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From the Margins to the Centre

The Diaspora Effect

A Collection of Essays to Celebrate
the 20th 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 9

Engaging World Religions with the Gospel

T.V. Thomas

Migration is one of the oldest and most enduring aspects of the human experience. In the last 50 years, we have witnessed worldwide population shifts on a mega-scale. Many nations are feeling the pressure of a population explosion. Some nations have large numbers of young people, many of whom have dreams for the future that cannot be fulfilled in their own nations. The young, therefore, tend to migrate more frequently than the old. Others are motivated by the desire for economic advancement for themselves and their families. The demand by some nations for cheap migrant labour has been magnetic. For still others, migration is caused by war and national disasters. In some nations, minorities feel the racial, religious, or political pressure, and so they desire to emigrate.

Today, transnational migration is a global phenomenon, occurring at an accelerated pace on an unprecedented scale and in unpredictable directions. This massive flow of people around the world is drastically changing the social, cultural, and religious landscapes of countries and continents. It is a demographic reality that no one can ignore and no community can avoid. This explains why the United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres urged world leaders in January 2018 to celebrate global migration as a positive global phenomenon (Summers 2018).

As Christians, we can enthusiastically celebrate this contemporary global migration. We must believe that it is our sovereign God who is allowing this scrambling of the nations. Although we mourn the uprooting of families and the disruption to communities, the massive movement of peoples across borders is no surprise to God. He may very well be allowing this for his ultimate redemptive purpose (Acts 17:26-27). The Great Commission compels the Canadian Church to enthusiastically embrace this amazing opportunity to participate in

mission in our own backyard, to expedite its efforts to love each newcomer, and to welcome them to Canada, as part of the redemptive purposes of the Kingdom.

Canada: A Destination of Choice

It would be no exaggeration to say Canada is a nation of immigrants. Historically, the immigration gates have been wide open throughout most of Canada's history. Waves of immigration have taken place from the very founding of the nation. Canada's population growth continues to be fueled by immigration. The current rates of immigration still remain noteworthy with 235,000 new immigrants arriving in Canada every year. A sample decadal comparison by Statistics Canada provides evidence of a significant influx of new Canadians. Canada is a premier destination of choice for potential immigrants (Statistics Canada 2016).

1964	112,600
1974	218,500
1984	88,300
1994	224,400
2004	235,800
2014	260,400

Table 1: Annual Immigration to Canada by Decade

The pattern of Canadian immigration can be identified in three general phases. In the first phase (pre-1967), immigration to Canada was largely from Europe. Large scale migration of Europeans happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These immigrants settled across the country in both rural and urban areas. At that time, Canada was primarily white and European, with a smattering of people of colour and a remnant of indigenous peoples. In the second phase (1967-2000), because of federal government policy changes in the mid-Sixties, immigration changed significantly from being Eurocentric to non-Eurocentric with most of the immigrants coming from Asia, Africa, Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean. The vast number of these from the Majority World countries settled primarily in cities. This phase transformed Canadian cities, resulting in a colour change – from monochromatic to a multi-chromatic nation. In the third phase

(post 2000), the greatest number of immigrants to Canada still come from the Majority World but a greater proportion are now settling in smaller and/or rural communities, even though a significant number are still ending up in urban centers.

The number of refugees seeking safety from war-torn regions, areas of natural disasters, or asylum-seekers fleeing political persecution, has drastically increased in recent decades. During these political and humanitarian crises, we recorded a high level of immigration – 37,500 Hungarian refugees arrived in Canada in 1956-57 and 60,000 boat-people from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos made Canada their home in the late 1970s (Statistics Canada 2016, 3). About 22 percent of the Canadian population of 37 million are foreign born. Canada is now the permanent home of thousands of diaspora people from across the globe. These are the New Canadians.

With this massive immigration, Canada has become a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious society. There are two striking implications. First, Canada is now ethnically pluralistic. Among the diaspora peoples, we see their distinctive social customs, preferred foods, clothes they like to wear, family and kinship structures, marriage customs, burial practices, and cultural celebrations. For example, every Spring, during the Chinese New Year, residents of Vancouver are treated to the colourful Dragon Dance. The Sikhs in the GTA celebrate Vaisakhi, their New Year festival, marked by a parade with a beautiful float on which the Guru Granth Sahib is placed, so everyone can offer reverence. Yes, Canada is ethnically pluralistic. Canadian society is not a melting pot, but a very rich and colourful tossed salad. The ingredients of this salad can be easily identified.

