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Abstract

Religion has been highlighted majorly in many scholarly works of sociologists as a key component of social integration. As people migrate from their countries of origin to different countries, they are often faced with difficulties of adapting into the new host society. As much as a lot of emphasis has been put on religion to be a positive influence in the process of social integration, it is not always the case. This article sought to point out the role of religion in social integration of protestant Christian immigrants in Finland as both a facilitator for social integration and a hindrance to social integration with focus on the experiences of East African Protestant Christian immigrants. Religious beliefs of the immigrants from respective countries of origin and the religiosity of the Finnish society serve as a foundation for the immigrant's settlement and integration into the host society. This study described the process of social integration in a two dimensional approach whereby the first approach focused on the positive role of religion in immigrants integration and secondly the hindrance of religion in social integration. The study found out that religion is a major link in social integration and that it can facilitate social integration and as well hinder social integration, depending on the position it occupies within a host society. Such findings go a way to provide explanations as to why societies are different and why it is easy for religious immigrants to settle in certain societies than others.

Keywords: *Lutheran Christianity, Immigration, Social Integration*

Introduction

Sociology as a discipline has ever analyzed the consequences of religion in the lives of individual persons in various sociological contexts (Gul & Chhachhar, 2014; Razaque, Singutt & Wanda, 2014). Every human being possesses almost inherent characteristics that identify them to a given community. While some characteristics are passed on from generation to generation, some are learnt and are subject to change (Mina & Kamal, 2012; Mustafa & Tahir, 2012). Some cultural traditions have been recorded to be abandoned because they have either been overtaken by time or their relevance does not stand up to the current trends in that given community. Amongst the many aspects of life that identifies an individual person's religion is the long lasting tradition and one that is rarely abandoned even when that individual moves out of the initial place of practice (Naaman, 2015). Scholars like Durkheim (1915) and Emile (1963) are cited to have been among the first to point out the sociological ramifications of religion towards the overall wellbeing of an individual in any given society.

The role of religion has been majorly highlighted as a contributory factor to the wellbeing of individuals especially in the current era when there is a surge in international migration. As a result to increased migration, people have moved more from different parts of the world to other parts (Newman & Graham, 2018). Religion and religious beliefs have also been diversified that today in the world there exists thousands of deities affiliated to different people. Europe and North America are the leading immigrant destinations with most of the immigrants migrating for 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 & 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 & Phalet, 2012). Immigrants in their new homes have created a tendency of freely interacting with the 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).

Finland as a country has been on the receivership of immigrants for a long time, with an increase seen as from 1980 as the country started gaining economic prowess (Forsander, 2002). The reason for settling in Finland by most immigrants has been search for employment and education but lately the country is experiencing increase in numbers of refugees and asylum seekers (Koivukangas, 2003). Although the dominant religion of Finland is Christian with the Lutheran Church of Finland being the state Church, it can be argued that the contemporary population of Finland is more diverse than earlier (Martikainen, 2005). Though in minority, today we have other religions such as Islam represented in Finland. On the side of Christianity, other denominations like the Roman Catholic, Orthodox Church, and other protestant churches have also gained access to the Finnish soil. Immigrants of Lutheran origin also travel to Finland and

most of them have been influenced by the dominance of the Lutheran church in Finland (Pohjanpaa & Nieminen, 2003).

Based on the respective history of immigration, this study focused on analyzing the effects of religion in the process of social integration of Protestant Christians immigration of East African origin in Finland. Although it is recorded that most of the immigrants in this category are mainly affiliated to the Lutheran church which is dominant in Finland, there still exists challenges in social integration since the contemporary Finnish society is not largely religious (Kaariainen, 2009). This study draws attention to both the positive and negative influence of religion in the process of social integration of east African protestant Christian immigrants into the Finnish society.

