Religious Conversion and Religious Switching

By

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Abstract

This study focused on religious conversion and switching, and their impact on social transformation. The study adopted theological approach. The observation made indicated that various people switching from one religion to another for diverse reasons, namely; change in education, geographical location, marital status and in assimilation. From the findings, it was also deduced that religious factor has served as a 'catalyst, if not an organizing prime mover, for political-economic change. Thus, it was concluded that religious switching and conversion exert significant influence on social transformation of member of a society. The study recommended that there should be uniformity of purpose and teachings among various religious organizations in Nigeria.

Key Words: Religion, Conversion, Society, Switching

Introduction

Every religion is dynamic, in that it grows, develops, modifies and changes over time. Religion is not an isolated entity, rather it is a social institution characterized by changing individual personalities in a changing environment. Changes in society occasioned by social forces not only affect every institution within the society but also the human persons who operate within the social systems. If religion plays a key role in the construction of social and personal identities, then, changes in the religious worldview also bring with it a characteristic modification and adjustments to all whose identities are built on or, are anchored on the religious worldview in question. Similarly, changes in individual persons can also generate an alteration, a break, a change in their religious affiliations or religious

worldview. This is more so in modern Nigeria society where religion compete with other meaningful systems in the construction of the individual's systems of meaning and in establishing the individual's self-concept. Not Only this, individual personal needs and challenges also tend to make and remake them, altering their sense of self-worth and self-concept which surely determine their religious inclination and affiliations. This is so, because religion tries to address fundamental human puzzles.

Religious conversion and switching have been predominantly practiced owing to the proliferation of various religious groups in Nigeria. The relevance of conversion and switching in every religious tradition cannot be ignored. Perhaps, it may be logical to say that every religious adherent is a convert either by choice or by inheritance. For any religion to be propagated, especially in an area where it is not very dominant, converts have to be made as religion cannot be impactful without adherents. In history, experience has shown that beyond membership drive, conversion and switching have been instrumental to the growth and development of individuals and society at large. This is what this study sets to establish. In other words, in the parlance of sociology of religion, conversion and switching go beyond spirituality, as it is a fundamental ingredient of social change and transformation.

Conceptual Clarification

Religion is seen as a social-cultural system of designated behaviors and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements (Morreall, 2013). Nongbri (2013) opines that religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. It is also seen as the entirety of the linguistic expressions, emotions and actions and signs that refers to a supernatural being or supernatural beings. According to James and Manda illegal (2010) religion is a relatively-bounded systems of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence, and in which communion with others and otherness is lived as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially-grounded ontologies of time, space,

embodiment and knowing. Religion fosters national unity and development. It offers people the understanding of existence and provide rules and regulations which controls people behavior as it is believed that to live a godly life according to one's religion is to carry out one's duty both to God and men. Religion is also characterized as a sound entity that is functional in the sense that it contributes to the maintenance of societal stability of equilibrium.

According to Spiro (2006), religion is an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (Spiro, 2006: 96). In a broad sense, it is adherence to asset of beliefs and teachings about the deepest and most elusive of life's mysteries. It comprises those aspects of our behavioral complexes that are organized around beliefs in spiritual or supernatural beings. Even though sociology understands religions as a group phenomenon, yet, every group is composed of individuals who incorporate into themselves what the group holds true and necessary to express and carry out. Certainly, religion is an individual affair in a number of ways. It involves personal emotions and thoughts (Johnstone, 2007).

The word 'conversion' has been given various interpretations by scholars. Such Interpretations often engender its misunderstanding in academic discourse and religious locale. Thus, conversion is sometimes used to connote some meanings that the word does not logically stand for. Literally, the root meaning of conversion is turning out, or complete and thorough transformation. Nabofa (2006) opines that the word is used very loosely to include "sudden religious illumination, with its attendant high emotional overtones, the slow religious growth or development, and all the varieties or degree between the two". Religious conversion is the adoption of a new religion that is different from one's previous religion (Familus, 2011). In this case, a Christian changes to lslam, traditional religion or any other religion and vice versa, terms of the coming of Islam and Christianity to Africa and their subsequent adoption by the people who were practicing African Traditional Religion.

The main argument here is that, in a strict sense of it, conversion is not synonymous with change of denomination. It entails total and complete change of one's religion. Therefore, much of what people, especially Christians, see as

conversion is not conversion. In other words, when someone who was born into Christianity becomes 'born again' and still remains a Christian, he or she is yet to be converted. People get converted for various reasons such as marriage, accident of birth, diffusion, and indoctrination to proselytization. Conversion may also take place at deathbed or by force as a result of war and violence or charity (Familusi, 2013). Religious Conversion/switching is based on experience; therefore, it could be understood in the light of emotion and psychology of the convert. Religious conversion is the adoption of a set of beliefs identified with one particular religious denomination to the exclusion of others. Thus "religious conversion" would describe the abandoning of adherence to one religion and affiliating with another. In some cases, religious conversion "marks a transformation of religious identity and is symbolized by special rituals".

