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# From the Margins to the Centre

## The Diaspora Effect

A Collection of Essays to Celebrate  
the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry  
Centre

*Edited by Michael Krause  
with  
Narry Santos and Robert Cousins*

From the Margins to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect

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## CHAPTER 14

# From Displacement to Diaspora: Finding a Place for the Outsider Within the Mission of God

*By Rupen Das*

*“It is rootlessness and not meaninglessness that characterizes the current crisis. There can be no meanings apart from roots.”*

*Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar and theologian (Brueggemann, 2002, 4)*

Migration, displacement and diaspora communities are not a new phenomenon but are as ancient as recorded time. However, there are new realities that are affecting the global community. In 2015 the United Nations reported that the number of people forcibly displaced had reached 65.3 million (UNHCR 2015).<sup>1</sup> This included refugees, those internally displaced, and the stateless. It is the highest global number since World War II. However, the number of migrants (UN General Assembly 1990) in 2015 had reached 244 million (Menozzi 2015, 5).<sup>2</sup> Forced displacement and migration are the new normal. Not only does migration originate in contexts of poverty, hardship, and

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<sup>1</sup> Gathering displacement statistics is problematic with many shortcomings in methodology. It is widely believed that actual numbers of displaced persons are higher than the reported figures.

<sup>2</sup> The United Nations has created a very specific distinguishing definition. A migrant worker is a “person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national.” Their broader definition of migrants is the following: “The term ‘migrant’ in article 1.1 (a) should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of ‘personal convenience’ and without intervention of an external compelling factor.” The basic difference between migrants and refugees is that migrants have chosen by their own free will to leave their home to seek opportunities or a better life in a country other than their own.

chaos, often rooted in conflict, but because of the sheer volume of refugees and migrants, the destination countries are struggling with existential issues of integration and identity, wondering how these relate to their long-held values of freedom of religion, cultural diversity, individual rights, and the concept of citizenship and who belongs.

Displacement and migration resulting in diaspora communities permeates the biblical narrative. Old Testament scholar and missiologist Christopher Wright observes:

Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative. People on the move (for all kinds of reasons) are so much part of the fabric of the story that we hardly notice it as a major feature. Indeed, when the text actually points out that YHWH, God of Israel, has been involved in the migrations of peoples other than Israel, some Bible translations put that affirmation in parentheses – as though to separate it off from the main story, even though it is an integral part of the theological context of the story. YHWH is the God of all nations and all their historical migrations and settlements. (Deut 2:10–12, 20–23) (Wright 2016, 1)

This collection of essays, *From the Margin to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect*, celebrating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tyndale Intercultural Ministries Centre, is a timely contribution to the various ongoing threads of conversations regarding the welcome and integration of migrants and refugees, the role of the church, the dynamics of ministering to such a disparate group, and the impact of diaspora churches and Christians on traditional churches in the host countries. With the doors in Canada still open to immigrants and the displaced, the Canadian church is uniquely positioned to minister to the world at their doorstep and through them impact the home countries of the newcomers. The global mission field now spans not only traditional cross-cultural missions overseas, but also intercultural missions within Canada.

Interestingly, unlike historical missions where western missionaries ministered to the unreached and the fledgling church in the global south, immigrants from Asia, Africa and Latin America are revitalizing the church in the west. Church historian Phillip Jenkins writes about the impact of immigrants on traditional Christianity in Europe, UK, and North America.

Southern influence grows through two distinct but related phenomena. In some areas, Third World churches undertake actual mission work in secularized North America and especially Europe. Commonly, though, evangelism is an incidental by-product of the activities of immigrant churches, an important phenomenon given the large African and Asian communities domiciled in Europe...When we measure the declining strength of Christianity in Europe, we must remember how much leaner the statistics would be if not for the recent immigrants and their children. (Jenkins 2007, 113, 115)

So, the diaspora effect is not just about strengthening local diaspora churches and empowering them to have a global impact, but also realizing the influence that these churches are having on the mainstreams of Canadian Christianity. The Christian diaspora is slowly moving from the margins of Canadian society to the center.

