

# The Bible as a catalyst for new life: An immigrant perspective



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*'Your word is a lamp unto my feet and light unto my path'* (Ps. 119.105, KJV).

As a young Christian man I traveled from India to Scotland to pursue further post-graduate studies. Amidst all my luggage was a precious gift my mother gave me, a Bible. She told me 'this book, the Bible, will guide you in all situations as it contains the wisdom of God'. A decade later, finding myself settled in the UK, I still hold this gift dearly. This story is shared by many immigrant Christians, who have come from different countries, continents and regions. I'm sure that many of these immigrant Christians to the UK carried with them Bibles in their mother tongue and in the language of their new homes.

The cultural, moral and social context of Britain offers a unique foreign experience for many immigrants. Britain can be at once very familiar and yet very foreign. For those immigrant Christians from former British colonies there is a degree of familiarity with British culture. However, many people arriving to the UK get a powerful sense of culture shock. Oblivious to the complexity of social living in UK, many Christian immigrants expect to see a devout Christian country, full of missionaries preaching the Gospel message in Britain. Yet immigrant Christians are faced with the surprising declining Christian population, rise of 'cultural immorality' and sharp socio-economic divide. Interestingly many of these immigrants find themselves slotted into those categories, even without their knowledge.

### 'Strangers in a strange land' (1 Pet. 2.11–12)

As part of wider research on Christians I have been looking at the nature and character of immigrant

communities in UK. These observations are part of an ongoing research on ethnic minority Christian (EMC) communities in the UK, investigating the place of immigrants in British society, particularly that of Christians.<sup>1</sup>

There have been few studies that focused on the 'reverse mission' of Christian immigrants who have come to Britain from the 'global south' with the intent of missionising the post-Christian British society.<sup>2</sup> These studies tend to focus on 'mission and congregational' studies and not on social assimilation or church polity. My research has been looking into the social and cultural function of Christian fellowships in immigrant contexts, mapping and identifying the diverse ethnic Christian groups, e.g. Indian, Chinese, African, Caribbean and South American in the UK.

This research also explores continuities and discontinuities in their belief systems and perceived identities within British society. Studying the changing nature of immigrant Christian identities in Britain, highlights the impact they are having on the traditional British Christian population, primarily referenced through the Church of England and the Church of Scotland, and the various social and political views they represent. This emphasis on the changing nature of contemporary Christianity in Britain will be a significant addition to discussions on diaspora and immigration.

Undoubtedly the Bible plays a prominent role in the lives of immigrant Christians living in the UK.<sup>3</sup> What I will outline in the following paragraphs are some aspects of my research that function as a window into EMC communities. Particularly highlighting how the Bible not

only functions as a guiding force but almost maps out an immigrant's life in a foreign context, where they might struggle to integrate.

### The Bible: A cultural constant

One of the main areas of concern for many EMCs is getting used to the foreign culture. Most of them feel culturally alien to the immigrant context. The cultural norms, language and social practices offer considerable challenges in the path of integration. Getting settled into the new environment is a considerable challenge facing immigrants. Despite feeling confident in their ability to assimilate, on arrival they soon realise the stark contrast to their imagined notions of British society and culture. Their reaction may be one of the following: to make a genuine effort to understand the cultural patterns of British society and explore ways to integrate, or, more commonly, to condemn the host culture as 'evil and alien'.

Let me unpack this latter perception. Culture could be defined as a set of precepts that provide a basic framework for people to exist in communities and societies.<sup>4</sup> The tangible symbols of culture could be food, dress and other social norms or practices. British culture over the years has developed its own unique culture, drawing upon various interfaces between European and non-European cultures. Also as a byproduct of colonial history, British culture has incorporated within itself aspects from the erstwhile colonies. Although the Bible was seen as the foundation of the Christian west, which includes Britain, it baffles the immigrants upon arrival, only to find that it is far from the truth. In reaction to this reality check, Christians who migrate from foreign countries often turn to the Bible to seek cultural directive.

