



THE IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION: EXPLORING CHALLENGES OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN EUROPE AND THEIR IDENTITIES IN THEIR HOME COUNTRIES

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Abstract:

Religious facilitation in immigrant integration will require that both immigrants and natives be in a neutral position whereby they will both accept adjustments to their normal religious routines. This prospect seems a solace to immigrants more than natives since with immigrants the change of their routines is something they can quickly harmonize with by the fact that they are away from their homeland. In this study, I explore the challenges faced by religious minorities in Europe and the impact of these challenges on their identities in their home countries. The study will examine the experiences of religious minority groups in European society and how their treatment by society and government affects their sense of self and connection to their home country. Additionally, this study will investigate the role of religion in shaping the identities of minority individuals and communities. The findings of this study will provide insight into the complex relationship between religion, identity, and belonging for minority groups in Europe and contribute to the larger conversation on diversity and inclusion in the region.

Keywords: integration; immigrant; religious minority; Europe; cultural identity

1. Introduction

In developing countries, poor economic status is considered one of the main factors pushing their citizens to emigrate in the search of greener pastures (Hirvonen & Liller, 2015). However, the reality is that these immigrants are not from the lowest economic stratum in society since they are able to fund their migration to other countries while the poorest are left home in their misery (Sundari, 2005). Immigration largely is comprised of the movement of people from areas considered low in the economic scale where life opportunities are scarce and the cost of living is high to established areas of economic stability (Castelli, 2018). African countries are among the less developed states of the world (African Development Bank, 2019). The majority of African immigrants are having

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low levels of education (Egharevba, 2006). Hence better educational training and prospects of a good life are the first and most influential factor which motivates them to migrate in order to better job opportunities (Ridderstad, 2007).

Statistics from recent migration trends show a high rate of immigrant influx into developed countries, with Europe being the most preferred immigrant destination (Abel & Sander, 2014; de Haas et al., 2019). However, there has been a sudden shift of events as the world has been affected by the outbreak of the Corona disease which has made movement across different territories almost impossible. The migration curve is relatively flat throughout the world and this has greatly affected patterns of migration. Previously, most of the immigrants were mainly from developing countries which comprise a great percentage of African countries (Hirvonen & Lilleør, 2015). Currently, the rate of migration has greatly reduced and this means there are yet to come new trends and patterns of migration.

As religion is being accepted as a significant mediator between immigrants and society; sociological scholars have begun once more to give it considerable attention (Cadge & Howard Ecklund, 2007; Ferriss, 2002; Maliepaard & Phalet, 2012). Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) are amongst the sociological scholars who illustrate religion and the social integration of immigrants. Hirschman (2004) articulated that there are three vital benefits which religion offers immigrants. The three benefits, as postulated by Hirschman include: refuge, resources and respect. Portes and Rumbut (2006) similarly add weight to the religious discourse by arguing that religious practices are the foundations of social exchange and are the determinants of social integration within a multicultural society.

Integration has been used in different contexts and generally, it gives a broad impression that makes the term applicable from many perspectives (Allman, 2013; Berkman et al., 2013; Korac, 2003; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014). Most scholars in other disciplines have markedly used the term for instance in fields such as business and economics the term is used respectively to infer different meanings (Adam & Roncevic, 2003; FitzGerald & Arar, 2018; Wharton, 2009). Nonetheless, on a general scale, the term is used to infer harmony, cohesiveness and peace (Rosso et al., 2010). Social integration in its entirety as illustrated is a diverse concept that cannot be assumed at its general impression and for that reason, this study picks a more specific meaning so as to capture the religious perspective of immigrants and how they affect the social dimension of the host country (Åslund et al., 2009). The understanding of social integration in this study and the differences created in the usage of the term in other contexts proves that even within the field of study there can be variations in the meaning of a term depending on the context (Mensah, 2013). Similarly, in sociology, the meaning of social integration varies greatly and sociologists do not have a specific definition that has been agreed on (Strang & Ager, 2010). This leaves out the meaning to be inferred by the context of its usage.