However, there are challenges in understanding and working with diaspora communities. The collection of essays in this book focus on the theology, vision, and biblical foundations for intercultural mission. It looks at the changing missional context in Canada, and finally explores new strategic thinking that is needed and the opportunities that already exist. In this final chapter, I want to briefly explore two issues that relate to diaspora churches.

### **Absence of Adequate Theological Foundations**

While missiologists and sociologists have been studying migration and diasporas, the idea of migration has been widely ignored by theologians. Concerned church members responding to the needs of the newcomer are motivated by the fact that Jesus was a refugee and the command to take care of the foreigner in our midst. Yet the biblical narrative is deeply infused with the ideas of belonging and alienation, of citizenship, compassion for the outsider, and of a small community impacting the nations. Daniel Groody at the University of Notre Dame writes, "Theology, however, is almost never mentioned in major works or at centers of migration studies"<sup>3</sup>...Even among theologians the topic of

<sup>3</sup> Such as the Refugee Study Centre at Oxford, UK and the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, Toronto.

migration is largely undocumented” (Groody 2010, 6-7). Without a theological foundation it is difficult to locate these ministries within the purposes and mission of God, *missio Dei*. I am really glad to see that one of the early chapters in this book addresses a missional-biblical theology for intercultural mission and biblical models in diaspora leadership.

Ministry to and with the displaced and the diaspora have strong biblical and theological roots. There are various streams within theology which are beginning to provide different pieces of a theological framework for ministering to the other, the foreigner, the outsider in our communities. Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf’s concept of exclusion and embrace is seminal in understanding that God’s embrace of sinners is the rationale and model for Christ followers to embrace the outsider and those who don’t belong. Japanese theologian Kasuke Koyama expands the understanding of embracing the stranger beyond merely an act of charity, to place it within the purposes of God for His creation. He writes,

The issue is not just about being kind to strangers; it is a reflection of the wholeness, healing, and shalom that God intends for his creation. This extraordinary thought cultivates and expands the horizon of the human soul. It is derived from a theologically informed experience of conversion (metanoia). It reveals the truth about the creation and maintenance of shalom (wholesomeness, wellbeing, integrity) in human community. “You shall not oppress a resident alien,” a socially marginal people. This command has remained relevant throughout the history of human civilization, and it is becoming even more significant in our own day as the number of uprooted people from political and racial oppression, inhuman poverty and ethnic conflict, civil war and natural disaster has been steadily increasing. (Koyama 1993, 285)

Koyama then roots it in what it means to live as a Christ follower.

Our “extending hospitality to strangers” happens “by the mercies of God,” and when this happens our life becomes a “living sacrifice,” which is “holy and acceptable to God,” and it is an essential part of our “spiritual worship.” There is a living connection between “extending hospitality to strangers” and

“loving your God and loving your neighbor” (Mark 12:28–34) of which Christ says “there is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:31). And his directive to love enemies (Matt 5:44) is the ultimate of extending hospitality to strangers. (Koyama 1993, 284)

Daniel Groody, in developing a theological foundation for a ministry to the displaced and migrants, writes about four divides that need to be crossed – the *problem-person divide*, the *divine-human divide*, the *human-human divide*, and the *country-kingdom divide* (Groody 2010, 9–32). Walter Brueggemann, New Testament scholar Gary Burge, South African theologian Craig Bartholomew, and Anglican theologian John Inge all write about understanding the importance of the land, place and community in a person’s identity, wellbeing, and spirituality. Brueggemann states “Land is never simply physical dirt but is always physical dirt freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience” (Brueggemann 2002, 2). Ministering to migrants and the displaced involves more than assisting with physical needs, housing, school, language, and jobs. Disconnected from their ancestral land and the community they grew up in, their understanding of who they are is often undermined. Lacking roots in their new land, most struggle with developing a new identity and a sense of belonging. Philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil explains;

To be rooted is perhaps the most important need of the human soul. It is the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of the community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future...It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he form[s] a natural part. (Weil 1952, 43)

The local church which is both a spiritual community of faith and a social institution in the community can play a critical part in helping newcomers and even existing diaspora communities who still feel that they are on the margins of society to develop roots in their new country. Brueggemann writes, “It is rootlessness and not meaninglessness that

characterizes the current crisis. There can be no meanings apart from roots.” People who have lost their sense of belonging because of displacement often long for a home and a citizenship that cannot be stripped from them. The local church can not only enable them to develop a more secure temporal home but also guide them to the security of the eternal Kingdom.

