

Migration, Diaspora Communities, and the New Missionary Encounter with Western Society

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The biblical record—from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis (3:23) to the magnificent vision of the Apostle John, who is exiled on the Island of Patmos in Revelation (1:9)—reveals a profound interconnection between human mobility or dispersion and the unfolding of salvation history. The same link is manifest throughout the history of Christian missions. As a prominent case in point, the Western missionary movement, from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, was shaped by international migrations. European missionaries not only benefited from the projection of Western political power, but they also formed a segment of the massive tide of European movement that dominated international migrations. By 1915, twenty-one percent of Europeans resided outside Europe, and Europeans effectively occupied or settled in over one-third of the inhabited world.¹

Global Migrations from 1960

With the end of European colonialism, or from the 1960s, international migrations have escalated in volume, velocity, and complexity, and have transformed into a truly global phenomenon.

The earlier flows, which were mostly defined by European initiatives and economic priorities, have given way to a far more complex pattern of migration involving vastly greater non-European or non-white migrations from the developing and under-developed, non-Western world to the Western world—generally considered South-to-North flows.

By the 1980s, Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia had become net exporters of millions of people to Western countries, initially as labor migrants, subsequently as asylum seekers, but increasingly and predominantly as economic migrants. By 2000, non-Western migrants accounted for seventy percent of immigrants into most wealthy developed nations in Europe and North America.

The Religious Divide

It is often overlooked that the global South-North divide is as religious as it is economic. In Western societies, the process of modernization has produced distinctive cultural changes associated with the secular ideal of liberal democracy, including: stronger individualism; a greater push for gender equality; sexual permissiveness; greater

tolerance of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality; and a massive erosion of institutional religion. Non-Western societies are not static, but they remain resistant to secularization (at least Western forms of the phenomenon) and retain strong allegiance to religious systems and traditional values.

Perhaps the most conspicuous testimony to this trend is the phenomenal growth of Christianity in the non-Western world accompanied by a corresponding decline in the West over the last half a century or so. This “shift” has seen the emergence of Africa and Latin America as the main Christian heartlands in the twenty-first century.

Due to the pervasive religiosity of non-Western societies, the South-to-North migration movement is essentially a religious movement. This is to say that in addition to the economic and cultural benefits which the new immigrants bring, they are also impacting Western societies in fundamental ways related to religious life. In other words, contemporary global migrations implicate the West as a site of new religious interactions. This is particularly true of the growth of new Muslim and Christian populations; however, it is the latter that forms the focus here.

The West as a New Missionary Frontier

It is a most extraordinary historical coincidence that the momentous “shift” in global Christianity’s demographic and cultural center of gravity to the southern continents has occurred at almost precisely the same time as the equally momentous reversal in the direction of international migrations. This means that, as in the previous five centuries, the continents which represent the chief sources of global migration movement are also now the main heartlands of the Christian faith.

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Thus, in the same way that unprecedented European migrations from Christianity’s old heartland provided the impetus for the European missionary movement, phenomenal migrations from Christianity’s new heartlands (in Africa, Latin America, and Asia) have galvanized a massive non-Western missionary movement. This movement from the new heartlands of Christianity to the old centers where the faith is experiencing dramatic erosion and marginalization essentially incorporates missionary initiatives, not only because every Christian missionary is a migrant in some sense, but even more so because every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.

Christian Immigrants in America

America is the definitive immigrant nation, and it remains the chief destination of the world's international migrants. By 2005, international migrants accounted for roughly thirteen percent of the American population. Significantly, the overwhelming majority of recent (post-1960) immigrants are of non-European stock and come from over 150 countries.² The majority—sixty-five percent, according to one estimate—also claim to be Christian.³ The impact has been striking. Across all Catholic and Protestant groups (mainline or evangelical), the new congregations or “ethnic” churches formed by the new immigrants provide the cutting edge of Christian growth. Their distinctive expressions of faith and ways of doing church, even when adapted to the new context, have contributed to a “de-Europeanizing of American Christianity.”⁴

Here is a glimpse of what is going on:

Largely due to massive Hispanic immigration, Latinos now account for one-third of all Catholics in the US; this Latino segment will continue to rise for the foreseeable future.⁵

The fastest-growing churches in America over the last two decades have arguably been Korean. By 1990, there were over two thousand Korean congregations belonging to various Protestant denominations nationwide.⁶

African immigrant congregations are also flourishing in major cities throughout the country, founded by enterprising migrant-pastors.⁷ For example, in August 1990, when the outbreak of the Liberian civil war left him stranded in the US, pastor (now Bishop) Darlington Johnson got together a group of seventeen Liberians and started Sunday worship at Blackburn Center at Howard University (Washington D.C.). So began Bethel World Outreach Church. In the space of ten years, what began as a small Liberian fellowship flowered into a community of faith comprising people from forty-two nations with a membership of about three thousand. In the fall of 2006, after ten consecutive evenings on the streets of downtown Silver Spring, Maryland, the evangelistic team from Bethel World Outreach ministries collected contact details from 1,132 respondents!

