

CHRISTIANITY AND THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION IN TIME PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Migration which involves human movement from one place to the other is a human phenomenon which has become a necessary tool for religious expansion, Christianity inclusive. The Christian Church which traces its origin from Palestine got to Europe and other parts of the globe by the effort and sacrifice of people who migrated from their original places of abode to their new places of residence. This work used the qualitative and descriptive methods of data collection and analysis, and in arriving at our findings, the phenomenological approach was adopted and our finding revealed that migration is as old as mankind. In fact Christianity travelled from the Middle East, to Europe and eventually got to Africa through the effort of migrants. The agents of this movement being none other, than those referred to as the missionaries constitute the migrants; and till date the Gospel message has been spread by these missionary migrants who left their homes to their mission fields for the purpose of evangelization.

Introduction

Migration which is the key word for this discussion, for the human beings in general is defined as the movement from one place to another for the purpose of living there (Arthur: 2000). It also means the regular travel from one point, region, location, settlement, to another. Migration can as well be defined as the movement of people from one place in the world to another for the purpose of taking up permanent or semi-permanent residency, usually across cultural and political boundaries.

According to Ferris (1993),

Migration means human mobility in relation to a territory which can happen inside as well as outside the country of origin. If it takes place within, it can be called displacement; and if to the outside, it is referred to as emigration. Once the movement occurs, there are always new problems that arise in regard to inner space struggles between the native and the resident culture (p. 34)

Migration can also be sub-divided into permanent and semi-permanent migration depending on the duration of stay. These movements are often caused by reasons ranging from economic, social, political and religious considerations. As Massey (2009) puts it, "the movement of persons across international borders or from a habitual place of residence within a state to another is migration" (p. 7)

Two major forms of migrations are highlighted in this work and they are: internal and external migration.

Internal migration occurs when people migrate within the same country or region. This is usually common with what has been referred to as the rural-urban migration. In most countries in sub-Sahara Africa, the cities are getting congested daily because most people want to either experience good life in the city or to benefit from some basic social amenities provided mainly in the big cities (which are of cause lacking in the rural areas) such as good roads, electricity, pipe-borne water, good schools with qualified teachers etc. In Nigeria in recent times, cities in the Southern part have experienced a huge influx of internal migrants mainly from the Northern part due largely to the menace of Boko haram (Millman: 2017).

External migration refers to when people migrate from one country to another which is often influenced by many factors (Izuah: 2011). Some people migrate in search of a better life and security. According to the *International office on migration* (Nigerian office) report on migration situation in Nigeria cited in Portes (2014), it is observed that "most youths migrate out of the country for the purpose of fending for their lives outside". It is believed that about 40% of the younger population in Nigeria for various reasons is out of the country.

It is important that a differentiation should be made between refugees and migrants. According to Massey (2009), "refugees may find it difficult to go home,

but migrants who are often people fleeing for life or on mission of some kind are those who have left their countries or lands for another.” (8). However both suffer limited rights in their new territory of abode.

This paper emphasized the fact that migration is looked at more as being a call for one to leave one's land for a mission. Sometimes the forces that makes one to leave for safety can encourage or start up a new mission for the migrant while in some other times those who left for a mission major on looking for where the mission has to be fulfilled and so meet with threats on their safety such that they may become itinerant migrants struggling to settle in peace or looking for where the mission has to be fulfilled. This paper will look at migration as being called to leave one's land for a mission to another which is what the Mission and Ministry of Christianity is all about.

Throughout the Bible and the history of Christianity, there are issues of people running away for safety, no doubt and this paper takes that in to full consideration, but it prefers the part where the western missionaries left their hometowns for mission in West Africa and indeed Sub-Sahara Africa. The 18th century missionary enterprise fits very well in this context. It is worthy of note that we do not ignore or dismiss migration in the Christianization of West Africa caused by the need to get safety.

Many terminologies have been used to describe the process of migration such as immigration, emigration or displacement. In this work, it is acknowledged that migration is an intrinsic part of the Christianization of West Africa. These migrations sometimes have led to intercultural and inter-religious encounters. There are certain consequences such as cultural clash, culture shock and culture slag, and the acquisition of new faith and enculturation. It would be noticed that it is this last consequences that will help us understand the challenge of Christianity in the context of migration. People have always been on the move from the earliest times, often over great distances and for a wide variety of reasons including trade, epidemics, economic opportunities, asylum, war, persecution, natural disasters, and adventures.

