



Monocultural churches in an age of migration



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Migration and British Christianity

This is a very *kairotic* moment in which we live. These years will go down in history as a season of many missional possibilities when distances between the nations were, for the most part, diminished (except, of course, for both Britain pulling out of the European Union in Brexit and Trump's threat to build a wall against Mexico). We live in an *age of migration*.¹ Indeed, it is an era when God is remixing the nations once again and, in the process, bringing strangers from different parts of the world together. Especially here in our Western cities, migrants from distant nations have come to dwell together to share with each other whatever gifts they bear. The presence of these migrants has permanently altered the demographics of most major European and other Western cities, some parts beyond recognition. Many cities, towns and villages have gone through massive and rapid transformations as people from other nations – speaking different languages and embodying different cultures – have made their homes in the diaspora. Migrants bring not only their cultures but also their religions with them. London, Birmingham, Manchester and many other cities are today decorated with temples, synagogues, gurdwaras, and mosques – worship facilities that stand as both foreign and at home. In addition, thousands of Christian churches and worship centres have mushroomed across the country.

Migration has changed what it means to be European today.² Cultural diversity is on the

increase in Britain. The 2011 Census showed white people accounted for 86.0 per cent of the usual resident population, a decrease from 91.3 per cent in 2001 and 94.1 per cent in 1991. Thus, overall, there is a rise in the non-white British population in Britain clearly observable in the past 25 years. This rise in non-white populations in Britain brings along a rise in religious affiliation, both of Christianity and of other religions like Islam.

A significant percentage of the migrants are Christians and their migration to Britain adds to the figures of Christians in the country, but it also adds a great deal of diversity to Christianity in Britain over the years. I have, for countless times, heard the hyperbole that British Christianity is becoming a *black* thing, and while I realise it maybe an overstatement, I do believe there is a bit of truth in it. Not only do we see Nigerian Pentecostals in Britain, we also meet Iranian Anglicans, Zimbabwean Methodists, both Ethiopian and Russian Orthodox Christians, Brazilian Baptists and Korean Presbyterians on the streets of our cities. Take London, for example, where only 14 per cent of the population is black, yet this small minority accounts for over 60 per cent of church attendance on any Sunday within the city. In my teaching work across the country, I have met white British children who believe that one has to be black in order to be a Christian simply because all the Christians they know are black. Walter Hollenweger was right to say, 'British Christians prayed for revival, and when it came, they could not recognise it because it was black.'³

What is happening now?

This diversity in the Christian population in the West that has come about because of the immigration of non-Western Christians has raised some serious theological as well as social questions. For instance, in the context of the Christian nations of Europe and North America (where many citizens still believe in some form of a Western supremacy that justifies the West's effort to dominate and colonise the nations which, in reality, translates into racism that believes not just that *white is might* but also that *white is right*), does the gospel preach equality of the races in the fellowship of the followers of Christ? Does baptism into the Body of Christ mean that Christians from around the world are equal? Is our heavenly citizenship more important than our earthly one? Are Western Christians supposed to be especially hospitable to foreign Christians in their countries?

The presence of non-white Christians in the West has been observable for some 50 years now. As such, there are some patterns that stand out. When they arrive in the West, many migrants remain separate in their own monocultural congregations, continuing to worship like they did in their native countries. Some will disappear in the melting pot of Western churches where their cultural identity is downplayed in order for the congregation to stick together. A small percentage of them find multicultural churches where their way of understanding God and expressing Christianity is accepted and celebrated along with that of many others. Let us look at each of these in detail.

Separation

Generally speaking, congregations tend to be divided by racial, national and tribal or linguistic identities. This is the case even in contexts of cultural diversity. Congregational segregation is the default mode of existence. Multicultural churches are few and far between. Of course, over 90 per cent of congregations in the USA are monoracial. Here in Britain, the statistics may be only slightly better, but it is also true here that Sunday worship time is the most segregated time of the week. Evangelical faith seems to divide people in worship rather than unite them. Consequently, the relationship between 'home' and 'foreign' Christians across most of Britain is generally more function driven and not relational. For many, it goes no further than allowing the foreign Christians to rent a hall for worship (as long as they make the payments on time). Race is a very strong divider. It is common and accepted to identify some churches as Black Majority Churches. Some African scholars have started to talk about white majority churches in *Britain* – whatever that is understood to mean, it serves to underscore the fact that race is a critical marker in Christianity. Nationalistic labels are also common. We see Korean churches, Chinese churches, Kenyan churches, and many more. Yet, if we pay closer attention, we also find

tribal divisions as well. There are Yoruba churches, Igbo churches, Shona churches, Kikuyu churches, Tumbuka churches, even when they all use English as their *lingua franca*. I would add here that even among Europeans, it is common to see them gather according to their cultural tribes (easily identified in their classes).

