

Postcolonialism, globalisation, migration and diaspora: some implications for mission



Author: Jonathan Ingleby, co-editor of Encounters and Postgraduate lecturer in mission, Redcliffe College.

Postcolonialism and migration

In many instances, migration is a postcolonial phenomenon, which continues to link the colonising and colonised nations. The presence in Europe, for example, of people whose not-too-distant origins were in Africa or Asia or Latin America reflects the bonds (in more than one sense) created by the Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and British empires. Difficult postcolonial issues such as multiculturalism (ethnic differences), language barriers, uneven development, inter-generational strife, identity crises and the like stem from this movement of peoples. In the same way Europe has become the testing ground for a number of new missiological issues such as monoethnic churches in a multiethnic society and witness to the gospel in a post Christian society (often by Christians who have no experience of a post Christian society!). (See the article in this issue by Dan Clark.)

As a result, today we see societies which are 'mixed-up' in ways that are quite unique. Migration itself is not a recent phenomenon, of course. It has been going on for centuries. The United States, Australia, and Canada – just to make a selection – have experienced huge waves of immigration for two hundred years or more, indeed are nations largely made up of immigrants. But their initial approach, speaking generally, was to handle the situation by promoting a sense of new-found oneness among their people. They were greatly aided in this by the way that immigrants were able to forge a new life for themselves without the presence of a settled population. (Sometimes the land was genuinely unoccupied, sometimes the original inhabitants were eliminated.) Immigrants today, however, encounter centuries' old civilisations and even more importantly, they remain the minority. On the whole, too, they form a diaspora, that is to say that retain strong links with their place of origin. (See below.) Another difference might be the relative isolation of past generations of immigrants. The original settlers of countries like the US and Australia had little opportunity to return to their homeland, even if they had wanted to. Partly this had to do with the fact that they were often escaping from the old to the new, and partly because transport systems were comparatively slower and more expensive – return to the homeland and regular visits were not easy to manage for people who had 'sold up' to make the move in the first place. I suspect that the vast majority of immigrants nowadays can afford the (relatively cheap) air fares to visit friends and relatives at home. People are 'on the move' more than ever before today and in all directions

Globalisation – people on the move

Postcolonialism links with globalisation. The global culture demands and then favours those who are prepared to be mobile or at least to plug into the communications revolution at some level. By one description most people in the affluent world are economic migrants. Very few people stay at home when it comes to finding a job. The difference is that globalisation has made it both easier and (often) more necessary to make that move. Not equally easy, however. Unequal development within globalisation means job mobility and open frontiers for some, but forced migration and hostile frontiers for others. (Postcolonial migrants, for example, are more often in this second category.) 'Economic migrants' is a loaded term, nowadays, because they come in a number of varieties. They may be people who simply want to earn a better living, and have marketable skills for which they can get a better price away from home. Then there are those who need to make new arrangements for their

families as a matter of survival. They simply cannot provide for their own by staying at home. Globalisation in its revolutionary communications mode has made these movements possible where they have not always been an option before. Also, sometimes global economics are the cause of this process. The way in which multi-nationals can now choose where their manufacturing and service base is, means that for many people the work which was traditionally associated with their locality has gone elsewhere and they simply have to travel away from home in order to move to a new job. (All this does not take into account the refugees from war and from religious and political persecution.)

Diaspora

The name 'diaspora' may have behind it the simple idea of dispersion, but it has now become something of a technical term, with a number of features. First of all, it involves a dispersion from one place or 'centre' from which all the dispersed take their identity, though there can be a variety of foreign destinations. All share in a common memory or myth of this 'homeland' (even if they are born somewhere else!), something which is so important that there is no likelihood that it will be forgotten. The fact that they remain 'strangers', a perpetual minority in their host nation, keeps the myth alive. If, by chance they are assimilated to such an extent that they disown or forget their place of origin, to that extent they are ceasing to be part of the diaspora. Many hope to return to their homeland, and even if this is not the long term plan they are often keen to visit from time to time if they are able to do so. They are also often very willing to take part in enterprises that benefit their homeland, whether this is to their individual advantage or not. All this means that the ongoing connections with their homeland are an important aspect of their self-identity.