Integration and immigration have been a concept widely covered by scholars within the field of sociology (Briggs et al., 2003; Brown, 2013; Gresaker, 2013; van Heerden et al., 2014). In the wide arena of scholarly works from various sociologists, the notion of

integration is captured not as a singular event but as a process, a relationship and even sometimes a phenomenon that involves the interaction of different aspects of human life with an aim of finding a neutral ground of (Åslund & Skans, 2009). The notion created from this understanding creates an umbrella-like definition that is broad enough to accommodate all aspects of integration in a sociological sense (Vermeulen & Penninx, 2000).

Down on that line of thought, the constituents of integration can be imagined and exploring the idea brings one to a vague understanding of social integration (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006). Therefore, social integration can be said to be a process through which individuals or constituents of a given society find a way to relate to one another amicably within that society (Geddes, 2003). To further explore that idea, integration can be more sophisticatedly defined as the connection of common ties, interchanges or reciprocity of cultural practices between constituents of a society (Wickström, 2015).

In his theory of modernity, the seminal German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, allocate a lot of space discussing an understanding of a society with a twofold concept that brings together action and system theory (Squeff & Bidinotto, 2020). Consequently, system integration, much similar to social integration, aligns with these paradigms. Entzinger (2007) postulates that for one to comprehend social integration we have to take cognisance of the fact that instruments of social integration constitute orientations of individuals and their preferred societal orders of morals and values.

More often, ideally, because the concept of integration can be expressed from different angles, it is taken by many scholars as a process of making strong the bond between relationships that exist in a given society (Kauppi, 2003). Similarly, from another perspective integration is viewed as a process through which new constituents are introduced into society through societal systems and institutions (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006). In reference to Falci, Lasso and Soto (2005) social integration can be illustrated as the connectedness of one individual in a society to another individual. In line with that notion, in some instances, social integration has been taken to mean involvement in social activities that connect people and creates relationships within society (Lasso & Soto, 2005).

Karklins (1998) approaches the understanding of integration in a two-way concept whereby he articulates that the first impression of integration has to be understood from the cultural aspect. Here, he basically argues that integration is a product of the merging of cultures over time, a development of a similar sense of political positions and a decrease in barriers, legal or social, that hinder interaction. His second definition wraps it plainly by saying the absence of disintegration should be construed to mean integration and he points less to socio-political stability and the general societal (Entzinger, 2007).

Integration from another perspective is described as a process that happens over time and that involves many aspects that affect immigrants and natives of the receiver country (Krippner & Alvarez, 2007). More specifically, from the perspective of the immigrant settlement in the receiver society, integration is understood to be a sociological system in which new entities are introduced into an already existing social system in such

a way that the resultant of the interaction does not affect the system but makes it to function more amicably (Koryś, 2003). So far, almost all definitions of integration leave an impression of it being an undertaking of both the incoming visitors and the natives of the receiver society (Moody, 2001).

2. The impact of religious and cultural identities of immigrants in the receiver society

The role of religion has been majorly highlighted as a contributory factor to the well-being of individuals, especially in the current era when there is a surge in international migration which has led to the movement of people from different parts of the world to other parts (Newman, David & Graham, Jesse, 2018). Religion and religious beliefs have also been diversified and today in the world there exist thousands of deities affiliated with different people. Europe and North America are the leading immigrant destinations with most of the immigrants migrating in the search of employment and education. This has led to a more diversified cultural and religious environment in the west, and consequently a clash between cultures and religions (Statham and Tillie, 2018).

Due to differences in the culture of immigrants in the countries of origin and the natives in host countries, a common ground ought to be found and that's where religion comes in. There exists overwhelming evidence that religion is the only aspect of an individual's life that is carried with the individual from the country of origin to their host country (Fleischmann and Phalet, 2012). Immigrants in their new homes have created a tendency to freely interact with people of similar religious beliefs and some have even been seen to migrate to those countries where they think the dominant religion is the religion of their choice because they believe that such preexisting religious setting makes it easier for social integration and socioeconomic outcomes (Lindley, 2000).

