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**RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND EXPERIENCES OF
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FINLAND: AN INTEGRATING OR ALIENATING
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Richard Ondicho Otiso
Email: rondicho@yahoo.com

Abstract

The contemporary Finland is more culturally diverse than previous years thanks to increased international migration. A large number of immigrants entering Finland today are religious in one way or another. This article is a case study of religious beliefs and experiences of protestant Christian immigrants in Finland with the aim of finding out the personal feelings of immigrants towards the Finnish society. A comparative analysis of Protestant Christian immigrants' experiences in both the host country and country of origin was taken as a foundation for determining effects of the immigrants' religious beliefs in Finland. This study takes a cross-cultural perspective in analyzing and evaluating the religious beliefs of immigrants. Even though religion is credited to have an upper hand in facilitating social integration of immigrants into host societies, this study found out that religious beliefs and experiences of protestant Christian immigrants in Finland can be integrating or alienating, depending on the degree of religiosity of the immigrants. An awareness of this observation as discussed in this article goes a long way in providing options to choose from in navigating the common problems faced by Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland.

Keywords: *Immigration, Protestant Christianity, social integration*

Introduction

Religion has become a major component of sociological studies especially when it comes to the social integration of immigrants into new societies (Mckinnon, 2010). Ebaugh and Chafetz (2002) are among the many sociology scholars that have put emphasis on the experience of immigrants when they are in a new society. Within that broader intellectual discourse, religion has been credited to be a major facilitator of social integration (Maliepad & Karen, 2012). When immigrants arrive in host societies, they face difficulties in settlement and their experiences are an ordeal in most cases. Religious ties seems to connect religious immigrants with religious locals, but still even in that case differences in immigrants' religious beliefs can become a hindrance to social integration (Wendy & Elaine, 2007). In that regard, immigrants are left stunned on what to do in the face of that settlement difficulty. On one hand, expressing their religious beliefs can result in isolating them from the locals and on the other hand religion seems to be the only available social link that connects them to the host society. In that dilemma, this study positions itself to ask if religious beliefs of immigrants results in social integration or alienation.

The individual lives of immigrants are subject to changes in order to fit into new societies but more often the process of fitting into that new society is faced with a mix up of societal values and individual perceptions that creates differences in human lives (Pamela, 2003). In the more globalizing world, we are obliged to understand major cultural and religious practices common to humanity (Massey & Higgins, 2011). The far people live apart the more diverse their cultures are, and this explains why there are differences in religious practices even within the same religious denominations. Such differences are the source of barriers that immigrants have to overcome when they arrive in new societies (Yang, F. & Ebaugh, H. 2001). The experience of overcoming the obstacles can be either integrating or alienating for immigrants, in regard to the religiosity of the natives in the host society (Broup & Allin, 2011).

The best possible explanation for an alienating experience is probably because of the differences in the religiosity of the host society and the society of origin. Similarly, a good experience of integration can be associated with similarity in the immigrants' and the natives' religious beliefs (Garcia & Shoshan, 2012). But as it stands in most host societies, there are so many differences and a lot of changes in the religious landscape over time (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001). Today's religious beliefs in a given society are not same as they were a decade ago or what they could be a decade to come. Many of the changes happen at an individual level, within one's own life and some are a gradual societal evolution (Threlfall, 2003). It's this increasingly changing religious landscape that creates differences in religious beliefs of people in different societies. Then how exactly are these changes affecting the social integration of immigrants into new societies?

Finland is considered as one of the most religious countries in the Scandinavian region (Legel & Tracy, 2006). Most immigrants coming to the country are largely of the Christian religion with a few other being Muslim and other religions (Annuka, 2015). It is no doubt that religion is the biggest influence of migration in the contemporary international migration patterns. As a country, Finland is dominated by the Lutheran church of Finland, which is also a state church (Balabeykina & Martynov, (2015). There also exist other denominations like the Orthodox Church, and other

minor Christian Churches (Kotiranta, 2010). Social integration of immigrants into the Finnish society is influenced by religion in cases where the immigrant is religious. Religious experiences of the immigrants are built from time to time; starting right from the time the immigrants arrive in Finland and begin their quest to satisfy their sociological needs (Lind, 2005). Most immigrants arriving in Finland consider religion as a means through which they are going to connect with the natives (Ondicho, 2020).