The second implication of this massive immigration trend is that Canada is now religiously pluralistic. These diaspora peoples have brought along with them their worldviews, religions, and religious practices. One can see Buddhist priests in their saffron-clad robes at Buddhist shrines and temples, elaborate Hindu temples with idols that are imported directly from India, Muslim mosques with Islamic architecture dotting the Canadian landscape and Sikh temples (gurdwaras) that are open most of the hours of the day to serve their devotees. The adherents of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism have noticeably increased in numbers.

Why Must We Respond Enthusiastically?

Allow me to present to you four biblical reasons why we, as Christians, need to respond enthusiastically to the diaspora peoples of different faiths among us. The first biblical reason is that the Old Testament instructs us to. God through Moses gave us this teaching in Leviticus 19:33-34.

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

God expected the non-Jew to be received by the Jew, and the non-Jew to be loved by the Jew. While secular society and institutions may stop at toleration, we, as Christians, must not just receive these “*strangers*” (new Canadians); we also need to love them.

Chris Wright succinctly highlights two proclamations that Moses made about the greatness of God of the Bible in Deuteronomy 10:14-22 that should persuade us to welcome and embrace the diaspora people among us (Wright 1998, 108-124). The first proclamation is God’s universal ownership (Deuteronomy 10:14-15, 18). Moses proclaims that Yahweh is the owner of the whole of the heavens and whole of the earth, because he created it. Therefore, everything belongs to God. To fulfill his redemptive mission in the world, this God chose to focus his love on the small group of Israelites (Deuteronomy 7:7). To accomplish this mission, God called for the circumcision of their hearts, which meant true submission to God in obedience.

The second proclamation is God’s universal sovereignty (Deuteronomy 10:17-19). God not only owns the world, but he is also in charge of it. The world of the Israelites was characterized by religious pluralism – nature gods, national gods, idolatries, cults, and the occult. Moses was aware of this. He is proclaiming that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is a supreme God over all nations and all other gods – whoever they may be. We then notice that this awesome, powerful God is concerned about the homeless, the stranger, and the needy. In Deuteronomy 10:18, we see that “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” We are to love the fatherless, the widow, and the sojourner, as God

loves them (Deuteronomy 10:19). God wants Christians to be like him.

The second biblical reason to respond enthusiastically to this grand influx of new Canadians is that Jesus expects us to. He spoke on the importance of welcoming a stranger in our midst in Matthew 25:35, “For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” As Christians, we need to be good hosts to the newcomers to Canada. As followers of Christ, we need to show genuine, loving hospitality to new Canadians and demonstrate Christ-like attitudes. We need to accept new Canadians with courtesy, respect, and affirmation. We need to remember that each new Canadian is made in the image of God and each is a potential candidate for the grace of God. Christ died for each one of them, because he loved them. Christ loves them and he wants to love them through us.

The third biblical reason to respond enthusiastically is that the Great Commission demands it of us. (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). The basic thrust of the Great Commission passages in the New Testament is cross-cultural evangelism. The early church, on the very day of Pentecost, demonstrated cross-cultural evangelism. We can even claim that, at Pentecost, the church’s core missional strategy was cross-cultural evangelism. On that blessed day, in Jerusalem, there were representatives from present-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Rome, Arabia, and Crete – at least 15 nations were specifically identified and represented. Christians must respond to this mission field within our reach. It is a door of opportunity that God has opened for us!

The fourth biblical reason to respond enthusiastically is that biblical prophecies foretell it. The Scriptures, like Revelation 5:9, predict the gathering of all nations and is a prophecy that is yet to be fulfilled.

“And they sang a new song, saying, ‘Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’”

This means that, in the final gathering around the throne, there will be believers from every language group, from every people group, and from every ethnic group. God purposes a global church to be made up of people from every class, culture, and ethnic identity.

What Should We Keep in Mind?

Religious pluralism is not new. The first-century apostolic church encountered pluralism from the beginning, by witnessing to Jews, Greeks, Romans, and others in the great melting pot of Hellenistic culture and the Pax Romana. In the face of the growing numbers of people of other faiths in our communities, we need to keep in mind the following ten core guidelines, as we engage with them.

First, religions are constructed by humans and, therefore, they reflect their makers (Miriam 2001, 68). The Bible teaches that humans are both created in the image of God and sinners. Hence, religions reflect these two polarized truths. Because humans are made in God's image and have the gift of creativity, there are elements of wisdom, goodness, beauty, and caring in all religions. Therefore, we can learn from non-Christian religions. On the other hand, because religions are shaped by sin-affected people, they are stained with that sin and function with idolatry, exploitation, and violence. We need to confront religion's idols, beginning with our own.

Secondly, religions are not merely a list of doctrines but are lived out by people (Miriam 2001, 67). Each religion includes beliefs and behaviours, experienced both individually and communally, and experienced both ideally and imperfectly.

