

78

FAITH IN FLUX: UNRAVELING THE SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY OF YOUTH CAUGHT BETWEEN RELIGION, CULTISM AND THE SEDUCTION OF WEALTH

Chioma Patricia Onuorah

Abstract

As contemporary society undergoes rapid transformations, the youth find themselves at a crossroads, grappling with conflicting ideologies that shape their beliefs. The research examines the impact of established religious institutions, the rise of unconventional cults, and the seductive allure of wealth on the spiritual choices made by the younger demographic. Through a combination of qualitative research approaches, the study sheds light on the nuanced experiences and challenges faced by individuals navigating this multifaceted landscape. "Faith in Flux" investigates into the intricate journey of today's youth as they navigate the complex intersections of faith, spirituality, and societal pressures. This study explores the dynamic relationship between traditional religious practices, emerging cult movements, and the allure of material wealth, unravelling the spiritual odyssey undertaken by a generation caught amidst these diverse influences. The findings reveal the fluid nature of faith in the modern era, acknowledging the inherent tensions between tradition and innovation, community and individuality by unravelling the intricate threads that weave the spiritual fabric of contemporary youth. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving dynamics that shape belief systems in an ever-changing world. It significantly offers insights into the factors influencing religious and spiritual identity formation, paving the way for more inclusive conversations and interventions that address the diverse needs of today's youth in their quest for meaning and purpose.

Introduction

In an era marked by rapid societal transformations and cultural shifts, the spiritual landscape among the youth is undergoing a profound metamorphosis. Traditional religious structures, once steadfast pillars of guidance, find themselves in a dynamic interplay with an array of unconventional belief systems. In the landscape of spirituality, the intersection of religion, cultism, and the allure of material wealth has become a compelling focal point, particularly among the youth (Clark, 2005; Hoover, 2006; Meyer, 2012). This dynamic amalgamation prompts an exploration into the diverse and complex spiritual odyssey undertaken by young individuals as they navigate the intricacies of their belief systems in the contemporary world. The background is rooted in the transformative nature of spirituality, as traditional religious frameworks coexist with emerging alternative movements, presenting a rich tapestry of influences that shape the spiritual fabric of today's youth.

The contemporary era also witnesses a profound evolution in the religious beliefs of the youth, marked by a departure from traditional structures (Tacey, 2004; Hunt, 2013). A notable phenomenon in recent times is the proliferation of cult-like movements captivating the imagination of the youth (Kaplan & Lööw, 2002; Abgrall, 2000). As societal norms shift, so do how young individuals engage and interpret faith. An in-depth analysis of these shifts will lay the groundwork for understanding the fluid nature of faith in the present day. The significance of understanding this spiritual flux lies in its profound implications for

both individuals and society at large. As the younger generation grapples with a myriad of spiritual choices, ranging from steadfast adherence to traditional religions to the allure of unconventional cult-like movements, the repercussions extend beyond personal belief systems.

This transition prompts a crucial exploration into the intricate tapestry of faith, especially as it intersects with the rising influences of cultism and an increasingly alluring pursuit of wealth. This unravels the complexities of choices, shedding light on how they influence not only the spiritual identity of the youth but also the broader societal landscape. Moreover, the exploration of the interplay between spiritual pursuits and the seduction of material wealth is crucial for comprehending the holistic nature of contemporary belief systems. The purpose of this research is multifaceted. Firstly, it aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the spiritual journeys of today's youth, investigating the tensions and synergies between established religious doctrines, emerging cult-like ideologies, and the pursuit of material success. Secondly, the research seeks to offer insights into the motivations and challenges faced by individuals navigating this intricate web of beliefs. By unravelling the spiritual odyssey of the youth, this study aspires to contribute to a nuanced comprehension of the diverse forces shaping contemporary spirituality and its impact on personal fulfilment and societal dynamics. Through these investigations, we endeavour to foster a deeper appreciation for the intricate interplay of faith in a world where the spiritual terrain is in a state of perpetual flux.

Theoretical Framework

In this research study some robust theoretical framework that can elucidate the intricate dynamics of the spiritual odyssey of the youth caught between religion, cultism, and the seduction of wealth were employed. The theories used were a combination of psychological, sociological, and identity formation theories. By delving into these theories, the research aims to construct a conceptual foundation for understanding how young individuals navigate and construct their beliefs in the context of religion.

A. Relevant Theory on Religious Identity Formation

To decipher the complexities of religious identity formation among the youth, theoretical frameworks such as James Fowler's stages of faith development, offer insights into the cognitive and emotional processes that shape one's religious identity (Fowler, 1999). Fowler's Stages of Faith Development provides a structure for understanding the lifelong spiritual growth of individuals (Andrade, 2014). The theologian James W. Fowler developed this model, proposing that spiritual awareness evolves alongside other dimensions of human development. He contends that spirituality is a fundamental facet of human existence, akin to cognition, social behaviour, and motor skills (Huitt & Robbins, 2003). Importantly, Fowler refrains from constraining faith and religion to a singular correct path but rather sees them as avenues for engaging with the universe and constructing meaning in one's life.

