

Charting New Paths of Religion in African Migration

Frameworks of Aspiration, Capabilities, and Integration

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, research on religion and migration from Africa and its diasporas has focused on outcomes in destination countries, often neglecting the generative conditions shaping mobility and immobility. This article advances a new research agenda centred on migration aspirations, capabilities, and integration, expanding the scope to include aspiring migrants and non-migrants. Drawing on Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in Ghana and the experiences of Ghanaian Christian immigrants in Canada, it argues that religion is not merely a facilitator of migration but a transformative force that redefines migration itself. Religious ideas, rituals, and networks shape who migrates, who remains, and how migrants integrate into new societies. Beyond physical movement, African migration encompasses emotional, psychological, and spirited mobilities shaped by dreams, prophecies, and divinely attributed intuitions. Overall, this article moves beyond traditional congregational studies of ‘immigrant religion’ to highlight a broader spectrum of religious phenomena in migratory and diasporic contexts.

Key words

Migration aspirations; migration capabilities; integration; Ghanaian immigrants; Pentecostalism; Canada

Introduction

Over the past three decades, research on religion and migration from Africa and its diasporas has grown significantly (see, for instance, Adogame 2013; Olupona and Gemignani 2007; Ter Haar 1998; Van Dijk 1997). However, much of this scholarship focuses on the religious lives of *actual* migrants in destination countries and their transnational engagements (Ludwig and Asamoah-Gyadu 2011; Burgess et al. 2010). Several studies operate on the assumption that Africans ‘carry along’ their religions during migration, emphasizing outcomes over the conditions that initiate or constrain movement. Consequently, theoretical and empirical insights remain concentrated on Europe and North America (Kivisto 2014; Connor 2014), with debates focusing on religion’s role in facilitating or obstructing integration (Foner and Alba 2008), the transformation of religious practices during migration, and how receiving countries respond to

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diverse immigrant religious traditions (Vertovec 2007). This narrow focus prioritizes the consequences of migration while neglecting the generative conditions that sustain diverse forms of mobility and immobility.

Given these limitations, this article reorients the study of religion and migration through the interconnected frameworks of aspirations, capabilities, and integration. Migration scholar Jørgen Carling (Carling 2002, 5) argues that migration begins with the desire to migrate, followed by realizing that wish. This framework is essential because migration does not occur in isolation; for every person who migrates, many others stay. Exploring unfulfilled aspirations offers critical insights into the broader dynamics of migration, highlighting the social, psychological, and structural dimensions of mobility and immobility.

In sub-Saharan Africa, migration aspirations have surged, driven by socio-political, economic, and ecological factors (Appiah-Nyamekye and Selormey 2018). Over 50% of young adults in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone express a desire to migrate, making West Africa the global leader in migration potential (Pugliese and Ray 2023). These aspirations arise in highly religious contexts (Pew Research Center 2018), providing fertile ground for examining how religion shapes migration desires. Yet, little scholarship explores this phenomenon.

Aspirations alone, however, do not guarantee physical cross-border mobility. Resources and immigration policies often constrain or enable movement (Hollifield et al. 2022). Hein de Haas (2021, 20) extends this by arguing that migration capability involves not only resources but also the agency to choose whether to migrate or stay. For many aspiring migrants in Africa, religion is a critical resource, providing networks, social capital, and a framework for migratory agency (Obadare and Wale 2010).

Religion also profoundly shapes integration strategies. Migrants rely on religious networks to navigate settlement and establish transnational connections (Van Dijk 1997). By examining religion's intersection with migration aspirations, capabilities, and integration, this article challenges traditional paradigms, offering a broader understanding of the generative conditions that shape migration.

To explore these themes, the paper begins by contextualizing religion and migration research, examining how historical trends and demographic shifts have shaped the field. It critiques dominant theoretical and methodological approaches, including the prioritization of transnational and functionalist perspectives over symbolic interactionist and ritual-focused approaches. Finally, it proposes a research agenda based on how Pentecostal Christianity shapes Ghanaian migration aspirations, capabilities, and integration in Canada.

