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RELIGION, MIGRATION AND HUMAN RELATIONS: ESSAY IN HONOUR OF REV. FR. PROF. B.A.C. OBIEFUNA

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Abstract

Religion, migration, and human relations are so intertwined that they have, throughout human history, influenced human society. While religion deals with man's relationship with the divine, migration concerns man's movement from place to place in search of survival. Human relations deal with man's bid to relate with one another to advance society. The Holy Bible and other religious literature are replete with religious practices, migratory activities and human interactions that have helped to keep the society going. Unfortunately, due to man's inordinate quest for wealth, people have migrated for the wrong reasons whilst using religion to cause disaffection that has negatively affected human relations. It's so worrisome that scholars and other social crusaders are concerned that it has led to mankind's abuse. Religious discrimination, xenophobia and social tensions have negated the original intent of migration that has spurred this discourse. This paper examines the role of religion in fostering human relations among migrants. The causes, effects and strategies for promoting tolerance and coexistence in a diverse world are also discussed. The paper uses documentary data analysis to interpret the data harnessed from secondary sources, which include books, Holy Scriptures, newspapers, magazines, journal articles and Internet resources. It concludes that human relations are possible if migration and religion are practised as righteously as possible for the success of society.

Keywords: religion, migration, human relations, supernatural, divine, society and economy.

Introduction

Religion, migration, and human relations have constantly enhanced human society and positively impacted the lives and experiences of individuals and communities. Religion gives solace, guidance, and a sense of community, while migration and human relations foster cohesion and mutual respect for one another as humanity moves about in search of better conditions of life and equity.

This led Berntsen & Rubin (2021) to state that "religion often plays a vital role in motivating individuals or communities to migrate. Religious persecution, sectarian violence, and ideological differences may force people to flee their home countries, seeking safety and freedom of worship elsewhere" (p.157).

The following passages from the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran might help to illustrate the interplay between religion, migration and human relations:

1. "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and thou shalt be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1-2; KJV).
Here, God asks Abram to migrate to a land where he would be blessed. This migration was for both religious intent and Abram's economic blessing.



2. "And Jacob rose up from Beersheba: and the sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, and their little ones, ... and came into Egypt, Jacob, and all his seed with him" (Genesis 46:5-7; KJV).
3. "There was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech ... And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there" (Ruth 1:1-2; KJV).

The preceding passages tell of migration solely for economic survival.

4. "And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was a strife between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle: ... And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdsmen and thy herdsmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left" (Genesis 13:6-9; KJV).

Abraham said this to maintain human relations and to forestall disaffection between him and his brother.

In the New Testament, the migration of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-5; RSV) was for economic reasons intended to generate more money from taxes. Secondly, the migration of the 3 wise men or Magi from the East to Jerusalem to worship the young Jesus (Matthew 2:1-2; RSV) was, obviously, for a religious rite. On the other hand, Islamic history considers the migration of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) from Makkah to Madinah as a major event.

The Hijra, meaning "migration," is celebrated every New Year 'Al-Hijra, during which all Muslims reflect on the journey that Muhammad made from Mecca to Medina in 622 C.E. to flee persecution and establish the first Islamic state or caliphate.

The Holy Quran in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:218) expressly treats the concept of seeking refuge and protection as well as treating migrants with kindness and compassion. It is simply put "Indeed, those who have believed and those who have emigrated and fought in the cause of Allah--those should expect the mercy of Allah. And Allah is forgiving and merciful".

Records of migration are also found in the African Traditional Religion practised in almost the entire continent. Unwritten laws that guide human relations are strongly emphasized, but due to the religion's non-documentary nature, much might not have been said before.

The preceding passages show the interplay between religion, migration and human relations, forming this paper's basis.

The paper is written in honour of Rev. Fr. Prof. Boniface Chijioke Obiefuna, whose service in the Lord's vineyard has spanned more than forty (40) years and more than twenty-six (26) years in academia. A professor of religion and society, Rev. Fr. Obiefuna, passionately believes that human relations can solve most of man's problems with religion. To him, religion and human relations are dependent on the human person as a vehicle for operation. In his inaugural lecture on Thursday, 25th July 2019, Rev. Fr. Obiefuna enumerated the elements of human relations including: Self-esteem, self-awareness, motivation, group dynamism, communication skills, attitude, conflict management and mutual respect.