B. Analysis of Sociological Perspectives on Cultism

Cultism, as a social phenomenon, demands a sociological lens for comprehensive analysis. Sociological theories such as symbolic interactionism theory provide the frameworks to scrutinize the dynamics of cult-like movements. Symbolic interactionism is a theory at the

micro-level that concentrates on the significance attributed to human interactions, encompassing both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as symbols (Okumdi & Akporaro, 2022). It posits that communication, involving the sharing of meaning through language and symbols, serves as how individuals interpret and understand their social environments. This theory elucidates the social structures, power dynamics, and symbolic interactions inherent in cultism. It also unveils the social forces that contribute to the appeal of cults among the youth.

C. Psychological Frameworks Related to the Pursuit of Wealth

The pursuit of wealth involves intricate psychological processes that go beyond economic considerations. The psychological framework such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs was adopted for concepts like materialism and consumerism. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a theory of psychology explaining human motivation based on the pursuit of different levels of needs (Navy, 2020). The theory states that humans are motivated to fulfil their needs in a hierarchical order. Maslow argues that the most basic needs must be met before people can move "up" to the more advanced needs (Zalenski & Raspa, 2006; Trigg, 2013). This theory unravels the underlying motivations and cognitive processes that drive the youth towards an inordinate quest for wealth. This analysis provides a psychological context for the interplay between material aspirations and spiritual values. The integration of these three theoretical perspectives - psychological, sociological, and identity formation theories contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the forces shaping the spiritual landscape of the contemporary youth.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research approach to investigate the subject. The data for analysis were obtained from secondary sources, including public and private libraries, as well as online materials. Employing both content and analysis, along with descriptive techniques, the study carefully examined data extracted from various sources such as journal papers and edited books, among many others.

Understanding Religion and Its Hold on Youth

A. The Traditional Role of Religion in Society

Religion, throughout history, has played a pivotal role in shaping the moral, cultural, and social fabric of societies worldwide. Traditionally, it has served as a guiding force, providing individuals with a framework for understanding the metaphysical, moral, and existential aspects of life (Marrone, 1999; Gall et al., 2011). In this context, religion has functioned as a cohesive element, fostering a shared sense of identity and values among community members. The traditional role of religion in society encompasses various dimensions. Firstly, it has been a source of moral guidance, offering a set of principles and ethical norms that govern individual behaviour (Israel & Hay, 2006; Ilogu, 1995; Madu, 2004). This moral compass not only delineates right from wrong but also contributes to the establishment of social norms that promote harmony and cohesion. Religion has often served as a source of cultural identity, influencing customs, traditions, and rituals that define a community's unique heritage (Smith, 1993). These cultural elements, deeply intertwined with religious practices, contribute to a sense of belonging and continuity across generations. Moreover, religion has traditionally provided answers to existential questions,

offering explanations for the mysteries of life, death, and the human condition (James et al., 2003; Cottingham, 2005). This metaphysical aspect fosters a sense of purpose and meaning, offering solace in times of uncertainty.

In terms of community, religious institutions have been central in providing a sense of belonging and support. They often serve as hubs for social interaction, communal worship, and the shared celebration of significant life events, fostering a collective identity among believers (Chacko, 2003; Roberto, 2015). For the youth, the traditional role of religion has historically provided a structured framework for moral development, identity formation, and a sense of purpose. The teachings and practices imparted by religious traditions have offered guidance as individuals navigate the complexities of adolescence and young adulthood. However, in the contemporary landscape marked by cultural shifts, technological advancements, and the rise of alternative spiritual movements, the traditional hold of religion on the youth is transforming. Understanding this evolution is essential to grasp the intricate dynamics of faith in flux among the younger generation.

Factors Influencing Youth's Adherence to Religious Practices

There are factors contributing to the complex interplay of influences that determine a youth's adherence to religious practices. These factors include the following:

Upbringing and Parental Influence: One of the primary factors shaping a youth's adherence to religious practices is their upbringing and parental influence. Families often serve as the initial and most impactful environment for the introduction and cultivation of religious beliefs (Whiting & Whiting, 1975; Parke & Buriel, 2008). The values, rituals, and traditions imparted by parents can significantly influence a young person's worldview and their choice to adhere to religious practices. The familial context lays the foundation for religious identity and forms a crucial aspect of an individual's early exposure to faith.

