Global South Reverse Mission in Europe: An Examination of the Limiting Factors and Prospects

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Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of the newly emerged missional paradigm called "reverse mission." Despite the paradigm's controversial nature, the article argues for its validity in missional discourses. Beginning with a general discussion of the term reverse mission, the discussion moves on to explore the challenges that reverse missionaries encounter in their efforts to evangelise native Westerners. Finally, the article investigates the contribution of reverse missionaries in the revitalisation of the Christian faith in those parts of the world where it has lost its vitality. It also shows that migration plays an important role in the reverse missionary efforts of the Global South church in the West. The article concludes that, in spite of significant challenges, reverse mission can be considered a reality that offers a tremendous opportunity for the revitalisation of Christianity in the West.

Key Words: church revitalisation, contextualisation, Global South, racism, reverse mission

Introduction

A number of authors have commented at great length on the decline in the number of Christians in the West and the remarkable growth of the Christian faith in the Southern Hemisphere (Jenkins 2007a; Hill 2016, 13-15). Scholars have called this phenomenon the great "shift of the center of gravity" (Walls 2004, 9) of the Christian world, such that the majority of Christians are now located in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (Tennent 2007). This exponential numeric growth in that part of the world has created Global South Christianity (Jenkins 2007b). 'Reverse Mission', therefore, comes out of this phenomenal revival of the Christian faith in those regions of the world, which were at the receiving end of missions from the sixteenth century to the late twentieth century but have now become senders themselves (Adogame 2010, 67). The old paradigm of missions, most evident during the Edinburgh 1910 ecumenical missionary conference (Sunquist 2015, 150) and which can be described as "from the West to the Rest" (Kim 2011, 353), has been challenged. Likewise, churches and mission agencies across the South have developed a growing interest in sending missionaries to Europe, creating a new paradigm, which Catto calls "From the Rest to the West" (Catto 2008a).

There has been some debate about the meaning of the phrase 'reverse mission' and how it has been applied in both the academic and practitioner circles. Some use it to refer to subalterns taking the gospel back to the colonisers (Burgess 2011, 432), others as the blacks taking mission to the whites (Ola 2017, 20), and others even refer to it as the act of missionaries returning to their home countries and helping people there understand the reality of the mission field (George 2001, 41). Recently the term reverse mission has also been defined as a sociological process through which members of migrant religious communities seek to educate their host society, and particularly its government, about the hardships that their compatriots back home face as the result of Western foreign policy (Byrnes 2011, 2). Even more recently, reverse mission has been used to refer to those individuals who were converted while living in the West and then decide to go back to their home settings to promote the gospel among their compatriots (Kim 2013, 172). While these aforementioned uses of the term reverse mission allude to a reversal of roles, they do not contribute to a clear understanding of the concept of reverse mission. On the contrary, these many variations of the terminology have generated confusion and controversy, leading some to question the term's validity (Morier-Genoud 2018).

However, the scope of this work aligns with the more comprehensive and accurate definition proposed by Adogame: "The (un-)conscious missionary strategy by churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America of (re-)evangelizing the 'West'" (Adogame 2013, 169). This description seems more precise, as it implies that, quite rightly, reverse mission can also be described as a "by-product" (Ola 2017, 20) of the migratory movement of people from the South to the North.[1] With this definition in mind, this article seeks to examine the process by which churches in the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) engage in mission in Europe, thus 'reversing' the "one-directional" (Marsh 2003, 370) mission paradigm prevalent from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries.

Before moving forward, two important clarifications are required. First is to note the difficulties produced by blunt generalisations and to recognise the significance of the analysis of the particulars of a discourse or of a geographical area. Even so, this study's approach is one of identifying common issues that will likely have implications for reverse missionaries from Africa, Latin America, and Asia coming to Europe. Second, this article's approach to reverse mission in Europe arises from my (the author's) own personal experience as a Global South missionary serving in the United Kingdom. Undoubtably similar situations are developing in North America, where churches from the Global South are working to evangelise the populations of Canada and the United States. In this regard, while this article highlights the critical issues for reverse mission in Europe, it is likely that the findings and conclusions drawn here will resonate with what is happening in North America as well.

With these two clarifications in mind, two critical issues are recognised as universally applicable to the context of reverse mission from the Global South to Europe. The first one relates to the reality and the prospect for reverse mission discourse, particularly in diaspora contexts. The second regards a certain aloofness between Global South missionaries and native Europeans, which has a significant impact on the process of reverse mission. This reality is evidenced in several studies, notably by Catto (2008a; 2012) and Freston (2010), who have drawn similar conclusions after analysing the cases of reverse missionaries from Africa, Latin America, and Asia working in various countries within Europe.