He also believes that the essence of human relations is to have positive attitude towards people, situations and events. Rev. Fr. Obiefuna regrets that the religious character of Nigeria has not meaningfully influenced its human populations. Greed has taken over the promises of religion for peace and harmonious relationship in the human society.

This erudite scholar, a member of Nigerian Institute of Public Relations and allied organizations, posits that formal knowledge of the use of human relations skills for effective religious relations is the hope for the healing of the wounds of the contemporary Nigeria that staggers with her image and reputation.

This paper is set to look at the role of religion in migration, the importance of Human Relations in Religious Practices and the Role of religious organizations to promote positive human relations among migrants. Causes and effects of Migration on the Nigerian population will also be emphasized with a view to suggesting strategies for promoting tolerance and coexistence in a diverse world.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in this paper refers to a set of interconnected concepts, theories, and principles that guide the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon being investigated or studied. Creswell (2014) states that a "theoretical framework serves to contextualize the research problem within an established body of knowledge and contributes to the generation of new insights or theories in the field ..." (p.86). Therefore, in this paper, two theories are used: theories of social identity and strain.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is a socio-psychological theory explaining how people's sense of self is influenced by their group membership. This theory has been used to explain a wide range of social phenomena, including intergroup conflict, prejudice and discrimination. It provides a useful framework for understanding how religion can function as a source of social mobilisation, influencing collective action and shaping group dynamics.

Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed this theory in the late 1970's. The social identity theory states that people strive to maintain and enhance their self-esteem by identifying with successful or positively esteemed groups and distancing themselves from those that are negatively perceived.

Tajfel & Turner (1979) assert that:

Individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, profession, religion or hobbies. This categorization leads to the formation of a social identity, which refers to the part of an individual's self-concept that is derived from their membership in a particular group. (p.74).

According to Tajfel & Turner, religion plays a crucial role in the formation of social identities. It provides a sense of belonging and shared values, which contribute to the development of a religious group's distinct social identity (p.76).

In Nigeria, as well as Africa in general, religion has been used to foster intercultural cohesion and to promote harmony amongst different groups. Ndukwe (2000) has observed that "Religion helps to improve social identity when it brings individuals together and they are more likely to engage in collective action, driven by a sense of duty and commitment to their religious community" (p.43).

Group favouritism has been considered as one major strengths of the theory. Here, members of a given group favour only their own flock. Conversely, though, Pascal (2001) believes that “favouritism is anti-social since members only favour their own without considering others thereby denying members of other groups of services no matter the degree of need” (p.112).

This theory helps to explain why migrants need to embrace religion in its unitive function and to maintain human relations that is necessary for their survival in a foreign environment.

The Strain Theory

The strain theory states that pressure derived from social factors, such as lack of income or lack of quality education, drives individuals to commit crime or other anti-social behaviour. The American sociologist Robert K. Merton proposed this theory in 1938.

Rogers (2015) notes that:

The strain theory focused primarily on disadvantaged groups, wherein common aspirations and the inability to achieve one's goals were considered a driving factor behind crime. Individuals whose incomes placed them below the poverty threshold, for example, were unable to realize common, socially accepted ambitions through legal means, and thus they were forced down a path of criminal behavior to achieve their goals (p.127).

Watkins (1992) asserts that:

Robert Merton's Strain Theory stemmed from a fundamental question that he posed on why the rates of deviance were so different among different societies. He thought that there could be deviance where there was a difference between what defined success and the proper means to achieve said goals. He found that the United States was a prime example of high levels of deviance because of the high social value of achieving success, primarily monetary, but there were contradictions to the means for acquiring such success. Employees who have a college education were respected but the robber barons who stole for their money were also admired, which demonstrated that success was viewed as more important than the actual means to achieve success. These contradictions led him to develop the strain theory because of society's high reverence towards achieving “success” (p.114-115).

The major strength of the strain theory is ‘conformity’. That Merton believed some in society still pursue cultural goals through socially approved means has been seen by many scholars to be one of the strengths of the strain theory.