Community and Peer Pressure: The social environment, including community and peer dynamics, plays a pivotal role in influencing a youth's adherence to religious practices. Community expectations and norms, often reinforced by religious institutions, can create a sense of belonging and acceptance. Peer groups, too, exert influence, with individuals tending to align their behaviours and beliefs with those of their immediate social circles (Kandel, 1986). The desire for acceptance and the fear of isolation can be powerful motivators, steering young individuals toward adherence to religious practices within their community.

Desire for Moral Guidance and Purpose: The quest for moral guidance and a sense of purpose is a significant factor motivating youth to adhere to religious practices. In a world marked by moral relativism and existential questioning, religious teachings often provide a clear moral framework and a sense of direction (Shweder, 2012; Twiss, 2018). The desire for a purposeful life, coupled with the moral guidelines offered by religious doctrines, can draw young individuals towards religious practices as a means of navigating the complexities of morality and purpose.

The Impact of Religion on Identity Formation and Personal Values

Religion exerts a profound influence on the identity formation and personal values of individuals, shaping how they perceive themselves, relate to others, and navigate the complexities of life. For the youths, religion plays a pivotal role in influencing how they perceive themselves and their place in the world. The religious narrative, encompassing

beliefs, rituals, and values, contributes to the construction of an individual's identity (Saroglou, 2011). Adherence to religious practices becomes not only a marker of personal conviction but also a crucial component of one's identity (Beyers, 2017, Mitchell, 2017). The impact extends to the formation of personal values, with religious teachings often shaping a person's ethical compass and guiding their decisions and actions. This impact is multifaceted, encompassing psychological, social, and moral dimensions.

Religion plays a role in the construction of personal identity. From an early age, individuals are exposed to religious teachings, rituals, and community practices that contribute to the development of a unique religious identity. This identity becomes a fundamental aspect of how individuals define themselves, influencing their worldview, values, and sense of belonging. Religion often intertwines with cultural and social identities, contributing to a broader sense of community and belonging (Mitchell, 2006). Shared religious practices, traditions, and values create a common thread that binds individuals together (Mabovula, 2011). This communal identity, whether on a local or global scale, becomes a source of connection and solidarity, impacting how individuals perceive their place in the larger social fabric.

Religion provides a moral framework that shapes personal values and ethical principles. Religious teachings often delineate right from wrong, offering guidelines for virtuous conduct and moral decision-making. The moral compass derived from religious beliefs becomes a foundational element influencing personal values, guiding individuals in their interactions, choices, and responses to ethical dilemmas (Barnett & Johnson, 2011). Religion frequently addresses existential questions, offering answers about the purpose and meaning of life (Emmons, 2005; Park, 2005). For many individuals, religious beliefs provide a sense of direction, purpose, and ultimate meaning. This existential aspect influences not only how individuals perceive their purpose but also how they approach challenges and uncertainties, seeking meaning within the context of their religious worldview.

The values propagated by religious doctrines contribute significantly to the formation of personal values. Concepts such as compassion, forgiveness, humility, and charity, often emphasized in religious teachings, become integral components of an individual's value system (Kim, 2017). These values, in turn, influence behaviour, interpersonal relationships, and the ethical choices individuals make in various aspects of their lives (Monroe, 2001; Eccles, 2009). The impact of religion on identity formation and personal values is profound and enduring. It shapes not only how individuals define themselves but also how they engage with the world around them. The interplay between religious beliefs and personal identity contributes to the rich tapestry of human diversity, highlighting the intricate connections between spirituality, individuality, and shared communal values.

The Rise of Cultism: A Threat to Faith

Cultist activities are pervasive and have been observed extensively in various societies worldwide. Cultism is a multifaceted challenge plaguing numerous societies globally (Larr, 2013). Cultism refers to a ritual practice by a group of people whose membership, admission, policy, and initiation formalities, as well as their mode of operations, are done in secret and kept secret, with their activities having negative effects on both members and non-members alike (Ajayi et al., 2010). Ekwunife (2000, p. 5) sees cultism as "a

systematized form of organization with a religious overtone in which members are engaged in concerted hidden activities whose overall ends and results spell doom for the members, the community, and society at large.” The rise of cultism represents a multifaceted threat to faith and societal well-being.

Understanding the characteristics of cults, the vulnerabilities of the youth, the psychological manipulation tactics employed, and the potential dangers of involvement is crucial for safeguarding individuals and communities against the insidious influence of these groups. Vigilance, education, and support systems are essential in countering the allure of cults and protecting the well-being of those who may be at risk of falling prey to their tactics. Cultism is often veiled in secrecy and charisma, presenting a distinctive challenge to established faiths (Anichabe, 2012; Lifton, 2019). Characterized by their insular nature, charismatic leaders, and unconventional beliefs, cults typically exhibit traits such as excessive devotion to a single leader, isolation from mainstream society, and a rigid hierarchical structure (Lalich, 2004). These groups often emerge as alternative spiritual movements, drawing individuals away from mainstream religious practices.

