

EVALUATING THE MISSIONARY IMPACT OF THE ACTIVITIES OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN EZINAIHITTE MBAISE

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Abstract

The New Religious Movements are religious group that were formed in modern times outside the mainstream religious organizations. This group engages in various activities in the society which affects people positively or negatively. The study seeks to evaluate the missionary impact of the activities of the New Religious Movements in Ezinaihitte Mbaise. The work used qualitative method of data collection which is mainly interviews and observations. Those interviewed were men; women and young people who have come in close contact and have experienced the missionary activities of the New Religious Movements. Data were collected and analyzed using descriptive method in relation to the research

questions asked during the interview. The findings of the study indicate that the missionary activities of the New Religious Movements have made positive impact in Ezinaihitte Mbaise especially in the area of youth empowerment, promotion of moral values, charitable works and evangelization. The work recommends for further research on the activities of the New Religious Movements and the main stream Churches.

Keywords; Evaluation, Missionary, Impact, Activities

Introduction

Understanding the meaning of New Religious Movements will help us to answer this research question properly. We have to first of all make a distinction between a cult, a sect and the New Religious Movement. Charles Braden in Onwuka(2015), described a cult as “a religious group which differs significantly in one or more respect as a belief or practice from those religious groups which are regarded as the normative expression of religions in our total culture, more a group of people gathered about a specific person’s misinterpretation of the Bible, within the Christian circle, there are a good number of cult groups established by individuals who misinterpret the scriptures and convince others by telling them that he has the correct understanding and interpretation of the scriptures. A Sect can be defined as any religious group with a distinctive world view of its own derived from but not identical with the teaching of a major world religion. Sects, however, use force, violence, intimidation, and very aggressive and do not

tolerate the ideas of others. They instill fear into the mind of their followers and even kill those who do not share their belief system. Example of sects is the Islamic brotherhood and Boko Haran.

Furthermore, Onwuka (2015) described New Religious Movement as a religious community or ethical, spiritual or philosophical group of modern origin such as may be novel in origin, may be part of a wider religion, for instance Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism. The New Religious Movements is a word that is applied to new faiths that have grown up all over the world over the centuries. The New Religious Movements claim to provide alternative answers to peoples' physical, Psychological and spiritual problems. They tried to convince people by telling them that they have supernatural vision, knowledge and provide answers to puzzling questions.

In addition, some of these religious Movements are syncretic in nature. They combine or blend both religious and traditional practices and people go to them to find answers to fundamental questions confronting them. The matter of the New Religious Movements becomes delicate when they are of Christian origin. Those who are of Christian origin borrow traditional practices while those that are of traditional origin bring in their Christian practices which make them dangerous and confusing.

The dominant Churches in Ezinaihitte Mbaise for many decades were the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church Presbyterian and Methodist Church. Although, there

were some New Religious Movements groups in existence at that time but their presence and their activities were not felt compared to what is in existence today. A lot of people were attending these main stream Churches especially the Catholic Church that made up 80% of the population of the area. In those days, there were no words like evangelism, outreach, Crusade or door to door preaching. The only people that move from house to house preaching to people were the 'Jehovah's Witness' who shared their books called the "Watch Tower". Families were not divided along religious denominational lines before the emergence of New Religious Movements. People were united in carrying out community projects, doing communal work or making any contribution for solidarity in the community. Everybody gets involved and nobody would say, I will not participate or I will not contribute because it is against my Faith.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used was basically qualitative and data were collected using oral interview. Different groups of people were sampled and the target population of thirty (30) participants was interviewed. Those selected were people living in the area who are always in close contact with the New Religious Movements and their activities. Data was also collected through personal observation based on the experience of the researcher. Other sources of data collection were books, journals and the internet.

Research Findings and Observations

Here, the analysis and discussions of the findings is presented. It analyses the information from the interviews collected on the evaluation of the missionary impact of the activities of the New Religious Movements.

Social Formation

Based on the findings, the New Religious Movements has promoted social formation in the life of the people. According to Iwuagwu (1994), for the social reformation of the people, the church emphasized on love, friendship and fellowship. The New Religious Movements is a fellowship of believers where emphasis is laid on forgiveness, love and tolerance.

Due to the teaching of the New Religious Movements, families and communities have enjoyed peace, unity and friendship. The New Religious movement preached that people should forgive their enemies, reconcile with their neighbors and forgive those who offend them. This has promoted the moral life of the people.

Evangelisation and Eangelism

The findings show that evangelization as a missionary activity of the New Religious Movements has contributed to the spread of the gospel and many people have been converted. The New Religious Movements believe that it is important to preach the good news to the people since it is the mandate of Jesus Christ. The New Religious Movements used this missionary activity to make good impact in the life of the of Ezinaihite

Mbaise. Many people have accepted the good news of Jesus. Those who were not Christians have been converted and have started going to Church.

