

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN NIGERIA: AN ENDLESS CONTROVERSY

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Abstract

This study explored the phenomena of religious conversion in Nigeria. It examined how religious pluralism and technological advancements reshaped religious identities and practices. The paper highlighted the historical, social and cultural factors that influenced conversion in Nigeria. It further analyzes the role of internal migration and Western education in shaping religious conversion as well as the consequences of such conversion in a religiously diverse society like Nigeria. The study also considered the impact of the internet and social media as key drivers among younger generations. In other to develop a structural framework for this study, the conversion theory of Pail (1973) served as the lens. The aim of this research was to explore the issues and challenges of conversion among Nigerian Christians and to x-ray the extend agents of modernity have influenced the phenomenon in Nigeria. It employed a historical approach in data collection and descriptive analysis in the discussion. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how religious beliefs and practices are negotiated in contemporary Nigerian society. The work concluded that the issues of conversion and reconversion are endemic and remains a teething challenge among Christians in Nigeria. It recommended that church leaders should incorporate elements of modernity to retain the youths in their fold.

Keywords: Conversion, pluralism, migration, technology and the social media.

Introduction

Religious conversion represents a shift in individual and collective identity in their religious affiliation. Thus, conversion signifies the embrace of a new faith, influencing personal beliefs, social relationships and community dynamics. It often reflects a quest for meaning or spiritual fulfillment and can range from gradual spiritual exploration to rapid, life-altering experiences. Some conversions are voluntary, marked by a deep personal quest, while others arise under duress or coercion. Nock (1933) describes certain conversion as revolutionary, highlighting the complete break from previous beliefs in favor of new ones.

From a theological perspective, conversion is often celebrated as a voluntary act of

belief. However, questions arise when conversions result from coercion or external pressure, challenging their authenticity (Kraft, 1999). As it were, religious conversion is frequently met with disapproval if it undermines communal unity. Still, some scholars argue that individuals have the right to change their beliefs if they no longer align with their spiritual needs (Smith, 2013).

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Theoretical Framework

The conversion theory espoused by Pail (1973), Horton (1975) and further extended by Smile and Paloustzain (2014), serves as a conceptual framework for this article. In their separate studies, Pail (1973), Horton (1975), Smile and Paloustzain (2014) state that several reasons accounted for the rate of conversion among the early Christian converts in Africa. According to them, some people are converted as a respond to personal pressures especially health issues in life. Others converted based on their strong desire for materialism or material aspirations to make them relevant in society, while some others more, converted to satisfy their quest for spiritual maturity. All of these reasons, according to this school of thought, culminate into a conversion experience that expresses genuine faith, emotional ecstasy or miraculous manifestations. Similarly, Starbuck (2018) as cited by Joel (2020), considered conversion as proffering individual solution to psychological crises, giving the individual fulfillment and self-esteem or new self. He further states that the new self, experiences completeness, wholeness and personal peace. Individuals therefore act out their personal interest especially when faced with spiritual challenges.

Carmody (2019) cited by (Opuwari, 2023), states that religious conversion as a concept is central to missionary and to the influence that Christianity has exerted in a variety of fields. He further states that in the African context, means a change from a traditional to a universal religion, involving a psychological transformation through which the converts underlying assumptions about the world are reconstructed, accompanied by a socially recognized display of change. He further notes that African conversions since the beginning of the 20th century indicate a significant increase especially in the Roman Catholic, Protestants and Pentecostal churches. Hefner (1993) stated that larger social order acts as a catalyst for both conversion and the reformation of indigenous religion.

The conversion theory as discussed by the scholars played out in the movement of Africans from one religious group to another, particularly from the traditional religion to the Christian religion. For example, some people were attracted by the facilities (education, hospital, white collar jobs etc) that were introduced by the missionaries and not necessarily because of their conviction of the supreme God that was superior to their own God. Most converts simply desired to identify with the new world view because of the benefits that were attached to it. Incidentally, the African deities were unable to adapt to the changing worldview which Horton described as the macrocosm. The African deities to a large extent remained limited in their ability to meet the needs of the new worldviews. To extent, the African responded to the modern needs. However when such needs could not meet the desire of the African, the average African would resort to their traditional belief system which continued to be source of her ethical values and cosmology, as the succeeding discussion shall show.