The youth, in their quest for meaning and belonging, are particularly vulnerable to cult recruitment tactics. Cults often target individuals in transitional life phases, such as adolescence and early adulthood, capitalizing on the search for identity and purpose (Kalu, 2001; Singer, 2003; Berger & Ezzy, 2007). The allure of a tight-knit community, charismatic leaders, and promises of exclusive spiritual enlightenment can entice young individuals seeking a sense of belonging and direction. Cults employ sophisticated psychological manipulation techniques to exert control over their members (Kalu, 2001). These tactics include isolation from family and friends, the use of mind-altering practices, and the propagation of an "us versus them" mentality. Charismatic leaders exploit the vulnerabilities of their followers, instilling fear, dependency, and a distorted sense of reality (Anichebe, 2012). Manipulative strategies such as love-bombing, coercive persuasion and information control contribute to the gradual erosion of critical thinking and individual agency.

Involvement in cults poses significant dangers to individuals and society at large. The erosion of personal autonomy, critical thinking, and emotional well-being can lead to long-lasting psychological consequences. Members may find themselves entangled in abusive relationships, facing emotional, physical, or financial exploitation. The severance of ties with mainstream society often isolates cult members, making it challenging to escape the grip of the group. Beyond individual harm, cults can become breeding grounds for extremism and antisocial behaviour (Levine, 1999; Anthony et al., 2013). The indoctrination of radical beliefs and the isolation of members from diverse perspectives contribute to a closed and potentially dangerous subculture. Cults can also serve as conduits for criminal activities, posing a threat to the broader social fabric.

The Seduction of Wealth: Materialism versus Spirituality

This era is characterized by unprecedented connectivity and rapidly evolving societal norms, the pursuit of material success stands as a defining narrative in the lives of the contemporary youth (Obiefuna, 2004). The seduction of wealth transcends geographical boundaries, influencing the dreams and ambitions of young individuals worldwide. This is well identified in this third millennium. According to Obiefuna (2004, p. 44):

This is the dawn of a new age. This is the age of hi-tech sophistications in interpersonal and international relations, commerce, political processes, intellectual development, crime and violence, especially as experienced in terrorism, in religious proliferation resulting in conflicting teaching and rituals and levels of communication turning the whole world into the small village, hence the concept of globalization. It is the age of the handiest MTN, GSM, GLO, Econet, etc It is the age of movies, especially home movies (in the Nigerian sense) of the good, the bad and the ugly. It is the computer age when even human beings must be Y2k compliant if ends must be met. It is the age when one does not belong if one's name does not appear on the internet.

This poses a significant challenge to the spiritual journeys of the youth.

The societal impact of materialism, the compelling attraction of financial success, conflicting values concerning spirituality and the chase for wealth, along with the pervasive influence of social media and popular culture, collectively contribute to an intricate terrain (Schor, 1999; Obiefuna, 2004; Berger, 2020). One of the timeless and complex components of the human experience is the careful balance between material desires and spiritual fulfilment. It captures the constant struggle people have to make their way through a society that frequently prioritizes material achievement above a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Material aspirations revolve around the pursuit of tangible wealth, possessions, and societal status. In a society driven by consumerism and external validation, individuals are often encouraged to chase after material success as a measure of their worth and accomplishment (Kasser, 2016). The allure of financial prosperity, a luxurious lifestyle, and the admiration of others can be powerful motivators. However, the relentless pursuit of material goals without consideration for spiritual fulfilment can lead to a sense of emptiness and disillusionment (Walker, 2013). On the other hand, spiritual fulfilment encompasses the search for meaning, connection, and a deeper understanding of oneself and the universe. This dimension of human experience often involves introspection, mindfulness, and a quest for inner peace (Cottingham, 2005). Spiritual fulfilment is not bound by external markers of success but rather centres around personal growth, compassion, and a sense of purpose beyond the material realm.

In contemporary society, the allure of materialism has become increasingly pervasive, shaping values and aspirations. Materialism, characterized by a strong emphasis on the acquisition of possessions and wealth, exerts a growing influence on societal norms (Obiefuna, 2004; Chan et al., 2006; Dittmar, 2007). The pursuit of wealth can significantly impact the spiritual journey of the youth. It may divert attention from traditional spiritual values, leading individuals to prioritize material accomplishments over inner fulfilment. The pressure to conform to societal expectations of success often equated with affluence can create a conflict within the youth, prompting them to reassess their spiritual priorities in the face of material temptations.

The tension between spirituality and the pursuit of wealth is a central theme in the modern narrative. Individuals may grapple with conflicting values, torn between the desire for spiritual fulfilment and the societal pressure to amass material possessions (Obiefuna, 2004). Striking a balance between spiritual well-being and material success becomes a delicate task, as the seduction of wealth tests the resilience of one's spiritual convictions. Social media and popular culture play a pivotal role in perpetuating materialistic ideals.

