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## **Anawim Economics: A Migrant-Centered Hermeneutic**

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# ANAWIM ECONOMICS: A MIGRANT-CENTERED HERMENEUTIC

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**Abstract:** Looking particularly at migrants moving from Central America’s Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) to the United States, this paper will use Luke’s Gospel and the Biblical concept of the *anawim* to argue that commonly used Christian anthropological considerations (i.e. Imago Dei), are not comprehensive or incisive enough to accurately reflect the situation of migrants. In reality, migrants are not always “choosing” to come to the U.S. at all, but rather merely reacting to both push and pull factors that are largely perpetuated by unjust economic policies. Migrants are not “stealing American jobs” but are forced into 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, or difficult) for which they often work extensive hours for little pay, all while under the threat of deportation.

An economic consideration in which the *anawim* are the center allows for a much more honest and critical look at the state of the Southern border, something that is necessary when working towards integration that is based on hospitality. So long as rhetoric around the economics of migration places the blame on migrants instead of the underlying sinful structures, it will be easy to promote the idea that migrants pose a threat. Economic rhetoric focused on the world’s most poor and vulnerable allows for greater strides towards fulfilling principles of Christian hospitality and achieving true integration. Failures in the migration system are not only a failure of imagination, but rather a failure to bother to love.

## Introduction

And Jesus said to him [the blind man], “Go; your faith has *saved* you.” Immediately, the man regained his sight and began following him on the road. (Mk 10:52, emphasis added)

You [speaking to the crowd] will be hated by all because of my name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be *saved* (Mk 13:13, emphasis added)

A mere three chapters apart from one another in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus tells two different figures that their faith has saved them. However, when more closely examining the

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rest of each individual passage, it is clear Jesus that Jesus is talking about the idea of *saving* someone in two very different ways. In Mk 10, he is saving someone by directly and concretely healing their blindness, but in Mk 13, he is speaking about a much more abstract sense of saving: a salvation that is yet to come. This comparative example engages just two of the over hundred different uses of the verb to save (*sozo*) in the New Testament, with each application being used in a variety of ways throughout the biblical narrative.<sup>3</sup> The reality of Jesus's Incarnation and Resurrection, along with the centuries of fierce dialogue between Christian scholars about soteriology, all highlight the necessity of Christian engagement with the issue of *saving*. Indeed, thinking closely about *saving* in the biblical narrative and beyond must prompt Christians to consider how they are called to treat one another in both an individual and communal sense. In Christ's ministry, making others feel "cared for and made well" was similarly central to his earthly work and the transcendent promise of eternal salvation represented in the Resurrection.

The title of this article is "Anawim Economics," and its fundamental purpose is to propose a comprehensive hermeneutic regarding migration that is more attentive to the different understandings of salvation that Jesus articulates in the Gospels. As such, I plan to define and more greatly attend to each individual usage of the term in subsequent sections, along with the usages of *anawim* and "economics." For now, it will suffice to say that the *anawim* refers to migrant populations, those to whom care needs to be shown. Found in different texts throughout the Hebrew Bible, the *anawim* refers to "the poor ones," those who remained faithful to God even in times of great difficulty. The use of the term economics is equally intentional, as it is the study of how goods are produced, moved, and consumed throughout different levels of society. There very much exists a migration economy throughout the world, and a dutiful adherence to Christian principles of care and saving must necessarily consider the most marginalized in that economy, the *anawim*, in order to show them appropriate care. This paper will therefore begin with a fundamental assertion about the nature of borders and theological consideration of the *anawim* before engaging the Christian tradition presented in *Christianity in the Law of Migration*. In doing so, this article

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<sup>3</sup> *Biblestudytools.com*, "Sozo Meaning in Bible - New Testament Greek Lexicon - New American Standard," [www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/sozo.html](http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/sozo.html) (accessed March 2, 2022).

will show that providing care to migrant populations is most effectively accomplished when they are provided a recognition of their own agency and individual self-worth.

