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The Wesleyan Communities and the World Beyond Christianity

**In Which Way Should the World Still Be Our Parish?**

Toward A Postcolonial Wesleyan Theology of Migration

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ROUGH DRAFT!

In this presentation I want to share with you my reflections on the necessity for contemporary (Western) theology to deal with the pressing issues of migration in the context of postcolonial globalization, and I am doing this with an eye to the particular and ambiguous connections that from the very beginning have existed between the Methodist movement and migrating people. Migration as a social, cultural, but also religious phenomenon is the frame within which I am here approaching the overall topic of this 13th Oxford Institute, the encounter with the “world beyond Christianity”. This means, I will not engage in a straight forward treatment of a Wesleyan theology of religions, which I have done elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> but rather deal with migration as a key context for the encounter with the world beyond Christianity, i.e. beyond Christianity as it was known before the migratory influence.

Methodism as Migratory Movement

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michael Nausner, *Glauben an der Grenze. Eine wesleyanische Perspektive zur Begegnung mit Andersgläubigen*, in: *Theologie für die Praxis*. Nummer 1-2, 33. Jg. Stuttgart 2007, 44-66.

Arguably Methodism as a worldwide movement is unthinkable without migration. Historically, ecclesiologically, and theologically Methodism is characterized by a certain basic mobility. Ever since John Wesley in his ministry refused to recognize the established parochial division lines within the Church of England, geographical mobility became an emblem of the Methodist movement. Wesley himself and his earliest “connexion” became known as people travelling on horseback and preaching under open skies. The itinerant preachers became a visible sign for one of the earliest designs of the Methodist movement: to spread scriptural holiness across the land and eventually across the globe. After all, the Methodist awakening was taking place in the context of an emerging imperial order, and its spread was decisively facilitated by the many migrating movements that are part and parcel of any colonizing empire. Wesley himself was a close witness to these dynamics during his own sojourn to Georgia from 1735 to 1738, and I think the cultural impact of this experience of (temporary) migration on his biography and the early Methodist movement still remains to be analyzed in detail.<sup>2</sup> Suffices it here to say that for all his conservative attitudes regarding the role of the British Empire in the world and the legitimacy of England’s North American colonies,<sup>3</sup> Wesley did not go to Georgia to bring Western civilization to the heathens, but his goal was to learn from the native people how to live in accordance with the Pentecostal community’s community of goods.<sup>4</sup> After his return to England, the Methodists very soon became known as the people who spread the message while migrating, which certainly is one of the reasons why this band of itinerant preachers was so successful in serving migrants especially after the foundation of the Methodist Church in the United States at the Christmas

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Michael Nausner, *Kulturelle Grenzerfahrung und die methodistische Konnexio*, in: Michael Nausner (Hg.), *Kirchliches Leben in methodistischer Tradition. Perspektiven aus drei Kontinenten*. Reutlinger Theologische Studien Band 6. Göttingen 2010, 273-295 (283).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *John Wesley*, in: Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger (eds.), *Empire. The Christian Tradition. New Readings of Classical Theologians*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2007, 257-268 (267).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 258-9.

Conference in Baltimore 1784. As David Hempton has pointed out, this conference did not send out missionaries “to export Methodism but to service and expand an existing constituency of migrants.”<sup>5</sup> And the Methodist movement followed the migrants throughout the nineteenth century as the frontier of the United States moved west. But it is “misleading to attribute Methodist growth solely to its own theological, organizational, and human resources.”<sup>6</sup> Instead a number of factors contributed to Methodist growth in its early phase as independent denomination. Among these factors were the rise of domestic and international markets as well as the spread of the British Empire, which oftentimes happened by military means. Methodism was symbiotic with these factors. “The earliest Methodist societies in South Africa (1806) and Tasmania (1820), for example, were directly the result of military mobility.”<sup>7</sup> Methodism thrived in the context of unprecedented population movement and migration, and “Methodists exploited the mobile margins of trade and empire”.<sup>8</sup> But it was not only the itinerant preachers who saw to Methodism’s expansion. Instead this expansion “was carried primarily by a mobile laity. Some moved along the trading routes established by the British Empire, others were in military regiments that patrolled it; many, including the migratory Irish and the Cornish tanners, moved in search of a better life in various parts of the New World.”<sup>9</sup> The ambivalence of early Methodism as a movement of migrants for migrants is well captured in Hempton’s observation that Methodism on the one hand “thrived on the margins and frontiers of race and class”, i.e. oftentimes breaking down these barriers, but on the other hand as well on the frontiers of “continental expansion and empire.”<sup>10</sup> Methodism, in other words, was on the one hand instrumental in building egalitarian communities and on the