There is often a historical undertone to this process. Christians from India, Nigeria and China often use their Christian identity to define their native identity.<sup>5</sup> In their native context they would have used their Christian identity to distinguish themselves from others particularly when it comes to cultural practices, such as food regulations, dress code and engaging with other faith communities. For example, many Indian Christians would abstain from eating pork. Although this is something common in the predominantly Hindu culture, the Christians have been taught the Levitical food regulations (Lev. 11) that prohibit pork consumption. So Christians believe that the Bible teaches that Christians should not consume pork. When Christians from this background emigrate to Britain, with its supposedly Christian culture, are shocked to find everybody consuming pork and ignoring the teachings of the Bible.

Immigrant Christians operate in multiple cultural layers, their native culture, shaped by biblical culture and the British culture that contradicts their understanding of biblical culture. There is conflation of various cultural patterns that often confuses the immigrant in their new location. It is in this context, the Bible becomes the sole provider of cultural norms for Christians living in an immigrant context. The biblical teachings on various cultural matters are taken very seriously, from food habits to choosing life partners, covering ones head to

women being subservient to their husbands, because the Bible teaches women to accept the man as the head of the house (Eph. 5.23). The Bible becomes the cultural constant when an immigrant's identity is questioned and challenged. Therefore many EMCs look to the Bible and its teachings for guidance and direction.

Another example is that of bringing up children in the British context. It is mentioned in Christian fellowship gatherings that the challenges they face when it comes to raising children in the British culture. 'Children have too much freedom in this culture' according to Isaiah, a Nigerian Christian. He says that they should be disciplined and brought up with Christian teaching. According to him the Bible clearly says that 'Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from hell' (Prov. 23.13). Many immigrant Christians believe that British Christians do not follow the teachings of the Bible therefore paving way for all the social and cultural evils. It is a serious issue. Isaiah is quite aware that if his child had to inform the social services, he could be in trouble for following the teaching of the Bible. That's how serious the cultural decline is in British society according to Isaiah.

This is not dissimilar to the experience of the early missionaries, when they traveled to 'pagan cultures' to proclaim the gospel. In such foreign contexts, many missionaries recorded that it was the Bible that sustained them in strange lands.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that people who inherited such Christian understanding, travel back to the host countries of the missionaries and seek solace in the Bible and not in the local culture of the missionaries.

### The Bible: A moral agent

Following on from the perception of British culture as a lapsed Christian culture, many EMCs consider the UK to be 'morally corrupt'. British culture is seen by many encouraging sexual promiscuity through its relaxed approach to adultery. Further with the legalization of gay and lesbian marriage, a large proportion of EMCs consider British culture to have lost its moral compass. These observations need to be unpacked further.

For many Christians in the global south, Europe is a Christian continent, where all the missionaries came from. Their perception of Europe is primarily mediated through their experience and knowledge of the missionaries and the churches they left behind, be they catholic or protestant. Post-reformation Christianity, the type of pietistic faith that facilitated missionary activities, continues to pervade the theology and practice of many Christians from the global south. Moral teachings from this stable had a very rigorous approach to moral and personal conduct. Biblical teachings on sexual matters are followed in minute detail. Moral and ethical behaviour is derived directly from the characters in the Bible.

The common perception in the global south is that across Europe the same moral scale is practiced. When Christians from the global south emigrate to Britain they are surprised to find the prevalence of what they

## NOTES

1. This research is funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Science, Lancaster University. People's names have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

2. I Olofinjana, *Reverse In Ministry And Missions: Africans In The Dark Continent Of Europe: An Historical Study Of African Churches In Europe* (London: Author House Publishing, 2010), M Guest, K Tusting, and L Woodhead (eds), *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a post-Christian context* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

3. For an interesting analysis on the role of Bible in contemporary Christianity see the chapter titled, 'The Bible as a public book: perspectives from Global Christianity', in S Kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

4. I discuss in detail about culture, identity and community in my book, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).

consider to be immoral activities that amount to this country being called 'Sodom and Gomorrah', which needs to be saved. According to Joe, an Indian Christian, 'there is no question about same sex marriage or even accepting gay and lesbians as normal people. It is against the Bible. God through the Bible clearly says that it is immoral and unacceptable in the sight of God. Therefore whoever supports such practices is actually sinning against God.' According to Joe, people need to turn from their wickedness (Ps. 36.1) to holiness (2 Cor. 7.1). Many EMCs in Britain follow the traditional line that people with same sex orientation need counseling and mental health treatment.