### **The Historic Development of Migration Economies**

Throughout the era of Westphalian sovereignty, borders have come to play an increasingly vital role in reinforcing the idea that a political entity's ability to control its own territory is directly tied to its ability to exert control over its own citizens. At a very fundamental level, borders serve to create two distinct groups: an "in-group" and an "out-group." Members of the "in-group" are those that live and work within the confines of the defined border, able to enjoy all the benefits that come with such membership. Members of the "out-group" therefore, are the much larger group of people who are not contained within the border, and are not allowed to access the people and resources inside, save for the discretion of the "in-group." Robert David Sack articulates this idea of territoriality, succinctly writing that "territoriality is the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area."<sup>4</sup> In short, he argues that the "out-group" is not controlled through their inability to access the controlled territory, but rather that the "in-group" is controlled by a the cultivation of a nationalistic identity, one only understandable against the exclusion of those not able to live within certain borders.

Jean Gottmann also discusses this concept in *The Significance of Territory*. He builds upon Sack's idea of territoriality as a means of control, and expands it to add that borders exist as a means to facilitate trade and cultural exchange.<sup>5</sup> Those in the "in-group" are able to control the flow of capital through their borders, giving territory the added benefit of opportunity. The challenge, consequently, is to strike a balance between allowing enough cultural exchange and working interaction to capitalize on opportunity, but also restricting borders enough to enhance security.

The United States as a sovereign nation has had a long and complicated history with the realities of international migration, but in many ways, it can be classified as a continual leveraging of opportunity. Gottmann's musings on territoriality as a means of controlling opportunity are largely evident in American history because sentiments towards migrants in

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<sup>4</sup> Robert David Sack, *Human Territoriality: Its Theory and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Jean Gottmann, *The Significance of Territory* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

popular culture have largely revolved around the idea of work (or economic output). While Northern and Western Europeans were some of the first to migrate to the United States, the Irish and other similar ethnic groups experienced religious persecution and were unable to find work in many urban areas.<sup>6</sup> Since that time, the United States has undergone different phases of migration, but has still had work at the center of the migrant exclusion. For example the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in response to a popular narrative that Chinese workers were responsible for reducing wages and increasing economic hardships.<sup>7</sup>

Khalid Koser has created the term “3D jobs” to refer to those jobs typically held by immigrants in American society. Often referred to by people in the United States as “unskilled labor” or agricultural work, these are jobs that often involve dirty, dangerous, or difficult work, and can pose an immediate or continuous threat to the worker’s well-being.<sup>8</sup> While many of the jobs that would fall into one of these categories were historically held by migrants of Asian descent, the harsh immigration laws of the nineteenth century required the United States to tap into a new labor force. The “Bracero Program,” an agreement between the United States and Mexico to bring hundreds of thousands of Mexican workers to the agricultural regions of the United States in exchange for a fair wage, decent food, and housing, was one such way to find a new labor source.<sup>9</sup>

The Bracero Program that laid the foundation for the context of modern migration in which this paper is written. In a vast departure from the historical norm, a 2017 Pew Research study found that from 2007 to 2015 the number of migrants coming from Mexico declined, and those from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador experienced a drastic increase.<sup>10</sup> One other fact worth emphasizing is that in that same time period, the percentage of immigrants who entered through legal processes from the Northern Triangle increased by 24%, compared to an average national increase of 19%. Even more striking is the 26%

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<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Batalova, Mary Hanna, and Christopher Levesque “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” *Migrationpolicy.org*, February 9, 2021, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2020#immig-now-historical](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states-2020#immig-now-historical).

<sup>7</sup> Batalova, Hanna, and Levesque, “Frequently Requested Statistics.”

<sup>8</sup> Khalid Koser, *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> *Nps.gov*, “American Latino Theme Study: Immigration (U.S. National Park Service),” 2010, [www.nps.gov/articles/latinothemeimmigration.htm](http://www.nps.gov/articles/latinothemeimmigration.htm).

<sup>10</sup> D’Vera Cohn, et al., “1. Recent Trends in Northern Triangle Immigration,” *Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project*, December 7, 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2017/12/07/recent-trends-in-northern-triangle-immigration/](http://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2017/12/07/recent-trends-in-northern-triangle-immigration/).

increase in unauthorized migrant populations from the Northern Triangle, as compared to a 10% decline nationally. It is because of this demographic shift that rhetoric around ‘illegal immigrants stealing jobs’ and ‘build the wall’ have dominated national headlines in the United States. Nevertheless, looking at quantitative migration data is just one aspect of a much larger and much more complex system.