When people move, they carry their ideas, cultures, fears, strength and weaknesses, beliefs, and religious practices with them (Hanciles: 2003). As the characters in the Christian moved from one place to the other whether in the short or long distances, they move with their cultures, religions and entirety, and

they come in contact with other cultures, religions and faith; impacting them and being impacted upon. For us to understand migration in Christianity, we will try to get a glimpse of the migration of this faith into West Africa and into Nigeria in particular.

Christianity and migration in 16th Century West Africa

As Dauda & Gbule (2000) puts it, “the first missionary immigrants came to West Africa in 1482 in Elmina (Gold Coast) to establish a church. In that year about 600 Portuguese immigrants arrived at Elmina. Their leader was Don Diego d’Azambuja” (p. 1). It is on record that the first Christian service was held under a mango, during which the Chief of Elmina and his subjects were introduced to the Christian faith. Land was acquired and a castle was built and dedicated to St. George in *Sao Jorge da Mina* (Portuguese settlement). This place served as base for the propagation of the Christian faith. This mission was a failure because the Chiefs initial acceptance with ‘immigrants’ faith (Christianity) was not borne out of any genuine religious commitment but for materialistic reasons.

Burgess (2008) reports that around 1630, some French Capuchins also migrated to the Gold Coast to convert the people to Christianity. They settled near the Portuguese factory at Axim. Initially, it seemed that Christianity would be firmly established on the Coast, but that was not to be because the Portuguese forced out the Capuchins following disagreements between them. In the course the century other European immigrants like the Dutch, French, Danes, and English challenged the commercial monopoly of Portugal and established their own forts along the coast. The result was that unhealthy rivalry ensued among the nations, making it difficult for the propagation of the gospel. Imokhai (1982), reports that “beginning with King Alphonso, King John 11, King Manuel, and King John 111, there were series of migration of Portuguese explorers to Benin and Warri. This people carried along their religion, culture and ideologies”(p.3). However as Eche (2018) observed, “the missionaries did not achieve lasting success in Benin...and Christianity never re-surfaced in Benin and Warri until the 19th century”(p. 13,15). Dauda and Gbule (2001) concludes it by saying “the Portuguese attempts to Christianize the people of Benin and Warri had thus aptly, if somewhat harshly been described as ‘futile, feeble, and spasmodic’, an attempt which became indistinguishable from the nefarious trafficking in ‘living tools’ that was to last for over 300 years” The scenario did not change much until the middle of the 19th century.

Challenges of Christianity and Migration in the 21st century West Africa

According to Ayandele (1966),

The first Christian immigrant in Sierra Leone was Balthazar Barrera, a Luso-African Jesuit layman. He was instrumental to the founding of the Jesuit Mission in Cape Verde in 1904. Barrera left Portugal at the age of sixty for Cape Verde. His missionary activities were limited merely to the peninsula. A remarkable achievement in respect of this was the baptism of a Bullom ruler, Philip Leonis and his household. The actual conversion of Leonis was done by his wife who had been Christianized by the Portuguese. The arrival of a Muslim immigrant in the Bena country foiled Barrera's attempt to convert a Susa King. Barrera's death in 1612 halted the spread of Christianity in Sierra Leone until 1647 when Seraphim, a Capuchin from Castile migrated to Port Loko. The migration of Signor Joseph in 1714 re-awakened missionary activity. He founded the model town in what would later be known as Granville town, and later referred to as Kissy (p.19)

Following the abolition of the slavery, there was a significant presence of blacks in England (Coupland: 1964). Estimates put the overall number of blacks in England, between ten to twenty thousand by the end of the eighteenth century (Howes: 1971). The liberated slaves were homeless, unemployed and destitute. They increased the alarming number of beggars and vagabonds and were dubbed 'the Black poor' by the press. These constituted a gross social problem and caused exaggerated fears needed to be incorporated into the society. Echoing this popular sentiment, *The London Chronicle* in March 1773, expressed the hope that:

Parliament will provide such remedies as may be adequate to the occasion, by expelling the Blacks now here ... Prohibiting the introduction of them in this Kingdom for the future, and save the natural beauty of Britons from the Morisco tint (cited in Campbell: 1993:iii)

A similar problem arose in America after the end of the War of Independence in 1783. Many American Negroes fought on the side of the British in the war and could not return to the United States after the war. Some settled in Nova Scotia (but found the Canadian climate too severe), while others settled in the Bahamas. Some migrated to England increasing the already existing number of homeless and unemployed there. A settlement in West Africa seemed a reasonable solution for the problem the freed slaves were confronted. An organized

migration of these freed slaves to the African continent seemed natural. However, the effort soon encountered many problems the philanthropists had not envisioned. The African chiefs had sold the slaves and were not willing to accept freed refugee immigrant slaves of other tribes into their territories. A neutral territory had to be found or purchased for the settlement of freed slaves.