Contextualizing Current Developments

Religion and migration research has evolved significantly, reflecting broader historical shifts in global migration patterns. Before the 1960s, international migration was predominantly characterized by European migrants, driven by colonial expansion, post-war reconstruction, and economic opportunities in the Americas and Australasia (De Haas et al. 2020). Early studies largely focused on European ethno-religious settler communities, particularly those from Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Jewish traditions (Herberg 1955; Smith 1978).

The 1960s marked a pivotal shift in migration flows. Decolonization movements and reforms to racist, ethnocentric, and culturally discriminatory immigration laws in North America facilitated an influx of migrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean (Mensah 2014, 284). These 'new' migrants introduced diverse ethnic, social, and cultural systems that significantly transformed the religious landscapes of receiving countries. Scholars responded by broadening their focus to include migrant religious communities from Islamic,

Buddhist, Hindu, and non-Western Christian backgrounds (Cadge and Ecklund 2007). This broader lens reshaped the sociocultural and religious dynamics of diaspora formations and enriched the study of religion in migration processes.

By the 1990s, pioneering work by Roswith Gerloff (1995), Gerrie ter Haar (1998), and Afe Adogame (1998) highlighted the emergence of African-led and Caribbean-initiated churches in Europe. These studies emphasized the resilience and adaptive strategies of such churches in secular and exclusionary contexts. Concurrently, sociologists in the United States examined religious organizations among post-1960 immigrant groups from the Global South, revealing how religion facilitated adaptation, identity construction, and transnational networks (Warner and Wittner 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000).

Further contributions by Olupona and Gemignani (2007), Kalu (2008), and Hanciles (2008) demonstrated that African immigrant religions serve not only as conservatories of African cultures but also as agents of religious transformation in the West. The concept of ‘reverse mission’ emerged, framing the West as a new mission field for African Christians (Burgess 2020). This concept challenged traditional missionary flows and sparked debates about the global influence of African Christianity. Scholars questioned whether African-initiated missions in the West fulfil their ambitious rhetoric or fall short (Freston 2010; Adedibu 2013; Asamoah-Gyadu 2005). Despite such debates, there is consensus that African Christian migrants reimagine both the West and Africa as mission fields, diverging from the unidirectional missionary practices historically associated with Europe (Onyinah 2004).

These historical developments underscore how demographic changes and adaptive religious strategies have shaped research. To deepen understanding of these shifts, it is essential to identify dominant theoretical and methodological patterns that have guided the field before laying the groundwork for a new research agenda.

Theoretical and Methodological Issues

Research on religion and migration from Africa and its diasporas has predominantly relied on qualitative case studies published since the 1990s (Ludwig and Asamoah-Gyadu 2011; Olupona and Gemignani 2007; Hunt and Lightly 2001; Ter Haar 1998; Van Dijk 1997). These studies have primarily focused on religious organizations—especially Christian—established by post-1960 African immigrants. Key questions have explored whether religion facilitates or hinders immigrant settlement and integration, how migration reshapes religious practices, and the transmission of African-derived religious traditions to the Americas (Stewart 2005; Hucks 2012). While these inquiries have provided valuable insights, they tend to prioritize traditional migration destinations like Europe and North America, often neglecting rapidly emerging African migration hubs in China (Haugen 2013), the Gulf States (Newberg 2021), and Western Asia (Au 2020).

The existing literature has also examined how religion intersects with immigrants’ ethnic (Hunt 2002), racial (Aechtner 2012), gendered (Parsitau and Mwaura 2010), cultural (Kalu 2008), national (Tettey 2007), and continental identities (Mensah 2014), as well as their political and civic engagement (Burgess 2009), and second-generation experiences (Nyanni 2021). Dominant theoretical frameworks have centred on four major themes: reverse mission (Burgess 2020), migration as a process (Tettey 2007), identity formation (Ugba 2009), and the intersection of religion with transnational and global networks (Adogame and Spickard 2010). Despite these contributions, a prevailing receiving-country bias limits the field, often overlooking how religion shapes migration’s origins and aspirational dimensions.