Finnish religious landscape

Christianity in Finland dates back to as long as the 9th century when it was introduced by immigrants from other countries, mainly the neighboring Scandinavian countries. Scholars such as Legel and Tracy (2006) notes that a monk of German origin by the name Ansgar arrived in Denmark in 826 AD and started a mission work of spreading Christianity and preaching to the local people. Due to connections and networks, in 830 AD, the monk entered Sweden and continued his preaching there, gaining numbers of followers. The then Sweden was secular and most Swedes were unwilling to accept the monks in what they considered as an invasion into their traditions and as a result most of the monks were persecuted in Sweden. Due to the hostility, the penetration of German mission in the Scandinavia declined and they lost their grip when Ansgar died in 865 AD (Ridderstad, 2007).

At the beginning of the eleventh century, more Christian groups arrived in the Scandinavia and Christianity began to establish, composed of more strong groups rather than individuals. Sweden was the first country to be converted, with its first Christian King being Olof Skotkonung (Ridderstad, 2007). The King was converted and baptized in 1008. Later on in 1150 the entire Sweden was taken over by Christianity and it's through there that other countries like Finland were reached (Ridderstad, 2007).

In Finland, the Swedes that migrated into the Finnish coastal area introduced a strong and unified form of Christianity. Most of the Finnish people were pagan and were not willing to convert to Christianity but the influence of the Swedish King led them into accepting it, with using force at some point (Lind, 2005). Roman Catholicism was dominant because of the Bishop of Uppsala who was said to have come from England, a predominantly Catholic country by then. Christianity continued increasing, recording a number of 130 churches in Finland by the end of the middle ages (Ridderstad, 2007). The increase was facilitated by the power and wealth of the Catholic Church worldwide. Roman Catholic continued to be the main church of Finland until 1520 when the Swedish state with Finland as a part of it departed from the tradition and turned to Lutheran which was as a result of reformation in the Scandinavia (Ridderstad, 2007).

The contemporary Finland is dominantly Lutheran, with the estimated percentage of Lutherans being 68.7% of the total Finnish population (Kaarianen, 2011). However, more recently there has been a drastic change in the Finnish religious landscape due to the improved immigration status with Finland receiving more immigrants from all over the world than ever before (Koivukangas,

2003). Due to the surge in immigration, Finland has become progressively multi-religious. There has been therefore a challenge in the process of religious regulation, affecting the both the natives and the immigrants (Kaarianen, 2009).

Religion and Immigrant settlement

In today's social sciences literature it's affirmed remarkably that religion plays a positive role in the settlement of immigrants in a new society (Baloch et al., 2014). The transition from being a native in their countries of origin to being an immigrant is often an arduous task considering the numerous differences between the country of origin and the host community. In east Africa, where these immigrants have originated from exists a lot of cultural practices and traditions that will most definitely seem alien in the eyes of the Finnish natives (Naaman, 2015). As a result, the only social bridge between the immigrants and the host society seems to be mainly religion. Generally, the importance of religion in meeting the immediate social needs of immigrants cannot be undervalued.

In this section, I will firstly analyze the positive influence of religion in the process of social integration of immigrants into the Finnish society and then secondly deal with the difficulties faced and the obstacles that make religion a social problem. With such a dynamic religious landscape and the progressively varying religiosity of the Finnish people, it's almost highly likely that religion will play more than one role in the process of social integration (Kaariainen, 2009). There is a possibility that it aids positively, but then again one cannot rule out the possibility that in other circumstances religion becomes a hindrance to social integration.

Religion as a refuge

The first experience of immigrants in a new land is the feeling of loneliness and the obvious culture shock. Immigrants feel disconnected with the new community and often lack the 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, 2004). What most Protestant Christian immigrants from East Africa mostly perceive of Finland is an enclosed system that is segregated and does not encourage interaction (Kaariainen, 2009).

Unlike in Finland, the three East African countries (Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania) are highly populated and in day to day basis there is almost some unavoidable interaction of people. To harmonize these differences, religion has been a refuge for immigrants by creating a membership and making the immigrants feel welcome and belonging to the community (Hirschman, 2004:1228).