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Assimilation

Assimilation is the way most congregations do 'multiculturalism'. One culture remains dominant while all other cultures disappear into it. This can be the home culture (and usually is) of the majority of the congregation, and it happens not just in 'white majority churches' but also in black majority churches. I have seen this in British churches as well as in African churches. The foreigner who walks into such a church is accepted or even celebrated as long as they make an effort to minimise their own cultural identity in order to blend in. The dominant culture becomes the melting pot into which everything must disappear and from which everything gets its flavour. The stranger must quickly learn and adapt to how 'things work here' in order to belong. Many such churches will lack diversity (especially that of voices and cultural vantage points) in their leadership. They are unable to imagine how their leadership decisions and church practices could be if they came from a different cultural point of view. More often than not, British churches expect foreign Christians to adjust in order to fit in. Generally, though, the foreigners respond by choosing not to adapt but to form their own congregations (where they will also demand other strangers to adapt to fit in).

Multiculturalism

There are a few congregations around Britain that welcome the cultural diversity that makes their membership and their parishes. These churches make sure that their ecclesial practices are informed and shaped by a diversity of cultural expressions. They do not try to subsume the cultural groups into a melting pot. Instead, they discern and uplift whatever gifts the strangers bear that will edify their congregations. They practice a radical hospitality as many of them understand themselves to be a house of prayer for all nations. One pastor told me that for his congregation to understand this kind of hospitality, he had to assure them that everyone was a migrant and God is our host. Such hospitality displaces the host community and insists that they also learn what it means to be a stranger.

NOTES

1. For instance, see S Castles and MJ Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (4th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2009).

2. The discourse around migration is beyond the scope of this essay so I will not engage it here apart from declaring my prejudice that migration is a normal human condition that has existed since the beginning of time.

3. W Hollenweger in the Foreword to R Gerloff, *A Plea for British Black Theologies: The Black Church Movement in Britain in Its Transatlantic Cultural and Theological Interaction with Special References to the Pentecostal Oneness (Apostolic) and Sabbatarian Movements* (Studien Zur Interkulturellen Geschichte Des Christentums; Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1992).

Monocultural Churches

The term 'monocultural churches' is generally used to describe monoracial churches. 'Multicultural churches' also tends to mean multiracial churches. Thus 'monocultural' and 'multicultural' are used interchangeably with 'monoracial' and 'multiracial' respectively. However, it is best to understand 'culture' here in a more holistic manner. Culture is a composition of many things and even though race may be one of them, race is not equal to culture. When we talk about monocultural and multicultural churches, we need to think beyond race. A middle-class suburban church can be

when the Kingdom of God is fully consummated, we will worship together across every dividing barrier

monocultural even though it is racially mixed while a church on an estate with a mixture of classes can be multicultural, even though it is made of one race.

Why do they exist?

There are many valid reasons for the existence of monocultural churches. For instance, most first-generation migrants find that mastering a new language is quite difficult, especially if they are older or if they have come from a non-Anglophone country. When this happens, they need space to worship in a language they can understand and this will generally be in a monocultural church. Second, there are some rural towns and villages around the country where racial diversity is non-existent. Third, there is a theory among church planting and church growth enthusiasts that suggests that churches grow faster if they are monocultural. They call this the 'homogenous unit principle'. Church planters are encouraged to find their niche – people of similar cultural characteristics to them – if their church plant is to grow fast, because people like to attend churches where they do not need to cross-cultural barriers. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking shapes a great deal of evangelical church planting today. Fourth, some pastors believe that God has sent them a specific people group and nobody else. For instance, a Nigerian pastor in London once assured me that he has no interest at all in reaching anybody who is not Nigerian simply because God has instructed him that his ministry was 'to preserve the Nigerians in Britain.' There are not many who think like this, but once in a while you may meet an evangelist in London who is only looking for Nigerians.