Thirdly, all religions contain varying degrees of ethical and moral truth, but non-Christian religions are insufficient in providing saving truth. Truth is embodied and incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:17; 8:31-32; 14:6). Knowledge of and power for salvation comes only through Jesus Christ.

Fourthly, each major religion displays sectarian, geographical, and generational variety (Gnanakan 2001, 180). No religion is monolithic. Different people believe and practice any one faith in numbers of different ways. So, we should not be surprised to meet a Hindu from India who is different from a Hindu from Trinidad, or a Hindu from Fiji. We should strive to understand a person's religion in their personal context and avoid making sweeping generalized statements.

Fifthly, religion may fluctuate between being central or marginal in an individual's life. So, if we meet a Sikh, we can neither assume he is deeply devoted to Sikhism, consistently living up to the tenets of Sikhism as a lifestyle, nor that he is ready to discuss it as a theology. We must realize that most immigrants are nominal in their beliefs and

often have embraced a folk religion version of their respective faiths.

Sixthly, diverse religions have a dissimilar set of questions and they answer them in different ways. John Howard Yoder illustrates this poignantly:

The problem of Islam is how to know and do the will of the unique sovereign God. Buddhism is not interested in that. Buddhism is interested in a concept of enlightenment in which sovereignty, God and holiness no longer make sense. Confucianism is interested in keeping a society stable. Shinto, if it is a religion at all, is interested in making a society vigorous. Other faiths are not interested in building a society at all. (Koontz and Alexis-Baker 2014, 368)

With such differences, each time a Christian seeks to testify to a person of a different faith, he/she needs to ask specific and relevant questions.

Seventhly, to fully understand religions, we must seek to identify the contrasts in their respective worldviews (Wu 2015,192-195). Comprehending differences, like cyclical or linear views of history, individualistic or collective views of culture, approaches to guilt and innocence, shame and honor, fear and power, absolute moral truth or relativism, etc., are critical to enhance our understanding in inter-faith interactions. A tool like the UReachToronto website (www.ureachtoronto.com), hosted by the TIM Centre, is a valuable resource for information about the characteristics of dozens of ethnic groups from around the world.

Eighthly, we need to find the compatible elements, revealed types, overlapping themes, and comparable practices in each religion (McDermott 2001, 17-35). These can be stepping stones to prepare adherents of other religions to better understand and respond to the claims of Christ. For example, in Islam, there is a tremendous emphasis on Allah's sovereignty, majesty and transcendence, and human beings' submission to the holiness of Allah and his eternal will. We can leverage this similarity to help Muslims apprehend a biblical understanding of God.

Ninthly, we should genuinely commend the positive actions and practices of people who desire to search for and reach God. For example, Jesus commended the faith of the Gentile centurion (Matthew 8:10),

and Paul makes a positive introduction in addressing the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17:22).

Tenthly, the God of the Bible is altogether unique and separate from all other gods (Exodus 20:30) (Lightner 1998, 174). This is the one true and living God of Creation, who has revealed himself in his world, his word, and his Son, Jesus. Only in this God, can the hungers of the human mind and heart find fulfilment (Zacharias 1994, 67).

What Must We Do to Engage People of Other Faiths?

The Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Taoists, and adherents of other faiths were once far away. That is no longer the case in most places in Canada. We do not have the luxury of ignoring or avoiding them. They are in our neighborhoods, schools, offices, airports, factories, restaurants, clinics, etc. The following twelve points are some helpful suggestions, as churches and Christians respond to the opportunity that is before us.

1. As followers of Christ, we are called to live in such a way that the people around us will hear our praises of God, see our good lives, and give glory to God (1 Peter 2:9-12). Scriptures make it abundantly clear that all Christians are to live holy lives and to lovingly share the good news of Jesus Christ “with every person of all faiths, or no faith” (Glaser 2005, p.216). Therefore, we need to live our lives in close proximity to the visitor among us, connecting to the community, being hospitable, and engaging our neighbours.
2. Nurture a biblically grounded personal faith (2 Timothy 2:15). The reading, study, and meditation on the Holy Scriptures is essential to deepen our faith. Anyone who engages in sharing the gospel with other faiths must be convinced of the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ, being the only Savior to offer forgiveness of sins, a brand-new life, and eternity in heaven (Matthew 1:21; John 14:6; Acts 4:12).
3. Maintain Spirit-controlled lives. Scripture exhorts us to “*be filled with the Spirit*” (Ephesians 5:18), display the “*fruit of the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:22-23), and exercise the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-5). The Spirit will lead us to engagements with

others in our circles of influence. We will need to be sensitive and responsive to that leadership.

