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Christian Ethics and Migration in Germany and the United States: Toward a Comparative Taxonomy

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Germany and the United States are the world's second and first-place destinations for migrants, respectively, and Christian ethicists in both countries have generated robust and growing literatures addressing the issue of migration. Engagement between the German and US-based communities, however, has been comparably meager. This article bridges the two literatures through a set of comparative categories for Christian-ethical projects on migration. These categories take the form of a threefold taxonomy of problems (flaws in the world that require reflection on how best to respond), approaches (ways of generating normative claims), and impulses (direction in which claims tend to move) as anchored in a Christian social-ethical distinction of stranger and neighbor. These categories are divisible into sub-categories: Approaches are divisible into scriptural-hermeneutical, cosmopolitical, and spatial-phenomenological sub-categories, and impulses are divisible into harmonizing and dismantling sub-categories. Presently only a sketch, this taxonomy encompasses German and US-based discourses while revealing characteristics unique to each discourse, thus helping to map points of connection across the German and US-based scholarly communities as a basis for an expanded scholarly exchange.

Introduction

Germany and the United States are the world's second and first-place destinations for international migrants, respectively.[1] Both countries' histories are shaped significantly by migration, even if this has been the case in each country in a distinct way. In Germany, which has a long history of emigration, a national self-conception of the country as a major migration destination has emerged comparatively recently—even if large-scale immigration has characterized the Federal Republic across the entirety of its history.[2] In

[1] Hein De Haas, Stephen Castles, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World,* 6th edition (New York: Guilford Press, 2020), p. 39.
[2] Following the end of the Second World War, refugees and displaced persons with German origins came from regions that had become parts of Poland as borders were redrawn at the end of the war. From the late 1950s onwards, during the "Wirtschaftswunder" period, large-scale labor immigration, mostly from Southern European countries and Turkey, was initiated by the government of the Federal

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the United States, by contrast, narratives of the country as a destination for migration have been a much more fundamental and longstanding part of the national self-conception. These narratives have often been idealistic. However, darker variants have also been present, and these have increased dramatically in public prominence and become more apocalyptic since Donald Trump's first presidential campaign launched in 2015. Historical differences aside, migration is a major topic of political debate within both countries, as well as a profound moral challenge. In light of the politicization, ideologization, and securitization of migration that has characterized not just Germany and the US, but many other countries, as well, it is unsurprising that the topic has captured the attention of ethicists, including scholars of Christian social ethics.[3] Nevertheless, with a few exceptions, specific bilateral exchange between the two countries in terms of migration ethics has been minimal.[4] The goal of the present article is to point toward a framework for such an exchange.

In spite of its relevance, this undertaking bears qualifying in three ways. First, there are no singular or stable "American" and "German" perspectives on migration, nor, obviously, does the simple fact of writing in either English or German confer a distinct perspective. Second, there is an asymmetrical relationship between the two countries and their respective languages because of the role of English as the international language and the US as a global hegemon. Third, as both a necessary limitation in scope and a reflection of the authors' disciplinary commitments, the present analysis focuses primarily on Christian social-ethical commentaries on migration, instead of either empirical research on migration in Germany or the United States or the liberal philosophical commentaries that are sometimes represented as the ethics of migration.[5] By articulating a set of comparative categories, we seek to initiate and structure a growing exchange between Christian social

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Republic of Germany in order to strengthen the German industrial workforce. In the German Democratic Republic, an international workforce was hired mostly from Vietnam and Mozambique, but only temporarily and with less readiness to integrate the workers into the society than it was the case in the Western German state, in which many of the foreign workers who did not return to their countries of origin brought their families. During the late 1980s and 1990s, another wave of immigrants with German (often originally Jewish) roots immigrated to Germany from the former Soviet republics. During the Balkan wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, civil-war refugees and asylum seekers also migrated to Germany. All of this occurred during a period in which Germany was being represented by politicians as not a migration country. For more details, see Bade, Klaus J./Oltmer, Jochen, Deutschland, in: Bade, Klaus J. (Hg.), Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart, [3]2010, Paderborn-München, 141-170; Birsl, Ursula: Deutschland, in: Gieler, Wolfgang/Fricke, Dietmar (Hg.): Handbuch Europäischer Migrationspolitiken. Die EU-Länder und ihre Beitrittskandidaten, Münster 2004, 31-50.

[3] Cf. Michelle Becka, 'Migration', in *Christliche Sozialethik. Grundlagen – Kontexte – Themen. Ein Lehr- und Studienbuch*, edited by Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Michelle Becka, Johannes J. Frühbauer and Gerhard Kruip (Regensburg: Pustet, 2022), pp 429-443.

[4] Exceptions include: Ruth Rubio-Marín, *Immigration as a Democratic Challenge: Citizenship and Inclusion in Germany and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); William Barbieri, *Ethics of Citizenship: Immigration and Group Rights in Germany* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). Christian Henkel, *Von der Wüste Sonora zum Platz der Republik: Eine qualitative Studie zur politischen Interessenvertretung für undokumentierte MigrantInnen durch katholische Bischofskonferenzen und Nichtregierungsorganisationen in den USA und Deutschland*, (Münster 2019), online at https://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:hbz:6-19179465655 (accessed 2024-12-29). This is a comparative study on the engagement of the Catholic Church (Bishops and volunteers) for migrants in the US and Germany.

