

BOOK REVIEW

Ahn, Ilsup (2019) *Theology and Migration*, Leiden & Boston: Brill. 108 pp.

Ilona Silvola

Systematic Theology, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, FI
isilvola@abo.fi

Keywords: migration; theology; Christianity; church; politics

In the field of migration studies, theology has not been a very prevalent approach, even though religion is an important dimension in both the lives of many migrants and in the integration process. In the Nordic countries, Christian churches have been a positive force in integration work (Hellqvist & Sandberg 2017; Niemi & Siirto 2017). On the other hand, many churches' teaching on migration has emphasised the right of a country to govern its borders, which can be manipulated to support policies destructive to migrants, as Ilsup Ahn notes (p. 24).

The author of *Theology and Migration*, Ilsup Ahn (Professor of Philosophy, North Park University), does not find the theological view that emphasises the church's role as a booster of patriotism satisfactory. Instead, he explores alternative ways of answering the question of how Christian theology can enlighten our understanding of migration. He also attempts to answer the question of how theologians, churches and societies could better tackle the challenges that arise in the current global situation in which the number of migrants is constantly growing.

Ahn's answer to the questions presented above is twofold: Firstly, he gives an overview of recent theological research on migration, and secondly, he constructs a comprehensive theological interpretation of the phenomenon of migration. As Ahn writes, the theological analysis of migration is a relatively new field, and thus an overview of recent research is needed. Ahn divides theology of migration into two categories: narrative-critical biblical reflection and systemic-constructive theological exploration on migration. Existing research in the first group is more numerous, containing works such as Snyder (2012). The latter group of systemic-constructive theological exploration on migration does not yet exist to the same extent, Ahn writes (p. 4). Thus, his contribution in *Theology and Migration* is of this kind. In his book, Ahn follows earlier works by Phan (2016) and Groody (2009), who have both developed systemic-constructive theological explorations on migration.

Theology and Migration consists of five chapters, first introducing the reader to the topic, then building the main arguments through the following three chapters, and ultimately synthesising them to a conclusion in the ending chapter. In the chapters 2, 3 and 4, the author aims to construct a theology of migration through a threefold analysis. The three parts of the analysis have as a starting point the three persons of the Christian God: Jesus Christ the Son of God, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, each composing one chapter. Ahn attempts to construct a theology of migration where all the three persons of God enlighten our understanding of some aspect of the phenomenon of migration.

In Chapter 2, Ahn explores how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can enlighten our thinking of migration. In other words, the author attempts to construct a Christology of migration. In Chapter 3, Ahn handles the theme of criminalization of undocumented migrants and argues that to control undocumented migrants, the national state constructs categories of 'unpayable debt' and 'unforgivable crime'. Ahn questions these categories and argues that because the unconditional love of God the Father, the church should persist in calling for politics of forgiveness and decriminalization of undocumented migrants. According to Ahn, undocumented migrants should be understood as victims of the neoliberal global economy, and (as all migrants) as gifts of God. In Chapter 4, Ahn concentrates on integration. He argues that the Holy Spirit works for reconciliation between migrants and citizens and helps people in the long path of acceptance and integration overcoming differences and challenges.

In this review, I will focus on Chapter 2, which is the first part of Ahn's threefold analysis. The chapter shows clearly Ahn's way of working with theological concepts through connecting them to phenomena of human life that are often seen as being outside the sphere of religion. Ahn starts to formulate his Christology of migration by stating that the main message of Jesus was the message of the kingdom of God (p. 31). Jesus encouraged people to leave their old life orders centred around the synagogue and enter a new life order centred around the kingdom of God, meaning new faith, and a new community of believers. The new community, in Ahn's thinking, can be characterised as being both spiritual and political: it is defined by solidarity between people and by a renewed relationship to God. Ahn's theological contribution to the understanding of migration is that he interprets the act of entering the kingdom of God as an act of migration, not only, for example, as a spiritual act of repentance. Thus, he argues that migration, in fact, has a theological signification concerning God's vision of liberation and redemption. Ahn (p. 35) writes: 'It is critical to see that migration allows all nations, all tribes, and all people to interact with each other across all borders rendering it possible to create new unity, solidarity and brotherhood and sisterhood amid differences and otherness.'