A biblical and theological foundation for intercultural ministry provides space to understand diversity and the way God has created human beings; it allows for creativity rather than trying to squeeze the forms of ministry into specific molds and traditions; and it places this type of ministry not only within the wider ministry of the Church but also within the eternal purposes of God.

### **Allowing Space for Different Ways of Perceiving and Encountering God**

The principles of cross-cultural (or intercultural) ministry locally are very similar to working cross-culturally overseas. Contextualization involves language, understanding different worldviews, appreciating the diversity of cultures, and respecting the religious traditions of the other. One thing that cross-cultural ministry has not paid much attention to is that the epistemology of many of the immigrants from the global south may be different from how westerners have understood the nature of knowledge, the rationality of belief, and the ways of perceiving the spirit world and the Divine.

For example, within the Evangelical world conversion is often described as a punctiliar event or personal crisis which can be dated, based on a rational understanding of personal sin followed by repentance and accepting Christ as personal Saviour. However, the encounter with other religions, in particular Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, is showing that people can encounter Christ in very different ways from the traditional Evangelical model of conversion. A Muslim convert to Christianity ibn Warraq (pen name) points out:

A Muslim abandoning his faith for humanism or atheism is likely to give rational explanations why belief in any of the tenets of Islam is no longer intellectually tenable, and his reasons would differ substantially from a Muslim who converted to Christianity. (Warraq 2003, 91)

Veteran missionary and professor at Fuller Seminary Dudley Woodberry has researched extensively how and why Muslims leave Islam and embrace Christianity. Between 1991 and 2007, he interviewed 750 Muslims from 30 countries and 50 ethnic groups who had decided to follow Christ. The study ranked the relative importance of influences on Muslims to choose to follow Christ. He noted a number of influences. The first was that the Muslims saw a lived-out faith in Christians – in the loving relationships in Christian marriages, treatment of women as equals, a simple lifestyle, respecting local customs of not drinking alcohol or pork, and not touching people from the opposite sex. They were particularly attracted to the person, life and teachings of Jesus. “Nearly half of all Muslims who have made a shift of faith allegiance have affirmed that the love of God was a critical key in their decision” (Woodberry & Shubin 2001).

The second influence was the experience of answered prayer, healing, and the supernatural intervention of God. Closely related to this was deliverance from demonic power in the contexts of the widespread prevalence of folk Islam. Missionary and Professor of World Evangelization at Gordon-Conwell Seminary J. Christy Wilson mentions that Muslims love to discuss and argue issues. Yet when healing or supernatural experiences occur, they are much more open to Christ (Wilson 1994). The third influence was dissatisfaction with the kind of Islam that they had experienced, especially the fact that they perceived their religion emphasizing God’s punishment more than his love. Many were also repulsed by religiously motivated violence and the imposition of Islamic law. And finally, dreams and visions played a role in the conversion of many (Woodberry, Shubin, & Marks 2015). These elements were more decisive than intellectual arguments. Muslims often come to faith in Christ without having a full understanding of the gospel and all its implications (Garrison 2014, 235).

Kelly Hilderbrand, who conducted research on Buddhist converts to Christianity, listed three factors that contributed to their conversion – an encounter with the supernatural, contact with Christians, and dissatisfaction or incongruence with their traditional faith (Hilderbrand 2016, 400–415). These results are comparable to those of Woodberry. Joshua Iyadurai, analysing the conversion narratives of persons from mainly Hindu backgrounds, had similar findings, with emphasis on the supernatural. The converts spoke about visions, dreams, mystical

experiences, miracles, and answers to prayer as being critical points in their “transformative conversion experience” (Iyadurai 2015). The present author’s own research on conversion experiences of the poor from non-Christian backgrounds showed that conversion was a process and often started with an encounter with the reality of God in Christ through a miracle, dream or vision. This led to a change of allegiance. (For more on conversion as a change of allegiance, see Bates 2017.) This conversion experience was attested by changed behaviour and relationships, abandonment of traditional deities, worship of Christ alone, and a hunger for the Word and prayer. Yet their understanding of personal sin and the need for a saviour emerged only 6 months to a year later. They had encountered the God who referred to Himself as *Immanuel* and only later encountered Him as Saviour.