Typically, diaspora communities are both needy and open. Many diaspora communities give the impression that they are doing very well! People who leave their own countries to work somewhere else (if it is voluntary) are often the most go-ahead and successful. Think of the way that members of the Indian diaspora have prospered in areas such as business and information technology. But the reverse is also true. Immigrant communities often fall behind in terms of education, securing jobs and business success. Natural disadvantages to do with language and culture (I mean that they are different from those of the majority) hold them back. So do the prejudices of the host nation. Some are lonely and isolated. They need help to cope with a challenging new situation. The openness of diaspora communities is also an ambiguous concept. Often the sense that they are being discriminated against, the feeling that they are in a foreign land, the all-prevailing newness of their situation leads to a very understandable 'closed' or defensive mentality. There is evidence, for example, that diaspora communities are more likely to emphasise their religious commitments – if they are different from those of the host population – than they did back at home. Being religious is now part of their identity that they need to emphasise if that identity is going to survive. (In this respect Christians who are concerned about the growing militancy of Muslims in the West should remember Aesop's fable about the wind and the sun. The contest was about who could get a man to remove his cloak. The more the wind blew the more the man clutched his cloak around him. However, when the sun shone he took it off!) On the other hand people do 'open up' when they are in new circumstances. They try new things. The fact that they are not being observed by what was likely a close knit community at home frees them up to do this. When moving to a new place they expect it to be different and expect to have to adapt to it. Some of the new arrangements suit them better than the old ones.

Mission

There are a number of missiological conclusions that we need to come to here. It is fair to assume that needy people are the church's opportunity, and that it is neither exploitive nor patronising to offer people friendship and help in these circumstances. Moving into a new culture, far away from familiar friends and family, can be a difficult process, and leaving people just to 'get on with it' is certainly not an appropriate response. Diaspora communities can live with a constant sense of being under threat, and Christians in their dealings with threatened minorities have a responsibility to do everything they can to alleviate that sense of threat, whatever its source. On the other hand diaspora people are usually hoping for something new. They have not come such a long distance only to remain the same people that they were before. In a very profound way the gospel offers people a new start, and maybe that is the newness they have been looking for all their lives.

Among Christians in particular it is unacceptable that people arriving as guests should end up in exclusive ethnic groups – even if this is in the name of dynamic evangelistic methods! I am not in favour of homogenous churches, for example. The cutting edge of evangelism in any church may have to have a cultural element in it. – young people evangelising young people, employing someone from an ethnic minority group as an evangelist to reach his or her fellows and so on – but one of the essential witnesses of the gospel is still that we are all 'one in Christ Jesus' and that as far as 'the world' is concerned we are all aliens and there is every reason for us to stick together.

Diaspora people are often keen to do something for their home country. This can have missiological significance, too. The organisation South Asian Concern is a good example here. Its 'concern' is primarily for the Asian diaspora in the UK, but Asian diaspora Christians are also warmly encouraged to take responsibility for the South Asian sub-continent and its need of the gospel. Notice that it is in a good position to do so. Because a diaspora never loses contact with 'home', because of the network effect, there is constant traffic between those at home and those in exile, so to speak. The gospel can be part of that traffic. This is one of the great joys of the postcolonial situation. Postcolonialism reminds us that we are living in a world that has been profoundly shaped by the colonial experience. There are so many bad outcomes of that, it becomes a dispiriting task to catalogue them. Yet the continued connection between, say, Britain and India seems, from the point of view of the gospel, an example of redemption. Not that it excuses the history of British imperialism, but it takes something which had much that was evil and exploitive and uses it for blessing – a process at which, if the irreverence may be pardoned, God is very good.

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