Oddly enough, despite the contemporary Finland being largely Christian statistically, a majority of the Finnish natives do not take religious matters serious (Koivukangas, 2003). Most of the Finns that profess a religion do so without necessarily taking it as a sociological identity (Kaariainen, 2009). This means that some can be Lutheran without necessarily affiliated to any religious institution or even rarely attends a local religious congregation. Historical studies of religion in Finland show this trend and have illustrated clearly the role religion plays in the integration of immigrants into the host society (Ridderstad, 2007). Richard Ondicho (2020) articulates that religion is part of becoming a member of the Finnish society, with religious institutions providing the primary level of association between immigrants and natives. When immigrants are affiliated to a certain religion they develop a sense of belongingness and in return it helps in social integration.

It's considerable to also note that because of the salient role that religion plays in social integration, the religiosity of immigrants tend to increase when they arrive in host countries (Henderson, 2004). This could be based on reasons that immigrants experience cultural variations and develop feelings of loneliness as this culture of the host society alienates them. Immigration has therefore been referred to as a theologizing experience as most immigrants express religious affiliations when they arrive in new countries (Massey & Higgins, 2011). Scholars like Hirschman (2004) postulated that religion is essential for immigrants because in the face of the new life orders in a new world, religion offers refuge, resources and respect. In the process of social integration, religion has also been seen as a source of social capital (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

This study focused on the collective experiences of the Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland. Emphasis was put to inquire if the Finnish society provides conditions necessary for religious immigrants to integrate. Religious views of the immigrants are analyzed, both in the countries of origin and when they arrive in Finland as their host country. The Finnish religious landscape is also taken into consideration and an evaluation is made to check out if the Finnish religious perceptions are compatible with the immigrants' perceptions of religion. The apparent existing religious differences between Protestant Christian immigrants and the Finnish locals shape the experiences of immigrants.

Religious perceptions of Immigrants Versus Natives

Religious perceptions and affiliation of immigrants remain relatively the same and they never seem to be affected by migration (Henderson, 2004). However, it has been considerably noted that the degree of religiosity of immigrants increases when they enter a new land (Foner & Alba, 2008). Similarly, as the duration of stay increases, the religious perceptions and affiliation of immigrants are susceptible to change especially due to interactions that are greatly influenced by the culture of the natives (Newman & Graham, 2018). In Finland, most immigrants tend to stick to their

religious practices and affiliation, with Protestant Christians identifying their specific denominations where they attend church services. Inside those congregations, immigrants who still seem dissatisfied with the process of running religious services or activities turn to congregate together in immigrant based congregations where their religious traditions can be practiced (Ondicho, 2020).

On the other hand, Finnish natives tend to consider religion as secondary in preference to nationalistic identity, keeping them a distance from immigrants (Balabeykina & Martynov, 2015). The religiosity of the Finnish population increases as the age advances. The young population does not hold to religious views or perceptions as much as the old population (Annuka, 2015). That trend holds in most parts of the country but varies significantly between urban areas and rural areas. In rural areas a good number of youths belong to a religious denomination as opposed to urban areas where the youths do not necessarily associate them with any religion (Bunikowski, 2009). This explains why the position of religion in Finland is different in urban areas and rural areas. Most immigrants coming to Finland settle in urban areas, with very few residing in rural areas and these differences in the religious perceptions of natives in urban and rural areas strike them hard, giving them choices between rural areas and urban areas (Raento & Husso, 2002).