The Concept of Religious Conversion

Religious conversion in Nigeria is shaped by a variety of factors, including the search for meaning, personal crises, social relationships, exposure to new ideas, and the desire for community. Scholars like Idowu, Adeoye, Olupona, Sanneh, Adogame, and Kalu provide essential insights into these processes, emphasizing how local cultural, social, and economic contexts influence individual decisions to adopt new faiths.

Religious conversion, broadly understood as the transition from one belief system to another, is shaped by personal motivations and external influences. Stark and Bainbridge (1980) frame conversion as a process driven by a search for deeper meaning and spiritual fulfillment. Individuals often turn to belief systems that offer emotional and psychological satisfaction, a key factor in the complex phenomenon of conversion.

As it were, conversions typically fall into three categories: sudden, gradual, and forced, each with distinct motivations and implications. Sudden conversions are marked by intense, often life-altering spiritual experiences. Nock (1933) describes them as rapid shifts in belief, common in evangelical and revivalist settings. Nigerian theologian Sola Adeyemo (2010) highlights the emotional intensity of such conversions, often triggered by perceived divine encounters. . Olukoya (2017) notes that sudden conversions can dramatically reshape personal identity and social relationships, as individuals experience a strong sense of belonging in their new religious communities.

Gradual conversions occur over time through sustained exposure to new religious ideas. Tunde Akinola (2016) emphasizes that gradual conversions are common in regions with religious pluralism, such as Nigeria, where individuals interact with various faith traditions through interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange. This type of conversion reflects the fluidity of religious identity in multicultural contexts, where beliefs may evolve in response to personal, familial, and societal influences. Afolabi (2020) notes

that gradual conversions often result in hybrid religious identities, where converts selectively adopt elements from different belief systems that align with their spiritual and social realities.

Without overstating the obvious, this represents a coercive form of religious transformation. During the European colonization of Africa, indigenous populations were often pressured to adopt Christianity. Chidester (1996) describes how forced conversions were tools of domination, replacing local belief systems with European Christian ideologies. Azuka (2018) further argues that forced conversions were not purely acts of faith but served colonial interests by undermining indigenous cultures. Femi A. O. Oluwaseun (2021) highlights the lasting effects of these conversions, asserting that they often led to cultural alienation and identity crises within communities coerced into adopting new faiths.

The Nigerian experience. In Nigeria, conversion is shaped by socio-political and cultural dynamics. Ogbu Kalu (2008) points out that conversion often serves as a means of negotiating social status and belonging, reflecting deeper communal and cultural influences. Similarly, Eze (2017) explores how evangelism attracts Nigerian youth searching for identity in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape. Conversion in Nigeria, therefore, is not only a spiritual experience but also a reflection of broader societal forces. The different forms of religious conversion—sudden, gradual, and forced—underscore the complexity of religious transformation. Each type reflects the interplay between individual agency and external socio-political pressures, particularly within Nigerian society, where religion plays a significant role in shaping personal and communal identities. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for grasping the nuanced nature of religious conversion and its lasting impact on individuals and communities.

Reasons for Religious Conversion in Nigeria

Religious conversion in Nigeria is shaped by complex factors, including personal, social, and cultural dynamics. Nigerian scholars have explored these influences, offering nuanced insights into why individuals adopt new faiths. Key factors include the search for meaning, personal crises, social relationships, exposure to new ideas, and the desire for community and belonging. Below are some perspectives from Nigerian scholars, supported by relevant studies.

The search for meaning and spiritual fulfillment is a significant driver of religious conversion in Nigeria. Idowu, (1973), notes that many Nigerians convert from indigenous religions to Christianity or Islam because these faiths offer clearer answers to existential questions about life, death, and the afterlife. He argues that traditional African religions often provide more fluid interpretations of these matters, leading some individuals to seek out religious systems that offer more defined spiritual guidance.

Personal crises frequently trigger religious conversions. Adeoye, (2015), highlights how personal hardships, such as illness or financial struggles, prompt individuals to seek religious solutions. Pentecostal Christianity, with its emphasis on healing and deliverance, often becomes an attractive option for those seeking divine intervention during times of suffering. Adeoye observes that churches, mosques, and religious groups provide not only spiritual but also social support, contributing to conversions during periods of personal crisis.

