

Towards An Immigrant Theology

*P.G. George**

The world in which we live is fast changing. Queen Elizabeth of England at the age of 71 in 1997 said, "I some times sense the world is changing almost too fast for its inhabitants, atleast for us older ones." The stress and strain on individuals and systems or institutions like the family are immense. Everyone acknowledges that there are problems, but they are not able to locate the cause of the problem. It is not just a 'mystery', but also a puzzle! In Religions around the world, reformations and counter reformations have tried to address the emerging issues, social theories developed to analyze, and political ideologies propounded to solve them. All these attempts were responses or reactions to address the apparent problems.

Let us take the recent terrorist attacks in New York and other places, which cast a shadow on the human psyche. The responses of the leaders of the nations of the world to curb and combat terrorism, however, did not go well because they were after the wrong person and pursued the wrong path. Terrorism is without doubt a menace. Just for the sake of argument, I propose that we are all becoming terrorists in our own right whenever we fail to create a more civilized society or make the world more beautiful. One must, however remember terrorists are people and their victims are invariably other people. So the problem is a **people's problem** and demands a fair hearing and an amicable solution. These issues border on a people's right to land. Political, cultural, religious and economic freedom now is no longer a luxury but a basic human right. Any system or person who denies the same to a certain people is bound to invite a radical response including violent reactions.

Many people and communities are displaced and their identity is changed and challenged. Justice and fairness have lost their standards and are worked out on a 'relative' setting than on a 'normative' pattern. Consider that the majority of the world's populations now live in cities or towns. These are people on the move. The reasons may vary. There are people who move for economic reasons. Such moves may be understood initially as temporary moves, but the reality is that when they start to enjoy economic benefits and better living standards, they cannot return to their 'home.'

In this paper I wish to explore the dynamics of these moving people everywhere whom

* Dr. P.G. George, formerly Professor of Old Testament at Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam, Kerala, is the Presbyter of the Mar Thoma Church, Kolkata, He delivered this address at the Serampore College convocation in March, 2002.

we propose to call *Immigrants*. The words 'Migrants' and 'Immigrants' are used simultaneously. Any person, family or community who has moved from his so-called home base/home land to a new adopted home/land is so called. So this movement could be within the borders of a nation or a trans border movement. It must be stated at the outset that all the cities around the world have become ghettos. It is a story of displaced people who are migrants, immigrants or refugees.¹ A lot of work has been done on problems of refugees and immigrant communities in the Western world, especially those of different ethnic origin. There is very little or almost no research done on the plight of people, who we call as 'immigrants', to develop an *Immigrant Theology*. This, not just a 'Christian problem' or problem of certain minority communities, but a pressing problem of all people everywhere and it should be seen as a serious problem which invites a fair analysis and a deeper understanding. The Israel-Palestine problem or Sri Lankan problem has this issue as a hidden problem, which may be very subtle, but nobody bothers to speak about it.

The Bible sheds a lot of light on this predicament

The following Confession (Creed) that every member of the Israelite community has to recite as they offer the first fruits to the priests, before the Altar of the Lord, supports this thesis and throws light on our attempt to articulate an Immigrant Theology.

Deut. 26:5-11

"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, we cried to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power and with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given me."

It is a confession of how God dealt with the forefathers of Israel. *It is a pattern for any group of immigrant people who cry to God in their struggle and suffering.*

Now let us have a closer look at a passage in the Book of Exodus. It will give us the dynamics of this argument. Then we can explore some theological paradigms:

Early Israelite History (Exodus 1:1 - 22)

Many years of eventful history of the 'People of Israel' is condensed in a few verses (vs. 1-7). It is the history of a family: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel). God is working in history. Yahweh is called the 'God of the Fathers'.² He provided food for them in days of famine. The total population is *seventy* in all.

It was an economic necessity that initiated migration of the family of *Mr. Jacob* to the Land of Egypt. Famine was a life-threatening experience and first it was just going to the land of Egypt with money to collect food and then slowly they moved to the comforts of the new homeland. Time passed. Days ... weeks ... months and years passed.

Growth and Settlement (vs. 1-7)

The growth should be understood both in Quantitative and Qualitative terms. They were enjoying a comfortable stay, in a foreign land under the Pharaoh. Prime Minister Joseph was famous and his name spelled *magic* in Egyptian society. They were comfortable with the advantage they enjoyed as "Joseph's people". Anytime, anywhere this status was a source of escape and advantage, i.e. they enjoyed a kind of 'immunity' in the land of Egypt. The People of Israel had no mission in Egypt or no real purpose for being there. Biological growth alone should not be understood as the sign of vivacity of a community.

v. 1 *Sons of Israel were seventy in all.*

v. 7 *they multiplied, became strong and the land was filled with them.*

In this summary of history (vs. 1-7), there is no mention of Yahweh the God of Israel. They did not worship Yahweh in Egypt. All the Patriarchs wherever they traveled, built altars and worshipped Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Abraham	Gen. 12:7	Shechem
	Gen.12:8,9	Bethel
	Gen. 13:3	Bethel
	Gen. 13:18	Hebron
Isaac	Gen. 26:25	Beersheba

Here, there is no mention of Jacob or Joseph building altars in Egypt and worshipping Yahweh, the God of Israel. People of Israel never knew about a God for the people of Israel until Moses came back and demanded the release of the people as the agenda of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

There was no need for God. Everything was done c/o Joseph. They had no problems; everyone knew Joseph and his people and they had a special place in the land of Egypt. They happily enjoyed these privileges and did not know the 'God of their fathers'. Generation after generation grew up in Egypt without the true worship of Yahweh and therefore they had no knowledge of God.