Platforms like Instagram and TikTok showcase curated images of opulence, creating a virtual realm where the pursuit of wealth is glorified. Influencers and celebrities often become symbols of success, promoting a lifestyle centred on conspicuous consumption. The constant exposure to these ideals can shape the aspirations of the youth, influencing their perception of success and happiness.

Here, the challenge lies in finding a delicate balance between these two realms. It is essential to acknowledge the importance of material well-being for basic needs and comfortable life, but it is equally crucial to recognize that an exclusive focus on the material can leave a void that spiritual fulfilment seeks to address. Conversely, an excessive emphasis on spirituality without addressing practical, material aspects can lead to neglecting responsibilities and the tangible aspects of life. Striking this balance requires conscious decision-making, self-awareness, and a reevaluation of societal values. It involves questioning the cultural narratives that equate success solely with material achievement and acknowledging the intrinsic value of spiritual well-being. It's about integrating both dimensions into a holistic approach to life, where material success is not pursued at the expense of spiritual growth, and vice versa.

Individuals often find themselves at different points along this spectrum, and the equilibrium may shift throughout life's various stages. Cultivating mindfulness, gratitude, and a sense of purpose can contribute to a more harmonious integration of material and spiritual aspirations. Ultimately, true fulfilment may lie in the recognition that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive but can complement and enrich each other when approached with intention, balance, and a genuine understanding of one's values and priorities. Recognizing these dynamics fosters a more nuanced understanding of the evolving interplay between materialism and spirituality in the modern world.

The Struggle of Youth: Navigating Religious, Cultic, and Materialistic Influences

The youth today find themselves at the crossroads of various influences, contending with internal conflicts and cognitive dissonance. As traditional religious values intersect with the allure of cultic movements and materialistic aspirations, young individuals often grapple with conflicting belief systems. The clash between ingrained religious teachings and the seduction of alternative ideologies or material success creates a turbulent internal landscape (Zúquete, 2017), giving rise to cognitive dissonance - a psychological tension that arises from holding contradictory beliefs or values (Harmon-Jones, 2000). Navigating the intricate web of religious, cultic, and materialistic influences can lead to social isolation for the youth. As they wrestle with their evolving beliefs and values, finding like-minded individuals who share similar convictions becomes a daunting task. The pressure to conform to societal expectations or adhere to specific religious doctrines may estrange them from peers, leaving them feeling isolated in their quest for authenticity and genuine connections.

In response to the challenges posed by conflicting influences, many young individuals embark on a journey of exploration beyond the confines of traditional religious structures. Some delve into alternative spiritual practices, seeking a more personalized and inclusive approach to spirituality. This may involve embracing meditation, mindfulness, or eclectic belief systems that resonate with their evolving worldview. Others, disillusioned by organized religion or captivated by the promises of cultic movements, may be drawn to unconventional paths, risking vulnerability to manipulation in their pursuit of a sense of purpose and belonging. In this landscape of struggle, the youth are confronted with the task

of navigating diverse influences while forging an authentic path that aligns with their evolving beliefs and values. The internal conflicts, social isolation, and quest for alternative spiritual practices underscore the complexity of their journey as they strive to reconcile tradition with modernity, spirituality with materialism, and community with individuality.

The Role of Religious Education and Support Systems

The role of education and support systems is essential in empowering the youth to navigate the multifaceted influences that shape their spiritual journeys. Comprehensive religious education plays a pivotal role in equipping the youth with the tools to navigate the complex interplay of religious, cultic, and materialistic influences. Beyond imparting doctrinal knowledge, such education should foster an understanding of diverse belief systems, encouraging tolerance and respect for differing perspectives. A well-rounded religious education helps young individuals develop critical thinking skills, empowering them to analyze and interpret the world's spiritual landscape. By promoting a nuanced understanding of their own faith and others, education becomes a cornerstone for cultivating open-mindedness and mitigating the potential for radicalization or extreme beliefs.

Creating platforms for open discussions is crucial in enabling the youth to engage in critical thinking about religious, cultic, and materialistic influences. Educational institutions, community centres, and online forums can serve as spaces where young individuals feel encouraged to express their doubts, explore alternative perspectives, and engage in constructive dialogue. Facilitating discussions that encourage critical thinking allows the youth to navigate the complexities of their spiritual journeys while promoting a culture of respect for diverse beliefs. Such platforms also foster a sense of community, reducing the isolation often experienced by those grappling with conflicting influences. Recognizing the challenges faced by the youth in navigating religious, cultic, and materialistic influences, community support networks and counselling services are essential components of a robust support system. These networks can provide a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, seek guidance, and connect with like-minded peers. Professional counselling services, whether within religious institutions or secular organizations, offer psychological support to those experiencing internal conflicts, cognitive dissonance, or social isolation. Such services play a vital role in helping struggling youth navigate the intricate terrain of their evolving beliefs and values.

