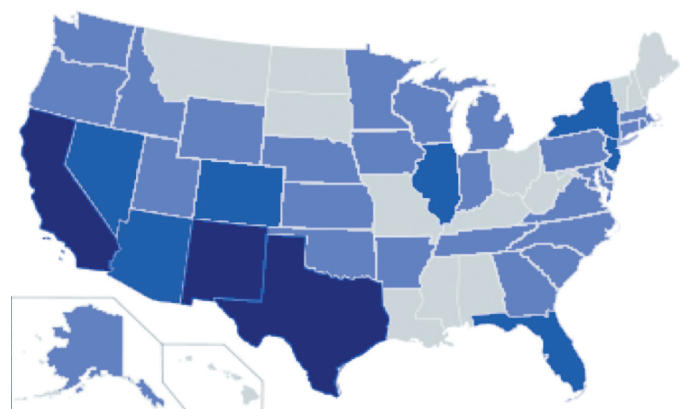
It is then that the great sententious bombing arises. Latin American migration constitutes “a great potential threat to the

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political and cultural integrity of the United States” (WAW, 243). Huntington has seen the enemy and this is—Latin American migrants!

This prestigious professor does not seem to have any serious concern about the painful social process through which these Latin American migrants become the new servants of the nation, our new *douloi*, on the margins of society, in a kind of social Apartheid, cleaning our shops, hotels, and universities; cooking our meals; cleaning our dishes; cutting the grass; picking our tomatoes and oranges; painting our buildings; washing our cars; staying out of our way.

He also disregards the history of violence behind a substantial segment of the Latinx population in the United States. How is it possible to discuss this population without mentioning the military annexation during the nineteenth century of several provinces that were previously Mexican, and the suffering that many Latin American countries endured as a result of military actions and foreign policy of the United States during the twentieth century? Have we forgotten the afflictions of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua during the administration of President Reagan?



- **Más de un 28% habla español en sus casas (Más de un 35% son hispanos)**
- **Más de un 12,2% habla español en sus casas (la media de EE.UU.)**
- **Más de un 3% habla español en sus casas**

Fuente: Censo Bureau de EE.UU. (2006)

Will the Latinx population become the new scapegoats for the nation? Does this population really represent “a great, terrible threat to the political and cultural integrity of the United States of America?” This is one of the crucial dilemmas that until now this nation has not been able to face or resolve. And here and now we are not called to solve it. But allow me to offer, from my perspective as a Latinx theologian, some critical observations that may illuminate our path in this very disconcerting labyrinth.

Earlier we mentioned the memory of an affirmation of faith in ancient times of the people of Israel as foreigners in the middle of an empire, a vulnerable community, socially exploited and culturally despised. It was the worst of times. But it was also the best of times because it constituted the time of their liberation and the redemption of their servitude.

That memory shaped the sensitivity of the Hebrew nation to outsiders, foreigners within Israel. Their vulnerability was a memory of their own past of abandonment in Egypt, but at the same time, an ethical challenge to worry about them. Concern for the stranger and the foreigner constituted an essential element of the Torah, the covenant of justice and righteousness between Yahweh and Israel:

“When an outsider lives next to you, in your land, don’t bother him. To the stranger Who live with you they will look at you as one of you and love him as yourself, For you too were strangers in Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.”⁴

“Do not oppress foreigners, because you already know what it is to be a foreigner. That is what you were in the land of Egypt.”⁵

“... Because Yahweh is the God of the gods... When he judges, he treats everyone equally, does not let of Self be bought with gifts. He does justice to the orphan and the widow, and loves the outsider, giving him bread and clothing. Love, then the stranger, because you were a stranger in the country of Egypt.”⁶

4. Leviticus 19:33ff.

5. Exodus 23:9.

6. Deuteronomy 10:17ff.



The prophets continually rebuked the ruling elites of Israel and Judah for their social injustice and their oppression of the vulnerable people. Who were these vulnerable people? The poor, widows, orphans and foreigners.