Most immigrants arriving in Finland belong to the same religious affiliations with their family members (Kaariainen, 2009). A Protestant Christian arriving in Finland sticks to the same religious denomination together with his or her family that is spouse and children. Immigrants have strong beliefs in association with their religions and religious traditions. Most Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland think that differences in religious affiliations within a family can result to a split in the foundations that hold the family together (Anne, 2004). Children are brought up in the religion of parents and they maintain similar religious perceptions until adulthood. Even in adulthood, there still exist little reports of immigrants converting away from the religious denominations of their parents (Anne, 2004). In Finland, cases of families having different religious perception are common (Shantal, Leena & Pekka, 2014). Religious freedom in Finland makes it possible for anyone to belong to any religion without disapproving the faith of the other person. This makes it possible for families to exist where parents can belong to the Lutheran Church and children to the Orthodox Church (Kotiranta, 2010). Such differences do not threaten the cohesiveness of families since religion in Finland is not an unavoidable sociological circumstance.

As illustrated earlier in this study, Protestant Christian immigrants arriving in Finland tend to associate themselves at first with natives professing similar religious faith. Most of them, especially in larger cosmopolitan areas like the Uusimaa region integrate quickly because there exists numerous religious structures in this region from which they have a variety to choose from (Ondicho, 2020). However, this only works effectively in integrating with other immigrants who have settled earlier because the difference in the religiosity of Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland and the Finnish natives even within the same religious denomination makes it difficult for social integration to take place (Koivukangas, 2003). A major population of immigrants relies on religion to develop links into the Finnish society, and this explains why all Protestant Christian immigrants arriving in Finland maintains their religious perceptions and affiliations (Anne, 2004).

Mostly with immigrants, their claim in religions remains true to their identity as being religious provides social security. Conversely, despite Finland being statistically regarded as a highly religious country, the contemporary Finnish society is progressively becoming secular in nature (Kotiranta, 2010). There are a number of Finnish natives that are not affiliated to any religion making it almost inaccessible to the religious sphere where immigrants are majorly comprised of (Bunikowski, 2009).

Although the non-religious natives can easily interact with religious natives, it's not easy for them to socially integrate with immigrants who have given religion a priority in their lives (Bunikowski, 2009). The representation of non-religious natives in Finland is low in numeric as Finland's population is majorly comprised of people who at least profess a religion (Kotiranta, 2010). Ondicho (2020) finds it hard to distinguish non-religious Finns from religious ones because Finns are bound together more strongly by language and culture than religion. In such situations where language and culture precedes religion, Protestant Christian immigrants who originate from different ethnic backgrounds with different languages and dialects experience alienation, even when they tend to express religious perceptions similar to natives (Raento & Husso, 2002). Therefore, not only will the immigrants' religious perceptions fail to facilitate the process of social integration, they will also not harmonize with the religious views of the Finnish immigrants.

Quite clearly, the prevailing religious preferences in Finland are different from the religious preferences of immigrants (Ondicho, 2020). There exists a dissimilarity index in terms of religious expression and application. Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland are both theoretical and practical with religion (Ondicho, 2020). It's observed that the Protestant Christian immigrants attend church service regularly and commit to prayer as a solution to most of their problems. Most of them have weekday sessions where they meet in churches and encourage each other through reading the bible and praying (Koivukangas, 2003). On the other hand, Finnish natives are majorly theoretical with religion with a few of the religious ones committing to religion publicly (Annuka, 2015). Most of them attend church services on Sunday occasionally and seem to face their daily problems from a different perspective other than a religious one.