Finding Balance: Reconciling Personal Faith

Finding balance in reconciling personal faith is a dynamic and ongoing process. It involves navigating conflicting ideologies, developing a personal belief system rooted in individual experiences and values, and embracing the diversity of spiritual exploration. In this journey, individuals cultivate a sense of authenticity, allowing them to navigate the complexities of spirituality with resilience, open-mindedness, and a deep appreciation for the diversity that enriches the tapestry of human beliefs. The possible recommendation /reconciliation tenets are thematically presented below.

The Quest for True Spirituality amidst Conflicting Ideologies: In the quest for true spirituality, individuals often find themselves amidst a landscape of conflicting ideologies, ranging from traditional religious doctrines to alternative spiritual movements and materialistic worldviews. The pursuit of authentic spirituality involves a journey of self-discovery, where individuals seek to reconcile the teachings and practices that resonate with

their inner selves (Harvey, 2013). This quest requires a discerning mind to navigate the diversity of beliefs, separating the genuine pursuit of spiritual truth from dogma and external pressures.

Developing a Personal Belief System based on Individual Experiences and Values: The journey towards finding balance in personal faith entails the development of a unique belief system grounded in individual experiences and values. Beyond adhering to prescribed doctrines, individuals draw on their personal encounters, reflections, and introspections to construct a spiritual framework that aligns with their authentic selves. This personalized belief system is dynamic, evolving with life experiences and reflecting an individual's growth on their spiritual journey. It becomes a source of strength and guidance, providing a foundation for navigating the complexities of faith in a world marked by diverse influences.

Embracing Diversity and Tolerance in Spiritual Exploration: Central to finding balance is the ability to embrace diversity and cultivate tolerance in spiritual exploration. Recognizing that the path to spiritual fulfilment varies for each individual, embracing diverse perspectives becomes essential (Pascual et al., 2017). This involves respecting the beliefs of others, even when they differ from one's own, and fostering an inclusive environment where open dialogue and mutual understanding can thrive. By embracing diversity in spiritual exploration, individuals contribute to a more harmonious and tolerant society, recognizing the richness that different belief systems bring to the collective human experience.

Recommendations

The society can contribute to creating a supportive and empowering environment for youth as they navigate the complex terrain of spirituality, religion, cultism, and the pursuit of wealth by implementing the following recommendations.

1. Religious institutions should prioritize ethical leadership and transparent practices, and engage with youth to provide guidance
2. Educational institutions should incorporate discussions around the intersection of religion, cultism, and wealth into their curricula.
3. Youth outreach programs should be encouraged to offer support, mentorship, and resources to young individuals navigating complex spiritual landscapes.
4. Media literacy campaigns should be promoted to help youth critically assess the influence of media on their spiritual perspectives.
5. Interfaith dialogues should be encouraged for the promote understanding, tolerance, and respect for diverse spiritual paths.
6. Financial literacy programs should be promoted to help youth resist the seduction of wealth as the sole measure of success.
7. Families and communities are encouraged to help youth avoid being drawn into potentially harmful religious or cultic influences.
8. Counseling and mental health resources should be encouraged since they are important for youth navigating spiritual flux.
9. Communities should advocate for legal protections against exploitative practices by cults and unethical religious organizations, and raise awareness about potential risks.
10. Online communities can be a valuable resource for young individuals seeking support.

Conclusion

The intricate tapestry of youth's spiritual journeys reflects a complex interplay of influences, including traditional religious doctrines, alternative spiritual movements, and the allure of materialism. The struggles faced by young individuals involve internal conflicts, cognitive dissonance, and the quest for authenticity amidst conflicting ideologies. The rise of cultism further complicates this landscape, posing a threat to traditional faiths and individual well-being. Understanding the challenges inherent in the evolving spiritual landscapes of the youth is paramount. Comprehensive religious education plays a crucial role in equipping them with the tools to navigate these complexities, fostering critical thinking and tolerance. Open discussions and supportive platforms offer spaces for reflection and dialogue, reducing the sense of isolation often experienced by those grappling with conflicting influences.

Finding balance in personal faith requires a commitment to developing a belief system rooted in individual experiences and values. Embracing diversity and cultivating tolerance in spiritual exploration contribute to a more inclusive society, where individuals can authentically express their beliefs without fear of judgment. In moving forward, religious institutions and society as a whole must extend empathy and understanding to the youth on their spiritual journeys. This involves acknowledging the diversity of paths individuals may take and embracing a culture of open-mindedness. By fostering an environment that encourages authentic exploration and dialogue, religious institutions and society can play a pivotal role in supporting the youth as they navigate the complexities of faith in a rapidly changing world. Through empathy and understanding, we can collectively contribute to the cultivation of resilient, informed, and spiritually fulfilled individuals.