4. Be undergirded by prayer (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Reaching non-Christians involves spiritual warfare, and prayer is an essential weapon to ensure any spiritual breakthrough (Jeremiah 32:27). One way to do that is to prayer-walk our neighbourhoods, praying on-site with insight. Prayer becomes more grounded, when we can actually observe the people, places, and situations we are praying for.
5. Relate to everyone with AGAPE love. Jesus calls us to love our neighbour, as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39). This AGAPE love is other-centered love, and it means loving with no conditions. We are called to love by both word and deed and be a blessing to them. Therefore, find ways of showing love, of displaying kindness, or of serving the newcomers around us.
6. Initiate genuine positive friendships with some non-Christians (Luke 5:27-31). Such relationships begin by being vulnerable. Be yourself and share yourself. Allow people to know the real YOU – the unique and special person you are. Create opportunities to enjoy relaxed hospitality. Again, this involves being in close proximity to new Canadians in your neighbourhood, greeting them, initiating conversations, and inviting them into your home.
7. Approach people of other faiths with the humble attitude that was demonstrated by Christ (Philippians 2:3, 5). Non-Christians need to be treated as equals, with respect and dignity. That means we must make an effort to accept them as they are, affirm them by respecting them, and appreciate them by valuing them. Be a learner and display your genuine interest in others, by asking questions about their lives and their faith.
8. Expose our faith, but don't impose it on others (Matthew 5:16). As Christians we are called to live out our faith, as witnesses of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). All our friends from non-Christian faiths should be allowed to observe closely how the Christian faith works in practical ways. When we live out our

winsome lives, it invokes curiosity in the non-believer. This requires participation in neighbourhood cultural events, sharing meals in each other's homes, and intentionally initiating conversations and friendships with others. Try volunteering at a local community centre or initiating a cultural festival at your children's school.

9. Articulate the entire gospel clearly, courteously, and contextually (Miriam 2001, 83). We might use 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, where Paul gives one of the clearest definitions of the gospel. Communication of the gospel will obviously involve conversation, discussion, dialogue, testimony, listening, and even arguing. We can argue without being argumentative. We should show ourselves as Christ's disciples and not as invaders, trying to prove their religion as false (2 Timothy 2:24-25). It will take multiple interactions over a longer period of time to communicate the whole gospel through word and deed. Witnessing is not an event but a lifestyle.
10. Make Jesus Christ central to our sharing (John 12:32). Explain who Jesus is, what he did in history on the cross, what he has done for you and what Jesus could do for them. Share that Christ can offer meaning and purpose in life, his peace, and his protection (John 10:10).
11. Use the Bible as our source of knowledge and authority (2 Timothy 3:16). In our conversations, we could stir our friends' interest with the Bible. Speak about the Bible reverently and not argumentatively. We must present the stories and truths of Scriptures in compelling ways. Whenever possible, do not just quote the Bible but read the verse(s) with the seeker. It is the Word of God that opens the heart to the presence of God. Neighbourhood Bible studies, or even comparative religion studies, can be effective ways of introducing the scripture texts into conversations with people of other faiths.
12. Invite well-disciplined converts from other faiths to help us in our witness to respective faith groups (Mouw 2001, 175). Sometimes, new converts to Christ can be negative about everything about their former faith and be distorted in their critique. A mature

convert can be a tremendous asset, both by bringing genuine insights and by sharing the story of his/her journey to faith. The believability of the gospel increases, when others see and listen to one who has experienced the same things as they have.

Conclusion

God has sovereignly brought the nations to Canada. This world movement will continue and will perhaps increase. New Canadians are streaming into our country, looking for help and wanting to connect and belong. We also need to believe that New Canadians will be hungry for the new life that Christ offers. No passports, visas, or foreign travel are required to show them Christ's love or to sensitively share the Good News of Jesus with them. God is calling all of us to respond to the Great Commission and has simplified the task for us. It starts by being a good neighbour.

Reflection Questions

1. In light of massive immigration, Canada has become a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious society. Thomas gave two striking implications, as a result of this current reality: (1) Canada is now ethnically pluralistic; and (2) Canada is now religiously pluralistic. How are these two implications real and relevant in your workplace and neighbourhood? How does that impact the way we relate with your workmates and neighbours?
2. This chapter referred to Wright's two proclamations about the greatness of God: (1) God's universal ownership; and (2) God's universal sovereignty. How do these two proclamations persuade you to welcome and embrace diaspora people?
3. Thomas listed 10 core guidelines in engaging people of different faiths. Which of the ten in the list is a guideline that you need to take to heart? What is an initial step you can do to apply this guideline in your workplace or community?
4. In the last part of the chapter, we find 12 suggestions to help churches and Christians, to respond to this opportunity of being surrounded by a plurality of faiths. What is one helpful suggestion

that you feel compelled to do right away? How can you specifically apply it this week as you interact with a friend, co-worker, or neighbour, who belongs to a different faith?

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