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<sup>5</sup> David Hempton, *Methodism. Empire of the Spirit*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, 151.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 20f.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

other hand it allowed itself to become a handmaid of the expansion of Anglo-American civilization. “The Methodists generally followed ... population migrations,”<sup>11</sup> but they also “basked in the perceived superiority and divine sanction of Anglo-American civilization in the mid-nineteenth-century world order.”<sup>12</sup> The result was that at times Methodists fell into the trap of many missionary endeavours of the time, i.e. to understand itself as a “civilizing mission” that would eventually shape the people in question into nicely settled Western style Christians. A tragic example for such attempts was the mission among Native Americans in the nineteenth century. The “vision of Native Americans converting to Christianity, forsaking nomadic customs, opting for a settled and domesticated lifestyle” proved naïve and insensitive. After all, “Native Americans did not choose to move in search of self-improvement but were victims of draconian removals perpetrated by the very civilization the Methodists represented.”<sup>13</sup> Maybe William Taylor is the person who most vividly exemplifies the many layered legacy of the Methodist movement among migrants of different kinds. He himself was a voluntary migrant and travelled the whole world leading and organizing missions on all continents. What kept him going was simultaneously what marred his engagement among people from all over the world: “(H)e was an American Methodist converted on the frontier who believed that what he had experienced had transformed the United States and would ultimately transform the world.”<sup>14</sup>

All this indicates that the history of the Methodist movement as a migrating community and in service for migrating communities is an ambiguous one and that the way in which “the world is the parish” of any Methodist serving the world needs to be continuously re-evaluated.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 175. (My emphasis)

Hempton's conclusion in terms of Methodism's role among migrants is a sobering one and it will be my starting point to consider what a constructive theology of migration could look like in our increasingly urbanized Western world. "Embourgeoisement and institutionalization," he writes, "did not kill Methodism as a religious species, but they gradually confined its habitat to more refined and restricted areas. These areas generally did not include the lower-class migrants to the fast-growing mega-cities of Western civilization."<sup>15</sup>

What then could a renewed Wesleyan theology of migration look like that attempts to learn from past mistakes and to listen anew to the migratory voices that come to us from beyond the "restricted areas" of Christianity that a gentrified Methodism has created for itself?

#### The Mutual Dependency of Migrants and Citizens

Before I get to my theological suggestions I want to highlight certain contemporary aspects of migration that seem to me especially relevant for Methodism in the Western hemisphere. Of course one does not need to look into the history of Methodism only to discover that migration has been the rule rather than the exception among the world's populations and therefore among the peoples of God as well.<sup>16</sup> "Human mobility in itself is far more 'normal' than we are given to expect," as Bridget Anderson, professor of migration and citizenship here in Oxford, reminds us in her recently published book *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*. It "is not a feature only of contemporary globalization, nor indeed only of capitalism." Instead "ideas of 'nation' and 'state' are relatively recent

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Michael Nausner, Re-imagining Boundaries in Europe. Migrant Utopias and Theological Eschatology, in: Elaine Padilla and Peter Phan (eds.), *Theology and Migration*, Volume I, Palgrave Macmillan *forthcoming*.

constructions.”<sup>17</sup> The borders between the nation states throughout the latest centuries have created the illusion of a clear cut division between citizens and migrants, between us and them. “However, borders are not simply territorial.” They always also create an imagination that more often than not is misleading. Therefore “(t)hey may be more usefully analysed as producing rather than reflecting status, as creating specific types of social, political, and economic relations.” National borders and a number of other “clear cut” categorizations should not blind us for the fact that “citizens and migrants define each other, and ... they do so through sets of relations that shift and are not in straightforward binary opposition.”<sup>18</sup> One observation in Anderson’s book seems to me to be of special interest for a treatment of migration from a Methodist theological perspective. Methodism from its beginnings has been a movement with special concern for people in dire straits, economically poor, prisoners, and other marginalized. Now, Anderson in her book shows how the perception and treatment of migrants is intimately related to the perception and treatment of the poor and other “failed citizens”. The inward categorization correlates with an outward categorization. Anderson describes a prevalent societal attitude in the United Kingdom as follows: “Lack of values and value is the hallmark of the undeserving poor, and ... the non-citizen and the Failed Citizen are both categories of the undeserving poor: one global, the other national.”<sup>19</sup> I can easily confirm that this attitude is common in public discourse in Germany as well. As a consequence, both the “failed citizen” and the non-citizen are marginalized and left alone in their deeply problematic perception of each other as rivals. “Those at risk of failure of not belonging seek to disassociate themselves, one from another.”<sup>20</sup> A Methodist theology that wants to take seriously its legacy of the preferential option for the poor needs to listen

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<sup>17</sup> Bridget Anderson, *Us and Them? The Dangerous Politics of Immigration Control*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

carefully to such analyzes and to make sure that a preferential option for the poor is not played out against a preferential option for (or better: with) the migrant.

