



# IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE: THE NIGERIA EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

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The position of this essay is that the self and strands of existence are oriented in religious essence and impulse and, that these function as the platform for constructing and shaping worldviews. So, identity change in religion affects man and his fundamental being – giving the individual new sense of life meaning, such as enlarging and or shrinking the self against the backdrop of new found belief systems and practices. The belief is that such change has the potency of assuaging the human crisis of meaning and the ambivalent changes in society. Against the backdrop of Nigeria's experience, the paper further identifies the forces of identity and religious change as mainly catalyzed by secularization and modernization indices, migration, psychological fulfillment of the self, doctrinal conflict, social status identity, ethno religious identity and search for other personal motives.

## KEYWORDS

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Identity. Religion. Change. Nigeria. Experience.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Man is not only a mystery unto himself but he is ever confronted with a host of perplexing questions and puzzles. Consequently, he is ever in search of answers. What is the

origin and purpose of life? What does it mean to be human? Are there greater-than-human forces responsible for the shape of things? How should a person behave? Is life as we know it? Or are we destined for an adventure that goes well beyond an earthly life-expectancy? Indeed, man is in the ultimate search to understand himself (in search of his identity), and the world around him. Identity is our understanding of who we are and what is meaningful to us. The philosophical maxim attributed to Socrates (between 470 and 399 B.C.), “man know thyself” presents a picture of the human person unaware of his identity but in search of his identity. Finding answers to the perplexing questions that confront man is the key to discovering the mystery of human identity. However, the search for the ultimate answers is a complex process requiring a balanced assessment of input from culture, religion, and personal experience. Among these, religion is committed to a quest of providing answers to human puzzles. As such religion becomes one of the major players in the construction or shaping of human worldview and indeed, human identity.

Therefore, identity and religion seem to be intricately intertwined. If this is so, a change in the human person affect his religion. Similarly, a change in religion affects man and his identity as a person. Kilbourne and Richardson (1984, p. 238) recognize that change of religion has the feature of giving a person a positive new identity and new sense of life’s meaning. Religious change involves both the enlarging and the shrinking of the self (BAUMEISTER; BODEN, 1994). Through religious change, the self may expand in that it comes to encompass a larger entity or ultimate concern, and it also shrinks in that it gives itself up, loosing itself in the ultimate concern. Certainly, the human person enters a seemingly dual paradoxical expansion and shrinking of the self, embodied in the process of self-transformation. The change in someone’s identity is simply change in his personality which is a matter of cognitive restructuring in the cognitive-information processing view, a modification of self and ego dynamics in a neo-psychoanalytic orientation, and the performance of different responses in the perspective of behaviour.

Changes in behaviour are often associated with the acceptance of a new belief system that serves to justify and explain the new personal ethic that a person is developing or

has developed. Different religions exert different changes on its adherents. The change manifested depends on that which the person changes to. But this may sound presumptuous if we do not establish a link between an individual and his/her religious beliefs and practices. What level of relationship is there between an individual's identity and his religious beliefs and practices? Does one's religious worldview play a part in the formation and sustenance of his or her identity? Whatever the religion of individuals is, it is, on some level, historical, social, and cultural.

Thus, identities are socially constructed. Even in closed societies where identities and social statuses are ascribed, anyone born into such society has to be formally and informally socialized into it. Religion is one of such institutions in society that a person is socialized into, and it is one of the components of identity construction and sustenance. An individual's identity is an interplay of complex variables that are harmonized in an individual entity. The complex variables arise from social, cultural, religious, ethnic, national, and regional backgrounds. "Religion is an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings" (SPIRO, 1966, p. 96). In a broad sense, it is adherence to a set of beliefs and teachings about the deepest and most elusive of life's mysteries. It comprises those aspects of our behavioural complexes that are organized around beliefs in spiritual or supernatural beings. Even though sociology understands religion as a group phenomenon, yet, every group is composed of individuals who incorporate into themselves what the group holds true and necessary to express and carry out. Certainly, religion is an individual affair in a number of ways. It involves personal emotions and thoughts (JOHNSTONE, 2007).

Even though religion plays a key role in the construction and sustenance of individual's identity, there are other social variables that also play dominant role and compete in and within each individual persons in the construction of their social as well as their personal identity. How do changes in the individual affect his identity and his affiliation to a social group like religious group? How do changes within the group affect the individual who shares in the worldview of the group, and does it affect his individual as well as his group

affiliation? How do changes in the society affect a group's religious worldview or systems of meaning and invariably the individuals whose social as well as personal identities are built around the religious worldview? Do social changes and social factors affect individuals in such a way as to alter their identities and implicitly affect their religious worldview, resulting to religious change? How does changes in the individual alter their religious worldviews leading to religious change? Finding answers to these questions determine to what extent religion and identity are connected. We shall be using the Nigeria experiences as refernece point.

## 2. UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Psychologists most commonly use the term “identity” to describe personal idiosyncratic characteristics that make a person unique. Sociologists on the other hand often use the term to describe social identity or the collection of group dynamics that define the individual. However, these uses are not proprietary, and a discipline may use either of the two approaches or combine both when considering the meaning of identity.