[5] For the latter category, see, for example, David Miller, *Strangers in our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016) and Andreas Cassee, *Globale Bewegungsfreiheit. Ein philosophisches Plädoyer für offene Grenzen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016).

ethicists in two of the world's most foremost immigration countries; an additional contribution is to highlight the valuable contributions of German Christian social ethicists on migration for English-speaking readers.[6]

Overview of approach

There is an old aphorism, sometimes attributed to Kant, which states that *eine gute Theorie ist das praktischste, was es gibt*.[7] To a considerable extent, this captures the present approach, which employs abstraction and taxonomizing for the sake of comparison and for devising a framework to accommodate Christian social-ethical scholarship on migration in both German and US contexts. Even if "a good theory", in the sense of a definitive account of social-ethical reasoning on migration, is not our aim, we are nonetheless interested in unpacking the reasoning by which Christian social ethicists generate their arguments about migration.

In our view, there are three particular elements that comprise Christian-ethical arguments about migration across German and US contexts: (1) problems, (2) impulses, and (3) approaches. By "problems", we mean flaws in the world that require reflection on how best to respond. By "impulses", we mean directions in which claims tend to move. By "approaches", we mean ways of generating normative claims. Broadly, these elements comprise a logical sequence, in that after problems are encountered, impulses for repairing this problem are imagined, and then approaches for achieving such a state of repair are pursued. Even if this sequence is not a blueprint that must be followed in a strict order by every ethicist writing about migration, there is nevertheless a logical coherence of this particular ordering. We employ these categories—with the categories of "impulses" and "approaches" conceived at our own initiative specifically for this project—comparatively, in order to navigate distinctions and commonalities between German and US literatures. In this way, we are able to frame what is nationally distinct (problems) within a common structure along with what is shared (impulses and approaches). Recognizing different sets of problems alongside shared impulses and approaches becomes a basis for a framework of exchange.

A fourth element, the anchoring distinction of stranger/neighbor, encompasses these three elements and structures their relations. With "anchoring distinction" understood simply as the most fundamental distinction within a given normative discourse, the claim is that stranger/neighbor is the anchoring distinction for Christian social-ethical commentaries on migration. This claim is justified on the basis of these terms' frequency in the literature and the fact that they represent a specification of the more general alien/citizen distinction.[8] Although not taken up at length within the present

[6] Original German quotations have been translated into English by the authors.
[7] In English: "A good theory is the most practical thing there is." For more on the history of this aphorism, see Arthur G. Bedeian, 'A note on the aphorism 'there is nothing as practical as a good theory", *Journal of Management History* 22:2 (2016), pp. 236-242.
[8] The stranger/neighbor distinction, as a metonym for other social relations, has always been as fundamental to Christianity and its biblical sources as has been migration. The meaning of *Apostolos*, for instance, is a "going forth" into spaces unknown. This exists against a backdrop of Christian commitments to hospitality. For a valuable history of the virtue of receiving the stranger across Christian history, see Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999). For a classic study of the importance of land within a Christian imagination, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

article, the stranger/neighbor anchoring distinction interacts with each of these three elements in a unique way: problems (stipulating that stranger and neighbor are alienated from one another in specific ways), impulses (visions in which stranger and neighbor are brought into redemptive relation), and approaches (bases or means for pursuing such conditions).[9]

The stranger/neighbor distinction could also theoretically frame positions in which the stranger is seen *as* the problem. This would be an accurate reflection of a considerable part of the political discourse concerning migration in both Germany and the US. When it comes to Christian commentaries on migration, however, the problem is typically not seen in terms of the presence of strangers per se so much as the vulnerability, exclusion, and suffering that migrants, as "strangers", face, as well as the challenge of better reconciling strangers and neighbors. This is our view, as well. In both Germany and the US, the present situation reveals an increasingly one-sided perception of refugees and migrants as "strangers", despite the fact that many of them *are* already "neighbors", in that they live as neighbors, participate in labor, provide help, cooperate with native citizens in many ways, and have in many cases become citizens themselves. This situation is especially urgent in the US, where, as a matter of federal policy, many such individuals have been targeted and subjected to invasive and often violent arrest, detention, and deportation at the hands of federal immigration enforcement.

Consistent with its interests in taxonomy and comparison, our approach takes a special interest in logic. Each of the key categories—problems, impulses, and approaches—has a distinct logical basis with respect to the logical forms of deduction, induction, and abduction.[10] The discernment of problems is largely inductive, in that problems are not invented by scholars but encountered as facts in the world by scholars approaching them from a specific ethical perspective. Impulses, for their part, are arrived at by the logic of deduction, in that they flow from the premises that the relationship between stranger and neighbor is currently problematic and that there are only so many forms in which this problematic relationship can be repaired. As for approaches, these are determined abductively, that is, through hypotheses that provide a durable but potentially revisable coherence for what is observed. For instance, in our engagement with the respective German and US Christian-ethical literatures on migration, we have observed within the literature a relatively small number of approaches adopted consistently. That such approaches are designated here as most important is simply a question of hypothesis—there is no reason to imagine that additional approaches might not be employed or discovered in the future.

