The Venture of Vulnerability

Christological Engravings
on Disturbing Questions about Migration

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Abstract

Human vulnerability yields a precarious power in migration discourse at present. This is shown especially clearly with people who are fleeing. The power of vulnerability works on the side of those who are fleeing but also on the side of those who see themselves affected in their own vulnerability by this fleeing. People, groups, and states seek to protect themselves from vulnerability by abandoning others to vulnerability—the classic Herod strategy.

The connection between vulnerability and migration is a key theme and reveals a sign of the times. What perspectives does Christian theology bring to this problem area? Christianity confesses a God who exposes himself voluntarily to the venture of vulnerability—from the manger to the cross. Migration also belongs to the primary challenges of Christianity since the Christmas narrative of Jesus and his parents fleeing to Egypt is told. Is there a “power of vulnerability” consisting in risking one’s own vulnerability? And to what extent does this power change migration from a pressing reality into a sign of the times in which the presence of God is revealed?

Migration and Vulnerability: A Key Issue

Refugees are extremely vulnerable. They cannot count on the assistance of relatives and friends in a foreign country and fear for their well-being and often even for their lives. They come to places where they are not wanted because they are viewed as indigent or lazy, have-nots, or even criminals. Even those who

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1 Translated by Diane Gössing.
were well off in their native countries but then had to flee for political reasons, as was the case with many intellectuals in Nazi Germany, live in difficult, i.e., precarious, circumstances in their countries of refuge. Refugees and migrants are characterized by what is called “high vulnerability”: they are limited in their ability to fend off attacks; they lack life resources of their own and need the protection of others. “Vulnerability” is therefore a key term in present discussions on migration.²

For theology this is very interesting, for vulnerability is one of theology’s key themes. It is a central Christian belief that in Jesus Christ God became a vulnerable human being. Christian teaching on the incarnation asserts that, by his own free will, God made himself vulnerable in the form of a human being made of flesh and blood. God did not simply create an extremely fragile and vulnerable world and then, without any concern, leave it to its own devices. On the contrary, in Jesus Christ God himself becomes vulnerable. Jesus was born as a helpless baby, and his family had to flee with him to Egypt. Christian theology begins with birth and flight, both of which are signs on the path of vulnerability.

This fact makes possible a discursive approach from Christology to the complex of problems surrounding migration today. Birth is a form of “biopower” (biopouvoir), as the French philosopher Michel Foucault termed it (Foucault 1998). The fact that seven billion people now live on this earth confronts us with the explosive force of this “biopower.” Vulnerability becomes apparent everywhere. What dislocations will the pressure from migration created by the growing world population cause? How many of the seven billion people on earth will die of hunger and war, disease, and impoverishment? How can people protect themselves from the violence inherent in the unfair distribution of global life resources?

² This vulnerability can very easily end up in unspeakably cruel deaths for many; see, for example, the report on a station for a children’s medical unit in the world’s largest refugee camp, Dadaab in Kenya (Bauer 2011).