The focus on the cognitive, the individual, and a logical systematization of theology in North American Evangelical soteriology has resulted in what American sociologist James Davison Hunter at the University of Virginia refers to as the methodization and standardization of spirituality within the Evangelical tradition. He states that Evangelicalism built on a propensity for the “rationalization of spirituality” in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism.

What is different about contemporary *American* Evangelicalism is the intensification of this propensity to unprecedented proportions. This intensification came about as an adaptation to modern rationality. Thus, one may note the increasing tendency to translate the specifically religious components of the Evangelical world view, previously understood to be plain, self-evident, and without need of elaboration, into rigorously standardized prescriptions [*italics added*]. (Hunter 1983, 74-75)

Matthew Bates writes that this rationalization of spirituality is the result of the impact of the Enlightenment on not only the Christian faith, but also on mission (Bates 2017). These “rigorously standardized prescriptions” are evident in much of evangelistic preaching and Evangelical missional practices such as Campus Crusade’s use of the “Four Spiritual Laws,” Billy Graham’s “Four Steps to Peace with God,” and other evangelistic tools such as the “Bridge Illustration” and the “Roman Road.” All of them incorporate a standardized process of

emphasizing a broken relationship with God and the need to accept the forgiveness that He provides in Christ. This culminates in a “sinner’s prayer” (Graham 1977, 287). This practice does not consider the influence of context on a person’s perception and understanding of spiritual issues, or their needs, where in desperation God meets them.

The rationale used for standardized presentations of the Gospel is that it enables the rapid communication of the gospel to as wide an audience as possible. Hunter writes about the parallel to a market economy. “In the rationalized economy, mass production allows for widespread distribution and consumption while maintaining a high degree of quality control over the product. Likewise, the reduction of the gospel to its distilled essence and the methodization of the conversion process makes widespread distribution of the gospel possible, while maintaining a cognitive uniformity in substantive quality of the message and an experiential uniformity in functional quality of the process” (Hunter 1983, 83-84). Karl Barth was highly critical of D.L. Moody’s method of evangelism, namely revivalism. While he was impressed with Moody’s revivals and their impact, Barth states, “The Apostles did not ask people whether they would accept or not [the Gospel], but told them of reality, not in a sense of false freedom but of true freedom. Concentrate on teaching and preaching the Word of God, and let experience take care of itself” (Barth 1965, 38).

While focus of much of ministry today has been on ensuring the relevance of the *message* of the Gospel in different cultures, a very different understanding of contextualization is presented by Orthodox priest Edward Rommen. In his book *Come and See: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Contextualization* he writes that contextualization is too focused on information - the message and the content of the Gospel, and very little on the Person of Christ. “So, whatever it is, contextualization involves mediation, not only of information about God, but the facilitation of a personal encounter with the saving, forgiving, all present, Lord of life, Jesus Christ” (Rommen 2013, xii-xiii). For Rommen, the Gospel is not merely a message but a Person. “Jesus, not salvation, is God’s greatest gift to us” (Wilson 2016). The emphasis is not on a logically presented contextually appropriate argument but on enabling a person to experience the reality of Christ in their specific context.

Missiologist Steven Bevans at the Catholic Theological Union in reviewing *Come and See* writes that while the Bible needs to be

translated and doctrines explained in ways that people understand, “Rommen is right in that a lively, faithful, and faith-filled church community is still the best witness to the Gospel. No amount of contextualization can substitute for authenticity, fidelity, or holiness” (Bevans 2013, 44). What is becoming increasingly clear is that the spirituality of much of the global south is based on a lived reality of the living God revealed in Christ, a God who hears them and walks with them in their struggles of life, and not on an intellectually robust Christianity based on a platonic separation of the spiritual from the physical. For the non-Westerner, the experience is followed by understanding, while for the Westerner it is the reverse.