According to the scripture, Jesus said “Go throughout the world and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the father and of the son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I taught you” (Matth. 28: 19-20).

There is a difference between evangelization and evangelism. The word evangelization can be described as the process of initiating people into the faith and incorporating them into the life of Christian community. It is learning and growing gradually in the life of Christ. On the other hand, Evangelism is to preach to people in order to attract them to the Church. The New Religious Movements understood conversion as something that is automatic and immediate. Therefore, their purpose of preaching is to convince people to come to their Church in order to increase their number. Sometimes, those who do not accept their preaching or accept to be converted to their Church, they call them ‘unbelievers’. This makes some of their members not having deep rooted faith in God.

Methods of Evangelisation

The New Religious Movement use the following ways to evangelize: early morning preaching, house to house visitation, crusades and hospital visitation.

Early Morning Preaching

One can observe the early morning preaching of these New Religious Movements in every nook and cranny.

They use loud speakers in singing and praying early in the morning at about 5; 00am. Their singing, praying and preaching is always very loud and forceful. This is aimed at waking people up from sleep as to hear the word of God they are preaching

However, people always frown at this method whereby people are forcefully woken up from sleep. Sometimes people insult them and even chase them away from the neighborhood. This constitutes public disturbance and it does not allow people to enjoy early morning reflection and peace of mind. Early morning preaching or morning cry as they call it is not an acceptable way of preaching the word of God of which it bears little or no fruit.

House To House Evangelisation

The research finding indicates that house to house preaching as a missionary activity of the New Religious Movement have made a good impact on the people and is a good method of evangelization. This is also in agreement with what the scripture (Acts 5; 42) says: ‘Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped preaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.’ Again, Jesus said in (Luke 10 : 5—9) ‘whatever house you enter first say, peace be to this house. Heal those in it who are sick, and say to them the kingdom of God has come near to you.’

Furthermore, Onwuka (2015) says, the fundamentalist sects are characterized by their very enthusiastic

proselytizing through persistent house visiting and large scale distribution of the Bibles, magazines, and books, their presence and the opportunistic help they provide at times of personal or family crisis.

This is where the New Religious Movements share the word of God with people by going from house to house. Whenever they visit any home, they requested that people should give them attention to share the word of God with them. They engage people in Bible discussions and at times, it leads to arguments especially when they condemn the religious beliefs and practices of other denominations. At the end of the Bible sharing, they pray and invite the people to come to their Church. One important aspect of this method is that as they share themselves into small groups, they are able to visit and interact with as many as people possible. Although, in many cases they meet resistance from families who don't want to see or listen to them. Jesus commanded his disciples to go to the house of Israel and preach that the kingdom of God is at hand. Any house they enter and they are welcomed they should stay in that house and eat whatever is provided to them. Therefore, house to house evangelism should be encouraged as a good method of evangelization and converting people to the faith. The New Religious Movements uses this opportunity to discover individuals and families that are in need of help both spiritual, psychological and material. They provide them with the necessary assistance in form of money and other material goods according to their need.

Crusade

Furthermore, one other means which the New Religious Movements use to evangelize the people of Ezinaihitte Mbaïse is gospel crusade. According to <http://www/romannachay.com/2024>, ‘Some gospel crusades are impactful events that bring together believers and unbelievers alike to hear the life changing message of Jesus Christ. Gospel crusade is an outdoor or open air event with music, prayers and singing and dancing and gospel messages. It is a strong means of evangelization that could last for days of a week.’

The New Religious Movements occasionally organize gospel crusades suing school fields or village squares. In order to attract people to the event, they spend time going to different places to make announcement, pasting banners sharing flyers and inviting people to attend the crusade. In a bid to attract many people to the Crusade ground. The New Religious Movements convince people that those who are sick, will be healed, demons will be cast out from those who are possessed and God will through them, perform miracles.

One good thing about the New Religious Movement use of crusade as a means of evangelization is that it is an opportunity to make the good news of Jesus Christ reach to many people. A lot of people use that time to change their live, be converted, become believers and start going to Church. People are happy and talk about the things that happened at the Crusade ground. Unfortunately, the promised healing, miracles and casting out demons from those who were possessed do not happen. Therefore,

people's expectations for attending the crusade were always met at the end of the crusade and they go home disappointed.

Open Air Preaching

According to (Luke 6; 17—46), 'Jesus gave an open air sermon, called the sermon on the plain'. Jesus sent out his disciples in Mark (16; 15), to go and preach the gospel to every nation and warn them on the consequences of their sins.