As a final point, it should be noted that some have questioned the validity of the reverse mission concept, arguing that in our day mission should be seen as "from everywhere to everywhere" (Nazir-Ali 2009) and therefore the direction of mission should not really matter. However, one major drawback of this approach is that it fails to account for the particulars of a missiological discourse, as Catto points out: "Having said this, though 'from everywhere to everywhere' captures something of globalising processes and the related complexity of contemporary Christian mission, and may be an ideal, it discounts discerning difference and more specific trends/patterns. Therefore, the concept is analytically empty and inadequate" (Catto 2008b, 116–17). Besides, while one should celebrate the reality that any Christian anywhere can participate in God`s mission, reverse mission does not contradict this. Reverse mission is simply one of the facets of the missio Dei.

The Motivation for Reverse Mission

What, however, motivates these churches in the Global South to send missionaries to Europe? Their primary motivation is a deep sense of appreciation from those who have benefited from historical European missionary activity, and it is out of this sense of gratitude that reverse mission was born (Burgess 2011, 434).[2] Second, these Christians are aware of the much-spoken about decline of Christianity in the West and consider secular Europe a "dark continent" (Adogame 2010, 68) and a "spiritual desert in need of reevangelisation" (Koning 2011, 12). Third, these Global South Christians feel commissioned and have a divine call to evangelise

Europeans (Fesenmyer 2014). Some of them have intentionally moved to Europe after receiving such divine leading, while others received their calling after they have arrived on the continent (Kahl 2014, 72–84). At the same time, some scholars have argued for a less noble drive behind the reverse missionary efforts. For example, some see reverse mission discourse as a way to "boost the self-image of postcolonial nations and their diasporas" (Freston 2010, 172), and others call it "mechanisms to negotiate the hardships and deprivations that individuals encounter in the process of establishing themselves in Europe" (Burgess 2011, 434). While there may be some truth in such criticisms, they appear to be based more on the judgment of the scholar than in research findings.

Worlds Apart: Limiting Factors

Building a significant and meaningful relationship with the host culture is considered essential for any missionary success (Kahl 2014, 83). However, developing such relationships has proved to be a great challenge for reverse missionaries in Europe. Scholars talk of a complete lack of mutual understanding that creates a "huge gap" (Paas 2015, 12) between these missionaries and the native Europeans. Koning calls it "boundaries" that are "not easily overcome" (Koning 2011, 127). For Knibbe, the encounter between reverse missionaries and Europeans represents the "intersections of different worlds" (Knibbe 2011, 475). Remarkably, the causes for this disassociation between the reverse missionaries and the native Europeans have been interpreted differently. For Europeans the gap is the result of cultural differences and the inability of reverse missionaries to acculturate themselves, while for reverse missionaries the gap is associated with socio-economic and racial distance (Koning 2011, 84–86). Nevertheless, there is a consensus that this 'gap' has major implications for reverse mission efforts in Europe. This study will thus proceed to examine the reasons behind this debilitating gap.

Lack of Contextualisation and Acculturation Skills

The apparent inability of the reverse missionaries to contextualise and be relevant to European host cultures has been a recurrent theme in the scholarly writings. For instance, Ola detects that two of the major limitations for an effective reverse mission in Europe are "the absence of a well premeditated cross-cultural missionary plan and acculturation challenges" (Ola 2017, 24). Similarly, for Kahl, the efforts of reverse missionaries are being hampered by "a widespread inability to overcome cross-cultural communication barriers" (Kahl 2014, 84). Notably, Knibbe quotes the complaint of native Europeans in the Netherlands who draw a parallel with the lack of cultural sensitivity of European missionaries in Africa, accusing reverse missionaries of "making the same mistake" (Knibbe 2011, 478). Moreover, there has also been some criticism of the use of evangelistic techniques that, though effective in the South, are ineffective in reaching Europeans (namely, street evangelism, door to door, bus evangelism) (Adogame 2010, 61; Kahl 2014, 84). Some have even taken issue with the message preached by reverse missionaries, deeming it to be "beyond their listeners' frames of reference" and, instead of drawing people in, "put[ting] people off" (Kahl 2014, 84; see also Paas 2015, 23). References to witches, demons, end times, hell, divine punishment, and ancestral curses are mentioned as unpalatable to Europeans' sensibilities. Additionally, some posit that reverse missionaries demonstrate a lack of theological training, particularly in the areas of church planting and contextualisation (Ola 2019, 63; Paas 2015, 25).

On a positive note, there are signs that reverse missionaries, aware of these shortcomings, are taking steps to become more culturally relevant in Europe. For example, some diaspora churches are adapting their church practices in order to attract native Europeans (Ola 2019, 63–64). They have also offered cultural training to their congregations and employed the second generation to work in evangelism and in other high-visibility roles (Koning 2011, 150, 177).

