Migration, Diaspora Mission, and Religious Others in World Christianity: An African Perspective

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In this article we celebrate Jonathan Bonk and his passion for hospitality. Jon has long demonstrated a conscious concern for the marginalized religious and ethnic others as part of Christian mission. When in 2012 I was a senior resident scholar at the Overseas Ministries Study Center and there encountered an Iraqi refugee family that he had hosted, immediately the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan came to mind (Luke 10:25–37). I celebrate Jon’s mission efforts here by reflecting on African diaspora churches, which is part of immigrant Christian mission activity in the North. This is an issue to which Jon gave some attention as editor of the IBMR, especially through a 2003 essay by Jehu H. Hanciles. African immigrant Christianity is part of the story of world Christianity. The churches and Christian communities concerned are manifestations of the much-talked-about shift in the demographic center of the Christian faith from North to South. “The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes,” says Philip Jenkins, and “the day of the Southern churches is dawning.” African immigrant Christianity in the Global North, although too often held in low esteem or dismissed as mere social safety nets for deportee strugglers in foreign lands, powerfully illustrates the renewal of Christianity as a non-Western religion. For some “Levites” and “priests” in our time African diaspora Christianity, despite the renewal abundantly evident in it, has become a new religious other, for it is culturally different, theologically fundamental, and even aggressive, and it seeks to reverse the old paradigms of mission in which Christianity was considered essentially a white man’s religion.

The primary question motivating this article is, What does the presence of African Christians living their faith outside their historic geographic boundaries say about the changing face of world Christianity generally? In particular, what does it say to their Western compatriots? For many such immigrants—coming from Africa, Latin America, and Asia—their Christian faith has become a fundamental element of their society and economic ways. Thus for Wonsuk Ma, a Pentecostal missionary from the Philippines currently serving as executive director of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, a non-Western institution in the U.K., it is the turn of the churches in the Global South to revive the Western church. The role of the diaspora in the midst of the secular West, Ma notes, is therefore critically important. Immigrant churches have been defined in terms of their ethnic identities and their provision of religious spaces as safety nets for foreigners in alien lands. Many, like the man in Jesus’ parable who fell among robbers, are wounded through the harsh realities of economic life in Africa and oppressive immigration conditions and are looking for some warm embrace from brothers and sisters in the West. But do they find it? Even further, we can ask, Is this “immigrant Christianity” considered authentic? Is it in fact a significant part of world Christianity?

Immigrant Christians as Religious Others

The significance of the new type of Christianity, as I will argue, lies in the perception of its bearers that the North needs Jesus Christ, who is nothing other than “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Unlike Old Testament Israel, which for the first time refused to live out its covenant with Yahweh within their depressing exilic conditions, African diaspora Christians, many viewing their communities as the new Israel, are convinced of the relevance of prayerfully living out the Gospel under difficult circumstances. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they seek to sing the songs of the Lord in foreign lands. Sadly, Western Christians have often viewed African immigrant churches as religious others, in some instances even lumping them together with non-Christian religious traditions. These attitudes occur because, as Jenkins notes, a number of radical writers still link Christianity with Western imperialism and do not recognize the ways in which Christianity has been transformed through African hands. The otherness of these African Christians in the eyes of some of their Western compatriots stems from the stubborn refusal in Western thinking to recognize the collapse of European missionary hegemony. Part of the modern West manifests a certain inability to come to terms with the fact that South Korean missionaries, for example, now dominate Christian activity across the world.

One study concludes that the massive presence of Korean missionaries in world Christianity “highlights the unique set of gifts which immigrant Christian communities can exercise not only in their ‘home’ . . . churches and missionary initiatives, but more importantly in global mission leadership.” It does not mean that Western Christianity ceases to matter in global mission. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, with the emergence of African Initiated Churches, the Western missionary Christianity of colonial Africa ceased to reflect world Christianity. The type of Christianity we consider below looks different from its “missionary original” because Africans, against the backdrop of indigenous interpretations of Scripture and religious-cultural experience, privilege the pneumatic over the cerebral in living out their faith. Jenkins notes: “These models have been far more enthusiastic, much more centrally concerned with the immediate workings of the supernatural, through prophecy, visions, ecstatic utterances, and healing. In fact, they have differed so widely from the cooler Northern norms as to arouse suspicion that these enthusiastic Africans . . . are essentially reviving the pagan practices of traditional society.”