In many cases, ‘migration’ is frequently reduced to physical movement across international borders, neglecting emotional (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015), psychological (Koikkalainen

and Kyle 2016), and spiritual modes of mobility that characterize diverse migratory experiences. The narrow focus on physical mobility underestimates the interplay between aspirational dimensions of migration, individual traits—such as age, education, family, and social networks—and religion. An alternative approach could also account for non-physical cross-border experiences, such as migratory dreams, visions, prophecies, and intuitions, reflecting African cosmologies that conceptualize ‘the world’ as encompassing both physical and spiritual realms (Kwateng-Yeboah 2025). Such socio-psychological approaches to migration remain underexplored in existing research, which prioritizes actual migrants over aspiring migrants and non-migrants. Furthermore, access to religious resources (Ter Haar 2009) can be critical in determining who migrates and who stays. This dynamic also warrants further exploration, particularly regarding people who possess the means to migrate but choose to stay due to religious influences. Moreover, while migration aspirations have primarily been examined in relation to origin contexts, the concept also illuminates the experiences of aspiring return migrants in destination countries, whose inability to return—due to economic constraints or instability in their homelands—can be navigated through religious discernment.

Additionally, conceptualizations of ‘religion’ in migratory contexts often adopt transnational and functionalist perspectives, emphasizing religion as a stabilizing or obstructive force for immigrant settlement and integration. These perspectives prioritize organized or institutional forms of religion, focusing on ‘immigrant churches’ and their roles in building communities, reconstructing identities, and facilitating adaptation. However, such congregational frameworks overlook alternative sociological dimensions of religion, such as conflict perspectives, which could interrogate how immigrant religious communities perpetuate power imbalances, foster social exclusion, or exacerbate intra- and inter-group tensions (Mensah 2009). Similarly, symbolic interactionist approaches could reveal how migrants reinterpret religious phenomena in response to migration (Manglos-Weber 2021).

Addressing these gaps, the next section interrogates the conceptual vocabularies of aspirations, capabilities, and integration within the religion-migration nexus. These frameworks move beyond the bias toward receiving countries to explore the contextual conditions shaping (im)mobility, thereby uncovering the socio-psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that are often overlooked in contemporary African migration.

Proposing a New Paradigm

Since the early 2000s, scholars and policymakers have increasingly focused on migration aspirations and intentions to better understand global migration patterns and enhance planning (Carling 2002; Esipova et al. 2016; Migali and Scipioni 2019). In the African context, this focus is particularly urgent given the high rates of youth unemployment, economic inequalities, and environmental challenges that drive widespread migration desires (Appiah-Nyamekye and Selormey 2018). Migration aspiration, as Carling (2002, 13) defines it, refers to the belief that migrating is preferable to staying. This conviction is shaped by socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions. Migration ability, on the other hand, captures the interplay of individual resources, structural barriers, and state policies that enable or constrain movement (Carling 2002). Together, these concepts highlight the phenomenon of ‘involuntary immobility’, where systemic barriers prevent individuals from fulfilling their migration goals. For example, in Cape Verde, restrictive immigration policies and limited resources often thwart migration ambitions, underscoring the complex interaction between aspiration and ability (Carling 2002).

The ‘aspiration/ability’ model of migration integrates macro-level forces like structural constraints and micro-level drivers such as identity-based characteristics and culturally defined ideals (Carling and Schewel 2018). It critically examines the gap between migration intentions and capacities, providing a robust framework for understanding contemporary dynamics of

migration, particularly in contexts like Africa, where systemic barriers perpetuate immobility. Building on this model, De Haas (2021) developed an ‘aspirations-capabilities’ framework, drawing inspiration from Amartya Sen’s (1999) ‘capability approach’. De Haas’ framework links migration to development processes, emphasizing both the intrinsic (well-being-focused) and instrumental (means-to-an-end) dimensions of human freedom. It expands migration analysis beyond economic models, reframing mobility as both the freedom to move and the freedom to stay. Despite its valuable contribution, the aspiration-capabilities framework overlooks critical sociocultural forces such as religion, which profoundly shape human aspirations, and the resources mobilized to achieve them.