Persecution and Systematic slavery (vs. 8-14)

A new chapter in history now began. One Pharaoh came after another and they were all familiar with Joseph and what he did for the people of Egypt. Egyptians had gratitude for Joseph and all who belonged to Joseph were respected and treated with favour. But the favour and fortune shifted.

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (v. 8)

The new King oppressed them. As we read, he acted as a 'god' towards them by regulating every aspect of their life and keeping them as slaves in Egypt. So far, the minority had controlled the majority (Egyptians).³ The tables were turned and the minority was now discriminated against. The people of Israel were the visible minority in Egypt. Fear of their strength and eventual power struggle cast a shadow of fear on the regime (v. 10). Pharaoh

makes some strategic moves.

“Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” (v. 10)

But, Pharaoh admits that the Egyptian economy demands their continued presence. The industrious, intelligent and hard working people of Israel were now forced to serve the Pharaoh. The people of Israel became ‘slaves’ of Pharaoh. Their life became grueling and miserable. Forced labour and the burden of working under such severe taskmasters made their lives brutal. They felt very insecure.

As the Egyptians oppressed the People of Israel, they multiplied greatly (v. 12).⁴ This further increased the fear of the Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The people of Israel were not sure of what was going on. The younger ones probably complained of the difficulties and the older ones might have comforted them by saying, “Son, it will soon be over. Keep working. Treat this only as an inconvenience for the time being.” It will soon be over, they thought. They recollected the good old days and found solace in those sweet memories. Internally the people of Israel were safe and tried their best to meet the demands of the taskmasters.

The problem however did not go away as expected. Rather it intensified and the Israelites were crushed under the yoke of slavery. There is no mention of prayers or crying to Yahweh. There was no need of God! The question seems to haunt them. Do you know whom you are serving? Do you know that you are serving Pharaoh? You are working so hard, but without any benefit. Great grandfather’s *God-element* had not filtered down through the generations.

Systematic Genocide - Infanticide (vs.15-22)

And then the attack came from within and hit home. Death! Tears! It was done in secret and since it did not work well, the Pharaoh’s edict compelled them to throw their newborn baby-boys into the river Nile. The life thread of Egypt became the deathbed for the Israelite children!

“The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.” (Ex. 2: 23— 25.)

They did not cry to God, but God heard their cry. God could not find anybody to give leadership. There was nobody that had any knowledge of Yahweh, the God of Israel. They were all a generation who did not know God and did not walk in His ways. They neither worshipped Him in times of trouble nor turned to God for deliverance and help.

Theological paradigms

All the situations discussed in the passage above and their responses continue to be the images of any displaced or immigrant community. We may deduce a few theological lessons to look at the relevance of the ministry in the new situation, like Moses who became the liberator.

1. God

God in the Old Testament has no name. God is called the God of the fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God of Israel, the living God was YAHWEH - "I am what I am, I will be I will be." He is the Lord God Almighty. When they were in their own land the 'God of the Fathers' made sense but when they moved into new lands, the God they had inherited and brought there was now placed alongside the 'gods of the land.' They had to make a hard and comfortable choice. Most of the time it was a difficult adjustment, which invited misunderstanding from all quarters.

The God of the immigrant community is an *imported God*. In the home land the place of worship and the concept of God and religious traditions were all well defined. Any change was treated as *anathema*. A moving community seems to make its own gods. (Like in Sinai) i.e. the traditional pattern is that the church is there and we worship in the same church our parents worshipped and our children will also worship in the same place.

Certain groups (e.g. the Amish) discourage their people from moving out of their community and they seem to enjoy life better than their brothers and sisters who seem to have more freedom and choices to move to distant lands in search of new opportunities. This however is not the normal state of things. It may not be abnormal, but is definitely rare.

The Christian church with its many forms and divisions is an outcome of this tendency. We are not satisfied with new arrangements available in a new situation and instead wish to create our own version and refuse to follow a given pattern. The apparent reason for the refusal is that the arrangement is the doing of another individual or community for which they may have neither respect nor loyalty.

In this context I wish to make a reference to the Mar Thoma Church. We have parishes all over the world, wherever our people have migrated. These parishes were very particular about starting Malayalam Mar Thoma worship. They built places of worship and requests were made for trained pastors. Pastors trained in Kerala were going to minister to a congregation in New York! One wonders what the second generation thinks about the whole business of the church? The growth of the Mar Thoma Church in North America is commendable. But what kind of spirituality is perpetuated? What is the idea of God? It is a mixed bag.

A critical analysis of the missionary movement may point us to similar conclusions. Everywhere the church was planted it was an 'imported version.' We use words like indigenization to bridge the gap we have created.

