

Understanding and Building Justice from Religious Beliefs with Displaced Population in Colombia

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More than 2 million people have been displaced in Colombia due the internal armed conflict during the last decades. Research teams from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (PUJ, Bogotá) and the Jesuit Service for Refugees (SJR) have been developing a study to identify the mental representations and religious practices of those people forced into displacement in Colombia. These issues are seen in light of the biblical categories of hope and *imago Dei*, in order to, in one hand, clarify the role of religion and spirituality in coping with adversity and, in the other hand, to propose alternatives for the establishment of strong social networks for this population.

From a qualitative perspective, the study seeks to determine some of the effects that displacement due the violence has on the Colombian population. This in-course research is focused on four specific topics: the meaning of the possession of the land, basic institutions for socialization, the spirit of the law and religious imagination, assessed within a group of 120 displaced people in four different small towns and rural zones.

The project has three main stages: 1) building the theoretical framework and conceptualization; 2) collection and analysis of data; 3) conclusions, debriefing to communities and suggested pastoral practices.

Currently, the research is in stage two. Researchers have been using unstructured interviews and observing participation in order to collect data about the way in which these displaced people experience their situation. Among some initial conclusions, researchers have found that in many cases the religious orientation allows people to return to their ordinary lives after displacement. However, in several cases, religious beliefs obstruct this process. This specific presentation introduces some of the findings on this topic.

Based upon this goal, what the research seeks to elaborate more specifically are the relationships between religious beliefs and coping with displacement. The fundamental question guiding this research is: What are those mechanisms of religious mystification and how are they built?

As well stated by other researchers, the importance underlying these kinds of studies rests in the fact that it "can help therapies determine whether clients' religious and spiritual beliefs and community could be used as a resource to help them better cope, heal, and grow" (Richards & Bergin, 1999, p. 173). A deeper knowledge about the displaced communities' beliefs could be a powerful tool for theologians and pastoral counselors in their efforts to offer solutions to human problems, at least for the particular population in which the research is being conducted.

These contextual resources will help theologians to formulate plans and pastoral activities in a more meaningful way. The researcher describes this challenge in terms of the overcoming old or urban religious practices, when most of the population is rural and they do not have a stable environment. In addition, it is possible that public justice and policies (local and state) may change in order to respond to real needs and not merely as a short-term, band-aid-like solution.

Starting with a biblical perspective about social commitment, we hope that, as a result of these findings, the different groups of the displaced population become real social actors. In order to do that, the researchers will help them to formulate some alternatives for their own development and to express their values and identities publicly, not ignoring the religious ones.

Researchers want to characterize the religious imagination, ways of thinking and personal religious experiences of the displaced population, while reading them in the light of the biblical categories of *hope* and *imago Dei in other's face*. As a result, researchers will offer theological criteria for pastoral proposals according with the sense of God's people and community condensed in the Scriptures.

In addition, researchers want 1) to identify the main factors around of which displaced people construct their religious imagination and its role in the social practices; 2) to establish the religious background from which people design their vision of hope in the middle of an armed conflict and the forced displacement; and 3) to offer theological guidelines applicable to pastoral actions and plans for this kind of community.

Until now, the research team has focused its efforts on the collection of many field notes and diaries, in which people express their personal religious experiences and practices in their daily life. Additionally, we built one instrument based on three separate questionnaires to measure religious beliefs and imaginations, as well as their images of God. A correlation between both sources of data will be established in order to find interpretative keys to understanding those images of God and their effects on daily interactions.

Such effects could be the loss of land and farms, the breaking-off of the basic socialization forms and the lack of support from the Colombian justice system. It is clear for us that religions are not the problem. We think that clergy and pastoral counselors – and that is the one of the most important goals of this research- can help people to clarify their religious beliefs, in order to enhance their daily relationships and to improve the human conditions in which they try to dignify their lives. In this sense, Theology and pastoral studies are important tools to encourage people to cope with their difficulties.