Religion, as a sociocultural force, intersects with migration aspirations across multiple dimensions. At the macro level, religious teachings and communal values may frame migration as divinely inspired or spiritually enriching, shaping collective perceptions of desirable destinations. Quantitative studies, for example, reveal trends where faith communities gravitate toward destinations aligned with their religious expressions (Gu and Fong 2022). At the meso level, transnational religious networks influence migration ideals by embedding mobility within theological and social frameworks. African Pentecostal churches, for instance, often integrate migration into prosperity theologies and missiological projects, portraying international mobility as both a divine blessing and a tool for global mission (Asamoah-Gyadu 2018). At the micro level, individual religious experiences such as dreams, visions, and prophecies legitimize migration as divinely guided, bridging intrinsic motivations (spiritual fulfilment) with instrumental goals (practical benefits). These interconnected dimensions highlight how religion not only facilitates migration but also provides interpretative frameworks for understanding mobility.

Moreover, religion plays a pivotal role in enhancing migration capabilities through what Gerrie ter Haar (2009) terms ‘religious resources’. These include religious ideas, practices, organizations, and experiences, all of which equip individuals with tools to navigate migration’s challenges. Religious ideas, such as those centred on divine favour or prosperity, strengthen individual resolve and resilience, while rituals provide emotional and psychological fortitude. Religious organizations also offer practical support, including visa sponsorships, housing, and employment networks. Transformative experiences, including migration-related dreams or prophecies, further empower individuals by cultivating confidence and providing a sense of purpose. Together, these resources bridge the gap between aspirations and capabilities, addressing both instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of migration.

The role of religion also extends beyond mobility to integration. As Peter Li (2003) critiques, traditional integration models often impose Eurocentric and conformist frameworks, overlooking migrants’ agency and cultural diversity. Religion, in integration settings, could act as both a practical and symbolic resource: practically, it facilitates access to networks for immigrant jobs and housing; symbolically, it preserves immigrants’ identities and fosters belonging. However, visible religious expressions, such as wearing hijabs or other markers of minority faith, can expose immigrants to structural inequalities and religio-racial bias in the integration process. Addressing these challenges requires rethinking integration as a reciprocal process that values religious diversity and actively dismantles systemic barriers.

In summary, the aspiration-capability-integration framework redefines the study of religion and migration by moving beyond receiving-country biases and emphasizing underexplored dimensions of mobility. This approach expands the framework of migration to include emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, offering a holistic perspective on religion’s role in shaping global migration dynamics. The next section applies the proposed framework to examine how Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity influences Ghanaian migration patterns.

Spirited Mobilities: Religion and the Ghanaian Migration Experience

The Ghanaian emigration context represents a complex interplay of historical, economic, sociocultural, and religious factors. Historically, colonial ties to Britain and post-independence economic challenges initially directed emigration toward Europe, with North America emerging as a major destination more recently (Black et al. 2018). Economic hardships, including youth unemployment and inflation, further amplify migration aspirations, as international mobility is perceived as a pathway to social advancement. Thus, families invest in their children's education abroad, reinforcing the narrative that leaving Ghana offers better opportunities than staying.

While economic factors are widely recognized as primary migration determinants, the role of religion is often relegated to a secondary position, overshadowed by ostensibly 'rational' drivers. Yet, economic drivers alone cannot fully explain the social, cultural, and psychological conditions that generate and sustain migration. In Ghana, religion—particularly in Pentecostal-Charismatic forms—emerges as a transformative force, not merely coexisting with socio-economic drivers but actively reshaping and amplifying migration aspirations and capabilities. Given this critical intersection, it becomes essential to explore how religious influences manifest in the lives of aspiring migrants and Ghanaians abroad.