As Christianity becomes increasingly non-Western, it is likely to be transformed through its immersion in the prevailing cultures of African societies. In African religious traditions, what is ultimately real is the spiritual. Through the pneumatic forms of Christianity lived and expressed by African diaspora Christians, we can discern what ordinary Africans consider critical to the faith: Jesus Christ is Lord, and by the power of the Spirit, he intervenes...
in real-life situations. Christ overcomes the power of witches and demons and restores people to hope and fulfillment within a physically and spiritually precarious diaspora, a conviction that requires faith to be lived and expressed.

Migrant Christianity as the New Religious Other

In many parts of Europe, as we have noted, the typical African immigrant church is a religious other professing a variant of Christianity that is considered biblically suspicious and theologically deficient. Claudia Währisch-Oblau discusses how immigrant congregations with historic links to German missions, for example, were expected to function under German church leadership and work within the German church’s ecclesial structures. She notes how African immigrant Christianity in Germany has mostly been perceived as foreign and transient, a minority phenomenon that might need some protection and support, but nothing that would have an impact on majority Christianity. Contrary to these assumptions, many immigrant churches and their leaders, she writes, have come to define themselves as missionaries who are “planning to reach out not only to their own nationals, but to German society as a whole” in a bid to bring revival to “dead” German churches. The type of diaspora Christianity discussed here has been the subject of some important studies within the last two decades.

The point is that African immigrants are revealing new paradigms in Christian mission that “raise the prospect of a revitalized Christian presence on European soil.” In response to aspersions that these communities are simply ethnic enclaves for people seeking to better their economic fortunes, it is important to point out that vulnerability has always been an important factor in Christian mission. The Incarnation remains the strongest lesson in this direction. Immigrant churches with their ethnic compositions and informal, expressive, and “noisy” services may not be attractive to secular-minded Westerners, but the witness of presence is also important, even if that turns out to be the only contribution that these so-called religious others make to world Christianity. The immigrant churches have in almost all cases remained firmly within the limits of what may be considered authentic Christian traditions. “Far from inventing some new African or Korean religions that derive from local cultures,” Jenkins further writes, “the rising churches usually preach a strong and even pristine Christian message.” While the lordship of Jesus Christ could be said to constitute the basis of all Christianity, the expression of this foundation varies across cultures precisely because cultures and peoples differ.

Speaking from the perspective of African diaspora Christianity and its encounter with secularizing Western countries, I am aware that the decline of public Christianity has not necessarily seen the exclusion of spirituality from private spheres. Not only are many non-Christian new religious movements emerging within Western communities, but the media, especially the Internet and the social media, facilitate the practice of new forms of spirituality. In the midst of these developments, non-Western forms of Christianity have gained prominence, which clearly teaches us that God is still active in history, working his purposes out in Jesus Christ as Lord. God may perhaps be doing this by using the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things to shame the strong, and the lowly things of this world—the despised things and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him (1 Cor. 1:27–29).

Apostolic Body in Diaspora

People move and migrate for various reasons. They respond to the movement of capital and resources or to their perceptions of opportunities for better living conditions available elsewhere. Migration takes place as transnational economic corporations and organizations of intellectual, social, and political life grow in number and require more transnational personnel to operate and serve. The critical motivation in all these movements is survival. For many Africans, migration occurs because fields are dry, crops have failed, or they are facing one form of persecution or another. Whatever the reason for migration, for many Africans the process of moving involves—from beginning to end—important religious dimensions, including rituals of facilitation, breakthrough, and survival. For example, it is not uncommon for prayer centers in Ghana and Nigeria to receive potential migrants, who come with their passports for prayer and anointing as they apply for visas or, if already secured, for protection and success on the journey. Some of these journeys have been fatal as African migrants perish in boats capsizing on the Mediterranean Sea, as recent news reports consistently bring to the world’s attention. Statistics indicate that relatively few people make it to the so-called “promised lands” of Europe and North America. These perilous journeys reveal the level of desperation with its attendant vulnerability when it comes to the desire to migrate in search of better lives. For ordinary Africans the original intention to migrate may not even be religious, but it is important that faith and spirituality are important in the lives of these migrants and they carry those with them everywhere.