In Europe today in times of financial crisis an attitude of criminalizing people who migrate for a better future is getting stronger again. Such attitudes are not new, as Anderson reminds us: “The unruly person who moves, the vagrant, has for centuries been regarded, as Christopher Tiedeman (1886) put it, as, ‘the chrysalis for every species of criminal’.”<sup>21</sup> It seems that especially with regards to the European Roma and Sinti populations these sentiments have gained new life.

Literary critic Klaus-Michael Bogdal has devoted a big study on the European invention of “the gypsies” and describes the relation between Europe and the Roma and Sinti people as caught in an ambivalence between fascination and disgust. In the introduction to the book he makes a big claim when he writes that “the sustainability of the intellectual construct Europe will have to be measured by its handling of the Roma people.”<sup>22</sup> To me it is significant that Bogdal describes the perception and marginalization of the gypsies as key for understanding the shadow side of the European development toward modernity. He describes the European perception of the gypsies as “stranded goods from former times”<sup>23</sup> and points out that the “master narrative” about this primitive people is told by the sedentary population without involving the voices of the people talked about. They are perceived and described as people close to nature, people without writing, without history and without “culture,” and they are

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>22</sup> Klaus-Michael Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner. Eine Geschichte von Faszination und Verachtung*. Frankfurt : Suhrkamp 2011, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

met therefore, according to Bogdal, with a fear that can be compared with a fear of dementia.<sup>24</sup>

Bogdal's perspective reminds in many ways of what Walter D. Mignolo, another literary critic and political thinker, has been arguing for quite a while regarding Europe's relation to the natives in the so called new world: Mignolo patiently and provocatively reminds his European readers of the colonial shadow side of modernity. Together with other postcolonial critics he points toward the problematic simultaneity of the emergence of modern thinking and colonial practice, and emphasizes for example that Max Weber, when he talked about the difference between people with and without history, was unaware of the colonial difference.<sup>25</sup> In his enlightened fervour Weber remained oblivious of modernity's complicity with coloniality. This is why Mignolo insists on talking about modernity only in conjunction with coloniality, dividing the terms with a slash: "modernity/coloniality". There is a "double edge", Mignolo writes, in the "coexistence and the intersection of both modern colonialisms and colonial modernities."<sup>26</sup> The analogy between Mignolo and Bogdal lies in their description of the simultaneity in which discourses of otherness developed in early modern Europe. The cradle of modern Europe is marred with a number of exclusionary discourses. Not only did the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian peninsula coincide with the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas and their inability of seeing the natives as humans outside of their own frame of reference,<sup>27</sup> but also the first narratives of the totally alien and threatening "gypsies" from the East were taking root at the same time in "civilized" Europe on its way

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Walter D. Mignolo, *Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Local Histories/Global Designs*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2000, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Vitor Westhelle, *After Heresy. Colonial Practice and Post-Colonial Theologies*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2007, 15-32.



into modernity.<sup>28</sup> I believe that the discursive and political “othering” of the gypsies haunts contemporary Europe in a different but similar way as the “othering” of native populations haunts the Americas until this day. The West indeed has a problem with “the other”.<sup>29</sup>

### Border Thinking

Mignolo has developed an intriguing strategy of countering our Western exclusionary ways of perceiving cultural coexistence and our Eurocentric epistemology.<sup>30</sup> It is a strategy he calls border thinking. Such border thinking develops an epistemology that takes its departure from a recognition of the colonial difference, which in the inner-European context could be applied to the unruly difference between gypsies and the sedentary population. Mignolo insists that it “is the recognition of the colonial difference from subaltern perspectives that demands border thinking.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, and applied to the European migratory context, it is the subaltern perspective of gypsies and other migrating groups that is needed for a new way of thinking that takes place in-between perceived positions of difference. Instead of only being objects of study and description, the perspective of subaltern subjects is needed for border thinking to emerge. The goal of such thinking, Mignolo writes, is the “(t)ransformation of the rigidity of epistemic and territorial frontiers.”<sup>32</sup> This also means that the rigid “distinction between the knower and the known” necessarily begins to fade away, and no observer of boundary dynamics can remain “uncontaminated by the border matters he or she describes.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner*, 23f.