The history of this ecclesial segregation in Britain goes back to the early days of the Windrush Generation (1948–60) when many migrants from

the West Indies came to Britain. Most, being Christians who had come to the faith in a British colony and mostly through the work of British missionaries, hoped that Britain, being a Christian nation then, would be more hospitable and that they would be welcomed in the churches. That hope was dashed at the sight of signs saying 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs' in some pubs and other places with rooms for rent, revealing deep anti-black sentiments in the populace back then. Many of that generation say the racism was also prevalent in the Church – some were told, 'a church for people like you meets down the road'. Where they were welcome, many found British Christianity relatively less enthusiastic and even less expressive compared to the church in their homeland. In response, they formed their own churches. Many African Christians in Britain say that this racially charged rejection is still prevalent and shapes a great deal of their experiences when they try to join British churches.

They are here to stay

Overall, monoracial churches will continue to exist. They are safe, convenient, and comfortable. In a world that rewards those who make the most out of the path of least resistance, the difficult work of cross-cultural mission is not very attractive. I have heard many pastors complain that 'the energy needed to lead a congregation of several cultural groups is unjustifiably enormous'. There are too many pitfalls. For instance, what do you do when one cultural group has problems with another group's way of doing things? How do you make sure that all groups feel heard and have a place at the table? I remember one friend wondering, 'how do I, as an Englishman, express the exuberance that my Ghanaian members expect of their pastor when they have their naming ceremonies?' A Zimbabwean pastor responded, 'when white people come to my church, they complain that my preaching is too loud. What am I supposed to do?' Both local and foreign pastors find it too difficult to work across different races, and to avoid this, they would rather stick to one's tribe where there is no need to cross cultures.

However, monoracial churches create a bubble that allows people to get together in worship without having to attend to the needs of their neighbours who are different from them. If they actually respond to their neighbourhoods, it is usually in the form of charity – 'we will help you here but you cannot follow us to our church.' Quite often, the rich want to keep their poor neighbours out, black folk actively want to keep the white people out, ('we cannot let them dominate us in our worship too'), and white people want to keep black people out (as 'they bring issues that we don't have time for'). Ironically, many British churches will send missionaries to Africa while neglecting their African neighbours on their streets in Britain.

Mission and the monocultural church

Monocultural churches, especially in contexts of cultural diversity, go against everything that we see in the New Testament. Christianity emerged in a multicultural context. Acts 2 is a multinational adventure that engages the entire Jewish diaspora of the day. The disciples spoke great things of God in tongues that were translated in the ears of the hearers into many languages from around the world. Later, in Acts 11, the word 'Christian' was coined to describe the multicultural fellowship of followers of The Way as Jews and Gentiles joined together in worship. The arguments that we hear justifying monocultural churches could never hold water among Antioch Christians whose leadership team was multicultural, or the saints in Ephesus whom Paul advised that there is *only* one body and one Spirit (of Christ in the world) and the Galatian Christians whom he reminded that 'you are all one in Christ' (Ephesians 4.4, my paraphrase and emphasis; Galatians 3.28).

Monocultural churches in multicultural contexts paint an image of a God who pays attention to the needs of one racial or cultural group and not the others. Of course, if God cares about the others, he will send other evangelists who look like them. More often than not, such monocultural churches will have a quasi-theological justification that only intends to justify their practice of a racist form of Christianity. 'This is how we reach the most people', their church growth consultants say. However, in their practice of ecclesial segregation such churches preach of a God who is selectively movable, and the church members tend not to be touched by the spiritual condition of those who are different to them. If the size of a congregation is what matters most to a minister, it is possible that he or she has substituted capitalism for God.

Without fixing our eyes on the missionary God who gave his only Son to be crucified, and the missionary Son who became a slave for us to belong in the *ekklesia*, and the missionary Spirit who loves to hang out with the marginalised, we will justify racism, calling it good missionary practice.

Those migrants who say that worship feels better and more authentic in their mother tongue need to be reminded that mission *only* works in the language of the strangers that you are trying to evangelise. A commitment to stick to 'home languages' automatically excludes all who cannot speak the language – and this often includes their own sons and daughters. I know several African denominations whose congregations worship in Akan, Yoruba, Lingala or Kiswahili here in Britain, and I often wonder how they can exclude and evangelise British people at the same time. Because of this, I am convinced that monocultural churches have a short shelf-life, and will only last for maybe a generation or two.

Looking forward to the future

Racism, even Christian segregation, should have no place in growing the Kingdom of God. It should not be a part of any church growth strategy. When the earth is transformed and creation redeemed, we will worship together – migrants and locals, black and white, rich and poor – across every dividing barrier. There will be no space for monocultural worship. The visions given to us in the book of Revelation show multitudes of people from every tribe and tongue worshipping together. That is where we are going. Maybe we can experiment with a foretaste of what that will be like. I am convinced that once a congregation goes multicultural, there is no going back.



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