These desperate and vulnerable people are those who constitute the religious communities that we are calling Christian churches in the diaspora. “We are God’s apostles to Europe” is how one Ghanaian explained her presence as a Christian in an alien land after one church service in Amsterdam. Migration has offered them opportunities to see firsthand what has happened to Christianity in the land of the missionaries, and they feel challenged to do something about the situation. Many of these “apostles” may be undocumented, but the dynamism of their faith overcomes the troubles that they often experience as illegal aliens. Their circumstances lead inevitably to a certain amount of ethnic bonding and creation of boundaries, and indeed they have been charged with “ghettoizing” religion. Nevertheless, one should not think that mission and witness are peripheral to the lives of African diaspora Christian communities.

There is much prayer in these diaspora churches for personal concerns—particularly for proper documentation, employment, health, family, and deliverance from witches seeking to thwart endeavors away from home. There is also prayer, however, that God will deliver Europe from the claws of the devil, who, according to Peter, prowls around like a lion looking for someone to devour (1 Pet. 5:8). In John 10:10 Jesus describes the devil as one who comes only to “steal and kill and destroy,” activities that in contemporary immigrant religious thought are expressed through
secularization, gay/lesbian ordinations, and the public promotion of what may be considered morally wrong and detestable in the eyes of African Christian communities. I have sat through African immigrant revival meetings in Amsterdam, Hamburg, Columbus (Ohio), and Chicago in which intense prayers have been uttered for the Lord to open the eyes of the West that it may return to him as Lord. “The battle is spiritual,” one prayer leader proclaimed, and “we must fight it in the power of the Spirit.”

Migration, Mission, and Diaspora in Biblical Contexts

There may be other reasons for the establishment of immigrant churches by non-Westerners living in the developed West, but the conviction that secularization is the devil’s way of stealing, killing, and destroying Christianity in Europe and the West is a strong motivation for the evangelistic activities of diaspora churches in these locations. In a sense, Christian mission is now being interpreted through African biblical lenses. In his article “The Diaspora Factor in Christian History,” Andrew Walls helpfully draws attention to the biblical precedents of migration history. The experience of exile and wandering in the desert in search of a homeland proved to be the setting for the people of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition to receive the promise and fulfillment of God’s care and protection and his love and grace for all peoples.

Jesus Christ was an outcast in his own country, yet in him, as Paul affirmed, “There is no longer Jew or Greek . . . slave or free . . . male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Exile and wandering in the desert became paradigmatic experiences, from which the religious fellowship of Christ understands itself as transcending political and other borders. “ Embedded in such religious traditions are the values of love, compassion and hospitality, and care for orphans and widows, strangers and exiles.” If we take all the stories together, Walls points out, we have examples of almost every known form of migration, both voluntary and involuntary. I appreciate his pellucid summary of migration as both punitive and redemptive:

Migration often stands for dispossession, loss of patrimony or habitat. Adam loses Eden; Cain loses the security of the group. Israel loses the land, kingdom, and temple. In all these cases, migration is punitive, the result of wrongdoing, leading to dislocation and deprivation.

But there is another style of migration that is redemptive rather than punitive. Abraham is not expelled from his Mesopotamian city: he is divinely called out of it, with the promise of another land for his descendants.

Walls continues his discussion of the theme in the New Testament.