In 1787, a committee for the relieving of the Black poor was set up and it proposed moving these destitute Negroes to Africa. The British government accepted the responsibility of transporting the Negroes to their new homes. To the advocates of re-settlement, Sierra Leone seemed an appropriate option. Falk (1997) reports that “the first attempt was made in 1787, when a party of 411 persons migrated for the West African coast. The party arrived in the area of Freetown. Captain Thompson arranged for twenty square miles of land by treaty with a local Chief. This first settlement faced many difficulties, not least of which were the climate and diseases which soon caused the west coast in general and Sierra Leone in particular to be dubbed ‘the White man’s grave’. It was too expensive to maintain the settlement of these immigrants. More so, the immigrants arrived during the raining season, and found it difficult to construct shelters and to find food. Disease took its toll on the migrants and many of them died.

In 1792, a second group of migrants came to Sierra Leone - this time from Nova Scotia. Like the ‘black poor’ most of these were freed slaves who had fought with the British in the American war of independence, having promised freedom, and land for their loyalty. After the hostilities, they went to Nova Scotia, but few received the land they expected; also the severe winter made them hope for a less harsh climate (Foster, 1961:2). The Sierra Leone Company heard about their plight and offered them a home in Sierra Leone. About 1,196 migrants landed in Sierra Leone in a new settlement on the site of the original Granville Town and named it Freetown; with transportation and other expenses fully borne by the British government. The Nova Scotia immigrants settled on a site near Granville and called it Freetown.

The Maroons were the third set of immigrants in Sierra Leone and they arrived in 1800. They were about 550 Maroons. The Maroons were freed slaves from West Indies (Jamaica). The fourth group were the slaves captured and freed by the British Navy during their patrol of the West Africa coasts. These set of liberated African immigrants were called the ‘recaptives’. It is estimated that

approximately 114,000 liberated immigrants were re-settled in the villages around Freetown from 1808 – 1877 (Falk, 1997:104)

A number of factors affected the establishment of the Sierra Leone Colony. Granville Sharp, who was the arrow head and motivating force behind the settlement of the liberated immigrant slaves in Sierra Leone, instigated a legitimate commerce of products of the land to provide a livelihood for the people. The English government on their part desired to establish a Naval Base in Sierra Leone from which to patrol the West African coast for slave traders. The French raided the settlement in 1794 and this spurred the Directors of the Sierra Leone Company to propose that the settlement be to the British Crown. Sierra Leone became a Crown Colony and a Naval Base in order that the Royal Navy could enforce the protection of the people (Bediako, 1995).

The first Negro immigrants' settlers from England, Nova Scotia, and Jamaica were already Christians before their migration to Africa. They were members of different Protestant denominations and in their new home they championed the building of Christian Churches and Chapels, and continued to worship God according to their various cultures. Worthy of note at this juncture is the fact that, immigrant missionaries who subsequently came to Sierra Leone were not the ones that introduced Christianity there. They only assisted and expanded what was already on ground.

The English Methodists migrated into Sierra Leone in 1811. Having observed that some Muslims were living along the trade route from Sierra Leone coast to Timbuktu and the Niger River, Zachary Macaulay, then the Governor of Sierra Leone, a Pro-Christian decided to send missionaries and skilled craftsmen to places along the route. The first attempt was by a group of Methodist immigrants who were sent out without adequate preparations. The party consisted of George Warren and three school teachers. Eight months later, Warren died; and one of the teachers was sent back home. In 1815, William Davies and other missionaries arrived in Freetown to revive the work of the Methodist Church, but they too failed. In 1859, a new initiative was started under another immigrant Joseph New. Following his demise in 1862, he was succeeded by Mackwaite who served the Church for 12 years. This venture was successful (Isichei, 1995).

The result of achievement recorded by the Methodist ministry among the Creole of the colony was similar to those of the Church Missionary Society. In 1877,

efforts were made to establish a ministry among the immigrant Creoles and the indigenous population did not promote evangelization (Sanneh, 1983). It was from Sierra Leone that Christian immigrants of various denominations migrated to other parts of West Africa including Nigeria.