Ajala (2009) states that conversion is not the same thing as changing from one denomination or group to another within the same religion. For example, a Methodist becomes a Baptist in Christian Religion and a Muslim changing from Shia to Sunni. This process is usually understood as 're affiliation' as no new religion is adopted In the real sense, conversion could be individualistic or collective. In other words, an individual or a group of people could experience conversion. However, if conversion is likened to religious experience, it will essentially be construed as a phenomenon that is absolutely individualistic. It can also be implied that in history, communities or groups of individuals do experience conversion. In this case, conversion may not be total as everybody cannot be converted at the same time. If some people had earlier been converted, others may wish to follow suit. Collective or group conversion can be explained in terms of the coming of lslam and Christianity to Africa and their subsequent adoption by the people who were practicing African Traditional Religion (Ajala, 2009).

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of birth, diffusion, and indoctrination to proselytization (Ademowo, 2010). Conversion may also take place at deathbed or by force as a result of war and violence or charity. Conversion is based on experience; therefore, it could be understood in the light of emotion and psychology of the convert.

Similarly, Ayantavo (2010) opined that religious conversion is the adoption of a set of beliefs identified with one particular religious denomination to the exclusion of others. Thus "religious conversion" would describe the abandoning of adherence to one denomination and affiliating with another. This might be from one to another denomination within the same religion, for example, from Baptist to Catholic Christianity or from Sunni Islam to Shi'a lslam. In some cases, religious conversion "marks a transformation of religious identity and is symbolized by special rituals". People convert to a different religion for various reasons, including active conversion by free choice due to a change in beliefs, secondary conversion, deathbed conversion, conversion for convenience, marital conversion, and forced conversion. Proselytism is the act of attempting to convert by persuasion another individual from a different religion or belief system. Apostate is a term used by members of a religion or denomination to refer to someone who has left that religion or denomination.

Types of conversion and switching

There are three different ways people get converted. Thus, scholars have identified unconscious, sudden and gradual forms of conversion. Unconscious conversion takes place when an individual is brought up in a religious home. In this context, he or she accepts the religion practiced by his or her parents; or guardians depending on the circumstances of his or her upbringing. As the word suggests, a person who got converted unconsciously can hardly think of anytime in his or her life when he or she was not a member of that particular religion or when the beliefs of that faith were not accepted by him or her. Many adherents of various religions gained their religious.

Beliefs in this manner. In other words, many are Christians or Muslims today because they were born into Christianity and Islam and since they have not had cause to change their religion, they have simply undergone unconscious conversion. How can one explain the case of someone born into a Christian family

and gets baptized on the right day? Does he or she know what it means to be a non-Christian?

The second type, sudden conversion is normally described as a crisis experience taking place at a specific time, which is more often than not significant for the individual throughout his or her lifetime. The convert concerned must have practiced one religion before embracing a new one. Sudden conversion is common during crusade, evangelism or other religious activities that may arouse the consciousness of people. It May also be an unexpected experience like that of Paul in the Bible on his way Damascus's large number of Christians these days quote specific days, months and years of their conversion. This is usually preceded by testimonies about their lives before they had a new religious experience. However, many of such cases are not real conversions, they are merely cases of people experiencing certain occurrences in their religious lives. The reason being that no change of religion is involved. At best, there could be a change of denomination, which has earlier been explained as affiliation.

There is also gradual conversion, which involves the process or growth of beliefs extending over a period of time, days, months and years. During this period, the person moves from a position where he is rejecting the religion into which he or she was born or which he or she had earlier embraced. In gradual conversion, the convert takes a longtime studying the new faith before making up his or her mind to embrace the new faith; when such decision is taken, there is usually ongoing back (Nabofa 2000:36).

On the permanence of conversion one could decipher from the foregoing that conversion is to a very great extent an individual experience. It is either permanent or transient, depending on the type. Thus, conversion is likely to be permanent if it is gradual in that the convert would have taken his or her time to assess the implication of changing his or her religion. Nabofa metaphorically refers to this as fire in dry log of wood, which burns slowly but lasts long. On the other hand, sudden conversion is not usually permanent because it is often a spontaneous reaction to a call by a leader or adherent of another faith. In such a situation, there is often no time to think; therefore, the convert may decide to go back to the former religion having seen no reason for any change in the first instance. This experience