Immigrants' religious perceptions are distributed differently according to the place of origin. Since most of the Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland come from countries where culture and traditions are still held in high regard like East Africa for instance, their religiosity might vary in regard to their societal value of religion (Balabeykina, 2015). These differences break down adherents of different religious denominations in the lines of region and country (Massey & Higgins, 2011). Harmonizing these varieties of religious beliefs amongst the Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland becomes an arduous task. Never to end there, it becomes even harder for the immigrants to align their religious perception with the natives' ones (Garcia & Shoshan, 2012). Finnish natives' religious perceptions are not mainly determined by area of residence (Kotiranta, 2010). The religious pattern in Finland is irregular with people having individual reasons for professing a certain religious faith as opposed to immigrants' countries of origin whereby a collective understanding of religious beliefs and practices comes as a reason for a group of a people in a community to belief in religion (Ondicho, 2020).

Based on this analysis, it can be argued that there exist differences between the religious perceptions of Protestant Christian immigrants and the Finnish natives. Obviously, in adapting to Finnish society, immigrants have to readjust their religious beliefs, sometimes some even ending up losing their original religious beliefs to accommodate what the new society considers as “normal” as opposed to what they have believed in from their home countries. In cases of extreme religious behaviors that involve specific cultural traditions, the experience becomes alienating from the Finnish society. Likewise, in circumstances where the religious practices of immigrants match with those of natives, social integration become easy, enabling immigrants to interact freely with the natives. The religiosity of Protestant immigrants in Finland differ from that of the natives, but since Finland encourages religious democracy the difference in the religiosity has not been seen to affect social integration (Bunikowski, 2009). Religion is credited greatly as one of the facilitators of social integration of immigrants into the Finnish society.

Religious practices of Protestant Christian immigrants in their countries of origin

Settling in countries like Finland where the Protestantism is dominant, Protestant Christian immigrants don't need to bridge a big religious divide. The only barrier that needs to be overcome is the balance of the degree of religiosity and probably the abandonment of some extreme religious traditions by the immigrants (Raento & Husso, 2002). The difference in the degree of religiosity between the Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland and the Finnish natives depends not only on regional and cultural differences but also on the intensity of devotion and the commitment to religious beliefs (Gearon, 2019). The protestant Christian immigrants are devout believers and faithful adherents of religious traditions that were raised in. Conversely, Finnish natives are secularized and only profess nominal adherence to the religion they were raised in (Kotiranta, 2010). Given all this, it is therefore important to bring into consideration the religiosity of the immigrants in their home country.

The dependency on religion for social problem solving is highly regarded by immigrants as a sign of devotional behavior already developed by immigrants while in their countries of origin. This tendency seems to follow the immigrants even into the new land as it is already part of their daily lives (Foner & Alba, 2008). Most Protestant denominations like the Lutheran Church that comprise of most Protestants in Finland allow a certain degree of accommodation of traditional views into religion depending on the country of origin (Ondicho, 2020). Like in most Protestant denominations in East Africa, the wearing of trouser by women to church is not considered ethical, a view that is disputed by Finnish Christian scholars as being traditional rather than of Christian value (Amunga & Noel, 2018). The practices of such traditions encompasses the religious perceptions of Protestant immigrants from that region, making it difficult for them to come to peace with the fact that women can wear trousers to church when they settle in Finland (Ondicho, 2020).

Generally, Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland report a higher attendance of church service and involvement in religious activities as opposed to the Finnish natives (Annuka, 2015). A number of the immigrants become more active in religious services in Finland than they were when in their home countries because they yearn for institutional attachment and restoration of the respect they had in their home countries (Anne, 2004). In their home countries, the immigrants'

attendance of church service is mainly for religious purposes but in Finland attending church service becomes necessary for immigrant for both religious services and getting a link to the Finnish society (Balabeykina & Martynov, 2015).

Determinants of religious practices in Finland

Religious practices in Finland do not follow a specific pattern since the contemporary Finland is multi-cultural thanks to immigration (Kotiranta, 2010). It's even difficult to classify the Finnish society as a culturally homogeneous society basically because the Finns' view of religion is individualistic rather than collectivistic (Koivukangas, 2003). However, the existing differences in terms of religious perceptions across the Finnish natives do not make Finns stubborn to widely accepted religious practices within their specific religious denominations (Kaariainen, 2009). The doctrines of their denominations are still recognizable by most Finns but as a matter of practice Finnish locals prefer individualistic beliefs over the collectivistic perceptions when relating sociological issues in their daily lives (Ondicho, 2020).