References

- Abgrall, J. M. (2000). *Soul snatchers: The mechanics of cults*. Algora Publishing.
- Ajayi, I. A., Eundayo, H. & Osalusi, F. M. (2010). Menace of cultism in Nigeria tertiary institution: the way out. *Anthropologist* 12(3): 155-160.
- Andrade, A. (2014). Using Fowler's faith development theory in student affairs practice. *College Student Affairs Leadership*, 1(2), 2.
- Anichebe, O. (2012). Cultism in Nigerian Universities: the Challenge of a Nation. In C. Krydtz Ikwuemesi (Ed.) *Astride Memory and Desire: Peoples, Cultures and Development in Nigeria*. Enugu: ABIC. Pp. 223-244.
- Anthony, D., Robbins, T., & Barrie-Anthony, S. (2013). Cult and anticult totalism: reciprocal escalation and violence. In *Millennial Violence* (pp. 211-240). Routledge.
- Barnett, J. E., & Johnson, W. B. (2011). Integrating spirituality and religion into psychotherapy: Persistent dilemmas, ethical issues, and a proposed decision-making process. *Ethics & Behavior*, 21(2), 147-164.
- Berger, A. A. (2020). *Ads, fads, and consumer culture: Advertising's impact on American character and society*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Berger, H., & Ezzy, D. (2007). *Teenage witches: Magical youth and the search for the self*. Rutgers University Press.
- Beyers, J. (2017). Religion and culture: Revisiting a close relative. *HTS: Theological Studies*, 73(1), 1-9.

- Chacko, E. (2003). Ethiopian ethos and the making of ethnic places in the Washington metropolitan area. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 20(2), 21-42.
- Chan, K., Zhang, H., & Wang, I. (2006). Materialism among adolescents in urban China. *Young Consumers*, 7(2), 64-77.
- Clark, L. S. (2005). *From angels to aliens: Teenagers, the media, and the supernatural*. Oxford University Press.
- Cottingham, J. (2005). *The spiritual dimension: Religion, philosophy and human value*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dittmar, H. (2007). The costs of consumer culture and the “cage within”: the impact of the material “good life” and “body perfect” ideals on individuals’ identity and well-being. *Psychological Inquiry*, 18(1), 23-31.
- Eccles, J. (2009). Who am I and what am I going to do with my life? Personal and collective identities as motivators of action. *Educational psychologist*, 44(2), 78-89.
- Ekwunife, A. N. O. (2000). Cultism and the Youth in Nigerian tertiary Institutions (Reflections on wider issues). Nsukka: Afro-Orbis
- Emmons, R. A. (2005). Striving for the sacred: Personal goals, life meaning, and religion. *Journal of social issues*, 61(4), 731-745.
- Fowler, J. W. (1999). *Becoming adult, becoming Christian: Adult development and Christian faith*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Gall, T. L., Malette, J., & Guirguis-Younger, M. (2011). Spirituality and religiousness: A diversity of definitions. *Journal of spirituality in Mental Health*, 13(3), 158-181.
- Harmon-Jones, E. (2000). A cognitive dissonance theory perspective on the role of emotion in the maintenance and change of beliefs and attitudes. *Emotions and beliefs*, 185-211.
- Harvey, R. (2013). *Your Essential Self: The Inner Journey to Authenticity and Spiritual Enlightenment*. Llewellyn Worldwide.
- Hoover, S. M. (2006). *Religion in the media age*. Routledge
- Huitt, W. G., & Robbins, J. L. (2003, October). An introduction to spiritual development. In *11th Annual Conference: Applied Psychology in Education, Mental Health, and Business, Valdosta, GA, October* (Vol. 3).
- Hunt, S. (2013). *Religion and everyday life*. Routledge.
- Ilogu, E. C. (1975). “The problem of Christian ethics among the Igbo of Nigeria” in A. E. Afigbo (ed.) *Ikenga journal of African Studies*. Vol. 3, Nos 1 and 2 January and July. Ibadan: Western Nigeria Printing Corporation.
- Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. Sage.
- James, M., Carrette, J., James, W., & Taylor, E. (2003). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Routledge.
- Kalu, O.U. (2001), *The scourge of the vandals: Nature and control of cults in Nigerian university system*. Enugu: Joen Press.
- Kandel, D. B. (1986). Processes of peer influences in adolescence. In *Development as action in context: Problem behavior and normal youth development* (pp. 203-227). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.
- Kaplan, J. S., & Löw, H. (Eds.). (2002). *The cultic milieu: Oppositional subcultures in an age of globalization*. Rowman Altamira.
- Kasser, T. (2016). Materialistic values and goals. *Annual review of psychology*, 67, 489-514.