For the immigrant community in the cities God becomes a property or a commodity. It is good to have that also, along with many other things. The God of the immigrants should be the god of *Prosperity*. That God should always bless, heal and meet their needs. If that does not happen, the immigrant community feels that there is something wrong with that God; they do not want that God. We'll look for someone else, they say.

2. Covenant Community Vs. Cities

God planted a garden and put Adam and Eve (hūman beings) there. The Garden is not their design or plan and neither the result of their efforts. After their disobedience they were sent out of the Garden. Thus the human community became a wandering community.

The Land is given to the people as a blessing and moving away from that land to urban centres is not considered as the right thing. A detailed discussion is not taken up here. One thing is clear: **Wherever cities are mentioned in the Bible there are problems.**

Examples:

1. Tower of Babel and Languages
2. Story of Sodom Gomarrah
3. Story of the Book of Jonah—Plight of a city

In cities therefore:

1. Nothing is permanent
2. Structures are temporary—Rented places for living, rented places for worship. Constant changes from one apartment to another, moving from one church to another all are frightening experiences for any person.

MINISTRY

Now you are going out to such a confused world. People are as Jesus saw *'sheep without a shepherd.'* The Ministry in such a world is difficult and needs a lot of courage and resolve. You need new software to do the job.

Seminary education has not equipped you for the task ahead. It has only given tools or guidelines to equip you for the task in every situation. You' all be called to different places and to work in different areas or levels. There is no ready-made ministry pattern. My humble request to all of you is the following : Be A Good Human Being, First; Be A good Christian; Be A Good Leader; And Be A Good Pastor.

A cursory reading of St. Paul's analysis of his ministry in 1 Cor. 9:19 may be mis understood today:

I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.

To the Jews I became a Jew

To those under the law I became as one under the law

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law

To the weak I became weak

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

The demands of the ministry should not crush us or shatter us. We are co-workers with Him. We may be able to recount the problems of the world and discuss at length about Globalization or Fundamentalism and much more. Ministers are more than scholars, teachers or

administrators. God is looking for people with **initiative, intelligence and integrity** to do the ministry and mission in his world. You can be one of them, if you will—Cultivate love and reap peace and harmony.

1. *Build Bridges: Dream for the World-make it more beautiful*

In a world of divisions and hatred you can be prophets of peace and reconciliation. Community building is the ministry of the Kingdom. Diagnose all the forces that separate us and strengthen all the forces that will unite us in love. Then the world we live will be a better place. It is a dream. More than that it is a vision. It demands hard work with deep commitment.

Joseph Strauss dreamed of a golden bridge spanning across San Francisco bay. But the people opposed it fearing that it would never survive the strong tides, it would lower the property values, and it would ruin the view. More than 2,000 lawsuits were filed. Strauss persevered. He met A.P. Giannini, the founder of Bank of America. "How long will this bridge last?" asked Giannini. Strauss answered, "For ever." The construction began in 1933 and finished in 1937. It withstood the 1989 earthquake where other bridges and roads were damaged-it survived.

2. *Build Up from the ruins—Mercedes Benz*

We may find people beyond hope and places beyond repair. Do not be disheartened. It is an opportunity you will be thankful for. Hopelessness is not a word you'll find in the Dictionary of God. God will not give up on anybody; he will not give up on you and me. He will not give up on our families, our churches, and our nations. There is nothing beyond his saving grace.

After the Second World War Germany was building up its automotive industry from scratch—restrictions regarding production laid down by the victorious Allies. Their automobile plants, much of which was used as target practice for Allied bombers, were reduced to rubble. But the spirit did not die. From 1947 onwards Mercedes started the production of its first post-war cars. And soon they were winning Grand Prix and Sports Car races. Along with fame, the cars soon to be regarded as a status symbol—selling like the proverbial hot cakes.

A Mercedes engineer by the name of Fritz Nallinger and his engineering team were credited with creating this masterpiece among all cars.

The world may be in disarray. Be of good courage. People around you need you. You may be the only person assigned by God to help them.

All of us are immigrants. Moving from home to some other place or moving from one place to another. In that they are losing so many things on the way. Please do not be unkind to them. Be gentle. Try your best to be God's messenger and minister to them in a way that will give them hope. Present them Jesus Christ through your life first and then through your preaching. The Ministry or mission within the churches is more important than ever, because those members are also immigrants or pilgrims. Please do not take them for granted. May the Lord bless you and your ministry so that you are called a faithful servant.

P.G. GEORGE

The Mar Thoma Metropolitan wrote a bible verse in the Bible presented to me at my ordination-(Mark 10.45), which is the roadmap for good Christian ministry.

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

NOTES

1. Siby Tharakan (ed.) *The Nowhere People: Responses to Internally Displaced Persons*, Bangalore: Books of Chance, 2002.
2. Albrecht Alt. “God of the Fathers,” *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*. Trans. R. A. Wilson. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1968.
3. Remember how Joseph made all Egyptians slaves of Pharaoh during the great famine and the people of Israel after Joseph enjoyed the economic benefits and privileges (Gen. 47)
4. cf. Laban story.