Thus, my research on Ghanaian migration patterns (Kwateng-Yeboah 2022) investigated two central questions: How does religion shape Ghanaian migration aspirations and capabilities? And how do these religious influences extend to Ghanaian integration experiences in Canada? These questions were anchored in two theoretical approaches: 'experiential religion' and Ter Haar's concept of 'religious resources'. Experiential religion refers to shared human experiences—dreams, prophecies, and intuitions—that gain religious significance through processes of meaning-making, valuation, and differentiation (Taves 2009; Bulkeley 2008; Cox 1995). Within African cosmologies, these experiences underscore the permeability between spiritual and physical realms, reframing 'migration' as encompassing psychological and affective forms. Religious resources, in turn, encompass the ideas, practices, organizations, and transformative experiences that enable migration (Ter Haar 2009).

Exploring these two questions, I utilized mixed methods, including two online surveys with 642 interlocutors from Ghana and Canada and 50 semi-structured interviews with aspiring migrants and Ghanaian immigrants. The surveys provided demographic insights and information on migration histories, religious practices, and social networks. The interviews illuminated how various dimensions of religion shape migration aspirations, capabilities, and integration, offering a more nuanced, comprehensive understanding of contemporary Ghanaian migration. These combined methods generated the findings outlined below.

Migration Aspirations: Experiential Religion as a Driver

In Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic spaces, dreams, prophecies, and intuitions are deeply valued as manifestations of divine communication, shaping general life aspirations and decisions (Kwateng-Yeboah 2025). Dreams are sensory, cognitive, and emotional experiences during sleep (Bulkeley 2008). They open limitless imaginative possibilities, enabling sleeping bodies to envision migratory scenarios such as boarding airplanes, navigating airports, or engaging with foreign landscapes and climates. As one participant in my study, Selina, recalled: 'I saw myself on an airplane, looking out at towering skyscrapers—so different from Ghana. It felt far from home, in a place unlike anything I knew.' For aspiring migrants, such dreams embody migratory experiences, reflecting their emotions and desires despite their physical stillness. They illustrate how dreams bridge mobility with imaginative geographies and individual subjectivities.

Migratory prophecies further amplify this imaginative connection. Prophetic declarations by religious clerics—such as ‘you are a great person, you will be travelling places’, ‘I see you walking with great people’, or ‘your life, education, and marriage are abroad’—reshape one’s self-perception and agency, framing migration as a matter of identity and transformation, not only place utility. Complementing these prophecies is a divinely attributed intuition—a deep sense that ‘God has the plan to send one abroad’ without explicit reasoning (Kwateng-Yeboah 2025). This intuition often drives migration decisions more powerfully than economic calculations, aligning with psychological research on how intuition operates alongside rational thought (Epstein 2010).

By emphasizing psychological and affective modes of mobility, experiential religion challenges the conventional view of migration as a singular event defined by physical movement across borders. These experiences shift the focus from actual migrants to aspiring migrants, highlighting how dreams, prophecies, and intuitions embody migration desires. Experiential religion ties migration aspirations to the body, embedding emotions and sensory engagements with imagined landscapes and cultures. It transforms the aspiration to migrate from mere cognitive thought into embodied constructs, prompting proactive steps like visa applications and expansion of social networks for migration. These experiential phenomena serve as vital frameworks that validate and shape aspirations for migration, warranting further research.