<sup>29</sup> From a Methodist perspective Hendrik R. Pieterse’s article on *A Worldwide United Methodist Church* is important to take into account here. He diagnoses the worldwide UMC to suffer from the “‘us-them’ mentality inherent in the Western presumptions of normativity.” – Hendrik P. Pieterse, *A Worldwide United Methodist Church. Soundings Toward a Connectional Theological Imagination*, in: *Methodist Review* 5 (2013), 1-23 (6).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Mignolo, *Coloniality*, 87.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

no encounter with a migrant can be understood by the sedentary person alone, and the criminalizing impulse described so well by Bridget Anderson needs to be resisted. Mignolo instead calls for a pluritopic hermeneutics: “(C)olonial semiosis requires a pluritopic hermeneutics since in the conflict, in the cracks and fissures where the conflict originates, a description of one side of the epistemological divide won’t do.”<sup>34</sup> Any encounter with a migrant therefore can be understood as a symbol of such an epistemological divide. I am aware that the epistemological divide between my perspective and the perspective of any migrant is not overcome by criminalizing him/her for example for overstaying the legally allowed time of residence. Rather a “pluritopic hermeneutics” is needed, which means an acknowledgement of the necessity of different hermeneutic perspectives on any given cultural encounter. Border thinking means that mutual interpretation and learning needs to take place in the contact zones between cultural and ethnic groups in an ever more mobile Europe.

### Cultural Boundaries as Places of Insight

Paul Tillich, maybe the cultural theologian par excellence of the twentieth century, has emphasized the epistemological significance of the boundary perspective a long time ago. He argues for the boundary as a privileged sight for acquiring knowledge.<sup>35</sup> As a philosopher of religion, however, he did not have the messy boundary zones in mind that postmodern cultural anthropology has analyzed many decades later. Especially postcolonial theory exhibits a keen awareness of the complexity of these boundaries. Of this reason I am indebted for my boundary analysis to postcolonial critics, above all Homi K. Bhabha, who has

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Paul Tillich, *Religiöse Verwirklichung*, Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1930, 11.

identified cultural boundaries as prime zones where identity emerges and is negotiated time and again.<sup>36</sup>

A paradigmatic boundary in contemporary European society is the boundary between sedentary Europeans and migrants, the contested contact zones between those belonging to the emerging “fortress Europe” and those who more or less forcefully are kept outside. To my mind this applies to the many encounters between gypsies and mainstream members of European nations as well as to the encounters in the Mediterranean between people from the European border control and African migrants. I believe the Swedish novelist Henning Mankell has a point when he describes Lampedusa and not London, Paris or Berlin as the center of Europe.<sup>37</sup> By calling the island of Lampedusa, where continuously dead bodies of African migrants float ashore, a place where the future of European identity is negotiated, Mankell gives a drastic example for what it might mean to apply border thinking to an understanding of European identity. The fact that pope Francis undertook his first journey to this tiny island close to the African coast is inspiring, and I will never forget his words about the “globalization of indifference” in the speech he gave there. It is at places like Lampedusa that a pluritopic hermeneutics à la Mignolo is direly needed, a hermeneutics that interprets the events at this contested European border from several perspectives, not least also from the perspective of the migrants themselves. Because more is going on here than a criminal attempt to enter European territory, as the media reporting time and again is trying to make us believe. Therefore simple exclusion and enforcement of the borders cannot be the way to handle these encounters.

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London & New York: Routledge, 1994, Introduction.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Mankell: “Europas Zentrum ist Lampedusa.” In: *Die Presse online* ([http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/news/668463/Mankell\\_Europas-Zentrum-ist-Lampedusa?\\_vl\\_backlink=/home/kultur/news/index.do](http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/news/668463/Mankell_Europas-Zentrum-ist-Lampedusa?_vl_backlink=/home/kultur/news/index.do)) accessed October 13, 2012.

## Boundary Theology

I want to offer here a specific theological version of such border thinking à la Mignolo. After all I am a theologian, but I love to take my clues for theological thinking from cultural critics like Mignolo and others. Judith Gruber, an Austrian catholic theologian teaching at Loyola University in New Orleans, is exercising some kind of border thinking, when she describes in her paper *Remembering Borders. Notes Toward a Systematic Theology of Migration* a hermeneutical process of “mutual interpretation of cultural and Christian narratives of migration,”<sup>38</sup> a process that fits with my theological hermeneutics. Christian and cultural discourses need to shed light on each other. For this to happen one needs to look for cultural boundaries as places where new insights develop but also as places that need careful analysis.