Europe as a continent has been on the receivership of immigrants for a long time, with an increase seen from 1950 as the continent was vacating territories of its colonies (Forsander, 2002). The reason for settling in Europe by most immigrants has been searching for employment and education but lately, the region is experiencing an increase in the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers (Koivukangas, 2003). Although the dominant religion of Europe is Christianity, it can be argued that the contemporary population of Europe is more secular (Martikainen, 2005). Though in minority, today we have other religions such as Islam represented in Europe. On the side of Christianity, denominations like the Roman Catholic, Orthodox Church, and other protestant churches have had dominion in Europe. The first experience of immigrants in a new land is the feeling of loneliness and the obvious culture shock. Immigrants feel disconnected from the new community and often lack a sense of belongingness because their usual lives get disrupted and the fact that they are far from their loved ones increases insecurity and fear of the unknown (Henderson A, 2004). What most immigrants mostly perceive is an enclosed system that is segregated and does not encourage interaction (Kaariainen K., 2009).

The Christian church has set congregations in major cities inhabited by immigrants where immigrants can join and be part of the religious community. The interaction between the immigrants and the locals creates a mental balance and helps immigrants to learn quickly about the host society's culture and societal expectations (Henderson A, 2004). Friendships develop from such interactions and the immigrants begin to break the social barrier and the stresses and setbacks of settlements get settled faster. Drawing from scholars such as Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000:74) it can be argued that religion provides an opportunity for breaking social barriers and it speeds up the process of social integration of immigrants into the host society by acting as a bridge by offering refuge.

Most of the Christian immigrants in Europe experience a shift in their social status. Some of them feel denied social recognition especially if they were influential in their home countries and others have even dropped in their occupational ranks (Balabeykina & Martynov, 2015). In such cases, religion has been seen to offer an opportunity for the respectability of immigrants since it provides a platform for recognition. Most Christian churches in Europe offer multi-sectorial services that most immigrants find suitable. Being a member of a given congregation provides opportunities for immigrants with leadership skills to lead and others are able to form groups whereby their skills are fully utilized (Shantal et al., 2014). In big cities, there are international congregations where immigrants and most locals interact and this provides opportunities for service provision and the creation of positions that can offer prestige. By being a member of the international congregation, immigrants are connected to a large part of the native community where they get access to job advertisements or recruitments. Immigrants are mainly informed of such opportunities through religious interactions. Such interactions have even helped immigrants to identify suitable areas of living in and the best schools to learn in (Shantal et al., 2014). Since religion acts as a web of connections in different sectors, it provides an interaction-friendly environment for the exchange of ideas and this helps in facilitating the process of social integration (Hirschman 2004:1225).

In most hosting societies, it is not always given that religion facilitates the process of social integration of the immigrant. There exist cases where religion becomes a hindrance to social integration, especially in cases where the religion of the immigrant and the religiosity of the host society do not match (Foner and Alba, 2008). The Christian church in Europe operates on its own unique guidelines that are not similar to the operational guidelines in the immigrant's countries of origin. Therefore, in some instances, far from religion being seen as a facilitating factor for immigrant integration, it's instead projected as a hindrance to social integration.

Many scholarly works like Adams et al., (2007) have pointed to race as the most influential aspect of social integration into European society. With most of the European population comprising people of the white race, there is almost an obvious difficulty for people of different races to integrate into society. Christian immigrants from the global south that live in Europe today are mostly if not all of black and mixed race (Raento et al., 2002). Putting their religion aside, it is evident that their social integration into

European society has been faced with barriers because of the perceptions held against the minority race. These perceptions do not only concern the culture of the minority race but go as well into generalizing the religious traditions of the immigrants (Raento et al., 2002). Any attempt to introduce the religious practices of the immigrants is often regarded as posing competition and a contradiction to the hosts' religious institutions and religious practices.

3. Experiences of religious minorities in Europe

Decisions to migrate are accompanied by expectations of improving the status of life through obtaining a better education or by getting better employment opportunities (De Jong, 2000). Migrants from developing countries especially African countries encompass a lot of expectations from a single migration process. Ranging from better educational opportunities to employment, immigrants look further to immigration to help in relieving political pressures, poor economic status and weak social systems (McKenzie et al., 2013). This shows that despite it being viewed as a voluntary decision, migration in a sense is pushed by desires of life such as hopes for a better life in a foreign country than it is at home (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009).