Migration Capabilities: Religious Resources as Enablers

The ability to migrate is often constrained by state policies and institutional requirements, such as Canada’s preference for skilled migrants. For many African applicants, these policies are fraught with discriminatory barriers, producing high rates of visa refusals (Kazeem 2019). In such situations, religious resources play a crucial role in shaping migration capabilities to Canada, particularly through Pentecostal prosperity theologies that define ‘the good life’ as one of material success and spiritual fulfilment. As one Ghanaian in Toronto stated, ‘My faith taught me that God wants us to prosper, and I believed moving to Canada was part of that plan.’ This belief is reinforced by migratory rituals such as prayer, fasting, and maintaining migration secrecy, which is believed to spiritually guard individuals for their journey. Another participant noted, ‘I prayed and fasted for guidance, and I felt a strong urge to keep my plans private until I was ready.’ Migration secrecy helps control information flow and is believed to protect aspiring migrants from potential interference by human or supernatural agents. Additionally, social capital from transnational Pentecostal churches in Ghana and Canada provides vital networks that enhance migration capabilities. As one participant remarked, ‘Through my church, I learned about job opportunities in Canada and received support from members who had already migrated.’ Thus, the concept of religious resources challenges the view of migration as solely driven by state policies and economic structures, highlighting the significance of local cultures, values, and social networks. Understanding these religious elements is essential for a comprehensive view of migration dynamics, revealing who migrates and who remains.

Integration in Canada: Religion as Agency and Negotiation

Ghanaian Christian immigrants demonstrate significant agency in navigating their religious affiliations, often resisting simplistic ties to ethnic or national identities. The surveys conducted revealed that approximately 40% of participants in Ontario joined white-led, non-immigrant congregations, while 25% engaged with online communities or refrained from formal affiliations. One participant, noted: ‘I joined a Canadian church because their teachings focus more on faith than prosperity, and that’s what I need to grow spiritually.’

At the organizational level, Ghanaian immigrants in Ontario establish independent churches that serve as hubs for cultural preservation and community support. However, these spaces often encounter religio-racial bias. As one pastor in Toronto remarked: ‘Sometimes, you feel

like they want us to change who we are just to fit in.’ Such remarks unveil the dual role of religion as modes of empowerment and negotiation in the integration process, challenging Eurocentric conformist assumptions.

Reframing Religion and Migration: A New Agenda

In summary, scholars can gain new insights by examining the interconnected concepts of aspirations, capabilities, and integration within the context of religion and contemporary African migration. These concepts foreground the lived, experiential, and ritualistic dimensions of religion, linking mobility to identity and spirituality. Religious resources—faith-based ideas, practices, and networks—enhance migrants’ capabilities, bridging the gap between aspirations and actual mobility amidst systemic barriers. Religion also provides African immigrants with tools for navigating belonging and identity in diasporic settings. In this regard, the continuities between the historic African diaspora, rooted in forced migration, and the contemporary movements of post-1960 African migrants must be further interrogated to enhance a comprehensive understanding of African diaspora religions. This expanded focus must challenge Eurocentric integration models, positioning African-descended peoples as agents who reshape religious traditions in the migratory process. Altogether, the proposed research agenda here extends the study of religion and migration to include aspiring and non-migrants, fostering a holistic understanding of religion’s transformative role in reimagining mobility and integration.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for a conceptual shift in the study of religion and migration by focusing on the frameworks of aspirations, capabilities, and integration. Through my research on Pentecostal Christianity in Ghana and the experiences of Ghanaian Christian immigrants in Canada, I have demonstrated the significant role of religion in shaping migration desires, facilitating migratory agency, and mediating integration into host societies. Migration aspirations are influenced by experiences, such as dreams, prophecies, and intuitions, which validate migration as a divine project and provide spiritual resources to navigate barriers. Additionally, the resources needed to migrate are not only material; they also comprise immaterial elements, such as religious networks that empower people to overcome institutional challenges.

The aspirations-capabilities framework, as articulated by de Haas (2021) and revisited by Carling and Schewel (2018), emphasizes the importance of both the freedom to move and the freedom to stay as expressions of migratory agency. It reconciles the divide between forced and voluntary migration, illustrating how structural constraints and individual agency intersect in shaping migration trajectories. This approach transcends the traditional emphasis on migration outcomes in religion and migration research, illuminating the conditions that shape various forms of (im)mobility. As Schewel (2020) notes, immobility deserves scholarly attention as an active process influenced by individual and structural factors. Future research can build on these insights to explore various dynamics of African migration in diverse contexts, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between religion and migration.

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