Humans have two types of identity: social identity and self-identity. Social identity is what other people attribute to someone. Self-identity is the process of self-development through which we formulate a unique sense of self and a sense of our relationship to the world. At any rate, identity is a social product. Although connected to individual persons, nevertheless, it is related to the social group to which the individual belongs and with which they are identified. Jenkins (1996) believes that identity is formed in the process of socialization. It contains individually unique and collectively shared elements. While each individual has an identity which is personal to him, those identities are shaped through membership of social groups – the interplay of individual presentations and the responses of other people that shape the individual identity. Thus, a persons identity is influenced by the situational meanings and practices of a certain group of people at

a certain time and in a certain context (LOVHEIM, 2004, p. 150). In social identity theory, a social identity is a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (HOGG; ABRAMS, 1988, p. 69). Of course, a social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. Social categories precede individuals as individuals are born into an already structured society. Once in society, people derive their identity or sense of self largely from the social categories to which they belong. Having a particular social identity means being as one with a certain group, and seeing things from the group's perspectives. As such people have an identity defined by their cultural classifications (nationality, race, religion and gender), as well as by societal characterization (family, career, and status). These are external components of identity that are bestowed upon people and they use these labels and external definitions to describe their identity.

In-group based identities, uniformity of perception reveals itself in several ways. These may be categorized along cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioural lines. Social stereotyping is primary among the cognitive. Group identification influences the view of the self as prototypical in the group. Indeed, social identity researchers have found that individuals who identify with the group feel a strong attraction to the group as a whole, independent of individual attachments within the group (HOGG; HARDIE, 1992). Each person, over the course of his or her personal history, is a member of a unique combination of social categories hence the set of social identities making up that person's self-concept is unique.

Social identity theorists regard the group as a collection of similar persons – all of whom identify with one another see themselves and each in similar views, all in contrast to members of out-groups. Nonetheless, individual's identity does not stop at the group. It is the interaction of one's social identity and his personal identity that gives rise to the individual's identity.

### **3. FORMATION OF SELF IDENTITY**

An individual's identity is made up of numerous overlapping aspects or sub-identities. In modern societies identities

can be multifaceted, that is, one's identity consists of multiple identities: racial identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, gender identity, national identity, regional identity, organizational identity, occupational identity, class identity, cyber and fantasy identity, personal identity among others (SAMOVAR et al., 2007, p. 113-119). As situations arise, people may choose to emphasize one or more of their identities. For instance, in Nigeria people belong to groups that are founded on these identities. However, regardless of the identity or identities that are on display, all are tempered, to various degrees, by one's culture and religion.

Identity theorists regard the group as a set of interrelated individuals, each of whom perform unique but integrated activities, see things from their own perspectives, and negotiate the terms of interaction. In general, one's identities are composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflexive activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in particular groups or roles. Individuals view themselves in terms of meanings imparted by a structured society. Post-structuralist and modern theories of identity suggest that people's identities have many different facets, that they frequently change and can contain considerable contradictions (HARALAMBOS; HOLBORN, 2008, p. 681-684). As such, people actively create their own identities, meaning that identities are not reducible simply to the social groups to which people belong. Implicitly, finding out who you are is the process by which an individual develops an understanding of self as a person distinct from others but related to other people in a certain context (HEWITT, 2000, p. 102-110). A person's experience of his or her identity is continuously being formed over time by forging a biography or story of the self from the lessons learned from different situations that arise in everyday life. Simply put, identity is formed in the interplay between a person's presentation of himself/herself in different situations and the responses of others to these presentations.

Thus, identity refers to each person's biographical arrangement of meanings and interpretations that form a somewhat coherent sense of who am I? It is our self-concept, who we think we are as a person (MARTIN; NAKAYAMA, 2005, p. 81). It is the central set of meanings of myself and my life (IHEJIRIKA, 2006, p. 21); a reflective self-conception or self-

image that we each derive from our family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization process (TING-TOOMEY, 2005, p. 93). Identity gives an individual a sense of self and personhood (YEP, 2002, p. 200-202). As the individual is a cultural, religious and social being, certainly, human identity emerges from the interaction of consciousness with culture, religion and the society at large. From this foregoing, it could be deduced that identity is the active principle which continually negotiates between the external demands of the social context and the internal demands of the self concept. It is an interaction that is characterized by dynamic and complex processes of change. It involves change in individual persons and change in the interplay of variables around him. The extent to which the change in the personal identity affects or conflicts with a person's social identity and how the change in the social variables affect one's individual identity will help us to understand the dynamics of identity and religious change. Of course, the social group's ability to construct and sustain the individual's sense of identity is anchored on the provision of systems of meaning from which the individual creates a meaning system, and thus, construct the social as well as personal identities.

Meaning and self-identity are intertwined. Personally held meaning system informs the individual's sense of self. One's meaning system is learned, for most part, through socialization, and it continues through the individual's life span. People locate themselves and their personal actions in a larger social order by means of their meaning systems. Individuals select subjectively meaningful interpretations of events and experiences from the larger interpretive scheme provided by the society or group's meaning system to which the individual belongs. The applied meaning system tells the individual what kind of person one is, the importance of the roles that one performs, the purpose of the events in which one participates, and the significance of being who one is.