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[9] For more on anchoring distinctions as a feature of the social ethical method, see Gary Slater 'Human/Nonhuman as Anchoring Distinction for Environmental Ethics', in *Gegen das Aus im gemeinsamen Haus! Die ökologische Krise – Paradigmenwechsel in der Christlichen Sozialethik?,* edited by Timo Hartmann, Esther Jünger, Pavlos Leußler and Alexandra Palkowitsch (Forum Sozialethik 26, Münster: Aschendorff, 2026), pages forthcoming; for stranger/neighbor as anchoring distinction for Christian social ethics on migration, see Gary Slater *Our Common, Bordered Home: Laudato si' and the Promise of an Integrated Migration-Ecological Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), pp. 43-49.

[10] Deduction and induction are classic syllogistic forms characterized, respectively, by general-to-particular and particular-to-general logical ordering, with induction predicated upon some form of observation and deduction predicated upon the ideas contained within the definitions of key terms. Abduction, for its part, is the logic of hypothesis, or inference to the best explanation. It is associated with the philosopher C.S. Peirce. See Ilkka Niiniluoto 'Peirce's Abduction and Its Interpretations', *The Oxford Handbook of Charles S. Peirce*, edited by Cornelis De Waal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 208-225.

Problems

To say that migration represents a problem for Christian ethicists in both Germany and the US is uncontroversial. "Problem" can mean many things, however, and one should neither ignore a problem that is really there nor make something into a problem that is not one. Nor should one think that the problems that US scholars are writing about are the same as those of German scholars, or vice versa. In terms of categories of identity, for example, migration in Germany intersects primarily with religion (especially with regard to Islam), whereas in the US, the more salient categories concerning migration tend to be race and ethnicity (notwithstanding religious relevance, as well).[11] Such differences reflect varying social and historical contexts, in spite of features common to both countries, such as the securitization of migration or the primacy of the issue in right-wing populism.

On many issues, nationally distinct problems can be brought together under common headings, which create meaningful relations among disparate phenomena. Take "borders" as a common heading relevant to migration, for example. In Germany, the issue of borders is related to the EU context[12], and it has become a prominent topic of academic debate in Germany and the German-speaking countries in fields such as social ethics,[13] political philosophy,[14] and the social sciences.[15] The Mediterranean stands out as a particularly acute border problem, as it is one of the world's most dangerous and lethal borders for migrants.[16] In the US, "the border" refers almost exclusively to the US-Mexican border, which is not only the single most significant flow of migrants in the contemporary

[11] For further support for this claim within a larger comparative study of migration and identity, see Richard Alba and Nancy Foner, *Strangers No More: Immigration and the Challenges of Integration in North America and Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). See also Daniel Bogner, 'Wechselseitige Irritation. Kann Religion eine Integrationsressource sein?', in *Zerreißprobe Flüchtlingsintegration*, edited by Marianne Heimbach-Steins (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2017), pp. 149-162; Hansjörg Schmid, 'Hindernis oder Ressource? Die Rolle des Islams für die Integration von Flüchtlingen', in *Zerreißprobe Flüchtlingsintegration*, edited by Marianne Heimbach-Steins (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2017), pp. 163-174.

[12] Markus Babo, 'Zwischen staatlichem Souveränitätsanspruch und menschenrechtlichen Anforderungen. Migrationspolitik in der Wertegemeinschaft EU', *Amosinternational. Internationale Zeitschrift für christliche Sozialethik* 18:1 (2024), pp. 12-19; Marianne Heimbach-Steins, 'Grenzenlose Offenheit oder begrenzte Verantwortung? Ethische Wegmarken europäischer Flucht- und Migrationspolitik', in *Die EU als ethisches Projekt im Spiegel ihrer Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik*, edited by Alexander Merkl and Bernhard Koch (Münster/Baden-Baden, 2018), pp. 225-249; Christof Mandry, 'Zwischen Verantwortung und Versagen. Die gemeinsame Asyl- und Zuwanderungspolitik der Europäischen Union', in *Begrenzt verantwortlich? Sozialethische Positionen in der Flüchtlingskrise,* edited by Marianne Heimbach-Steins (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2016), pp. 134-145; Petr Stica, 'Risse im europäischen Haus? Eine sozialethische Begehung angesichts aktueller Konflikte um Flüchtlingsaufnahme und Grenzpolitiken', in *Begrenzt verantwortlich? Sozialethische Positionen in der Flüchtlingskrise,* edited by Marianne Heimbach-Steins (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2016), pp. 146-159.

[13] Walter Lesch, *Kein Recht auf ein besseres Leben? Christlich-ethische Orientierung in der Flüchtlingspolitik* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2016), pp. 15-45; Lukas Schmitt, *Von Grenzen, Menschen und Mauern. Migrationsethische Perspektiven in der globalisierten Weltgesellschaft.* (Freiburg i. Br. Herder, 2022).

[14] For example, see Julian Nida-Rümelin, *Über Grenzen denken. Eine Ethik der Migration.* (Hamburg: edition Körber-Stiftung, 2017); Adrian Papenhagen, *Eine Stufentheorie der Migrationsethik* (Ethik in den Sozialwissenschaften 7), (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024).

[15] Volker M. Heins, *Offene Grenzen für alle: Eine notwendige Utopie* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2021); Volker M. Heins, Frank Wolff, *Hinter Mauern: Geschlossene Grenzen als Gefahr für die offene Gesellschaft* (Berlin: edition suhrkamp, 2023); Steffen Mau, *Sortiermaschinen: Die Neuerfindung der Grenze im 21. Jahrhundert* (München: C.H. Beck, 2021).

