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Cho, Eunil David: *Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience*. Religious Stories Korean American Dreamers Tell in the Face of Uncertainty. – Leiden: Brill 2024. 228 S. (Theology in Practice, 13), brosch. \$ 25,00 ISBN: 978-90-04-70404-6

Kyle, who studies sociology, came to the US via Honduras following the death of his younger sister. Julia works as an accountant, and her family became undocumented after a lawyer forgot to file an important immigration form. Charlie, who is unemployed, became undocumented when his family ran out of money after being scammed by a false immigration agency. Sue studies art and communications. She had been on the verge of deportation from the US when the news came that she had received DACA status.

Stories like these—personal, specific, gripping—form the basis of Eunil David Cho’s *Undocumented Migration as a Theologizing Experience*, which employs a narrative approach to interpret the stories of young Korean-Americans of DACA status as “theologizing” experiences, which is to say, stories in which God plays a role for those who tell them. DACA, which stands for Deferred Action for Child Arrivals, is a US federal policy stipulating that some undocumented individuals are eligible to receive a renewable two-year period of protection from deportation and apply for a work permit, so long as they: (a) had been physically present in the US for five years as of June 15, 2012; (b) entered the country as children. Initiated by Barack Obama, the policy continues, albeit with much uncertainty, under Donald Trump.

At only ten people, the number of participants interviewed by Cho is quite small. Also narrow are the profiles of those interviewed: young (late teens to late twenties), Korean-American, Christian, and recipients of DACA. Yet such specificity does not restrict the book’s significance to these demographic categories alone. The themes and claims raised in the book—from the “violence of uncertainty” (since US immigration policies are constantly changing) to the damage of “narrative foreclosure” (since undocumented status deprives one of a clear future)—can be extended without difficulty into successively larger contexts, from non-Korean DACA recipients to undocumented migrants per se, migrants per se, and, ultimately, anyone with the capacity to find something with which to connect within these stories.

The book is structured across two sections. In section I (chap.s 1–2), Cho describes the empirical dimension of the project as based on a series of interviews (chap. 1), then goes to great lengths to justify the narrative approach to pastoral theology (chap. 2). Drawing support from philosophers like Alastair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur or gerontologists like William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth McKim, Cho argues on behalf of a universal or near-universal impulse to make sense of our lives within a sociocultural milieu by telling stories. In section II (chap.s 3–5), Cho foregrounds

his interlocutors' stories with respect to past (chap. 3), present (chap. 4), and future (chap. 5) orientations. In addition to being a clever way of "narrativizing" the narratives on hand, the past-present-future sequencing is also effective for conveying some of the book's major points.

Regarding the past, for example, Cho delves into the background of the DACA recipients, explaining how they came to be undocumented (most had families that overstayed their legal residency) and came to *feel* undocumented (adolescent recognition that basic rites of passage like obtaining a driver's license were off-limits to them, and many had difficulties in school). Regarding the present, Cho draws out the notion of the fact that his interviewees live in a sort of eternal present, their future radically disconnected, if not missing—a condition that prevents the participants from actualizing what he calls the "redemptive self" (140). Cho also speaks to burdens unique to Korean DACA recipients, who neither fit the cultural expectations for what undocumented migrants should look like nor find it easy to conform to the myth of the "model minority" so often applied to Asian-American communities. As for the future, Cho cites Jonathan Lear to invoke a "radical hope" directed toward a future goodness that "transcends" our inability to imagine and tell stories (169). In this final chap., Cho makes the book's most overtly theological move, arguing that a relationship with God comprises an important element of how DACA recipients reconcile themselves to conditions of uncertainty and make sense of their lives. In Cho's telling, the narratives are in fact a form of prayer, a point made with reference to William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, itself a classic of foregrounding religious experience within individuals' lives.

If there is a complaint to be made about this book, it is that Cho defers his subject's stories (with one exception at the start of the introduction) until section II, nearly halfway into the book. Although chap. 2's efforts on behalf of narrative approaches are convincing, they would benefit from being preceded by material drawn from the narratives themselves. Readers might therefore be advised to read chap. 1 quickly first, followed by chap.s 3–5 in detail, and only then finally come back to chap. 2 for the deeper dive into narrativity. Beyond being, arguably, a more vivid experience for the reader, this approach would also reinforce the teleodynamic character of Cho's method as an interviewer, in that he sought to listen to the stories without imposing his own biases and to let the themes emerge organically.

There is also the question of the applicability of the book to the experiences of readers based in Europe. Although it has already been noted that the stories in Cho's book are all the more universal for being specific, there are nevertheless political and cultural differences between Europe and America regarding migration that raise questions about how well Cho's points might apply to the European migrant experience. There is no single European equivalent to DACA, for example. Nor would undocumented migrants likely be embedded in the sort of Protestant Christian communities structuring the lives of Cho's interview subjects and grounding his claim of migration as theologizing—this is part of a general divergence in which American migrants tend to be "otherized" on the basis of race and Europeans on the basis of religion.

Sociological differences aside, there are certainly European academic projects that potentially complement Cho's book. Examples include the postmigration approach of Naika Foroutan, the work on public theology of Ulrich Schmiedel, or the work on religious minorities and solidarity with migrants of Daniela Rapisarda. Most importantly, the goal of Cho's book of creating a space in which undocumented perspectives can represent themselves in their own way applies no less urgently in Europe than in the US. Amidst the prevailing transatlantic impulse to scapegoat migrant

communities—especially those who are undocumented—Cho’s demonstration of the power of narratives in cultivating empathy is compelling, not only as a project in pastoral theology, but simply in creating a space for stories that are at particular risk of going unheard. At a time in which US government agents wait outside churches to apprehend undocumented congregants, this is an achievement. If, as Simone Weil said, attention is the highest form of generosity, then Cho’s book is generous indeed.

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