In the New Testament it is still Abraham, the perennial migrant, who becomes the exemplar of Christian faith and the pointer to Christian identity (Rom. 4). In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Abraham heads the list of those who died in faith without attaining the well-founded city prepared for them (Heb. 11:8–10). Christians in that letter are described in terms applicable to migrant workers, seeking that better future that migrants typically desire for their children. Other New Testament writers use the figure of the diaspora, that institutionalized migration whereby so many Jews lived outside the promised land, to portray normal Christian experience to the world (Phil. 3:20). One even describes Christians as “refugees” (I Pet. 1:1; 2:11 GNB).

In the same article, Walls argues that in many places migration forwarded the spread of Christianity. To that end, the Acts of the Apostles shows how Barnabas and Paul ministered in Jewish communities with “a fringe of interested Gentiles” (see Acts 13–14). That is, migration and mission have been related since biblical times.

Diaspora Mission and Incarnation

Mission means the announcement or transmission and confession of faith, and to that end the church is called to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ in the world. Hendrik Kraemer mentions the incarnation as the epitome of Christian mission, referring to the mission of the church as a reflection of “divine extravertness.” For Kraemer, the church in its missionary work expresses its constant looking toward “the ends of the earth” and “the end of time.”

Mission interpreted through an incarnation model is evident in the IBMR essay by Hanciles, who notes that the version of the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:18–20 is unlikely to retain its primacy in the growing non-Western missionary movement. Those involved in diaspora mission as immigrants simply do not possess the same economic and technological privileges that the Western mission agencies did when they worked in Africa. Non-Western diaspora missionaries are working from the periphery. In contrast to their Western forbears, as Hanciles notes, this mission “comes not from the centers of political power and economic wealth but from the periphery.”

The model of mission that fits the diaspora initiatives is thus the Johannine version—as the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21)—with its implications of humble service and vulnerability, because it follows the incarnation principle: “Christ’s life and ministry included the travail of a refugee, the pain of uprootedness, and the alienation that comes with being a stranger. Even the emptying of status to take on the form of a servant has its parallels in the migrant experience.”

Immigrants are now beginning to have a significant place in Western Christian history. Immigrants are now beginning to have a significant place in Western Christian history. Walls is no doubt correct that, at least in some areas of the West, “Christianity will be associated increasingly with immigrants.” It must not surprise us, then, that a high level of internationalism has crept into the missionary agenda of the contemporary African Pentecostal/charismatic movement. According to one qualitative study, African immigrants in the United States are making a significant social and cultural impact, especially through the proliferation of religious communities, doing so despite their modest numbers. Let us remember, however, that the primary motivation for the establishment of religious communities goes beyond the sociocultural function of reproducing ethnic enclaves in foreign lands. The question of diaspora Israel “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Ps. 137:4) has been rephrased in the hearts of contemporary African immigrant Christians, who are seeing possibilities rather than impossibilities in mission.
Rethinking Mission through the Diaspora Challenge

The New Testament has much to say about dealing with the other, especially the marginalized, the stranger, and the vulnerable. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a useful example, for it shows risk-taking and going the extra mile in order to accommodate the needs of a stranger. We also need to note that the point of Peter’s vision in Acts 10 right before his encounter with Cornelius was to prepare him to embrace Gentile converts, among whom the Holy Spirit was also active. The Spirit of God is a Spirit of inclusion; only by the experience of the Spirit can Gentiles come to inherit the blessing of Abraham (Gal. 3:14).

The incarnation shows redemption through humble con-
descension and identification with the other. When, through the incarnation, divinity was translated into humanity, God in Christ as the second Adam fully and completely identified with fallen human nature in order to redeem it. God disempowered himself that he might empower his people in the course of mission. The migration of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus, Walls notes, “locates the Jesus story within a movement that spans history, of people desiring a better life or escaping the threat of death.” Throughout the New Testament, it is within such diaspora conditions that the Gospel takes root. Similarly, we eagerly expect that, as Christianity moves from the South to the North through migration, we shall discern in it the move of God empowering the weak to fulfill his purposes among the strong.

Notes

4. Jenkins, Next Christendom, 163.
6. Jenkins, Next Christendom, 134.
7. Ibid., 7, 9.
11. Ibid., 122, 135.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 4.
19. Ibid., 150.
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