[16] Reese Jones, *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move* (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 12-28.

world, but also, at more than 12 million, the single largest number of undocumented migrants.[17]

Another common heading is irregular migration, which is understood as migration without legal authorization. In Germany, the topic of irregular migration has risen in prominence, even as the dependence of the German economy on its migrant workforce has been comparatively overlooked.[18] In the US, irregular migration is represented as a challenge to the legal and political structures of the state as well as the cohesiveness of the nation as a people.[19] The issue also reveals contradictions in the narratives of economic interdependence and the capacity to assimilate outsiders that occupy many US national self-descriptions.

Still another heading common to both countries is that of church and state. In Germany, the practice of Church asylum stands out as an effort on the part of churches to save persons from deportation in cases where the real dangers those persons have to face when sent back to their countries of origin seem not to have been evaluated correctly in the bureaucratic process.[20] Recent conflicts between asylum-giving parishes or monasteries and the police indicate that the changing political climate will not leave the practice of church asylum untouched.[21] In the US, the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, which began with the sheltering of El Salvadorian immigrants by Christian churches,[22] has lived on in the form of cities and even states designated as sanctuaries of non-cooperation for

[17] Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Border* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 181. For trenchant commentaries on this border, see Jason De León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015). See also: Justin P. Ashworth, 'Who Are Our People? Toward a Christian Witness Against Borders', *Modern Theology* 34:4 (2018), pp. 495-518. See also: Mark Adams, Minerva Carcano, Gerald Kicanas, Kirk Smith and Stephen Talmage, *Bishops on the Border: Pastoral Responses to Immigration* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2013).

[18] One of the earliest social ethical studies on irregular migration in the German political context is the monograph by Andreas Fisch, *Menschen in aufenthaltsrechtlicher Illegalität: Reformvorschläge und Folgenabwägungen aus sozialethischer Perspektive* (Schriften des Instituts für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften 56) (Münster: Lit, 2007). As an illustration of the contrasting emphases on asylum that received greater attention in the previous century, see: Hans Tremmel, *Grundrecht Asyl: Die Antwort der christlichen Sozialethik* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1992).

[19] Marie Friedmann-Marquardt, 'Double Threat? Unauthorized Migration as a Global Phenomenon', in *Religious and Ethical Perspectives on Global Migration*, edited by E.W. Collier and C.R. Strain (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), pp. 13-34, at p. 14.

[20] Church asylum as a political-ethical issue was discussed in the German-speaking context under the notion of civil disobedience, cf. Marianne Heimbach-Steins, *Menschenrechte in Gesellschaft und Kirche: Lernprozesse – Konfliktfelder – Zukunftschancen* (Mainz: Grünewald, 2001), pp. 54-72. Further contributions to the topic: Klaus Barwig and Dieter R. Bauer, *Asyl am heiligen Ort. Sanctuary und Kirchenasyl: Vom Rechtsanspruch zur ethischen Verpflichtung,* edited by Klaus Barwig and Dieter R. Bauer (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 1994); Rainer Krockauer, *Kirche als Asylbewegung. Diakonische Kirchenbildung am Ort der Flüchtlinge* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993); Dorothee Wilhelm, 'Kirchenasyl bedeutet Unterbrechung', in *Kirche und Asyl. Legitimer Widerstand im Rechtsstaat?*, edited by Muriel Kadima and Jean-Claude Huot (Zürich: NZN, 1996), pp. 51-59.

[21] Michelle Becka, 'Gedanken zum Kirchenasyl – aus aktuellem Anlass', in *feinschwarz: Theologisches Feuilleton* (2022-06-21), online at https://www.feinschwarz.net/gedanken-zum-kirchenasyl/ (accessed 2025-06-19). An influential Christian initiative is the German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum, see: German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum, *Basic Information on Church Asylum*, online at https://www.kirchenasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/kurzinfo_englisch1.pdf (accessed 2025-07-03).

[22] See: Ann Crittenden, *Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988).

migration law enforcement, even as the second Trump administration expands its deportation efforts to target foreign students and even legal US residents.[23]

One problematic issue that does not lend itself to a common heading is integration, which disproportionately applies to Germany. Germany has only relatively recently developed an explicit integration policy, although the issue has been relevant at least since the late 1950s when the systematic recruitment of migrant workers (so-called guest workers) was started. [24] The integration of migrants is thus a long-neglected task of both national politics and civil society.[25] Issues of integration raise questions on different levels. Fundamental is the legal status of a person who has not been born in the country and thus is not a native citizen. Equally important is their degree of social participation, be it in education, labor, healthcare, or social security.[26] A third dimension of integration refers to the freedom to live up to one's customs and traditions, cultural features, and religious convictions—in general, to one's own identity—and to the impact the scope of action migrants can use in order to cultivate their identities has on the identity discourses of the native residents.[27]

For ethicists in Germany or the US wishing to engage with their counterparts across the Atlantic, understanding how or whether to group problems associated with migration under common comparative headings is a necessary task. Necessary does not mean sufficient, however: A richer comparative understanding is possible, one that is facilitated by reconstructing how Christian ethicists writing about migration frame their arguments and arrive at their conclusions. A set of categories concerning the impulses and approaches of Christian-ethical engagements with migration thus bears navigating.

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[23] These policies have been justified on religious grounds, as in US Vice President J.D. Vance's Invocation, on Catholic grounds, of the principle of *ordo amoris* in assigning a preferred moral status to citizens over migrants. Vance's position was forcefully rebuked by Pope Francis in a letter to the US Bishops on February 10, 2025. The position from Francis is consistent with that of then-Cardinal Robert Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV.