It was observed that this method used by the New Religious Movements in preaching is known as 'open Air Preaching'. Jesus used this method during his public ministry and it yielded a lot of fruit. This is where they go out to the streets, market places or preaching in public or even in commercial buses. It is the act of evangelizing the faith in public places. The New Religious Movements use this evangelizing method to preach to people and convert them as their members. We always see them preach and share flyers and leaflets. This gives them the opportunity to reach out to many people. One problem with open air preaching is that it is seen as disturbing public peace because they use loud speakers and music to attract people's attention.

Charitable Wroks

Another missionary activity which the New Religious Movements embarked upon which the work evaluated and saw the great impact it made in the life of the people is charitable works. In the gospel of (Matt; 25; 35-46),

Jesus said “When I was hungry you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, in prison and you visited me, when I was a stranger you let me in. I was sick and you visited me. The New Religious Movement is well known for their charitable works to the poor and the needy. They share cash and material items such as food stuff and clothes to the poor and the needy; they fetch water to the elderly people in the villages. Again, they visit the sick in their homes and in the hospitals, pray and encourage them to have faith in God. They pay hospital bills for those who cannot afford to pay their bills and those who are in prison were also visited with material items.

According to S M Onwuka (2015), the sects, offering a place where solidarity is truly practiced, becomes for the abandoned and the frustrated a protest against present day society that condemns some to poverty or undeserved suffering. This act of charity has made positive impact in the life of the people it gives joy and a good sense of belonging that they are not neglected by the society. The Church, obviously do not pay much attention to this missionary activity of caring for the poor, the needy and those who have no one to care for them. The care and presence of the New Religious Movements; provide relief and consolation to the poor and the marginalized in the society and they are assured that God loves them.

In addition, the fundamentalist group has a financial well backed plan; millions of dollars flow easily in different forms such as funding for livelihood projects,

educational scholarships, care enhancement programs, employment. The movements are known for taking care of the less privileged in the society especially those who are converted to their group.

Bible Study

According to Palms (119; 15), 'I will meditate on your precepts and regard your ways. I shall delight in your statutes. I shall not forget your word.' Again Hebrew (10; 24-25), 'Not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching' The scripture encourages people to come together; to study the word of God. The New Religious Movements see this as a weekly activity where they gather in groups to read the Bible. The movements share Bibles free to people to encourage them to read and understand the word of God.

The New Religious Movements devote much of their time reading the Bible and interpreting it according to their level of understanding. All their practices and moral codes are based on the scriptures. They don't accept or believe anything that is not found in the scripture. One problem with the New Religious Movements and Bible study is that they lack the basic theology to teach the scriptures correctly and their Biblical interpretations are most of the times wrong.

Night Vigil

There are however, some places where the scripture mention night vigil (Exd 12: 42). ‘It is a night to be observed for the Lord for having brought them out from the land of Egypt, this night is for the Lord to be observed by all the sons of Israel throughout their generation’ (Lk 6:12). “It was at this time that he went off to the mountain to pray and he spent the whole night in prayer to God” (Lk; 22:46). “And he said to them, “why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” These Biblical references suggest that night vigil is a time of prayer and having a personal encounter with God.

The New Religious Movements as a religious group is associated with night vigil. It is a religious service that takes place at night. The New Religious Movements organizes night vigil which is characterized by prayers, music and songs of praise, clapping of hands, shouting halleluiah on top of their voices and dancing. It is an all-night wake keeping where people are spirit filled with joy of songs of praise, prayers, playing music and dancing. The New Religious Movement use night vigil to heal people both physical and spiritual.

However, night vigil is highly criticized because this activity of the New Religious Movements is conducted at night and those living around that environment it is taking place will all be awake throughout the night. Nobody will sleep that day because the sound of music, singing, clapping of hands and shouting do not allow people to sleep. According to Ede (2024), In August 15th

2024, the Enugu state government ordered all Churches and Mosques to remove all outdoor loudspeakers within 90 days and install soundproof measures within their centers. This policy is to eliminate noise pollution in the state especially during night vigil. It is also a relief to those who experience sleepless night on the day of night vigil.

Prophecy and Healing

According to (1 cor.14; 1), 'follow the way of love and eagerly desire the spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy' According to Onwuka (2015), There are people who seek in religions, an answer to and protection against suffering, sickness and death. The New Religious movements seem to them; to confront these essential problems openly and to promise instant remedies, especially psychological and physical healing'. The gift of prophecy and healing is a gift from God that should be used according to the direction of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the Church. However, these gifts have been abused and commercialized such that the New Religious Movements open healing centers and answer prophets for selfish interest in order to make money. People run from one healing center to another and from one prophet or man of God to another seeking for solution to their problems.