Challenges of Migration and Christian Expansion in contemporary times

Castles & Miller: 1998) posits that:

Migration has been a prime factor in the global spread of world religions notably Christianity. Christian immigrants travel with their religion. It is central to their way of life and a crucial means of preserving identity as well as homeland connections. Even those who are casual about matters of religious devotion often renew or revive their religious commitment as a vital part of dealing with alienation. It is therefore of utmost significance that in recent times and decades, international transfers of population and associated displacements have increased to unprecedented levels, fostering the claim that we are living in 'the age of migration' (p. 94,119).

The data on the number of international migrants in the world today inevitably involves educated guesses. According to Ferris (1993) "by the early 1990's there were an estimated 17 million refugees and asylum-seekers in the world, 20 million internally displaced people, 30 million regular migrants and another 30 million migrants with an irregular status" (p. 10). "The combined total signifies a doubling of the the global migrant population in the space of five years" (Mittelman, 2000:59). A more recent survey puts the number of migrants - defined as people who have lived outside their homeland for one year or more - at 150 million.

International migrants are also unevenly spread across the globe. Sub-Sahara Africa with an estimated 35 million migrants, has the largest numbers of any continent (followed by Asia and the Middle East). For all the media hype surrounding migrants and refugees, the majority of them stay in the region of origin, and international migration movement is predominantly a South-South movement. That said, interregional transfers occur mainly from South to North, and it is conjectured that many movements that start as South-South transfers end up as South-North flows.

The forces of globalization shape contemporary migration in significant ways. This is particularly true of current patterns of migrant identity formation and

assimilation. The common notion of immigrants as individuals who uproot themselves from their home country to start a completely new life in a new land is no longer valid in many cases. According to Schiller (1999), “while contemporary migrants invest socially, economically, and politically in their new society, most continue to participate to some extent in the life of their society of origin” (p. 94, 19). These dynamics has led some scholars to argue that the contemporary phenomenon is best conceptualized in terms of ‘trans-national migration’ or ‘trans-migration’. Trans-migrants are often bilingual, able to lead dual lives, move easily between cultures, frequently maintain a house in two countries, and are incorporated as social actors in both (Portes, 1999: 29)

Truth is that none of the other major religions of the world has quite matched Christianity’s expansionism and missionary mobilization engineered by migration. Somewhat surprisingly, the critical role which migration has played in this process has received little attention in historical perspective. In a recently published article, Andrew Walls (2002) provided a fascinating periscope of the links between migration and mission in Christian history when he said among other things that:

The Old Testament provides every known form of migration – indeed the book of Genesis might almost readily have been named the book of ‘Migration’. In his analysis, the biblical record, broadly speaking, presents two somewhat conflicting models of migration: the *Adamic* model, signifying disaster, deprivation, and loss, and the *Abrahamic* model, indicative of escape to a superlative better future” (p. 132)

Wall’s, indicates that because these two models often overlap, it is difficult to provide a straightforward answer to the question of whether or not migrant movement is conducive to Christian expansion. He explains that from a historical perspective, migrant movement has been a causative factor in both Christian advances and Christian decline. While migration has often and most conspicuously advanced the spread of the faith, it has also in notable instances inhibited or reversed Christian expansion. The latter experience is evident, for example, in the impact hordes of pagan or Muslim migrations had on pre-existing Christian communities.

Conclusion

Migration no doubt is a human phenomenon that predates Christianity. There has always been a link between Christian migrant movement and the spread of

the Christian faith that provides the focus. Christianity is a migratory religion and migration movement has been a functional element in its expansion. Every missionary is a migrant in every sense of the word or better still, every Christian migrant is a potential missionary.

From the outset, the spread of the gospel was linked to migrant networks. The very inception of the Gentile mission championed by the Apostles of Jesus Christ was marked by the actions of unnamed migrant refugees in Antioch (Acts 11: 19-20). In the centuries which followed, the Christian faith spread mainly through kinship and commercial networks, migrant movements (some stimulated by persecution), and other informal means. The thousand years from AD 500 – AD 1500, saw Christianity's entrenchment as the faith of Western Europe being transformed to a Universal faith. Thanks to migration. The end of this thousand years period witnessed the beginning of that momentous migration of Europeans to the hinterlands of Africa and other parts of the world with the message of Christianity.

The period from 1815 – 1914 (the great century of Christian missionary expansion) marked the coming of the Church (Christianity) into most parts of Africa. It is hardly an accident of history that this, the most remarkable of all migrations of mankind, coincided with the greatest Christian expansion of all times; culminating in an epochal transformation of global Christianity.

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