[24] A crucial moment for the debate on migration was the 2015 experience of open borders and large numbers of refugees coming in —recall Angela Merkel's famous and, later on, much criticized "wir schaffen das!"—followed by a short period wherein refugees were welcomed and supported, before the public mood rapidly changed. With the change came growing opposition, open hate against "strangers" and the still-growing populist and partly extreme anti-migrant movements.

[25] A critical social ethical perspective that relies on the fact Germany has been an immigration society at least since the end of the Second World War was first elaborated by Albert-Peter Rethmann. *Asyl und Migration. Ethik für eine neue Politik in Deutschland* (Schriften des Instituts für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften 33) (Münster: Lit, 1996).

[26] Michelle Becka, 'Zugehörigkeiten, Rechte, Partizipationsmöglichkeiten. Dimensionen von Citizenship und ihre Herausforderung durch Migration', in *Ethik und Migration: Gesellschaftliche Herausforderungen und sozialethische Reflexion,* edited by Michelle Becka and Albert-Peter Rethmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), pp. 81-105; Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Grenzverläufe gesellschaftlicher Gerechtigkeit: Migration – Zugehörigkeit – Beteiligung (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016), pp. 119-144.

[27] Walter Lesch, 'Die Ambivalenz von Identitätsdiskursen. Bausteine zu einer kosmopolitischen Ethik in einer Welt von Fremden', in *Ethik und Migration: Gesellschaftliche Herausforderungen und sozialethische Reflexion*, edited by Michelle Becka and Albert-Peter Rethmann (Paderborn: Schöningh 2010), pp. 51-66; Hille Haker, 'Identität und Migration. Ein ethischer Kommentar zu Walter Leschs Beitrag 'Die Ambivalenz von Identitätsdiskursen", in *Ethik und Migration: Gesellschaftliche Herausforderungen und sozialethische Reflexion*, edited by Michelle Becka and Albert-Peter Rethmann (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), pp. 67-80.

Impulses and approaches

Unlike problems, which are nationally distinct, if sometimes comparable, the impulses and approaches that characterize the literature on Christian social ethics and migration apply commonly across German and US contexts. Approaches and impulses complement each other: If, broadly put, impulses are about where an argument is trying to go, then approaches speak to where that argument comes from. In what follows, we present two impulses (harmonizing and dismantling) and three approaches (scriptural-hermeneutical, cosmopolitical, and spatial-phenomenological), with examples provided for each category.

1.1 Impulses

The category of impulses represents an answer to the simple question, "What are your arguments working toward?" We have identified two divergent impulses in the German and US literatures. These are the tendencies to extend, absorb, generalize, and reconcile the categories needed to grapple with migration—the *harmonizing* impulse—versus those that work to reveal contradictions that the illusion of consistency has concealed—the *dismantling* impulse. These impulses are rarely expressed purely and explicitly, yet they are present across the field of Christian ethics of migration. Framed in terms of stranger and neighbor, both impulses start with the conviction that, regarding migration to Germany and the US, the present relationship of strangers to neighbors requires redemption. Both impulses also recognize that the present estrangement of stranger and neighbor is a function of the juridical structures that distinguish aliens from citizens and serve as the formal basis for the political and social attitudes that subject these groups to differential treatment.

The difference between the two impulses lies in their respective normative visions for how Christians should best approach those juridical structures. The harmonizing impulse operates along a *continuity* between stranger/neighbor and alien/citizen in seeking to harmonize existing juridical structures with values and principles drawn from a Christian social-ethical tradition.[28] Conversely, the dismantling impulse presumes a *discontinuity* between stranger/neighbor and alien/citizen, working, if not to dismantle said structures, then at least to keep them at bay in welcoming the stranger and redeeming their alienation. To put it dynamically, the dismantling impulse moves down, seeking to critique the state from below, that is, from specific perspectives and spaces. This differs from the harmonizing impulse, which moves up, seeking to critique the state by helping the nation-state live up to the universalism in its promise—or, more precisely, to uphold a contextual universalism within a Christian perspective that grants a vital, if limited, role to the national state. In other words, concerning the question of how one should engage with the national state (which is widely criticized by ethicists of migration as it currently exists), the harmonizing impulse retains the state as an object of reform or improvement to a far greater extent than in the dismantling impulse.

The harmonizing impulse, even when rooted in a particular tradition or oriented toward a particular readership, tends to generate claims that are generalizing and

[28] In their being predicated on a sense of continuity between these two distinctions, harmonizing projects draw inspiration from a range of background resources. Particularly influential in this respect are the traditions of Biblically-motivated theological anthropology and universalistic understandings of ethics. For an example of the former, see Marianne Heimbach-Steins, *Grenzverläufe gesellschaftlicher Gerechtigkeit: Migration – Zugehörigkeit – Beteiligung* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016), pp. 62-64. For an example of the latter, see Omri Boehm, *Radikaler Universalismus* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2022).

comparably optimistic. This impulse implies that there are not only general moral goods beyond particular societies or systems but also that more and more people, including dispossessed or displaced people, can gain access to these goods. The harmonizing framework lends itself to values such as common good or dignity framed in universal terms.[29] In the German context, an example of the harmonizing impulse is evident in the work of Michelle Becka, who has written extensively about the ethics of migration from a Christian social-ethical perspective. Writing on human rights, Becka articulates the claim that "post-and decolonial critique is indispensable, but that a universal normative claim must be defended."[30] In the US context, Kristin Heyer fits among those whose work extolls a harmonizing impulse. She expresses this impulse in pointing out that the "country's immigrant nation 'celebratory narrative' underscores ideas like hospitality, liberty, and democracy", even as "legislative debates about immigration have historically centered around issues of national security, economic instrumentalism and social costs rather than human rights."[31] In its conviction that the ideas of the "celebratory narrative" are worth committing to, Heyer's account suggests the possibility of working through and perhaps refining existing political structures, a sense of possibility that qualifies Heyer's position as harmonizing rather than dismantling.