is analogous to fire in dry leaves, which will burn glowingly but goes down after a short time. Conversion or re-affiliation for convenience is an insincere act, sometimes for relatively trivial reasons such as a parent converting to enable a child to be admitted to a good school associated with a religion, or a person adopting a religion more in keeping with the social class he or she aspires to. Conversion of this nature is also usually not permanent. It may end when the incentive disappears. Nabofa (2000:39-40) unambiguously emphasizes that in gradual conversion, the adoption of belief is much slower and therefore likely to be more thorough, whereas, the sudden converts' background of religious thought and consideration is somewhat limited. In some cases, he may know little more than what he has just heard from the evangelist. It is, therefore, very likely that when he reconsiders his decision he will have doubts about the truth of the argument used and the value of his religious commitment. He is more likely to retrospect to see the flaws and inadequacies in the evangelist's address and conclude that his response was as a result of a hasty and rash decision. For personal reasons, a convert may decide to go back to his or her former religion or adopt an entirely new one. In Christian parlance, this is referred to as backsliding. Such is a recurring issue among religious people.

Reasons behind religious conversion and switching

Williams and Leonie (2012) surveyed 118 people across the world, exploring how, and why, people convert to another religious or spiritual tradition. Their observations are represented below: Williams said: "Two-thirds (65%) of those surveyed reported making the change in their beliefs system after experiencing a 'light bulb' moment in which it felt like the right thing to do. For two-thirds of those surveyed, this change also took place after a considerable period of reading about the chosen belief system and becoming more acquainted with what it entailed." Almost half (44%) of those who took part reported that they made the change because they were turned off by the views or the actions of people who belonged to the religion or spiritual tradition that the participants had rejected.

Other common reasons for switching included wanting to find meaning or purpose in one's life and interpersonal experiences of connecting with other people by talking to a learned person about the chosen belief system or attending's congregation event with like-minded people. The most significant factor

influences someone to convert and switch to another religion is conflict. Previously, they face conflicts about their own religious beliefs and identity, unsure of their place in the community and angry with their religious leaders. Then after conversion, they get a wide range of emotional gratifications, such as a sense of belonging, relief from guilt, development of new relationships, and offer sense of excitement and stimulation (Rambo, 2013; Palautian, 2009).

Another factor that is also important to be measured in religious conversion and switching is religious motivation. According to All port (2011), there are two types of religious motivations. Intrinsic motivation is described as people with mature and meaningful religion. They display behaviors based on their religion.On the contrary, extrinsic motivation is people using their religion only in order to achieve a nonreligious goal (Beck & Jessup, 2004).

Lovheim (2004) identified the following as factors responsible for religious conversion and switching:

1) Changes in education. People who obtain more education than those in their childhood faith are 18% more likely to leave their existing religion to another.
2) Changes in marital status. People are more likely to switch their religious choices when they marry, when they divorce, or when a spouse dies.
3) Changes in geography. Change your location, change your religion. Even those who move within the same region of the country are more likely to make some types of religious change.
4) Changes in assimilation (or the continuity of recent immigrant communities).First and second generation immigrants are more likely to stick with their religion than are other Americans whose families immigrated earlier in history.

Similarly, Wright (2007) opined that people convert or switch to a different religion for various reasons, including active conversion by free choice due to a change in beliefs, secondary conversion, deathbed conversion,, marital conversion, and forced conversion.

Religious conversion/switching and social transformation

The purpose of this paper is to establish the nexus between religious conversion/switching and s conversions formation, both at individual and group levels. Empirically, the functional role of religion in society cannot be ignored. Emphasizing this, Shupe and Misztal (1998) opine that the expectation of religion's loss of influence impersonal daily and public personal as been with us since the days of the founding fathers of social science, yet, tsp. of is no evidence that religious influence, in whatever faith tradition, is on the Faith traditionalize that the religious factor has served as a 'catalyst, if not an organizing prime mover, for political-economic change. In other words, there are conversion words the individual and society at large. This is because religion is a pervasive fo religion permeates and transforms other social institutions. Thus, any conversion/ switching from one religion to another, carries with it transformative elements of transformative on.

Implications of Religious Conversion/switching for the Individual

The effect of Christian conversion on individual is explicitly stated by Paul in 2Corinthians 5:17"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new passed me". This passage, though spiritual in content and context, can also be explain context terms of social transformation. Change of religion is usually accompanied by change of status. For instance, the convert sees himself or herself as no more belonging to the old order. Consequently, he or she now enjoys the benefits accruing to the adherents of the new religion. He or she becomes a member of a new family in terms of fellowship and brotherhood. In this case, brotherhood is not in terms of filial relationship. A new set of friends is made as what is called the right hand of fellowship is extended to him or her. The convert initially, logically feels more loved than before. This is the reason several encouragements interns of scholarship, job opportunities, medical assistance, welfare and humanitarian gestures are provided for converts so as not to have reason to go back to the former religion.