The Lutheran church has set congregations in major cities inhabited by immigrants like Helsinki where immigrants can join and be part of the local Lutheran community. The interaction between the immigrants and the locals creates a mental balance and helps immigrants to learn quickly about the Finnish culture and the societal expectations (Henderson, 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) 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 and by offering refuge.

Most of the East African protestant Christian immigrants in Finland 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 respectability of the immigrants since it provides a platform for recognition. Most Lutheran churches in Finland 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 other are able to form group whereby their skills are fully utilized (Shantal & Halttunen, 2014; Leena & Pekka, 2014). In Helsinki, there are international Lutheran congregations where immigrants and most locals interact and this provides opportunities for service provision and the creation of positions that can offer prestige.

Another way in which religion can be seen as a refuge is in the socioeconomic life of immigrants. By being a member of the Lutheran church, immigrants are connected to a large part of the native community where they get access to job advertisements or recruitments¹. In Finland, 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 & Halttunen, 2014). Since religion acts as a web of connections in different sectors, it provides an interaction friendly environment for exchange of ideas and this helps in facilitating the process of social integration (Hirschman, 2004).

Identity creation

One of the reasons of having international Lutheran congregations in Helsinki is because immigrants have failed to reassert aspects of their home culture in other congregations that are deeply entrenched in the Finnish culture (Henderson, 2004). Since some of the ethnic cultures practiced in East Africa cannot be tenable in Finland, immigrants have found away to introduce them through religion. This has in a way reinforced ethnic identities, which is regarded as an effect that has been seen to facilitate social integration. Herberg (1960) argues that because the host society is more willingly accepting religious diversity than ethnic diversity, immigrants therefore resort to religion as means of introducing their ethnic identity.

In the international Lutheran congregation of Finland, formally known as the Luther church where most of the East African Protestant Christian immigrants fellowship, most immigrants have found away to introduce some religious heritages from their country of origin. Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) notes that some of the heritages shared to include worshipping in their own language or enjoying the rituals and music of their native lands creates curiosity within the locals and draws attention which makes such practices gradually acceptable by the host society. But more important is that as the immigrants worship in their native styles, a deep strong sense of ethnic identity is developed.

Integrating into the Finnish society becomes easier with ethnic identity since the locals will be willing to learn interesting aspects of the immigrant ethnic practices (Henderson, 2004). Some

¹ Most of the immigrants have been introduced to job interviews through religious interactions. At the arrival of immigrants in Finland where they are new to the society and lack knowledge of the system of operation, locals have always given help in such situations.

Finns have chosen to attend international congregations where they enjoy choir singing and learning some songs sang in Swahili which is the native language of East Africa². Such interactions have promoted social integration between the Finns and the immigrants. When locals learn about the culture of the immigrants through religion, sensitization is created and policies are developed to favor immigrants' rights (Foley & Hoge, 2007). A continuous cultural interaction between the immigrant and the locals creates an awareness of the differences that exists between the two groups but at the same time facilitates immigrant integration into the Finnish civic and political culture as it becomes easy because they feel part of it (Koivukangas, 2003).

With regard to the cultural differences, some of the traits from immigrants' countries of origin may appear undesirable in the face of the Finnish society but once incorporated in religion they are appreciated by the locals and usually taken as an identity for a given community within a group of immigrants. By getting a chance to express the religious traditions, the immigrants' perception of religion gets vindicated and this boosts their levels of confidence as they rise to penetrate in other aspects of the social sphere (Min & Carl, 1998).

Religion as a hindrance to social integration

In most hosting societies, it is not always given that religion facilitates the process of social integration of the immigrant. There exists 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 & Alba, 2008). The Lutheran church of Finland operates on its own unique guidelines that are not similar to the operational guidelines in the east African countries where the immigrants come from. 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, Michael, Osho & Gbolahan (2007) have pointed to race as the most influential aspect of social integration into the Finnish society. With nearly the entire Finnish population comprising of people of the white race, there is almost an obvious difficulty for people of different races to integrate into Finnish society. Protestant Christian immigrants from east Africa that live in Finland today are mostly if not all of the black race (Raento & Kai, 2002). Putting their religion aside, it is evident that their social integration into the Finnish society has been faced with barriers because of the perceptions held against the black race. These perceptions do not only concern the culture of the black race but go as well into generalizing the religious traditions of the immigrants (Raento & Kai, 2002). Any attempt to introduce the religious practices of the immigrants is often regarded as posing competition and a contradiction to the Finnish religious institutions and religious practices.