“All the chiefs of Israel ... are dedicated to shedding blood ... Foreigners are badly treated. The orphan and the widow are oppressed.”⁷

After condemning with the most severe words possible the apathy and inertia of the religiosity of the temple in Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah, in the name of God, imposes the alternative:

“Thus speaks Yahweh, God of Israel: Improve your behavior and your works and do justice to everyone ... Stop oppressing the foreigner, the orphan and the widow ...”⁸

The perennial temptation is xenophobia. The divine mandate, persevered in this way in the Torah is xenophilia—love for those we usually find very difficult to love: the stranger, the foreigner, and the unknown inhabitants.

How nice it would be to stop here, with these affectionate biblical texts of xenophilia, of love for others, the foreigner. But it happens that the Bible is a disconcerting book. It contains a disturbing multiplicity of voices, a perplexed polyphony that frequently complicates our theological hermeneutics. It is not merely that for many key ethical dilemmas we find different perspectives in the Bible; but these are often conflicting, and even contradictory. Sometimes we throw ourselves from our contemporary mazes to the biblical entanglement, becoming even more perplexed.

A colleague of our faculty, Professor Barbara Rossing, has shown in a splendid way that the end of apocalyptic times can be conceived in at least two different ways in the New Testament: as the liberating end of imperial domination, or as the end of the created world, with the turn of eternal retribution for many of the human beings. We are confronted, she concludes, with a serious ethical decision, in the context of an impending ecological disaster.

In the Hebrew Bible we also discover statements with a certain unpleasant taste of nationalist xenophobia. Chapter 25 of the book

7. Ezekiel 22:6ff.

8. Jeremiah 7:3ff.

of Leviticus is usually read as a classic text for the liberation of the Israelites who have fallen into debt bondage. Certainly. But it also contains a perverse distinction:

“The slaves you have will be from neighboring nations, from them you can acquire slaves. You can also buy them among the children of foreigners living with you and your families that are among you ... Those can be your property, and they will leave their children in inheritance after you ... they may have them as slaves; but if it’s one of your brothers, the children of Israel, you will not treat him with tyranny.”⁹

And what about the terrible fate imposed on foreign wives (and their children) in the epilogue books Esdras and Nehemiah? They are cast out, exiled, as a source of impurity and contamination of the faith and culture of God’s people. Not to mention the dreadful rules of war that prescribed forced servitude or devastation to the people found on Israel’s route to the “promised land.”¹⁰ These are all in the successful expression of Phyllis Trible’s, “horror texts.”

This problem is a constant irritating *modus operandi* of the Bible. We go to her in search of clear and simple solutions to our ethical enigmas, but she hits us exacerbating our perplexity. Who has said that the Word of God is supposed to make things easier?

At this juncture it is important to note that the Lutheran legacy is oriented in a Christological way. After all, *Solus Christus* was the main teaching of the Lutheran reform. What can we say then about Christ and the foreigner?

The parable of the judgment of the nations that we find in the

Gospel of Matthew (25:31–46) is a pure classic of Jesus. It is a text whose connotations I refuse to reduce to a current and restrictive confinement of an ecclesiastical nature. Jesus interrupts, as he liked to do, the family criterion of ethical and religious value, by distinguishing between human actions that sacramentally indicate a divine love for the homeless and vulnerable, and those who are not part of them. Who are, according to Jesus, those to be blessed and to inherit the kingdom of God? Those who through their actions care about the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned; in short, marginalized, vulnerable, and helpless human beings. But also those who welcome foreigners, who provide hospitality; to whom it is possible to overcome nationalist, racist, xenophobic exclusions; and those who have the courage to offer the welcome and embrace the stranger; the people among us whose skin pigmentation, culture, language and national origin is different.

Why? Here is the scandalous statement: because they are, in their vulnerability and impotence, the sacramental presence of Christ:

“Because I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I passed as an outsider and you received me at your home.”¹¹

When the powerful and imperial nation of the United States welcomes and embraces immigrants, who reside and work with or without the documents required by the powers of the nation, we will be blessed, for it will be in this way that we will be welcoming and embracing Jesus Christ, our Lord.

9. Leviticus 25:44–46.

10. Deuteronomy 20:10–17.

11. Matthew 25:35.