As for the dismantling impulse, the diagnosis of institutional failure runs deeper, as does the relative emphasis on injury or harm.[32] An example of the dismantling impulse at work is the exhortation that the neighbor become the stranger in order to combat estrangement, for example by way of a Christology of resident alienage.[33] In the German context, Josef Könning's work exemplifies the dismantling impulse, in that he reflects the principal limitations of a human rights-based approach to the global situation of refugees. With regard to Hannah Arendt's "right to have rights", Könning makes the point that "[t]he *right to have rights* does not appear here as the last piece in the puzzle of a human rights ethics. Rather, it is conceived as a proviso that already points to the fact that this world must be different in order to achieve the breakthrough for which the *right to have*

[29] See, for example, Graziano Battistella, 'Migration and Human Dignity: From Policies of Exclusion to Policies Based on Human Rights.' in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*, edited by D.G. Groody and G. Campese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 177-191.

[30] Michelle Becka. 'Whose Criticism of What? Ethical Reflection On Postcolonial and Decolonial Criticism of Human Rights. *De Ethica* 9:1 (2025), pp. 57-71, at p. 58. https://doi.org/10.3384/de-ethica.2001-8819.25915757/.

[31] Kristin E. Heyer, 'Migration and Structural Injustice', in *Christian Theology in the Age of Migration*, edited by Peter Phan (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 185-200, at p. 187.

[32] See William O'Neill, S.J., 'The Place of Displacement: The Ethics of Migration in the United States', in *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migrations of Peoples,* edited by A.M. Brazal and M.T. Dávila (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), pp. 67-77, at p. 71.

[33] See Stephan Bevans, 'Mission among Migrants, Mission of Migrants: Mission of the Church', in *A Promised Land, A Perilous Journey. Theological Perspectives on Migration*, edited by D.G. Groody and G. Campese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), pp. 89-106, at p. 90; Craig S. Hendrickson, 'Mission in an Urban Culture of Displacement: A Missional Theology of Place for the North American Church', in *God's People on the Move. Biblical and Global Perspectives on Migration and Mission*, edited by v.T. Nguyễn and J. M. Prior (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), pp. 101-115, at p. 114. Văn Thanh Nguyễn, 'Migration in the New Testament: The Quest for Home', in *Christian Theology in the Age of Migration*, edited by Peter Phan (New York: Lexington Press, 2020), pp. 69-86, at p. 75. See also Stanley Hauerwas and W. H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony (expanded 25th anniversary edition)* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2014).

rights stands […]."[34] A US counterpart to Könning's work can be found in the work of Justin Ashworth's Christian ethics of migration.[35] On Ashworth's account, "Because it was the theologically dubious means inherent in finite, fallen history that enabled us to imagine our nation as a people whose enduring life we must ensure, any discussion of belonging that fails to reckon with these realities will ring hollow to those who suffer national belonging—and alienage."[36] Perspectives as Könning's and Ashworth's do not call for eliminating political considerations from Christian social-ethical engagements with migration. Yet they do display skepticism about not only existing political structures, but also received assumptions about political membership. It is this sense of distancing or discontinuity that locates such arguments within the dismantling impulse.

1.2 *Approaches*

The category of approaches refers to the repositories of normative insight from which Christian ethical arguments on migration draw. The category represents an answer to the simple question, "What is your argument based on?" Unlike impulses, which are distinguished deductively, and which present essentially fixed and limited options, approaches are variable and combinable. A given approach is not, therefore, to be associated with a whole thinker, book, or article. A given approach refers, rather, to the level of specific arguments, and multiple approaches can and do work together within common projects.

In our experience of the literature, there are three approaches that stand out with particular frequency: the *scriptural-hermeneutical*, *cosmopolitical*, and *spatial-phenomenological* approaches. Stemming again from the premise that the anchoring distinction in Christian migration ethics is stranger/neighbor, the scriptural-hermeneutical approach can be understood as seeking an adequate normative stance toward the stranger in scripture, the cosmopolitical approach as seeking to enlist categories that encompass strangers and neighbors in common and extend the blessings of neighborliness to the stranger, and the spatial-phenomenological approach as seeking to represent the sufferings of the stranger via the stranger's own experiences within specific and concrete spaces. As with the impulses surveyed above, each approach can be taken in turn, with one German and one US example for each case.