In this section this study focuses mainly on the factors that make religion to be viewed as a hindrance to social integration in Finland. Some of the factors concern the natives of Finland and others are about the immigrants. Adaptation into the Finnish society therefore becomes hard for

² The Luther Church in Helsinki conducts religious services in two languages; the native Finnish and English. The English service, mainly attended by immigrants has attracted Finnish locals who want to learn more about immigrant religious traditions through interactions.

protestant Christian immigrants from east Africa because of these underlying factors such ethnic differences that make it stiff for religion to aid in the process of social integration. Attention was drawn to illustrate that some of the factors contributing for religion to be viewed as a hindrance to social integration are mainly cultural perceptions and have nothing to do with governmental policies.

Religious culture of immigrants as threat to Finnish Values

Apart from the East African Protestant Christian immigrants of Lutheran origin in Finland being seen as religious, there are parts of the country where their religious practices are not considered as an identity but rather a threatening force to the Finnish values (Bunikowski, 2016). In such circumstances, much is argued on what aspect of the immigrant religious practice should be allowed into the Finnish Lutheran church. Much of the criticism comes from the difference in the regional views held against religion. The Finnish society as a way of life allows freedom of expression to an extent that is regarded as excess by most of the East African protestant Christian immigrants (Raento & Kai, 2002). For instance, it is barely offensive for a Finnish to question or even criticize religion, something considered as blasphemous on the other side of the East African Protestant immigrants. Such intolerance to dissenting religious views exhibited by the immigrants has led to the development of a negative attitude by the locals towards the immigrants making it hard for their religious stands to be integrated into the Finnish society (Koivukangas, 2003).

Some scholars in Finland like Kaarianen (2009) have argued that the Lutheran church of Finland should not allow the rigid opinions of immigrants that do not offer room for talks and negotiations. Much of the criticism towards the religious practices of the immigrants is focused on the lack of acceptance of differing religious views by the immigrants which makes the locals to treat their religious views with resentment (Kaarianen, 2009). The Lutheran church of Finland is divided into the liberals and the conservatives in which the liberals have accommodated the current changes in the contemporary world like the legalization of the same sex marriage whereas the conservatives don't seem to agree with that (Vainio, 2015). Despite such differences, the two parties still exist amicably, running their respective parishes autonomously. On the other hand, such culture as the same sex marriage is treated with extreme contempt in the East African countries where the immigrants have originated from, with it being referred to as a constitutional crime (Mbote, Sandfort, Waweru, Zapfel & Andrew, 2016). The perception of the East African Protestant immigrants as being religious radicals has therefore been regarded as a threat to the values held by the liberals of the Lutheran church of Finland who feel that if their religious traditions are incorporated into the Finnish Lutheran church they are going to hurt the values of the Finnish locals who believe that same sex marriage should be given equal rights as any other human right.

Another possible problem that relates to the religious views of immigrants has been to be closely along the dress code of church members. Finland being a country of modern civilization, its Lutheran church does not necessarily need to give guidelines on dress codes unlike in East Africa where the Lutheran church, mostly in rural areas does not view the wearing of trousers to church by women as being morally upright (Amunga, 2018). Most of the immigrants from East Africa hold to this religious traditions up to Finland where they still think that some dress code

are immoral for church. Such perceptions have spurred dislike from the Finnish locals who feel that if such traditions are allowed into the Finnish Lutheran church it will curtail their freedom. Sociologists in Finland have argued that the allowance of such radical religious beliefs risks plunging the country into unnecessary divides and needs to be denied access in order to curb religious extremism (Gearon, 2019).