Another strategy has been to team up with indigenous churches in order to gain cultural insights (Burgess 2011, 449). In terms of evangelistic strategy, aware of their inaptitude for personal methods of evangelism, reverse workers started to use methods that are more relevant for the Western European context (Adogame 2010, 61). Perhaps the most significant development is the increasing number of available theological and cross-cultural training programmes tailored to reverse missionaries working in Europe (Ola 2019, 64). There is much room for improvement; however, it seems that reverse immigrants are making good progress in raising their cross-cultural skills.

As a final note, it is relevant to mention that, despite the real cultural challenges mentioned above, reverse missionaries and diaspora churches have experienced some success in attracting native Europeans exactly because of their uniqueness and difference in comparison to what Europeans are accustomed to have in their mainstream churches (Koning 2011, 188; Catto 2012, 100). Thus, while trying their best to acculturate and fit in, these reverse missionaries must also be aware that people in Europe are tired of the old forms of Christian practice and are looking for something new and exciting.

Post-Colonial Superiority Complex in Europe

To what extent does the post-colonial mindset found in Europe contribute to this huge relational gap between Europeans and reverse missionaries? Firstly, some have accurately argued that Western societies, particularly Europe, have, as a result of contact with the Enlightenment and Modernism, become secularised and see Christianity as outdated, as something of the past (Jenkins 2007a, 1–54). Therefore, for Europeans, the efforts of reverse missionaries are seen as a call to regression, an attack on modernity (Knibbe 2011, 480). Remarkably, this uneasiness of Europeans with reverse missionaries has been exacerbated by an antagonising political discourse and media coverage of Global South Christianity in the West (Jenkins 2006, 1–17; 2007a, 98–101; Verstraelen 2007). Secondly, racial prejudice seems to be another significant contributor to the disconnect between Europeans and reverse missionaries. As Ola asserts, “Racism is still deeply entrenched into the cultural fabric of the global north, perhaps only modernized and cloaked in newer lingo” (Ola 2017, 54). He also criticises the use of labels, such as ‘white and black Christianity’, or ‘local and immigrant churches’, for they imply the “othering” (Haar 2008, 39–41) of one group from another on the grounds of ethnicity. Corroborating this argument, both Koning (2011) and Catto (2012) report cases of reverse missionaries experiencing racial prejudice and even abuse in their efforts to evangelise native Europeans. Thirdly, in general, reverse missionaries come from poorer and, in many ways, less developed societies in the South (Jenkins 2006, 68). Remarkably, this significant economic gap between the Global South and the West is understood to be the most significant cause of the contemporary massive migratory movement to Europe (Hanciles 2003, 147). Concurrently, there seems to exist in Europe an assumption that someone from the poorer South is not qualified or sufficiently prepared to do missions in the West (Knibbe 2011, 7; Ola 2017, 27). For them, mission should come from above, from the “people in positions of power” or from a “superior civilisation” (Ola 2017, 24). Catto alludes to this sense of superiority prevalent among Europeans, quoting a Global South missionary in the UK as saying: “…and the British, some say “we are grandfather of mission, so we don’t need you” (Catto 2012, 97). Fortunately, while Europeans’ sense of superiority is an extremely controversial and frequently avoided issue, even in church contexts (Ola 2019, 65), there have been some voices crying out for a recognition of this prideful superiority prevalent in post-colonial Europe and for a change of attitude (Smith 2016, 179).

In view of the foregoing, one obvious conclusion is that reverse mission can be depicted as “mission from below” (Escobar 2003, 19) or, as Kahl calls it, “from the margins to the center

of global power" (Kahl 2014, 72). As such, the experience of reverse missionaries "evokes sharp images of the biblical paradigm of God's people as pilgrims, migrants, and refugees" (Hanciles 2003, 150). In light of this biblical parallel, there is great hope for Christianity's future in Europe (Smith 2016, 177–79). As Gyatu posits: "Throughout the New Testament, it is within such diaspora conditions that the Gospel takes root. Similarly, we eagerly expect that, as Christianity moves from the South to the North through migration, we shall discern in it the move of God empowering the weak to fulfil his purposes among the strong" (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015, 192).

Reverse Mission, a Reality!

Reverse mission discourse has been under severe scrutiny, and its success has been highly criticised. Many empirical studies seem to imply that the numbers of Europeans reached by reverse missionaries is relatively insignificant (Koning 2011, 12; Ola 2017, 26; Catto 2008a; 2012, 105). These observations have led some scholars to question whether reverse mission is in fact a reality or only a rhetorical discourse of some Global South leaders (Freston 2010). Some have gone as far as to consider reverse mission a "myth" (Emirade 2017, 263) or a "mission impossible" (Kahl 2014, 82). Without belittling the significant challenges for Global South reverse missionaries in Europe, it must be noted that most of the scholars questioning reverse mission discourse base their argument on its apparent lack of quantifiable success. While numbers are important for gauging the realisation of an enterprise, mission should not only be about numbers.[3] Take, for instance, the many men and women of old who devoted their entire lives as missionaries in Africa and Asia. Many of them did not see much fruit during their lifetime; however, few Christians today would dare to affirm their mission was a failure (Ola 2017, 61). Similarly, reverse mission needs to be considered as a long-term endeavor, and its success should be evaluated by different criteria than numerical increase alone (Burgess 2011, 431, 437–38).