I want to suggest that these oftentimes painful places of boundary negotiations need to be a focus not only for a cultural analysis of identity but also for a theological one. Because it is at these borders European amnesia of its own migratory identity becomes apparent. We need the perspective of these borders and of those suffering under these borders in order to subvert “the ‘symbolic annihilation’ of migratory pasts in European cultural memories,” as Judith Gruber puts it.<sup>39</sup> My constructive theological proposal therefore is to understand and interpret the contested places of encounter with migrants as prime sites for the re-imagination not only of spatial boundaries between cultures and ethnicities but also of temporal boundaries toward a future of peaceful co-existence. In other words: Exactly the perspectives of these cultural in-between spaces are necessary to envision new communities that transcend the inflammatory

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<sup>38</sup> Judith Gruber, *Remembering Borders. Notes Toward a Systematic Theology of Migration*, Unpublished Paper, 1-22 (7).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

imagination of cultures in confrontation. Not least theology needs this specific cultural in-between perspective to develop a sustainable and inclusive eschatology. In an intercultural situation, Christianity and theology need to be intercultural, starting “in the in-between of cultures.”<sup>40</sup>

I do not think it is a modern fad to say that Christian identity is a boundary identity, a matter of being in-between spatially and temporally. Already the pre-Constantinian church seems to have had a keen awareness of its provisional and transient identity in time and space. In an article on migration in the patristic age Peter C. Phan for example refers to the second century letter to Diognetus as an early instance of a migratory theology in as much as Christians according to this letter “considered themselves as *paroikoi* – sojourners, displaced people without a home and a nation, migrants – by far the early Christians favorite term to describe themselves.”<sup>41</sup> If Christian identity in a fundamental (and not only cultural) sense is a migratory identity – and I believe it is –, then close attention to migrants as boundary dwellers is mandatory for a contextually minded theology. Indeed, migration as a kind of boundary existence needs to be read and analyzed theologically.<sup>42</sup> More precisely I want to understand the migrant condition here as a fruitful focus for a culturally grounded eschatology.

### Instances of Eschatological Boundary Negotiations

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>41</sup> Peter C. Phan, Migration in the Patristic Era. History and Theology, in: Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (eds.), *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 35-61 (49).

<sup>42</sup> In a recent analysis of the religious aspects of exile as a form of migration John D. Barbour concludes that authors understand exile not so much “as a physical dwelling place, but rather a condition of mind and spirit with religious meaning.” – John D. Barbour, *The Consolations and Compensations of Exile: Memoirs by Said, Ahmed, and Eire*, in: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 79, Number 3, September 2011, 706-734 (732).

That there are roots for a theological understanding of migration in the Bible has been elaborated on by many writers. With my focus on the eschatological significance of migratory boundaries I want to focus on two Biblical visions of community that I consider central for a renewed eschatological imagination: *multilingual community* and *table fellowship*. To me both terms are crucial to one of the key soteriological tropes in Methodist theology, the *new creation*, which has been the topic of the 11<sup>th</sup> Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies in 2002.

### Multilingual Community

Regarding multilingual community it is a long standing tradition to read the story of the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) in conjunction with the narrative of Pentecost (Acts 2). According to many voices in this tradition the punishment of the spreading and diversification of the languages is juxtaposed with the blessing of the unification at Pentecost. I am here joining those scholars who ever since Claus Westermann's interpretation of the passage highlight the blessing of diversity that is expressed in the scattering of the people in Genesis 11:9.

Westermann does this by explicitly deviating from Gerhard von Rad's earlier interpretation.<sup>43</sup>

Later Walter Brueggemann sees the scattering abroad as "part of God's plan for creation and the fulfillment of the mandate" to fill the earth.<sup>44</sup> If such linguistic scattering is part of God's original plan for creation it can be concluded that diversity of languages is part of the renewal of creation as well, which is of importance for the imagination of a migratory eschatology.

The tower project is an attempt at homogenizing the previously existing diversity, an attempt at creating transparency and uniformity in the place of ambiguity and communication. By

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<sup>43</sup> Claus Westermann, Genesis 1-11. Biblischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament I.1, Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1974/1983, 739.

<sup>44</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Genesis. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982, 98.

letting this homogenizing project fail, God liberates humanity from uniform homogeneity and challenges people to apply what Mignolo called a pluritopic hermeneutics.