Immigrant religious beliefs as an oppositional identity

The introduction and the acceptance of the east African religious traditions into the Finnish church has been viewed by most Finnish locals as an emergence of a new order that can finally gain influence and reverse the cultural identity of the Finns (Raento & Kai, 2002). Most societies existing in the world today have been seen to possess an inherent penchant for maintaining cultural identities that are highly guarded and passed to other generations. Studies done on minority immigrant groups in Finland have revealed discrimination towards the groups which have led to isolation and difficulties in social integration of the immigrants into the host societies (Cesari, 2004).

The profound religious democracy in Finland has allowed immigrants to introduce their own religious orders and this has raised awareness of the immigrant religious traditions within the Lutheran church of Finland. As much as that is welcome by other Finnish locals, others still believe that integration of the foreign cultural traditions can play a negative role in the socialization of the Finnish young generation by exposing them to “un-Finnish” traditions and hence washing away their authentic cultural identity. Gearon (2019) observes that Finns are reluctant to allow in foreigners into their social sphere because of the fear of cultural clash.

Drawing from that analysis, it seems like the religious traditions of the immigrants are viewed as oppositional identity for some members of the Finnish Lutheran Church. This has led to the rejection of such traditions, greatly affecting the integration of the East African Protestant Christian immigrants that settle in Finland. Such public rejections have brought the immigrant into difficulties of navigating the Finnish socioeconomic sphere, with most of their practices being termed as backward and primitive (Vainio, 2015). It is however not known how much the immigrants have influenced the Finnish church through their religious traditions but at least there exists reports that the religious traditions of the immigrants are considered insignificant and harmless to the Finnish culture at large (Raento & Kai, 2002). Raento and Kai (2002) also note that religious consciousness trails ethnic consciousness in Finland and it's therefore difficulty to gain ground in Finland by basically fronting religion. Finns are more nationalistic and bound together by culture and language than the East African protestant immigrants who besides being Lutherans have different countries of origin and even different ethnic communities within each country that speak in different local dialects. Nonetheless, such open rejections and discriminations on the basis of religious identities may lead to frustrations and in the overall affect the process of social integration of immigrant into the Finnish society.

Conclusion

Many scholars in sociological sciences have written about the influence of religion as factor of social integration, with many citing positive effects of religion. The major argument in this article has been that religion as a factor of social integration can play both sides. Firstly as a

facilitator of social integration of immigrants into the host society and secondly as a hindrance to social integration. It can be concluded that religious similarities between the east African Protestant immigrants in Finland and the Finnish locals, the religious roots of the Lutheran church in Finland and the existence of the Finnish Lutheran missionaries in the East African countries has spurred international migration of the East African protestant Christian immigrants to Finland. Factors such as the dominance of the Lutheran church and the profoundly democratic religious space in Finland can arguably be said to be major reasons for the Finnish society to be more welcoming to immigrant religious traditions hence facilitating social integration (Henderson, 2004).

However, to conclude at that point leaves a lot of questions unanswered as it presupposes of there not existing challenges that face the East African Protestant Christian immigrants that have settled in Finland. There exists in deed challenges of social integration of immigrants and as this study has illustrated some of them are associated with religious perceptions of the immigrants. At the end of it all, it is not known how much religion impacts social integration, both on the negative and positive sides. It is however clear that the Finnish government will continue encouraging religious democracy and harboring of divergent views (Shantal et al., 2014). It's still a debate if the religious perceptions of immigrants facilitate the integration of the immigrants into the Finnish society. It should be expected that immigrant religion in Finland will be treated with most of the factors and patterns that have been explained in this article, but mostly emphasis should be put on the positive influence of religion in the process of social integration because that seems to be a reflection of reality in Finland. Therefore, the analysis and discussions in this study have added a value to the outlining of religion as both a facilitator and a barrier to social integration. Moreover, this study demonstrates the value of assessing effects of religion from all perspectives in sociological contexts.

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