Despite the strong voices questioning the tangible impact of reverse missionary efforts in the revitalisation of faith in Europe, there is significant evidence for affirming that Global South Christian migrants and the formation of diaspora churches are having a positive impact on the religious milieu in the continent. A few researchers have shown that diaspora churches have attained some success in reaching out to Western Europeans (notably Olofinjana 2013). Koning (2011, 187-196), for instance, talks of Dutch people being attracted to the immigrant churches because they found in them not only a more orthodox belief and liturgy but also care and a sense of community, in contrast with individualistic western society. Similarly, Catto describes a Korean church in the UK which has had "an impact beyond their own diaspora congregation" (Catto 2012, 100), validating the recognition by Lady Warsi, the former UK Foreign Office minister and minister for faith, that "immigration was making Britain more Christian" (Fesenmyer 2014). Another noteworthy example is the success of Latin Americans in reaching out to indigenous people in Portugal and Spain (Hartch 2014, 189–90). In addition, one should not exclude the well-known case of the Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja, the founder of the 'Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations' in Ukraine, considered to be the largest evangelical church in Europe with around 25,000 members, most of whom are native Europeans (Koning 2011, 13).

Besides, considering Christianity`s own history and the massive influx of Christian migrants into Europe, the most reasonable expectation is of a spiritual revitalisation in the land. Mission historian Andrew Walls has masterfully demonstrated that it is possible to reconstruct the history of global Christianity as a series of successive waves of migration and the formation of ethnic diasporas (Walls 2014, 19–37). The Lausanne Movement encapsulates this notion with great finesse:

> Global diasporas and migration have been and will continue to be a significant and indispensable means by which God accomplishes his redemptive purposes in this world through Jesus Christ. The developmental process of the Church's expansion – inclusive of past, present, and future – cannot be explained without taking into consideration 'God's sovereignty, ruling over the nations, and the moving of His people' from everywhere to everywhere (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 2010, 20).

Therefore, the potential for the revitalisation of Christianity in Europe through migration is immense. The Lausanne Movement remarkably concurs with this view, stating that "these migrants now offer the possibility of helping their new brothers and sisters in the process of revitalizing Western Christianity and the evangelization of now largely post-Christian societies" (Lausanne Movement 2004). Furthermore, while it is true that the first generation of reverse immigrants may struggle to engage with European societies, the same may not be true for subsequent generations. In fact, there is great hope that the children of these migrants will have an even greater impact on the revival of belief in Europe. Having grown up on the continent, the second generation of immigrants show a better understanding of the value system, as well as fluency in the language of the society of which they have become part. At the same time, they carry with them a deep spirituality and evangelistic zeal inherited from their parents. To illustrate this point, Kahl alludes to two significant developments in Germany, where second generation migrants are engaged in missional church planting. Both initiatives seek to create new ways of doing church and communicating faith, which may have meaningful impact on the wider society (Kahl 2014, 86).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that defining reverse mission is a strenuous task, given the variety of the uses of the concept, as well as the many nuances attached to it. It has also identified a significant cultural and socio-economic gap between native Europeans and Global South missionaries, which negatively affects the reverse mission enterprise in Europe. Despite contrasting views for the reasons behind this divide, where native Europeans see it in terms of cultural differences and reverse missionaries view it as a case of racial prejudice, it has been shown that the problem is in reality a combination of both issues. The study has also noted that, despite significant challenges, reverse mission is happening and is indeed a reality. Moreover, the prospects of reverse immigrants having a significant impact on the religious outlook of the 'old continent' is very positive.

For further study, there are several other important nuances to reverse mission that have not been discussed here and will need to be addressed separately. The most significant one is the transnational nature of reverse mission and the diaspora communities in Europe, which involve the formation of transnational networks linking the North and the South (Adogame 2010). The next relevant theme to be explored is multiculturalism in Europe (Ola 2017, 25). Without doubt, the recent changes in Europe's population may also have major consequences for reverse mission.

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[1] With this definition in mind, the terms reverse missionary, reverse worker and reverse immigrant (including their plural forms) will be used interchangeably.
[2] This stated reason resonates with my own motivation to do missions in the UK, as well as with the discourses I hear from church leaders in my home country.
[3] This obsession with numbers resembles the contested Managerial Missiology Paradigm and has been severely criticised by some, including Wan 2014, 111-118.