In the German context, an example of the scriptural-hermeneutical approach is the claim from Marianne Heimbach-Steins that "Biblical anthropology at the same time provides a strong motif to overcome the distinction of stranger/neighbor by relating to the basic commonality of all humans being created in the image of God."[37] In the US context, an example of the scriptural-hermeneutical approach comes from the work of Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, who are "firmly committed to the deepest biblical traditions of, and

[34] Josef Könning, Theologische Menschenrechtsethik angesichts der globalen Flüchtlingssituation: Eine Neuorientierung in der Diskussion um das Recht, Rechte zu haben (Gesellschaft – Ethik – Religion 23) (Leiden/Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2024), at p. 288.
[35] Justin P. Ashworth, *Electing Citizens and Aliens: A Theology of Migrants, Borders, and Belonging*, (Ann Arbor: ProQuest LLC, 2015), p. 189.
[36] Ibid. at p. 87.
[37] Heimbach-Steins, *Grenzverläufe*, pp. 62-64; Fisch, *Menschen in aufenthaltsrechtlicher Illegalität*, pp. 103-160. German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany in Cooperation with the Council of Christian Churches in Germany, *Shaping Migration in a Humane Manner* (Joints Texts 27) (Bonn/Hannover 2021), online at: https://www.dbk-shop.de/media/files_public/afb7023943fa893cb6eb8da751138aa5/DBK_627001_neu.pdf (accessed 2025-06-19), pp. 73-82; 98-101.

to current expressions of, immigrant justice and 'prophetic hospitality'", which, along with the authors' own experiences with immigrants, "have taught […] that God has a special relationship with those marginalized by social and political systems and therefore that the church should as well."[38] Regarding the hermeneutical-scriptural approach, the Samaritan story stands out with particular prominence.[39] The scriptural-hermeneutical approach is the rare position in which a nationalist orientation on behalf of the state and its laws appears.[40] For example, Romans 13:1-5 is a passage commonly cited in American literature to invoke restrictions on migration.[41]

As for the cosmopolitical approach, a German example comes from Walter Lesch, who writes, "As the regulative idea of a universalist ethic, cosmopolitan responsibility is the horizon of every human being who is not a prisoner of a territory, a state, an ethnic group or a religion."[42] As for the US, Luke Bretherton articulates a "Christian Cosmopolitan Framework" that "must incorporate the fulfilment of humanity via differentiation into particular sodalities of persons that involve differences of language, kinship and territoriality and a myriad of other aspects of creation."[43] In this approach, dignity stands with particular prominence, [44] as do themes of a Christian anthropology relative to the divine,[45] which often takes the form of a critique of the state.[46] Cosmopolitical approaches also support, in some cases, a Christian defense of human rights as indigenous to the tradition.[47] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cosmopolitical approach tends to appear in projects that are animated by the harmonizing impulse.

Turning to the spatial-phenomenological approach, an example in the German context comes from Ulrich Schmiedel, whose claims are grounded in the direct observation of Muslim migrants being received with a handshake at the Munich train station to

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[38] Ched Myers and Matthew Colwell, *Our God is Undocumented: Biblical Faith and Immigrant Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), p. 7.

[39] Pope Francis. *Fratelli tutti. On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Rome 2020-10-03), online at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html (accessed 2025-06-19), numbers 56-86. Similarly relevant are the commandments of love of the neighbor and the stranger (Lev 19,18.33f.) and the parable about the last judgment with its sentence on sheltering or not the stranger (Mt 25, 35.40.45), cf. Heimbach-Steins, *Grenzverläufe*, pp. 65-67.

[40] See, for example, James K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

[41] Susanna Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, migration, and church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 146. It is important to clarify that Snyder is *representing* this position rather than expressing it herself.

[42] Lesch, *Kein Recht auf ein besseres Leben*, p. 161. See also Marianne Heimbach-Steins, 'Migration und Zugehörigkeit. Sozialethische Perspektiven', *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 51 (2010), pp 15-40.

[43] Luke Bretherton, 'The duty of care to refugees, Christian cosmopolitanism, and the hallowing of bare life', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 19:1 (2006), pp. 39-61, at p. 48. For another example, see Kanan Kitani, 'Jesus the Paradigmatic Migrant', in *Christian Theology in the Age of Migration*, edited by Peter Phan (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 129-150.

[44] See, for example, William A. Barbieri, 'The Migrant Imago: Migration and the Ethics of Human Dignity,' in *Christian Theology in the Age of Migration*, edited by Peter Phan (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2020), pp. 169-184.

[45] See, for example, Bretherton, 'The duty of care to refugees'; M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas), *Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008).

[46] Matthew Soerens and Jenny Hwang Yang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion and Truth in the Immigration Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 90.

[47] Daisy L. Machado, Bryan S. Turner and Trygve Wyller, 'Traces of a Theo-Borderland', in *Borderland Religion: Ambiguous Practices of Difference, Hope, and Beyond*, edited by Daisy L. Machado, Bryan S. Turner, and Trygve Wyller (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 3-14, at p. 6.

formulate a critique of common framings for migration in Germany and suggest the possibility of interfaith exchange. "Drawing on the scene at the station", Schmiedel writes, "I advocate for a re-conceptualisation of migration ethics that takes multi-faith encounters, such as the scene at the station in Munich, as a point of departure to develop and discuss the theological ethics of migration in dialogue with Muslims." [48] In the US, Miguel De La Torre likewise aims to ground an ethical response to the suffering surrounding migration in concrete spaces rather than abstract principles. As De Le Torre puts it, "What is needed is to sit with the disenfranchised in the dust (at times the literal dust of the migrant trails), accompanying their suffering."[49] In the spatial-phenomenological approach, arguments are framed in specific, experiential terms, frequently invoking such references as bodies[50], borders[51], and specific sites of encounter as occasions for hospitality.[52] One also finds here a critique of abstract conceptions of time and space that are traced in terms of their consequences in the experience of undocumented migrants in US sanctuary cities.[53]