Jacques Derrida in his article *Des Tours de Babel* expresses this in a language that brings its contemporary significance to the fore. God, according to Derrida, responds to the “colonial violence of the tower’s architects by imposing on humanity ‘the irreducible multiplicity of idioms’.”<sup>45</sup> It is this irreducible linguistic multiplicity that can be considered as an integral aspect of divine creation, and therefore the plurality of cultures is not a punishment but a recreation of the circumstances before Babel and a divine interference against any attempt at homogenization. The Babel story, Jürgen Ebach maintains, ends with God reestablishing multiculturalism.<sup>46</sup> Ebach draws out the obvious implications for our contemporary situation of globalization: thanks to God globabelization, that is forced homogenization, has failed.<sup>47</sup> The descent of the Spirit on an intercultural multitude gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2) is then not so much an undoing of the scattering after the disaster of the tower project (Genesis 11), but rather a continued blessing of multilingual community. Surely it is not a coincidence that the birth of the church described in Acts 2 takes place in a very intercultural setting.<sup>48</sup> Migrants from all over the known world of antiquity had gathered in Jerusalem. The Spirit’s gift is not an erasure of such ethnic and linguistic difference but rather a new gift of communication in-between and across differences.

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in: Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace. A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville, TN : Abingdon Press, 1996, 227.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Jürgen Ebach, ‘Wir sind ein Volk.’ Die Erzählung vom ‘Turmbau zu Babel’. Eine biblische Geschichte in aktuellem Kontext, in: Giancarlo Collet (ed.), *Weltdorf Babel. Globalisierung als theologische Herausforderung*, Münster: LIT, 2001, 27.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. M. Nausner, *Kulturelle Grenzerfahrung*, 273f.

Of course there is one important difference between Genesis 11 and Acts 2: the miracle of understanding. It is of the essence, however, that this new understanding does not come at the cost of diversity and difference: rather the new situation implies a new listening to difference, as Brueggemann points out. He acknowledges the issue of speech but emphasizes the importance of listening when he writes: “Perhaps the miracle of Pentecost concerns a new gift of speech. But we should not miss the hint of the text. The newness concerns a fresh capacity to listen because the word of God blows over the chaos one more time.”<sup>49</sup> If the pneumatological awakening implies open ears to people of other tongues, such listening to voices of difference must be of the essence for a theological eschatology of migration as well,<sup>50</sup> and therefore listening to migrant voices, to which I will turn at the end, is a necessary component of a constructive eschatological imagination. It is a kind of hermeneutical boundary practice that facilitates border thinking by letting the cultural difference be interpreted from several perspectives.

### Table Fellowship

One of the most succinct accounts of an eschatological vision that combines multilingual community and table fellowship can be found in the conclusion of Jesus’ rather harsh description of the coming kingdom of God as community around a set table in the gospel of Luke. He ends his challenging narrative with the following vision: “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God” (Luke 13:29). Here Christian community is imagined as a multilingual table fellowship that engages in sharing gifts across linguistic/ethnic difference. The implications for the most central

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<sup>49</sup> Brueggemann, Genesis, 104.

<sup>50</sup> Åsa Nausner in her dissertation investigates the difficulties of cultural norm groups to listen to the culturally other. – Cf. Åsa Nausner, “Listening to the Cultural Other: A Christian Ethics of Transformative Listening,” (PhD diss., Drew University 2011).



Christian practice of table fellowship, Holy Communion, are important here, because to me this vision challenges an understanding of communion as a strict boundary marker of Christian community. It also helps to realize that the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist is about more than the salvation of the individual souls of the participants. Celebrating the Eucharist always also entails an experience and an exercise of imagining God willed community together with those not physically present at the table. A certain “Eucharistic permeability” is required for such an imagination. With this term Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff emphasize the economic and political significance of the Eucharist.<sup>51</sup> Bread and wine shared at communion are also reminding those who share that they are part of an economic system favoring some and oppressing others. In this way the Eucharist itself becomes a kind of social and cultural boundary negotiation. Issues of economic justice and marginalization of migrants converge. What Daniel G. Groody says about the US-American context is increasingly true for the European context as well: “Given that the agricultural industry in the United States is sustained largely through immigrant labor, the bread and wine that even comes to the table is most certainly the result of immigrant labor.”<sup>52</sup> Eucharistic permeability reminds us of the connections between current migration and the eschatological migration expressed in the coming to the table in God’s kingdom from all corners of the earth. In a sense then, the Eucharist binds together the memory of troublesome migrations in the past. After all, it has theological roots in the Jewish Passover remembering the Exodus from