Christian Immigrants in Europe

Unlike the US, where the majority of new immigrants are Christian, the majority of post-1960s immigrants in Europe are Muslim. Islam represents Europe's fastest-growing religion and its second largest faith. But among Europe's new immigrants are also huge numbers of Christians whose presence has contributed to an explosive growth in the numbers of churches. Largely confined to major metropolitan centers, these immigrant congregations display extraordinary spiritual vigor and dynamism in startling contrast to much older homegrown churches. In 2001, the number of African Christians throughout Europe was estimated to be in excess of three million.⁸

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A 2005 assessment of church growth and attendance in England reported that non-white groups account for fifty-eight percent of churchgoers in London (outside London the percentage drops to thirty-one).⁹ A century ago, Charles Spurgeon's 5000-seat

Metropolitan Tabernacle at Elephant and Castle (south London) was the largest Baptist church, with thousands of white English worshippers; today, the largest Baptist church in Britain is composed of African immigrants.¹⁰

The Nigerian-led Kingsway International Christian Center has the largest congregation (over ten thousand) in the entire United Kingdom; while the Redeemed Christian Church of God (a Nigerian-based movement), which established its first church in Britain in 1989, had grown to 141 churches with a total of eighteen thousand members by 2005.¹¹

Perhaps the most powerful testimony to the dynamism and drive of contemporary African Christianity is the fact that the largest single Christian community in all of Europe (the former heartland of the faith) is the Embassy for the Blessed Kingdom of God to All Nations in Kiev, Ukraine, founded by Sunday Adelaja, a Nigerian pastor. Established in November 1993 as a Bible study group of seven people meeting in Adelaja's apartment, the new group registered as a church three months later with only forty-nine members.¹² By 2002, after adopting an outreach strategy which focused on the marginalized groups within Ukrainian society, the church had grown to twenty thousand. Over one million Ukrainians have reportedly been converted to Christianity as a result of its ministry.

Assessing the Missionary Function

The growing presence of immigrant Christian communities in Western societies is no longer open to debate. But many question the capacity of these new Christian initiatives to reach across the cultural chasm that often separates newly-formed, non-white communities from the predominantly white mainstream society. They imagine that immigrant congregations are primarily ethnic-based, inward-looking entities specifically designed to address the parochial needs of particular immigrant groups. In this view, the overwhelmingly Ukrainian, but Nigerian- founded and led, Embassy for the Blessed Kingdom of God to All Nations, is seen as a singular exception.

This outlook reflects less an understanding of the nature of Christian expansion through the centuries than the influence of Western missionary models and assumptions. Throughout the history of the Christian faith, migrant Christians who settled in new areas and formed settled fellowships that provided long-term witness formed the main thrust of cross-cultural expansion, not the few gifted specialists serving in distant lands, dependent upon the superior resources of their church and country.¹³ Meaningful assessment of the emerging non-Western missionary movement calls for new forms of analysis.

Partly because they hail from countries where the Christian experience is dynamic, and partly due to the hardships and travail of the immigrant experience, these congregations are characterized by marked spiritual vitality and a strong commitment to evangelism. Many (if not most) exhibit a strong missionary vision—one engendered in no small measure by the fact that they confront societies in which Christianity is experiencing

marked decline. At the very least, their growing presence provides a counterweight to the downturn in Christian observance and church attendance within Western societies.

In truth, a good proportion of immigrant congregations are veritable ethnic enclaves given to self-maintenance and insulated from the wider society by non-English usage in their worship and fellowship. But the vast majority function as both centers of community life and sites of negotiated adjustment to Western society. Yet, even if all they did was evangelize other immigrants—many of whom were not Christians before they migrated and most of whom are beyond the outreach of Western churches in the countries where they now reside—the new immigrant congregations will be making a significant contribution to the growth of Christianity in the Western world

Often located in inner city or urban areas, these congregations also represent the face of Christianity to a good proportion of the nation's disadvantaged and marginalized population, where effective missionary function depends upon sustained daily interaction with others who belong to the same neighborhood and deal with similar daily challenges.

Undeniably, racial divisions, cultural rejection, and social demarcations represent significant missionary challenges; however, the missionary-mindedness of immigrant Christians and congregations is well attested.

The outlook remains complex. The encounter with Western societies is attended by complex assimilation patterns and transnational existence which enables these congregations to bridge non-Western Christian experiences and Western forms. There is also strong evidence to suggest that their outreach capacity increases over time with critical adaptation to the cultural environment, which in turn indicates that the next generation may hold the key to greater missionary effectiveness.

Unlike generations of Western missionaries, many de facto members of this non-Western missionary movement have acquired citizenship, and their congregations function as spiritual training grounds for the next generation of citizens. Given these considerations, the question is not whether these new Christian communities formed by migration will impact Western society, but rather to what extent.

Endnotes

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7. Hanciles, Jehu J. 2008. *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migrations, and the Transformation of the West*. New York: Orbis Books.
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