### **Who are the *Anawim*?**

It is in through the lens of biblical concept of the *anawim* that the other side of economic migration coin in the United States begins to reveal itself. In 2001, Pope John Paul II gave an address to a general audience on Psalm 149. The fourth verse reads: “For the Lord takes delight in his people, he crowns the humble with victory.”<sup>11</sup> It is this verse, in the context of the broader Psalm, in which the concept of the *anawim* is most clearly expressed. John Paul wrote that the *anawim* are the persecuted, the oppressed, the marginalized members of society who place their faith in God despite their situation. It is those who, even with all their worldly burdens, rejoice in the reality of their lives and the loving relationship they have with their Creator.

The pope is quite clear in attending to the fact that the *anawim* do not exist in a vacuum; they are not oppressed or marginalized in an abstract sense. Rather, John Paul writes that the concept of the *anawim* also “indicates not just the oppressed, the miserable, the persecuted for justice, but also those who, with fidelity to the moral teaching of the alliance with God, are marginalized by those who prefer to use violence, riches and power.”<sup>12</sup> The *anawim* are therefore the people in whom God delights not only due to their fidelity to Him, but to their constant persistence even in the midst of sinfully oppressive societal structures.

The historical evolution of the migrant economy in the United States has led to the stage in which the country currently finds itself. Migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America experience a particular kind of oppression that is structural, that often forces them to migrate whether they would like to or not. In a 2019 letter to Congress, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) urged federal lawmakers to more

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<sup>11</sup> Ps 149:4

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, “May 23, 2001 General Audience,” at The Holy See, [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010523.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010523.html) (accessed March 2, 2022).

comprehensively consider the root causes of underdevelopment and migration in the Northern Triangle. The letter addresses generalized violence in the region, perpetual underdevelopment, agricultural infertility, and corruption as several of the reasons that might force migrants to move.<sup>13</sup> Looking at these issues through a structural lens leads to the conclusion that migration is much more than an “individual choice,” as it is so often framed. It is instead migrants seeking to achieve a bare-minimum quality of life to which all people are entitled. Migrants are persecuted at borders around the world, but perhaps most acutely so at the United States’ southern border. Persevering through racism and violence in the United States, while only being here in the first place because they moved out of an economic or humanitarian necessity, is why migrants from the Northern Triangle can appropriately fulfill the lens of the *anawim*.

### **Engaging the Theological Tradition**

Having described the migration economy and the theological concept of the *anawim*, we return to where the paper started: with the concept of salvation and saving. The reality of “anawim economics” proposes an interesting paradox that William Cavanaugh lays out well:

Most significantly, capital is free to move across national borders, but labor is not. Indeed, the impermeability of border for laborers accounts for much of what we call “globalization”. It is the very fact that workers south of the border can be paid a tenth of what workers a few miles north of the border that accounts for the phenomenon of factories in the U.S. shutting down and moving to Mexico. [...] and yet the displacement of people has become a major phenomenon of a globalized world. Millions of “illegal aliens” live and work in the United States, coming mainly from south of the border. Borders regulate mobility, but they do not prevent it. Indeed, it is most accurate to say that the purpose of borders is to control the movement of labor, not stop it.<sup>14</sup>

What is striking about the paradox that Cavanaugh is addressing is how accurately it reflects the historical development of migration in the United States. We must be careful not overly generalize (since migration is an extremely complex and multifaceted concept), but the above description shows quite clearly the reality of an “in-group” leveraging the

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<sup>13</sup> USCCB, “USCCB-CRS Letter to Congress on the US-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act,” June 24, 2019, [www.usccb.org/resources/usccb-crs-letter-congress-us-northern-triangle-enhanced-engagement-act-june-24-2019-0](http://www.usccb.org/resources/usccb-crs-letter-congress-us-northern-triangle-enhanced-engagement-act-june-24-2019-0) (accessed March 2, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> William T. Cavanaugh, “Migrant, Tourist, Pilgrim, Monk: Mobility and Identity in a Global Age,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008): 344-345

opportunity created by their borders to the disadvantage of the “out-group.” What makes this dynamic even more unjust is the reality that many of the factors driving the “out-group” to seek opportunity are created and perpetuated by the “in-group.” It is in this juncture that we find the *anawim*, migrants who are victims of an unjust system yet still seek to glorify God through honoring their individual dignity and right to work.