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Andrea Bieler, Luise Schottroff, *The Eucharist. Bodies, Bread & Resurrection*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2007, 4ff. – For a more detailed analysis of the ethical implications of Holy Communion from a Methodist perspective see: Michael Nausner, *Gebrochenheit und Erneuerung der Schöpfung. Das Abendmahl als theologische Basis sozialer Gerechtigkeit*, in: *Ökumenische Rundschau* 61 (4/2012), 440-456; Michael Nausner, *Die soziale Bedeutung des Sakramentalen. Wandlungen methodistischer Ethik*, in: Ralf Dziewas/Michael Kißkalt (eds.), *Wandel und Identität. Konfessionelle Veränderungsprozesse im ökumenischen Vergleich*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2013, 95-115.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel G. Groody, *Fruit of the Vine and Work of Human Hands. Imagination and the Eucharist*, in: Daniel G. Groody and Gioacchino Campese (eds.), *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey. Theological Perspectives on Migration*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2008, 299-315 (310).

slavery in Egypt.<sup>53</sup> The plight of current migrants and the anticipation of an eschatological migration to the table in the kingdom of God belong together. Inasmuch as Christians gathered around Christ's table are anticipating the coming to this very table from all corners of the earth, an opening up for and listening to migrants already present around the Christian community would seem to be an intrinsic part of gathering for the Eucharist. After all, migrants do have a lot to contribute toward a re-imagination of the future of the common good. The general perception of diasporic communities as nostalgically longing back to their origin is challenged by research showing their creative development of new and future oriented identities, where essence and purity are not sought for any more, but rather the "necessity and recognition of heterogeneity and diversity, of difference and hybridity."<sup>54</sup>

Acknowledging such hopeful and creative imaginations of a different future in migratory communities, I now turn to some final suggestions for rethinking Christian eschatological imagination based on migrant discourses. These discourses, I believe, can help to identify and resist eschatological models that imagine spatial or temporal purity in the beyond. They can serve, therefore, to re-imagine both temporal and spatial boundaries of Christian community. In order to make this case for a contextually sensitive theological eschatology my focus here is on a particular migratory context in Germany. This will be my version of a migratory interpretation of theology, my attempt to discern the potential for theological eschatology of a certain utopian discourse circulating among migrants in Germany.

### Migrant Utopias and Re-Imagining Eschatological Boundaries

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 303.

<sup>54</sup> Ulrich Dehn, *Migration im Kontext. Motivgeschichtliche und diasporaltheoretische Perspektiven*, in: *Interkulturelle Theologie* 37, 2-3 (2011), 146-156 (152).

The analysis of this utopian discourse is provided by María do Mar Castro Varela, a migration researcher and postcolonial theorist with Spanish background, who has conducted extended interviews with female migrants in Germany and gathered her conclusions in a book entitled *Unzeitgemäße Utopien* (Untimely Utopias). In it she is analyzing the relation between utopia, migration, and gender. Her special interest is the question of the possibility of political transformation and the creation of social justice in and through the visions of female migrants.<sup>55</sup> Castro Varela is coming to the conclusion that among female migrants in Germany “utopias have not lost their mobilizing force.”<sup>56</sup> Her insistence that the utopias and visions of these female migrants have the potential of constructive transformation of the entire society is reminiscent of the paradigm of liberation theology and its preferential option for the poor. While liberation theology focuses its attention on the liberating potential of the perspective of the socio-economically poor, a theological eschatology informed by the utopias of migrants analogously practices a “preferential option for the stranger”<sup>57</sup> and focuses its attention on the visionary perspective of migrants. It is such visionary perspectives that Castro Varela is identifying in the utopias of second and third generation female migrants in Germany.<sup>58</sup> She is specifically looking for the critical impetus of utopian thinking against violent hegemonic discourses and lamenting the light-handed dismissal of utopian thinking in a society where the utopia of neoliberalism is unapologetically celebrated. Castro Varela reads utopian thinking not as dreaming but as an important aspect of critical thinking. She emphasizes that the critical potential of utopia is still needed even after 1989, when the slogan of the end of utopia emerged. A decisive difference to previous utopias is that postmodern

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. María do Mar Castro Varela, *Unzeitgemäße Utopien. Migrantinnen zwischen Selbsterfindung und Gelehrter Hoffnung*, Frankfurt: transcript, 2007, 7.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Gruber, *Remembering Borders*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Castro Varela, *Unzeitgemäße Utopien*, 15f.

utopias are reemphasizing spatial aspects,<sup>59</sup> turning away from the temporal utopias of modernity.