Moreover, the social lives of converts are transformed in different ways. As earlier mentioned, they become members of a new family, which often leads to change in diet, dressing habit and adornment, choice of music and economic activities, in terms or pattern of consumption and business transaction. Of course, religion is a

proven shaper of economic attitude and behavior. Hence, many people have had reasons to rejected ploy mentioned offers and change their jobs on grounds of religious inclination, which innocent small way altered their economic status either progressively or retrogressive lyrics (Johnstone, 2000).

Implications of Group Conversion/switching for Social Transformation

Earlier in this paper, it was argued that conversion or switching is both an individual and group phenomenon. In this case, it is possible for many members of a society to change their religious affiliation e mass. This accounts for why Christianity and Islam became dominant religions in places that were originally made up of adherents of traditional religion. In other words, Africans had their own religion(s) characterized by diversity in beliefs and ritual practices. Olupona (2006) argues that practitioners of traditional religions understood the founders of their religions to be God or the gods themselves, the same beings who created the universe and everything in it. Major elements in African religions included beliefs in the Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, ancestors, magic and medicine. Ritual practices varied from region to region, but they include: rites of passages (from birth to death), polygamy, slave trading, killing of twins, female circumcision, and human sacrifice. From a Christian perspective, some of these practices were products of endemic ignorance of nature of things. Hence, they were condemned by the missionaries who brought Christianity to the shore of Africa.

To the question of how conversion to Christianity led to social transformation, Corney (2009) writes "The task of Social Transformation empowered by the Gospel is integral to the mission Jesus has entrusted to us, but it is a complex and challenging task." It Involves at least these six elements:

i. The spiritual and moral transformation of people by the Gospel.
ii. The transformation of peoples' world view.
iii. The transformation of community and social relations.
iv. The transformation of economic and political structures.
v. The transformation of education and health.
vi. The transformation of the communities' physical and technical resources -capacity building.

Conclusion

We use Christianity as a case to demonstrate how conversion and switching cane gender social transformation. One thing is certain, religion is a revolutionary force-for good or bad. It carries within it the power to permeate and transform other social institutions or inhibit social changes. Whether it is conversion by the sword or word, the religious community is bound to make significant changes along the line prescribed by the new and dominant religion. Peter Corney's adoption of Niebuhr's historical relationships between Christianity and culture could help us understand the present Day efforts o religions towards transformation. In this case, Christianity is seen as transforming the culture. For example, where the church acts like salt and light in the culture, reshaping its values and affecting public policy like the influence of the 18th and 19th Centuries English Christian social reformers (Peter, 2009).

Social transformation, as a product of conversion, should not be seen merely as an oversight function of religion but it's the main duty. This is true even when such religion is not an official or state religion, enjoying executive favours, that is when religious policy of a given country is not adhered to (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended). Jesus' description of Christians as light of the world and salt of the earth necessarily requires that group conversion to Christianity must impact society as much as the salt and light. As long as Christians are not light and salt of the church, but of the world, the drive for numerical growth must be accompanied by positive social transformation.

This paper has argued that Christian conversion has transformed the Nigerian society from what it used to be before the coming of the missionaries. The conversion and attendant social transformation resulted from contact with early missionaries who propagated Christianity in Nigeria. This attests to the fact that religion is of both spiritual and social relevance. One can imagine a Nigerian society that does not feel the presence of Christianity. Perhaps, it could be compared to Thomas Hobbes' perspective on state of nature, where life was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short (Okanlawon, 2012, 469). Indeed, without religion, Christianity in particular, Nigeria would have been extremely backward. In line with Emile Durkheim's view of religion, the social effectiveness of conversion to Christianity is obvious in Nigeria (Dzurgba, 2009).While this is

appreciated, a major aim of conversion, which is spiritual transformation, must not be completely sacrificed on the altar of social transformation. If this caution is not exercised, the society will be populated with many but un-regenerated Christians, thereby becoming the light that does not shine and the salt that is tasteless.

Recommendations

In the light of the above identified factors necessitating religious conversion and switching in Nigeria, the following suggestion are made to ameliorate the rising cases of religious conversion and switching:

i. There should be uniformity of purpose and teachings among various religious organizations in Nigeria. Diversity in purpose and teaching often results to dissatisfactions among followers of religious doctrines and premises, as such the tendency to explore other religious organizations will no doubt be high.
ii. It also ideal that every religious bodies should ensure that facilities that ensures that members of their religion are comfortable during religious sessions are adequately provided, so that every member irrespective of your class derived a measure of comfort during programme.
iii. The possibility of change in marital status resulting to change in religious affiliation should be minimized by ensuring the strict implementation of existing laws that will ensure that everyone has equal right to freedom of worship.
iv. Monitoring and regulation of the activities of religious organization and bodies is also essential to ensure that they do not deviate from established laws and principles governing the lands.

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