Cases of migration being a salvage for a low life seems to be a trend for people coming from low-income earning families (Delavande et al., 2011). With such kinds of individuals, migration serves as an escape route that leads away from poverty to economic stability. The increasing use of technology has contributed to more cases of migration since now travelling has become easy and people can obtain information concerning a country on the internet (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). When individuals identify opportunities in a place they compare and if they find life is promising in those places then a migration decision is made.

This study reveals to a great extent that immigrant religiosity maintains even after arrival in a foreign land. The immigrants who were religious from their home countries remained religious even after settling in Europe and they attended religious services in Christian congregations. In some cases, the immigrants expressed more interest in religion in the host society than they were in their home countries. This is supported by the fact that religion is one of the social institutions that provide a connection between fellow immigrants and natives of the host country (Koopmans, 2013).

Accordingly, religion is both individual and social (Crul & Schneider, 2010). Settling in a foreign land throws the immigrant into a social crisis. The apparent cultural differences make them feel excluded and completely bound to societal norms and morals of the new society (Faaborq et al., 2010). Since they cannot jump in that direction immediately, immigrants have often resorted to religion to develop social identity and to feel involved in society (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013). The desire for institutional attachment has also been a contributing factor to immigrants' involvement in religious institutions like churches (Moskos et al., 2017). Given that they cannot identify

themselves based on their ethnicity when in a foreign land, the question of “who am I” is best addressed within the channels of religion (Christou & King, 2010).

It can be concluded that religion plays a great part in the integration of immigrants since it forms a primary social identity for immigrants in a foreign land. A similar finding has been observed in another study (Omenyo, 2011). This is more common, especially for migrants coming from developing countries like African countries where culture and ethnicity precede religion and identity through the tribe, not even nationality (Koopmans, 2013). When these immigrants arrive in Europe, a nationalistic society they get thrown into an identity crisis because they cannot identify themselves by their tribes which are unknown (Délano, 2014). The only chance to connect remains and lies in religion. Religion, therefore, connects most of them to fellow immigrants and as well natives.

In true essence, many immigrants have found refuge in Christian communities in that they find a place where they connect to other people. Hence, it can be concluded that the inclination to religion by immigrants upon arrival in a foreign land is actually a response to developing a social connection between them and the natives of their host society and as well it helps them to develop a social identity (Moskos et al., 2017). Immigrants when in a foreign land have exhibited the capacity for strong religious beliefs and their religiosity has been an anchor for basing a meaning of life and as well developing an identity (Kastoryano, 2004). This can be understood by the underlying fact that those immigrants tend to interact in most cases with the people they think have similar religious views as them because in such a context most things are understood in common. This, however, does not indicate that in so doing they are connected to the host society but rather it can also mean that they isolate themselves.

The role of the religious community would thus be instrumental to themselves and not that it can also help in the integration process. While the expression of religious traits and the apparent religiosity of the immigrants can be helpful in finding life meaning as well as developing an identity, it can as well bring frustration since the host society does not see religion the same way as the immigrants. Religious values according to the immigrants have shared values of an (ethnic) group which manifests in religious beliefs although this might as well block them from being open to integration as they will finally exclude themselves from others who are not of the same religion.

4. Conclusion

Religion, as revealed in this study, plays a major role in how immigrants integrate into their new homes. Exploring the experiences of religious minority groups, the study endeavoured to give a clear picture of immigrants on how they find their situation while becoming socially included in European society. As illustrated earlier in this study, the study of religion and migration from a sociological perspective has not been greatly done and this explains the limited literature available for reference. However, in studies that have managed to capture an aspect of religion in migration processes shows that the

religion of an individual influences a lot of decision across the entire process of migration. Out of these findings, it is clearly reflected that little or no known studies have focused on religious minorities, especially from the global south in Europe.

Major findings from this study revealed that for the process of social integration to occur immigrants need to first connect with fellow immigrants so as to get an understanding of the host society's social structure from the perspective of an immigrant. This means that upon arrival immigrants relied on fellow immigrants in order to understand the host society's social sphere. In Europe, immigrants even have religious congregations mostly attended by immigrants that conduct religious services mainly in English. Such structures provide an opportunity to orientate new arrivals into the European religious system. This also stresses the importance of support offered by immigrants to the new arrivals of immigrants as being paramount for the settlement of immigrants in Europe.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declared there is no conflict of interest.

About the Author

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