In ministering to the diaspora from the global south, there needs to be space for different ways of perceiving truth, God and spiritual realities<sup>4</sup> rather than trying to fit their spirituality into traditional western methods, traditions, and forms. There is a need to observe, listen and learn before strategizing. Gordon Smith, the President of Ambrose Seminary in Calgary writes that the conversion experiences of Hindus and Muslims are influencing the Evangelical discussion on

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<sup>4</sup> There is very little research on understanding the epistemology of conversion of those from non-Christian backgrounds (ethno-epistemology). People from non-Christian background and non-Christianized contexts may encounter Christ differently and respond to experience rather than a reasoned presentation about sin and forgiveness. This is a highly controversial issue and cannot be easily separated into Eastern and Western approaches to philosophy and epistemology. It would be important to differentiate between philosophical traditions and the epistemology of ordinary people. However, ethno-epistemology is a growing field of study. Goldman referred to the ethno-epistemology of ordinary people as “epistemic folkways” consisting of pre-reflective, untutored, and uncritical epistemic concepts, intuitions, judgements, and norms of everyday people (Goldman 1992). A few of the others who have done descriptive studies of intuitions, judgments, standards, and goals of folk epistemic practices are Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). P.H. Coetze and A.P.J. Roux, eds., *The African Philosophy Reader* (Routledge, 1998). Emmanuel Chukweze Eze, ed., *African Philosophy: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1957). Anne Waters, ed., *American Indian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). One of the criticisms of many of the studies of ethno-epistemology of ordinary people is that they amount to a compilation of anecdotal evidence and are not critical evaluations using epistemic norms and concepts.

conversion. “As evangelical witness has led to the conversion of Hindus and Muslims, there has been an increasing willingness to ask, for example, not how *should* a Muslim become a Christian but how *does* it actually happen: What is the character of their experience and how can we appreciate this without having to superimpose the categories of revivalism on their faith journey” (Smith 2010, 211)?

A different epistemology is not just reflected in the conversion experiences, but is seen in how people from the global south read the Bible and how they pray. This in turn influences what their perceptions and expectations are of God, how they navigate the spiritual-physical divide, and how they relate to society, since many of them come from places where Christians are a minority and they have now moved to Canada with its remnants of Constantinian Christianity.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Ministering to and with the diaspora will change the Canadian Church. Jürgen Moltmann, the German theologian at the University of Tübingen, describes the struggle between *identity* and *relevance* that the Church in every generation and in every country face. The struggle is for the church to constantly define and protect its identity, which is often defined by its history, in the midst of competing and changing values in the surrounding culture, and threats from the political context. Unfortunately, this causes the church to be inward looking and thereby losing its relevance. However, the process of remaining true to what it means to be a people of God and followers of Christ, while engaging with people from other traditions, faiths, and cultures will change the church (Moltmann 1974, 3). This will change its identity and the way it has always perceived itself. It is a risk which is very unsettling and threatening to its members.

Ministry to and with the diaspora is also messy. There is no one size fits all template or approaches to effectively ministry with them. Each diaspora community is different and even when they come together in multicultural churches, the dynamics will vary from church to church. However, there are principles, case studies, and existing strategies that provide a wealth of insights on how to minister to and with diaspora congregations. This is what the collection of essays in *From the Margin to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect* seeks to do.

### Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think “the idea of migration has been widely ignored by theologians”? What aspects of migration should be addressed?
2. Rupen Das quotes Simone Weil: “To be rooted is perhaps the most important need of the human soul.” What might that mean to a new Canadian? Have you ever felt “unrooted”? How did you find roots again or reconnect?
3. Migration runs like a thread through the whole Bible narrative. People on the move (for all kinds of reasons) are so much part of the fabric of the story that we hardly notice it as a major feature. What scriptural migration stories come to mind for you? Which biblical migration story most resonates with you?
4. Dr. Das declared that in a changing and challenging culture, the church often struggles to define and protect its identity while still trying to be relevant. What does that look like in your church context? In what ways is your church struggling to protect its unique identity while trying to communicate the gospel in a relevant way to our culture? Given the research that Rupen Das provides about Muslims and Hindus converting to Christ, what change would you make in your own life when having a conversation with someone from a different faith?

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