The existing religious landscape in Finland is a determinant of religious practices of both immigrants and locals but it does not explain the increased degree of religiosity of Protestant Christian immigrants when they arrive in Finland (Shantal et al., 2014). Similarly, even with the irregular pattern of religiosity within the Finnish natives, there is still a considerably high level of religious practice noticed to be common among groups with similar demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status and other background variables (Legel & Tracy, 2006).

The religiosity of Finnish natives might, though in a slight manner, determine the religious practices of immigrants in Finland but reportedly very few immigrants have given up their home country religious perceptions for the foreign ones (Newman & Graham, 2018). The common factors associated with the level of religious practice in Finland lie within employment, level of education, marital status or even age. As much as these factors are associated with differences in religious practices in Finland, they partially account for the religiosity of Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland (Kotiranta, 2010). Immigrants tend to exhibit variations in religiosity along the demographic characterization, employment status, level of education and nationality of origin (Koivukangas, 2003).

Church attendance and commitment to religious services is highly influenced by a good number of factors in Finland. To begin with, most Finns get interested to a given church congregation if the process of conducting religious services goes in line with Finnish traditions (Raento & Husso, 2002). For instance most Finns prefer to conduct religious services in the Finnish language in most parts of Finland. Immigrants on the other hand prefer congregations conducted in English as an international language that connects them across all ethnicities (Ondicho, 2020). The frequency of religious service attendance is also high when the church incorporates other outdoor activities like Christmas gatherings and Easter celebrations away from church. The more protestant congregations organize outdoor religious activities the more the members it has and vice versa (Jouko, 1988).

Attitudes of immigrants towards the Finnish society also influence religious practice in Finland. Protestant Christian immigrants tend to attend church the more if they develop a positive attitude

towards the Finnish natives (Bunikowski, 2009). In congregations where natives are welcoming and conducting religious services in international languages like English immigrants have been observed to regularly attend church services there. Treatment of immigrants in job places and even in educational institutions affects the religiosity of immigrants too (Annuka, 2018). When the immigrants are treated negatively, they develop a negative picture against the Finnish society and are more drawn to isolated immigrant in-groups other than openly interacting with the Finnish natives. Similarly, the nature of work one works in determines a lot if one can get time to engage in religious matters. The longer the Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland work, the less they get time to attend religious services (Jouko, 1988).

Religious practices after immigration: integrating or alienating?

Given the increased arrival of immigrants in Finland in the recent years, it's not possible to determine the religious practices of most Protestant Christian immigrants arriving in Finland. However, Protestant Christian immigrants maintain their religious practices and beliefs that they had acquired in their home countries even after staying for a long time in Finland (Newman & Graham, 2018). The religious practices of Protestant Christian immigrants vary according to the country of origin, with some being extremely radical in their behavior and others even expressing slight dependency to religion (Adams & Osho, 2007). Nevertheless, generally all immigrants attend church and show commitment to religious activities when they first arrive in new countries but their stay affects their religiosity consequently over time (Massey & Higgins, 2011).

The religiosity of the Protestant Christian immigrants and Finnish natives is expected to be different for various reasons. First, the socioeconomic characteristics of immigrants are different from those natives and these characteristics usually translate to religious practices (Foner & Alba, 2008). Immigrants' religious perceptions are not much affected by income level but rather the treatment they receive from the Finnish society is what affects how they carry out their religious practices (Naaman, 2015). Finns with high income rate are not typically religious in the same manner as immigrants of the same category. The expression of religion becomes limited to specific religious occasions on the side of the Finnish native but conversely, Protestant Christian immigrants express religion at least almost daily in their lives (Ondicho, 2020). Such disparities sometimes create occupational barriers between immigrants and Finnish natives in their workplaces.