- Kim, K. (2017). The power of being vulnerable in Christian soul care: Common humanity and humility. *Journal of religion and health*, 56(1), 355-369.
- Lalich, J. (2004). *Bounded choice: True believers and charismatic cults*. Univ of California Press.
- Larr, F. (2013). *Africa's Diabolical Entrapment: Exploring the Negative Impact of Christianity, Superstition and Witchcraft on Psychological, Structural and Scientific Growth in Black Africa!*. AuthorHouse.
- Levine, S. (1999). Youth in terroristic groups, gangs, and cults: The allure, the animus, and the alienation. *Psychiatric Annals*, 29(6), 342-349.
- Lifton, R. J. (2019). *Losing reality: On cults, cultism, and the mindset of political and religious zealotry*. The New Press.
- Mabovula, N. N. (2011). The erosion of African communal values: A reappraisal of the African Ubuntu philosophy. *Inkanyiso: Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 3(1), 38-47.
- Madu J E (2004) *Honest to African Cultural Heritage*. Onitsha: Coskan Associates.
- Marrone, R. (1999). Dying, mourning, and spirituality: A psychological perspective. *Death studies*, 23(6), 495-519.
- Meyer, B. (2012). Religious and secular, “spiritual” and “physical” in Ghana. In *What matters? Ethnographies of value in a not so secular age* (pp. 86-118). Columbia University Press.
- Mitchell, C. (2006). The religious content of ethnic identities. *Sociology*, 40(6), 1135-1152.
- Mitchell, C. (2017). *Religion, identity and politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of belonging and belief*. Routledge.
- Monroe, K. R. (2001). Morality and a sense of self: The importance of identity and categorization for moral action. *American Journal of Political Science*, 491-507.
- Navy, S. L. (2020). Theory of human motivation—Abraham Maslow. *Science Education in Theory and Practice: An Introductory Guide to Learning Theory*, 17-28.
- Nche, G. C (2019). Cultism in Rivers State: Causes, Faith-Based Organizations’ Role and the Setbacks. *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies*
- Obiefuna, B.A.C. (2004). *The Youth on Fire*. Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick
- Okumdi, M. C., & Akporaro, A. C. (2022). Social Interaction and Social Relations: A Sociological Analysis. *J Sociology Soc Anth*, 13(1-2): 1-16. DOI: 10.31901/24566764.2022/13.1-2.373
- Park, C. L. (2005). Religion as a meaning-making framework in coping with life stress. *Journal of social issues*, 61(4), 707-729.
- Parke, R. D., & Buriel, R. (2008). Socialization in the family: Ethnic and ecological perspectives. *Child and adolescent development: An advanced course*, 95-138.
- Pascual, U., Balvanera, P., Díaz, S., Pataki, G., Roth, E., Stenseke, M., Watson, R.T., Dessane, E.B., Islar, M., Kelemen, E. and Maris, V. & Yagi, N. (2017). Valuing nature’s contributions to people: the IPBES approach. *Current opinion in environmental sustainability*, 26, 7-16.
- Roberto, J. (2015). *Reimagining faith formation for the 21st century*. Lifelong Faith Associates.
- Saroglou, V. (2011). Believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging: The big four religious dimensions and cultural variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(8), 1320-1340.

- Schor, J. (1999). The new politics of consumption. *Boston Review*, 24(3-4), 4-9.
- Shweder, R. A. (2012). Relativism and universalism. *A companion to moral anthropology*, 85-102.
- Singer, M. T. (2003). *Cults in our midst: The continuing fight against their hidden menace*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Smith, A. D. (1993). The ethnic sources of nationalism. *Survival*, 35(1), 48-62.
- Tacey, D. J. (2004). *The spirituality revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality*. Psychology Press.
- Trigg, A. B. (2013). Deriving the Engel curve: Pierre Bourdieu and the social critique of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In *Consuming symbolic goods* (pp. 119-132). Routledge.
- Twiss, S. B. (2018). Four paradigms in teaching comparative religious ethics. In *Explorations in Global Ethics* (pp. 11-33). Routledge.
- Walker, S. (2013). Design and spirituality: Material culture for a wisdom economy. *Design Issues*, 29(3), 89-107.
- Whiting, B. B., & Whiting, J. W. (1975). *Children of six cultures: A psycho-cultural analysis*. Harvard University Press.
- Zalenski, R. J., & Raspa, R. (2006). Maslow's hierarchy of needs: a framework for achieving human potential in hospice. *Journal of palliative medicine*, 9(5), 1120-1127.
- Zúquete, J. P. (2017). *Populism and religion* (pp. 445-466). Oxford: Oxford University Press.