Another significant issue that has impacted the ethnic minority community is the place of women in church. Many communities strongly believe that women should 'know their place,' which is to help men and to raise children. They often quote Genesis for their understanding of Eve as a 'help mate' to Adam. This perception has considerably altered the relationship with some mainline churches that encourage women in leadership. There are distinctions that need to be kept in mind. In the UK most of the West African communities encourage women into various leadership roles but they are often subservient to male leaders. Women could be seen as the worship leader, organiser, hospitality co-ordinator, but not a pastor or a prophet (with few exceptions). That is strictly reserved for the male member of the community. This understanding is deeply rooted in the biblical perceptions, both in the Old Testament and Pauline teachings, that women are weak and should not be given leadership roles. Allowing women into the priesthood and most recently the bishopric has further alienated some of the EMCs from Church of England. In their opinion these are serious sins in the sight of God, which result in God's punishment.

Drinking and socialising within church communities are seen as sinful activities among EMCs and are said to contribute to the decline of the church as such practices encourage alcoholism and unholy behavior, and wasting financial resources that could be better spent on the church's mission. Many believe that the body is the temple of God (1 Cor. 6.19) and that it needs to be kept holy and undefiled. In a society that is immoral, one needs to look to God and his word in the Bible for direction. Many EMCs teach how to deal with the sinful culture, to shield oneself and protect from the attack of devil.

### The Bible: A socio-economic directive

Many of the recent EMCs are economic migrants. They have moved to Britain either to pursue higher education or to take up employment. Hence adherence to the socio-economic realities are an important factor in deciding their place in the society. Some of the common teachings in these communities are exhorting the Christians to submit to the local authority. Paul's writing to Roman (13.1,2) and Peter's exhortation (1 Pet. 2.13,14) to submit to local government are often taught. But most important of them all is the teaching of Jesus, 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's (Matt. 22.16–21).'

However there is also a strong drive towards the notion that if you work hard God will reward. Lilly, a Chinese Christian, says that such as promises from God as 'Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you' (Matt. 6:33). should be understood that if they are faithful to God, they will be blessed materially. She also cited other biblical verses in Genesis (21.1; 24.1,35,36) and Deuteronomy (28.11; 30.9) that are taken as direct promises from God, particularly given that many immigrant Christians are in a similar context to Abraham and Israelites, living in a foreign land, as immigrants. Therefore God promises them a fruitful life in the strange land if they abide by the covenant with God.

The prevalence of such understanding is widespread among the immigrants. Many EMCs also personalise the story of Abraham and make it their own journey to Britain as a promised land, 'Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen. 12.1–3). There are other biblical verses (John 10.10; 14.14, 2 Cor. 8.9) that points to material benefits that are popular among the immigrant Christians.

### The Bible: A catalyst of new life in a foreign land

By providing a cultural, social and moral framework, especially in an immigrant context, the Bible becomes the most important tool in shaping and guiding, individuals and families belonging to ethnic minority communities in Britain. When many immigrants find it hard to socially and culturally integrate into the host context, they time and again look inwards to find a community to be part of. Frequently immigrant Christians who belong to mainstream churches in their home countries, do come with the expectation that they will be welcomed with open arms into churches that belong to the same family. However, many often find themselves unwelcome or even excluded in spite of making great efforts to integrate. For example, an Anglican from the Church of South India often does not feel at home in an 'Anglican' Church of England.

Coupled with this unexpected situation of feeling unwelcomed, the moral and cultural differences between the migrants and hosts further alienates the immigrants. In this scenario, with a strong need to have a community and support network in a foreign land, many EMCs develop their own Christian fellowship groups that are based on a common language, culture, ethnicity, moral code and culture. In order to sustain such new groups they turn to the Bible to be the catalyst that shapes, sustains and informs their 'new life' in an immigrant context. The Bible not only provides teachings to enhance the community but a map for their new life in an immigrant context. For them the Bible is 'a lamp unto their feet and light unto their paths' (Ps. 119.105).

5. RE Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and L Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (2nd edn; Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 2009).

6. J Kafwanka, AHM Jeremiah, J Miller, & N Taylor, *David Livingstone and Christian Mission and Ecumenism Today* (Glasgow: Scottish Episcopal Church, Diocese of Glasgow & Galloway, 2014).