If utopias from the margin have political significance for the wider society – and immigrants occupy a large segment of the margins in Europe – utopias formulated by female migrants are of double interest. And, as Castro Varela points out, they are barely accounted for in academic research. But it is precisely these discourses which from their position half inside, half outside provide a specific and revelatory perspective on issues of hegemonic conditions,<sup>60</sup> and they facilitate the kind of border thinking from the subaltern perspective that Mignolo deems necessary. Especially two of Castro Varela's assumptions are of interest for a theological eschatology in a migratory context: First, migration and utopia are related in that they unveil multiple belongings. They expound the problems of the concepts of "home" and "identity". Second, these utopian discourses are not temporal alone, but always also connected to spatial discourses.<sup>61</sup>

Much in the sense of the mentioned above description of the Christians' relation to the world in the Letter to Diognetus the utopian discourses of migrants can function as analogies for theological imagination by exemplifying what multiple belonging means. Listening to migrant utopias can help to make concrete the Christian vocation to be *xenoi* in society (cf. Letter to Diognetus) in solidarity with those who are considered and treated as *xenoi* by the establishment. For Christian community an awareness of a certain existential homelessness

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Reinhard Henkel, Migration nach Deutschland und Globalisierung aus der Sicht der Religionsgeographie – Fallbeispiel Mannheim/Heidelberg, in: *Interkulturelle Theologie* 37, 2011, 173-184 (173f).

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Castro Varela, *Unzeitgemäße Utopien*, 27.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-30.

can have transformative potential, especially when surrounded by a political atmosphere in Europe that takes for granted that the real “home” of Turkish migrants is in Turkey, even if they have lived in Germany for generations. Listening in on migrant utopias, however, should not be equated with just “dreaming of a better future” together, but it can aid the development of the kind of utopia Ernst Bloch describes as tested and understood hope that criticizes reality, anticipates a distant goal, and mobilizes historical action.<sup>62</sup> These migrant utopias oftentimes emerge out of an intense experience of longing, which Ernst Bloch, very much against the tradition of German idealism, considered “the most certain being.”<sup>63</sup> These utopias, of course, are distant from any grand narrative of global transformation, but from a theological perspective they can be seen as seeds of societal transformation toward the eschatological table fellowship. No concrete vision of the future can fully grasp the promised, and of course migrant utopias cannot either. But the small utopias, as Johanna Rahner reminds us, are always also a taste of God’s great utopia. Without them also God’s future remains mute, without speech, without color and un-real.<sup>64</sup>

An eschatologically relevant re-imagination of both temporal and spatial boundaries occurs in migrant utopias. The metaphor of the boundary plays a decisive role in the production of visions, as Castro Varela reminds us.<sup>65</sup> In accordance with her observation that migrant utopias are not temporal alone but spatial as well, a theological eschatology in tune with migrant utopias will help any Christian community to develop a new sensitivity both for its anticipation of the future (its understanding of temporal boundaries) and its relation to its

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in: *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Johanna Rahner, “‘Lasst euch nicht vertrösten!’ Das ‘Reich Gottes’ als eschatologische Metapher im theologischen Disput.“ Lecture given at the annual meeting with *Interkonfessioneller Theologischer Arbeitskreis (ITA)* in Erfurt, Germany, January 13, 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Castro Varela, *Unzeitgemäße Utopien*, 184.

physical surroundings (its understanding of spatial boundaries). Utopias are never just a re-imagination of temporal boundaries, but always also a challenge to current spatial boundaries (Cf. the Greek meaning of u-topos: non-place). They simultaneously divide space and regulate what is possible in a certain time span.<sup>66</sup> The re-imagination of boundaries in times of systematic exclusion needs to be part of the eschatological self-understanding of the Christian church,<sup>67</sup> especially for the church in Europe. Too much carnage litters the road of the history of European mission and its exclusively temporal understanding of eschatology. Today's migrants in Europe oftentimes come from precisely those places of violent encounter with European civilization and its accompanying Christian mission. This circumstance gives the Christian church a new chance with the help of migrant utopias to re-imagine its temporal and spatial boundaries.

The cultural and theological reflections I shared in this paper do not allow me to come to a final conclusion. Such closure would shut down the boundary negotiation I have been advocating. Seen through a cultural lens our encounters with migrants in Europe remind us of the continuous need of border thinking and a pluritopic hermeneutics that takes into account the perspective of marginalized migrants throughout Europe. Seen through a theological lens and with the Biblical texts on multilingual community and table fellowship in mind it challenges us not to restrict our imagination regarding spatial and temporal boundaries to our own community. Both theologically and culturally I feel challenged not to imagine a common future without the participation of those culturally excluded for centuries.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Nausner, *Homeland as Borderland. Territories of Christian Subjectivity*, in: Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, Mayra Rivera (eds.). *Postcolonial Theologies. Divinity and Empire*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004, 118-132.