Social relationships, particularly marriage and family dynamics, are also significant factors in religious conversion. Olupona, (2014), explains that inter-religious marriages often lead to conversion, especially among women, who are more likely to adopt their husband's faith in patriarchal societies like Nigeria. This reflects broader cultural expectations surrounding family unity and religious transmission, where shared beliefs are considered essential for social cohesion within extended families and communities.

Education and exposure to new ideas have historically played a role in religious conversions. Lamin Sanneh, (1983) a scholar of religion in Africa, highlights how Western education during the colonial era introduced many Nigerians to Christian doctrines. Christianity was often seen as a gateway to modernity, literacy, and progress. In the contemporary era, globalization and access to digital information continue to expose Nigerians to a wide array of religious ideas, leading to conversions not only to Christianity and Islam but also to new religious movements.

In Nigeria, where religion is deeply tied to identity and social integration, the desire for community and belonging is a powerful motivator for conversion. Afe Adogame, (2013) in his work on Pentecostalism, points out that new religious movements, particularly Pentecostal churches, attract converts by offering a strong sense of community. These groups provide not only spiritual guidance but also social and economic support, making them appealing to people navigating the challenges of urbanization and economic instability.

Socio-political and economic factors also influence religious conversion in Nigeria. Ogbu Kalu, (2008), argues that the appeal of Pentecostal Christianity is partly rooted in its promise of prosperity. In a country where poverty and unemployment are widespread, Pentecostalism's message of wealth and personal success draws many individuals seeking material improvement through religious conversion.

Charismatic leaders play a crucial role in the religious conversion process, particularly within Pentecostal and evangelical movements. Adeoye (2015) discusses how the persuasive and emotional appeal of Pentecostal pastors leads to mass conversions. These leaders often promise spiritual and material breakthroughs, further reinforcing the belief in the transformative power of conversion.

The motivations for religious conversion vary from one individual to another as well as from group to group. Stark and Bainbridge (1980) argue that conversion often fulfills deep psychological needs for meaning, identity and belonging. In their view, this quest for stability becomes especially relevant in societies undergoing rapid change owing to globalization, migration, and technological advancements. In contrast, the internet has facilitated access to diverse belief systems, allowing individuals to explore or challenge their faith more freely (Davie, 2007).

Religious conversion in Nigeria, therefore, is not just a personal spiritual journey but one deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the nation. The process of religious conversion, as outlined in three stages Pre-Conversion, Conversion Experience, and Post-Conversion is deeply interconnected with personal, social, and spiritual dynamics.

The Controversy

The process of religious conversion in Nigeria reflects a complex interplay of personal, social, and spiritual motivations. Nigerian scholars emphasize that this process is not just a matter of individual belief but is shaped by broader socio-cultural, political, and economic factors. Whether through a search for existential answers, the emotional impact of crises, or the influence of charismatic leaders and supportive religious communities, religious conversion in Nigeria continues to be a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon.

Religious conversion, while offering personal fulfillment and spiritual renewal, also introduces significant challenges. These challenges, particularly in the Nigerian context, are shaped by cultural, social, and psychological factors. Nigerian scholars have examined these dynamics in depth, providing valuable insights into the hurdles that converts face. Below is an elaboration of the key challenges, supported by scholarly perspectives.

One of the most profound challenges of religious conversion is the internal conflict regarding one's identity. Conversion involves a fundamental shift in belief systems, which can create tension between the individual's past and present. According to Osinubi (2014), individuals often experience a sense of loss or guilt when abandoning their former religious traditions. This struggle between old and new identities can result in emotional distress, as the convert reconciles their new faith with the values and customs of their previous religion. In Nigeria, where religious identity is closely tied to ethnicity and culture, this conflict can be particularly pronounced.

Conversion LEADS to social estrangement, as individuals may face rejection or hostility from family, friends, or their community. Religious identities in Nigeria are often collective, and converting to another faith can be seen as a betrayal of family or ethnic traditions. Ikechukwu (2010) notes that in some cases, social ostracism is a significant deterrent to conversion, as individuals fear being cut off from their support networks. This challenge is particularly evident in tight-knit communities where religious unity is a

key social bond. Converts may face alienation, rejection, or suspicion, requiring emotional resilience and tact in navigating these strained relationships.