The New Religious Movements claim to possess the gifts of prophecy and the power to heal every kind of illness. People consult them to seek information on what or who is holding them from progressing in their business or family, what is causing death or misfortune. Unfortunately, the New Religious Movements convinces

people that through their healing and prophetic powers, they have solution to all these problems. Sometimes, they tell them that it is one of their family members or ancestral spirits that are disturbing them. Therefore, the New Religious Movement engage people in series of rigorous rituals, fasting and prayers including asking them to provide fund and other materials items for healing and casting out demons, which most of the time, never happens and people still live with those problems unresolved.

Syncretic Practices

It was equally observed that some groups that used to practice traditional religion, have now incorporated elements of other religious practices into their activities so as to make it attractive to people.

It is important to note that these movements are consciously and intentionally syncretistic in the sense that they form a new system by borrowing both from the African traditional religion and from other religious traditions. The New Religious Movements derived from other religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or other traditional religions. Some of them brought in syncretistic elements they borrowed from Christianity.

The movements are not traditional or Christianity and this is where their activities become very confusing. In most cases, they have turned their homes and shrines into healing centers and they answer “man of God or prophet” but their practices are purely a mixture of things from other religions. They perform rituals

containing a mixture of other religions and African traditional religion. This is to make people especially Christians believe that they are not traditional worshippers.

Marriage Counselling

The New Religious Movements conducts marriage counseling or couple therapy for intending couples which is called premarital counseling or marriage counseling for couples experiencing difficulties in their relationships. This is meant to help intending couples to be aware of what might be involved when they come together as husband and wife. It is also a means of helping married couples having difficulties in their married life to understand one another better and resolve their family problems.

Tiara Blain (2014) described Christian marriage counseling as a cognitive behavioural based counseling for married Christian couples. This counseling incorporates psychotherapy with Christian belief practices. This form of counseling is typically facilitated by a Christian therapist or a pastoral counsellor. Christian marriage counseling aims to develop relationship techniques that strengthens communication and commitment to one another and improves individual growth.

Findings indicates that marriage counseling organized by the New Religious Movements for those planning to get married and for married couples who are having conflicts in their married life, has yielded much fruit. It has helped intending couples to be aware of themselves

and plan for their future. Again, married couples who are experiencing difficulties in their families have been helped to resolve their difficulties, improve their communication and live a happy married life.

Youth Camping

The New Religious Movements create youth ministry whose aim is to help young people grow in their faith. It is the youth ministry that organizes and hosts youth camps annually during holiday periods. According to bwmic (2021), it is always imperative we provide our youth, leaders and Churches with the best opportunity possible to participate in youth camp that is theologically sound, physically safe, emotionally healthy and spiritually challenging. The one week youth camp offers children and young people the opportunity to interact with others, play games, study the Bible, and participate in worship and other spiritual activities.

Furthermore, religious youth camp gives young people a sense of belonging and a positive relationship with their group and with God. Metiva (2018) God is still using camp in amazing ways. He is still saving students, transforming them, making them new, killing addictions and providing hope. Parents are encouraged to allow their children to participate in youth camp organized by the New Religious Movements for good moral and spiritual upbringing of young people.

Recommendations

This work carried out a study on the evaluation of the missionary impact of the activities of the New Religious

Movements in Ezinaihitte Mbaise. The study made the following recommendations.

1. Further research should be carried out in the area of the syncretistic activities of the New Religious Movements.
2. Other state Governments should follow the Enugu state policy and put a restriction on the use of outdoor speakers in worship centers.
3. Thorough investigation into the activities of the New Religious Movements to see how their activities are helping the faithful to deepen their faith in God.
4. The New Religious Movements should give basic theological training to their members so that they can acquire sound theological knowledge in order to teach and interpret the Bible properly.
5. The Church should be deeply involved in taking care of the needy and less privileged in the society especially in the area of providing employment, education and material support.
6. Further research should be carried out on the missionary impact of the activities of the new Religious Movements and the main stream Churches

Conclusion

The rise of the New Religious Movements has been on the increase throughout the world. Some of them were formed as a result doctrinal or leadership disagreement with their mainstream groups. Others originated as a

result of the founders own interpretation of the scriptures while others came from ancient traditional religions. As the New Religious movements continue to rise and spread in so many places, they carry out a lot of missionary activities such as evangelization, charitable works, healing and prophecy, youth camping and marriage counseling. These activities have made some impacts in the life of the people in the society. The study has carefully evaluated the missionary impact of the activities of the New Religious Movements in Ezinaihitte Mbaise. The research was carried out using qualitative method for data collection which was majorly interviews and observations. After the data analysis, findings revealed that the missionary activities of the New Religious Movements have made both positive and negative impacts on the people living in various communities in Ezinaihitte Mbaise.

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