Critics, on the other hand, believe that the strain theory failed to take account of the crimes committed by wealthy businessmen, women, and corrupt politicians. This led Bernard (1984) to argue that “strain theory failed to explain white collar crime, the perpetrators of whom have many opportunities to achieve through legal and legitimate means” (p.355).

The strain theory aptly describes the Nigerian situation as it relates to migration. Today, Nigerians, both old and young, seek to emigrate to different countries of the world in the hope of better living conditions.

Of course, the failure of most Nigerian socio-economic institutions and politicians' apparent impassivity toward the welfare of the populace have led to a noticeable indiscriminate migration spree.

Causes of Migration

It has been established that migration is the movement of a person(s) or a group from one place to another and that many factors lead to it.

Pagallu (2023) states that:

The causes for migration can be classified as economic migration, social migration, political migration and environmental migration. And the factors for migration can be summed up or called summation of various “Push (reason to leave the area)” and “Pull (reasons to move to the area)” factors (p. 7).

Economic Migration

This refers to migration to a more economically viable environment solely to run away from poverty, unemployment, poor education system and other better living conditions. Nwosu, Eteng, Ekpechu, et al. (2022) note that:

Migration is a major aspect of the nature of humans. There is also a significant correlation between poverty and migration as was noted in section 4.8.1 of Nigerian National Migration Policy. Nigeria has abundant and varied resources which portrays it as a rich nation. Most times these resources are mismanaged, pushing the inhabitants to extreme poverty. As the poverty is biting hard and the population is increasing, the people seek for various strategies to survive. One of such strategies is migration, an age-old strategy for human survival (p 79).

Social Migration

This results from such human activities as pilgrimage to sacred lands, search for medical care, and nearness to family and relatives. A good example of this is the emigration of a married woman to meet with her husband in a foreign land.

According to the United Nations Population Fund (cited by Nwosu et al. 2022), the number of international migrants worldwide increased by 33% in 2013. Of this number, 59% of migrants targeted entering developed nations. A significant change in the migration pattern was witnessed in the last half of the century because women constitute[ed] about 50% of these migrants (p. 81).

Political Migration

Political migration, also known as forced migration, is caused by many factors, including conflict and war, persecution, human rights violations and political instability. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020) reports that:

Around two-thirds of all refugees worldwide come from just five countries experiencing conflict, underscoring the impact of armed conflict on displacement. ... Individuals facing persecution due to their beliefs, ethnicity, or political affiliations are often forced to seek refuge in other countries to escape persecution and threats to their safety (p. 17).

Furthermore, The International Organization for Migration (2015) believes that:

Human rights violations, such as torture, arbitrary detention, and infringement of freedom of expression, can also compel individuals to flee their home countries. Political instability, including authoritarian rule, civil unrest and lack of democratic governance, can create an environment of uncertainty and fear, prompting people to seek asylum in more stable and secure nations (p.43).

The Effects of Migration

Having looked at the causes of migration, it is expedient that some of the effects are considered.

1. **Disruption of Religious Practices:** Migration, oftentimes, leads to the disruption of religious practices which in turn brings about the erosion of the cultural and religious identities of the migrants. Vertovec (2020) has observed that "As migrants settle in new lands, they face challenges in preserving their religious traditions, adapting to new religious contexts or assimilating into the dominant religious beliefs of their host countries" (p. 237).
2. **Religious Discrimination and Xenophobia:** One of the major effects of migration on migrants is religious discrimination and xenophobia. The host lands of the migrants oftentimes use religion as a tool to perpetuate oppression and discrimination, especially if the migrants are of different religions. The case of the Rohingya Muslims who were refugees in Bangladesh is still fresh in the minds of many. They suffered much persecution in their land in Myanmar (Burma) and fled as refugees to Bangladesh, and yet they were discriminated against by their host communities. This led Dalacoura (2020) to believe that "The perception of religious differences amongst the migrants and their host communities usually exacerbates existing prejudices, leading to social exclusion, hate crimes, violence, discrimination and even xenophobia" (p. 349).
3. **Brain Drain:** Migration causes brain drain, which adversely affects the economy of any given society. Brain drain, according to Young (2023), is:
A slang term that alludes to the loss of human capital from one area to another or from one industry to another. It usually happens when skilled individuals and professionals leave their home countries (in most cases, developing nations) and go elsewhere to take advantage of better opportunities. It also occurs when individuals leave one area of the workforce and go to another for some of the same reasons (n.p.).