How then should we engage the Christian tradition? To what are those who believe in the reality of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection called to do in response to the plight of migrants both in the United States and around the world? One of the most vocal Christian voices regarding migrants in recent years has been Pope Francis, who has been unequivocal in stating that honoring the transcendent idea of salvation means working to concretely care for and make others well in this life. His encyclicals such as *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti* pose an unequivocal call to action to Christians around the world to respond generously to those in need, while visits like his 2013 trip to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa show him in close proximity to migrants in need.<sup>15</sup> In his analysis of Psalm 149, John Paul speaks very much to the same reality. The text reads that the faithful of God should praise His name through dancing, through taking up instruments.<sup>16</sup> There is a sense that worship and honoring God, and therefore his people, comes through concrete action in this life and is more than just words.

In *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, the themes discussed thus far well attended to by Gemma Tulud Cruz in her chapter on theological responses to unwanted migration. While not explicitly using the term *anawim*, her use of “migrants in search of a bare life” is a close analogue.<sup>17</sup> Migrants are not coming to the United States because of their selfish desire to steal American jobs or upset the status quo of the country, which is often the presumption of many who disparage their migration journey. Rather than seeking this “better life,” Cruz asserts that the migrants are merely trying to survive, to gain access to the bare necessities of life that guarantee their survival. These needs cannot be met in their home

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<sup>15</sup> Francis, “8 July 2013: Visit to Lampedusa - Holy Mass in the “Arena” Sports Camp,” July 8, 2013, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130708\\_omelia-lampedusa.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130708_omelia-lampedusa.html).

<sup>16</sup> Ps 149:3

<sup>17</sup> Gemma Cruz, “When the Poor Knock on Our Door,” in *Christianity and the Law of Migration*, eds. Silas W. Allard, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021): Page 201



countries, so they must necessarily look for other options, most commonly resulting in a perilous migration journey.

Her analysis of the Christian body as “one people” is another helpful theological reflection that speaks to the systemically oppressive nature of the globalized market economy, and how Christians are called to respond. She discusses the Trinity is an inherently relational entity, which evidences the reality that the Christian God has concern and love for the “other” as an inherent part of God’s substance. Believing themselves to be made in the likeness and image of this God, Christians must therefore hold themselves to the standard to recognizing the dignity and inherent worth of each other, and of every person they encounter.

Within the context of migration, recognizing the other is looking at the figure of the migrant as the *anawim*, as the other that has been systematically oppressed by a failure to love made manifest in structural systems. Cruz succinctly quotes Kristin Heyer in saying that “the subversive hospitality invited by a migrant God demands not only an orientation of operative frameworks but also a concrete praxis of kinship with the displaced.”<sup>18</sup> This is exactly what both Pope Francis and John Paul are writing on in their reflections. To truly live a Christian life is to recognize the transcendent aspect of salvation, that humans are made in the *imago Dei* and will one day return to Him, and for that they rejoice in prayer. But there exists at the same time a concrete aspect, an analysis of economic structures that is accompanied by concrete action to aid the humanitarian needs of migrants. Christians are called to take up instruments, to take on substantive action, in rejoicing about God; the *anawim* remind us that to concretely rejoice in God is to honor the other, the oppressed in society.

### **Conclusion: “Go and Do Likewise”**

These are not aspirational claims. They are not the “highest ideal” of what a Christian must constantly work to achieve. While the challenges of a globalized and interconnected world are by no means ignored by the Christian tradition, to look at the reality of migration through the lens of the *anawim* and then take direct action is a requirement that the Christian tradition calls upon its people to fulfill. The Christian tradition has long looked to the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a way to understand how to appropriately engage with others.

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<sup>18</sup> Cruz, “When the Poor Knock on Our Door,” 107.

Jesus instructs an expert on the law that to be a true neighbor exists not in enforcing boundaries and clinging to barriers, but in showing mercy to those around.<sup>19</sup> This message of “go and do likewise” never rings truer than when it is applied to those that are viewed as strangers, including and especially the *anawim*.

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<sup>19</sup> Lk 10:30-37