Embracing a new religion often necessitates cultural adjustments, which can be difficult to navigate. Nigerian scholars like Ezeanya (2012) argue that conversion sometimes demands changes in dress, language, dietary practices, and rituals, all of which are often deeply rooted in cultural and familial traditions. For example, a convert to Islam or Christianity may have to adapt to new dietary laws or moral codes that differ drastically from their previous lifestyle. These changes can create cultural dissonance, where the individual struggles to balance their cultural heritage with their newfound religious beliefs.

After converting, individuals FIND it challenging to be fully accepted within their new religious community. As Onwuka (2017) highlights, religious communities, sometimes ARE skeptical of new converts, questioning their sincerity or dedication. This skepticism may require converts to prove their commitment through active participation, learning religious doctrines, and conforming to communal expectations. The period of adjustment and gradual integration IS USUALLY taxing, as the individual seeks to build trust and establish a new social identity within the group.

Even after conversion, individuals may encounter lingering doubts or conflicts regarding their new religious beliefs. According to Olajide (2016), this challenge is especially common in Nigeria, where the coexistence of multiple religious traditions can lead to intellectual and spiritual conflicts. Converts more often than not, question the teachings of their new faith or struggle to reconcile elements of the new doctrine with their previous religious understanding. This can be exacerbated by external factors, such as societal pressures or the influence of former religious communities. Continuous spiritual exploration and counseling are often necessary to address these doubts.

Adapting to new religious practices are most time, challenging, particularly when balancing them with pre-existing commitments. Kalu (2008) argues that converts in Nigeria often face difficulties in incorporating daily prayers, fasting, and other religious rituals into their routines, particularly in urban centers where modern life is fast-paced. For instance, a convert to Islam may find the regularity of daily prayers difficult to integrate into a busy work schedule. Similarly, a convert to Christianity might struggle with new ethical standards that conflict with professional or social norms. These adjustments require a period of learning and reorganization of priorities.

The psychological toll of conversion are on their own substantial, leading to stress, anxiety, and even identity crises. Religious conversion involves not only a change in belief systems but also a profound shift in self-perception and worldview. Adetayo (2011) discusses how individuals often experience psychological stress as they transition from one belief system to another, particularly when they leave behind a religion that shaped their worldview for years. The emotional upheaval LEADS to feelings of

isolation or insecurity, and the individual in most cases, require psychological counseling or community support to cope with the change.

Religious conversion in Nigeria is a multifaceted process that involves deep emotional, social, and psychological challenges. From identity conflicts to community acceptance, individuals must navigate a complex set of dynamics in order to successfully integrate their new beliefs. Nigerian scholars offer a nuanced understanding of these challenges, emphasizing the need for emotional resilience, cultural adaptability, and spiritual support throughout the process.

The Internet and Social Media

The internet has emerged as a powerful influence on conversion. As Daniel Enwerem (2016) observes, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp have become central to religious debates in Nigeria. These platforms allow individuals to explore religious and anti-religious content freely, providing avenues for religious exploration and conversion.

Enwerem argues that the anonymity and accessibility of online spaces enable individuals to question their faith without fear of immediate social repercussions. This democratization of religious discourse through technology has facilitated the spread of globalized religious movements such as Pentecostalism and Islam. At the same time, it has contributed to rising secularism, atheism, and apostasy, particularly among urban youth.

Conclusion

Religious conversion reflects significant shifts in individual and collective faith, shaped by a multitude of factors, including spiritual quests, societal pressures and evolving cultural contexts. In Nigeria, these phenomena are intricately linked to historical, socio-political and economic realities, demonstrating how personal religious choices are deeply embedded within broader societal dynamics. While conversion often signals a reorientation towards new spiritual and social communities, it equally provokes tensions between individual autonomy and communal expectations, frequently resulting in social exclusion and emotional struggles.

In the contemporary world, driven by globalization, migration, and the rapid dissemination of information through digital platforms, the challenges of conversion are gradually becoming more fluid and diverse. These processes expose the complexities of negotiating religious identity in an era of increased connectivity, where individuals are exposed to a range of religious beliefs and non-beliefs. Understanding these shifts is essential not only for analyzing the current state of religious practice but also for predicting future trends in religious adherence, particularly as younger generations navigate a pluralistic world. By exploring the nuanced interplay between personal belief and community norms, this study contributes to the broader conversation on faith,

identity, and the enduring tension between tradition and modernity IN Nigeria.

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