Conclusion

It is important to be clear on what this sketch of the foregoing categories does and does not accomplish. Readers will notice that we did not comment on the relative frequency of these categories across German/US contexts. To do so would presume total familiarity with the literatures, a task well beyond the scope of the present project. Readers will also notice that we did not argue for or against any particular impulse or approach. This is a substantive position on our part, as we do not believe that any single impulse or approach should

[48] Ulrich Schmiedel, "Take Up Your Cross': Public Theology between Populism and Pluralism in the Post-Migrant Context', *International Journal of Public Theology* 13 (2019), pp. 140-162; Ulrich Schmiedel, 'What's in a Handshake? Multi-Faith Practice as a Starting Point for Christian Migration Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 35:3 (2022), pp. 561-583, at p. 563. https://doi.org/10.1177/09539468221090401. Schmiedel draws from the postmigration approach to migration in Germany, which attends to specific performances of everyday social life to confound the binary between migrant and citizen. For Schmiedel on postmigration, see Schmiedel, 'Take Up Your Cross', at pp. 140-152. For foundational texts on postmigration, see Naika Foroutan, *Es wäre einmal deutsch: Über die postmigrantische Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2023). Naika Foroutan, *Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft: Ein Versprechen der pluralen Demokratie* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2021). Naika Foroutan, Juliane Karakayali, and Riem Spielhaus, *Postmigrantische Perspektiven: Ordnungssysteme, Repräsentationen, Kritik,* edited by Naika Foroutan, Juliane Karakayali and Riem Spielhaus (Frankfurt/NewYork: Campus, 2018). Marc Hill and Erol Yildiz, *Postmigrantische Visionen: Erfahrungen – Reflexionen – Ideen*, edited by Marc Hill and Erol Yildiz (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

[49] Miguel A. De La Torre, *The US Immigration Crisis: Toward an Ethics of Place* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), at p. 101.

[50] William O'Neill, S.J., 'The Place of Displacement: The Ethics of Migration in the United States', in *Living With(out) Borders: Catholic Theological Ethics on the Migrations of Peoples,* edited by A.M. Brazal and M.T. Dávila (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), pp. 67-77, at p. 69.

[51] Carroll `R. (Rodas), *Christians at the Border*, p. 136; Slater, *Our Common, Bordered Home.*

[52] Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 95. The motif is present also in German literature, but it is commented on in an ambivalent way, with regard to the precarious notion of Germany as an immigration country, on the one hand, and the specific meaning of hospitality which means to host people for a limited time and expect them to leave afterward, on the other. Cf. Axel Bernd Kunze, Wo stößt Gastfreundschaft an Grenzen?, in *Zerreißprobe Flüchtlingsintegration*, edited by M. Heimbach-Steins (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder 2016), pp.56-69; Dominik Ritter, Gastfreundschaft und Willkommenskultur. Wen sollen wir warum und wie willkommen heißen? In *Zuflucht – Zusammenleben – Zugehörigkeit? Kontroversen der Migrations- und Integrationspolitik interdisziplinär beleuchtet*, edited by Andreas Fisch, Myriam Ueberbach, Prisca Patenge, Dominik Ritter (Forum Sozialethik 18) (Münster: Aschendorff 2017), pp. 397-427.

[53] Hendrickson, 'Mission in an Urban Culture of Displacement', p. 105.

characterize the Christian response to migration. Christians do not always speak with one voice on this or any other social issue. As contexts shift, one should never expect that a single combination of problem, impulse, and approach with a single anchoring distinction will unlock every answer. The association of a given commentary on migration with a certain impulse or approach, therefore, does not constitute an evaluation of the strengths or weaknesses of that commentary, nor does it presume to guide readers, whether self-identified Christians or not, on how to orient their thoughts and practices to respond to migration as a social-ethical issue.

What the foregoing taxonomy helps accomplish, even as a sketch, is the creation of a framework by which ethicists can recognize each other's arguments as sharing certain impulses or approaches relative to their own or, when disagreements arise, help ethicists formulate more precise critiques. In terms of the comparative dimension at the core of this project, the fact of the commonality of the categories across German and US contexts not only facilitates a mutual recognition among migration-ethical projects in both countries, but also helps clarify how not all problems that social ethicists are responding to are the same. The relation between (distinctive) problems and (common) analytical structures, in the form of impulses and approaches, suggests why the scholarly output of Christian ethicists of migration sometimes varies across the respective national contexts. Navigating this balance suggests not just the possibility of facilitating further exchange between the respective literatures, but also engagement with the fundamental questions for a Christian ethics of migration: *Who belongs? What does it mean to think of strangers and neighbors across such categories of identity? What constitutes a common identity?*

The value of reflecting on migration, an inherently international topic, in a self-consciously international way, especially for countries like the United States and Germany, which share so much even as they are also affected by such different histories, demographics, and geographic locations, is clear. In an atmosphere in which migration continues to be an ethical challenge amidst deteriorating expectations for adherence to basic liberal-democratic processes, and in which the production of new Christian social-ethical literature on migration is unlikely to abate any time soon, the building of German-US bridges is a valuable undertaking.

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