Expression of religious practices or beliefs in public is tolerated in Finland to some extent. Finns have mixed reactions on how they treat people with extreme religious behavior (Koivukangas, 2003). Jouko (1988) found out in his study that some Finns consider it normal for anyone to adhere to their religious beliefs no matter how extreme they are. However, there are some who think that it is necessary for extreme religious behavior to be controlled. The study concluded that a majority of Finns do not approve of extreme religious behaviors in public but at the same time they never get bothered to do anything. This only leaves the Finns with a personal decision to make, and that's to exclude the group of immigrants that exhibit extreme religious behavior from their social circles (Adams, 2007).

In other cases, Protestant immigrants that are viewed to be "religious friendly" are more welcome into the Finnish society even by Finns that are not religious themselves (Raento & Husso, 2002).

First encounters between Finns and the Protestant Christian immigrants out of the religious circle gets well because natives remain secure in the knowledge that they can trust the immigrants at least for the fact that they are religious and can therefore be morally good (Gearon, 2019). In such cases, the immigrants are given opportunities to prove of their morals without necessarily appealing to their ethnicities. Religion therefore gives a foundation with which Finnish natives base their evaluation in sociologically identifying immigrants. Immigrants that are religious tend to quickly be absorbed into the Finnish society than their non-religious counterparts (Ondicho, 2020).

It can therefore be argued that the religious practices of immigrants in Finland can result in both integrating and alienating experiences (Bunikowski, 2009). In cases of extreme religious behavior, Protestant Christian immigrants experience alienation from the Finnish society. This is because most Finns don't accommodate religious practices beyond certain levels. On the other hand, religion is the best facilitator of social integration between Protestant Christian immigrants and the Finnish locals provided that it is regulated.

Conclusion

A lot of sociological works have been published to outline the role of religion in social integration of immigrants into host societies. It is generally observed and agreed by most sociology scholars that religion has contributed a lot to immigration and to the process of interaction between immigrants and locals. This study focused majorly in evaluating the religious experiences of Protestant Christians in Finland. In the wake of a new era where international migration has increased, people are progressively on the move from one area to another in search for greener pastures. In that process we have an interaction of cultures and religion in the host country where immigrants arrive. The experiences of immigrants in new countries depend on the process involved for them to integrate into the host society. Some cultural differences and religious perceptions can make it hard for the immigrant to settle in host societies. The religion of immigrants has an impact on the host society and overall on the process of social integration. It is therefore worth noting that such an impact leaves the immigrant with either an integrating or alienating experience.

Although immigrants do not change their religious beliefs, this study found out that in order to avoid alienation of immigrants change their religious behaviors. This process becomes strenuous because it involves the learning of the Finnish language, adapting to a strange new culture and the balance between work and other social activities. Even if generally this study leans towards the integrating experiences felt by religious immigrants in Finland, there are still existing cases of alienation of immigrants based on their religiosity. It should be expected that most of the religious experiences of Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland follow the pattern explained in this study.

Recommendations

Finland as a country has in the recent past been receiving visitors who settle for employment, education or even seek asylum. The process of social integration is edged with many aspects of human life to include political, economic, and religion. The political and human aspects have been exploited in the sociological discipline, leaving out religion. Lately, religion has been the biggest

facilitator of social integration but the process is often two sided: the experiences can be either positive or negative. In Finland, religious experiences of immigrants are individualistic but are greatly determined by specific patterns in the social dimension. To understand better, more studies need to be conducted to investigate the most causes of alienation of immigrants in Finland as part of the solution of the challenges faced by immigrants in the process of social integration in Finland. This study has added value to the existing sociological literature, more especially in the understanding of migration, religion and social integration patterns in Finland. Besides, this study provides the necessary framework needed for understanding religion and migration experiences in Finland.

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