Strategies for Promoting Tolerance and Coexistence

In the face of the diversities of religions and the fate of migrants, this paper asserts that the following strategies might help to promote healthy human relations and forge a better and cohesive human society:

1. **Inter-faith Dialogue:** Practitioners of the different religions in a given community should build bridges amongst themselves by creating a platform for an inter-religious dialogue with a view to finding a common ground for existence. Al-Muktadir (2018) posits that:
By promoting understanding, tolerance and mutual respect between different religious groups and migrants, societies can address the root causes of discrimination, avoid stereotyping, and build inclusive communities. This is essential to foster love for one another, avoid frequent conflict and enhance cooperation (p. 295).
2. **Promotion of Human Rights:** To address the challenges faced by migrants who are discriminated against and to promote positive cohesion, all forms of human rights should be upheld by government policies at all levels. The importance of protecting the rights

and dignity of migrants, as enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), will promote equality, non-discrimination and freedom of religion of all individuals.

3. Religious Education: Religious education should be taught at all levels of education in every community, especially where migrants from various socio-religious environments are present. This does not mean teaching one particular religion to its adherents but rather to the adherents of the other religions so that they will better understand each other's beliefs and practices. Obiefuna and Uzoigwe (2012) agree that:

The study of religion in Nigeria ... [will] inculcate in the students better appreciation and respect of life as a common gift of a Supernatural Reality. Life should not be terminated in the name of religion through which humans, individually and collectively, petition this Reality for its (life) protection. The students would be able to teach this, formally and informally, to the rest of Nigeria's citizenry (p.151).

4. Lastly, Separation of Religion and Politics: Governments in different countries of the world intermeddle with religious affairs, thereby causing disaffection among the practitioners. The Government's preferential actions sometimes tend to polarise the population into some form of religious conflict. Pertinence demands that the Government, at all levels, should maintain a high level of neutrality in issues of religion and divest itself from aligning to or with any religion. This will help to build a society devoid of religious persecution, discrimination and hatred.

Conclusion

As the foregoing pages elucidate, religion plays an important role in the lives of migrants as they seek to survive in a foreign land. It is a source of motivation for migration as people seek to escape religious persecution or to find a more favourable religious environment.

Religious networks, according to Cohen & Schiller (2017), "provide migrants with support, information and can help them to find jobs and accommodation" (p. 73).

On the other hand, Migration leads to the spread of religions to new parts of the world and has shaped the way that people interact with each other across religious boundaries.

Human relations enhances economic survival. The migrants are supported by either their family, friends, acquaintances or neighbours in order to find jobs, accommodation and other essential resources.

Houtum (2020) agrees that:

Religious organizations play a role in fostering positive human relations among the migrants and their host communities. Religious organizations, For example, can provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds to come together and socialize. They can also provide mediation and conflict resolution services to help migrants to resolve their differences peacefully (pp. 18-19).

To facilitate a healthy interplay between religion, migration and human relations, this paper recommends that:

1. Governments of different countries and at all levels should recognise the role of religion in migration and economic survival. They should develop policies that will curb the

high level of migration and/or support religious organisations in their work with migrants.

2. Religious organisations should promote inter-religious dialogue and understanding. This can help to reduce prejudice and discrimination against migrants from other religious groups.
3. Religious organisations should provide support to migrants, both in their home countries and in their destination countries. This support should include job training, education, and social services.
4. Educational institutions, especially where religion and allied subjects are taught, should develop and teach courses that promote religious tolerance, inter-faith dialogue and the need to build a peaceful and cohesive society and;
5. Religious practitioners, especially clerics, need to exhibit a high sense of openness to the members of other religions and inculcate the same to their adherents.

Implementing these recommendations will go a long way to create a more supportive environment for migrants, a peaceful and prosperous society for the host communities and a congenial world for humanity.

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