In line with his argument, Ahn (pp. 31–32) interprets Jesus's suffering and crucifixion as the 'opposition and rejection of this world to God's will to let God's people migrate'. The political power's attempt to suppress the new movement around Jesus, which they feared could lead to an uprising that would rock the prevailing political and religious system, led to the crucifixion of Jesus. The significance of the crucifixion lies, Ahn argues, in the fact that it is a specific form of violence: state terror.

State terror is defined in *Migration and Theology* as a form of violence by a political organization or a state, having the purpose of spreading fear and stigmatizing certain people. In the Roman empire, the crucified bodies were commonly put on display by the roadside to remind the passers-by of 'the dire consequences of rebellion' (p. 32). In interpreting the death of Jesus as an act of state terror, Ahn parallels it with the events of state terror deployed against migrants in different parts of the world today. He argues that state terror to deter migrants has the same effect now as it had in the case of Jesus: it is still an attempt to deter people from migrating to the kingdom of God. However, Ahn writes that the resurrection of Jesus shows that the state terror cannot prevent the kingdom of God from emerging. This is a creative interpretation of the theologically central event of the crucifixion of Jesus, which traditionally has been understood as a turning point in the salvation history where the humankind is reconciled with God (p. 30).

Migration as a phenomenon is thus understood as a theologically relevant phenomenon: as nearing the kingdom of God. The spiritual meaning that Ahn ascribes to the phenomenon of migration highlights migration as a part of God's plan. As such, it is something inherently valuable, and the value lies beyond its potential, for example economic, benefits. As the value of migration in society is often understood as instrumental, Ahn's view provides

a much-needed alternative, which emphasizes the importance of the right of migration and gives new theological urgency to the work for the rights of migrants.

The merits of the book are that it is clearly written and well structured. However, as the length of the volume is only 108 pages, one would hope for a more thorough exploration of the themes that the book presents. Unfortunately, Ahn's way of writing may cause problems to readers without preliminary knowledge of theological terminology because the terms are not defined in the book. It is easier to follow Ahn's thinking in his other works, especially in *Religious Ethics and Migration* (2014), which might be easier to approach for readers not familiar with theological terminology. All in all, *Theology and Migration* shows clearly the potential of theological thought in promoting the right to migration as well as a more inclusive society for migrants.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Ahn, I.** 2014. *Religious Ethics and Migration*. New York: Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315857275>
- Groody, D.** 2009. Crossing the Divide. Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees. *Theological Studies*, 70(3): 298–316. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390907000306>
- Hellqvist, K** and **Sandberg, A.** 2017. *En tid av möten. Arbetet med asylsökande och nyanlända i Svenska kyrkans församlingar 2015–2016*. Uppsala: Svenska kyrkan. Available at: <https://webbshop.svenskakyrkan.se/en-tid-av-möten-arbetet-med-asylsökande-och-nyanlända-i-svenska-kyrkans-församlingar-2015-2016> [Last accessed 29 January 2020].
- Niemi, H** and **Siirto, U.** 2017. *Hätämajoituksesta Aleppon kelloihin Evankelis-luterilaisten seurakuntien turvapaikkatyö Suomessa*. Kuopio: Kirkon tutkimuskeskus. Available at: <https://evl.fi/documents/1327140/45386794/Ktk+-+Hätämajoituksesta+Aleppon+kelloihin/e400905e-a288-5db7-6fa7-c0d1936a7c9d> [Last accessed 29 January 2020].
- Phan, CP.** 2016. *Deus Migrator – God the Migrant: Migration of Theology and Theology of Migration*. *Theological Studies*, 77(4): 845–868. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916666825>
- Snyder, S.** 2012. *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

How to cite this article: Silvola, I. 2020. Ahn, IIsup (2019) *Theology and Migration*, Leiden & Boston: Brill. 108 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 10(2), pp. 96–98. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.137>

Submitted: 01 April 2020 **Accepted:** 01 April 2020 **Published:** 28 May 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.