## **4. RELIGION, THE FORMATION AND SUSTENANCE OF IDENTITY**

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From birth, each individual person enters into the current of ongoing project of personal identity construction.



Religion is one of the factors that form an integral part of peoples's life and development. It has an enduring significance in the lives of many people, and thus, serves as a major resource for the construction and sustenance of personal identity. Religion represents an important tie between the individual and the larger social group, both as a basis of association and as an expression of shared meanings. The sense of group membership to a religion and the importance of this group membership form the basis of one's self-concept. This is moreso in Nigeria where religion is a very important institution of influence in society.

More than any other meaning system for most people in Nigeria, religion can generally provide a perspective from which to view the world, opportunities to socialize with a spectrum of individuals from different generations, and a set of basic principles to live out. The force of religion to shaping individual's identity is anchored on its ability to provide and form a meaning system upon which the individual finds the essence of life and derive meaning for his/her existence. Indeed, religion serves as a template for establishing meaning (MCGUIRE, 2002, p. 214-216). Religion not only interprets reality but also shapes it. The template of religion fits experiences of everyday life and makes sense of them; in turn, this meaning shapes the experiences themselves and orients individual actions. Thus, in Nigeria religion permeates into every aspect of the people's life and cravings. Scholars find in religion the main source from which people have through the ages sought to construct a sense of meaning in their existence. Accordingly, Berger (1967, p. 11-15) believes that the provision of meaning is particularly important for an understanding of religion because of the ways that meaning links the individual with the larger social group. Most historical religions offer comprehensive meaning systems that locate all experiences of the individual and social group in a single explanatory arrangement. A comprehensive meaning system such as these is called a worldview (BERGER; LUCKMANN, 1966, p. 126). The worldview of a group provides psychological reinforcement for the group and the individuals that make up the group. At points of anxiety or crisis of life, it is to one's conceptual meaning system that one turns for encouragement to continue, or the stimulus to take other action. In pre-modern

societies, individual's and group's perception of reality and the formation of individual and group's identity are created, shaped, modified and determined by their religious meaning system or worldview. Religious beliefs and practices are salient examples of the meanings and practices that have provided a basis for the construction and sustenance of personal as well as social identities throughout history (DURKHEIM, 1966; MCGUIRE, 2002). Religious myths, rituals, and symbols create overarching narratives or stories that give meaning to individuals and collective experiences in relation to the struggles of everyday life (AMMERMAN, 2003, p. 210). This active force of religion is overwhelming in the traditional religious practices of Africa and Nigeria in particular. Religious socialization attempts through rituals and other means to foster high ego involvement in one's religious identity and thus make religion salient in many situations. This is most effectively achieved when one's collective identity and one's ego identity are united in communities that are able to sacralize identity, both in ritual and myth and situate it within a contextual sense of the transcendent. Through relating human life to something sacred or transcendent, religion also makes sense of existential experiences of a more profound nature, such as confronting death, suffering and the purpose of life.

The ability of religion to do this is more in pre-modern societies than in the modern and contemporary society. The construction of self-identity in modern and contemporary societies is qualitatively different from traditional societies. In modern, highly differentiated societies, religion is only one source of the individual's sense of belonging and identity. Individual's social situation is not rigidly determined, that is marked with ascribed (socially fixed) identities, social statuses and roles. Thus, self-identity tends to be malleable, selectively constructed, and changing (GIDDENS, 1991). Individual self-identity is more eclectic, more like bricolage – an edifice constructed from a wide range of culturally available options (BECKFORD, 1989; LUCKMANN, 1967). Components of the individual's self-identity including religion, family identification, ethnic identity, aesthetics, and even gender, appear to be more open to reflexive choice in the modern world. Religion thus, becomes an optional resource for constructing personal identity.

Consequently, from the modern and contemporary societies, religious meaning system compete with many other worldviews. Individuals are less likely to use any single comprehensive meaning system but may apply religious meaning in collaboration with other meaning systems to segments of their lives in shaping their identity. In pre-modern societies also, communities or localities usually have one unique religion which ties or unites the community into one, the likes of which Durkheim found among the Australian Aborigines, and Malinowski among the Tronbriand Island. In this type of community, religion provides the meaning system that shapes the group as well as individual's identity. Given the strong affinity and attachment of Nigerias to their traditional religious background in spite of modern forces of change, one quickly understand why their life is oriented in such identity. But in modern and contemporary societies urbanization, modernization, globalization and secularization have not only created an atmosphere of religious pluralism but also brought a weakening of religious influence in society. This then becomes one of the fundamental bases of change in individual's life and invariably their religion, and consequently their identity.

Furthermore, when one's religious meaning system becomes incapable of directing and controlling his/her worldview, or falls short of managing his/her life crises and anxieties, the individual may be forced to look for alternatives. This often leads to change in foundational trust, which is religious change. These notwithstanding, the strong force of religion in people's self-concept comes out clearly, when on many occasions, individuals take to religious fundamentalism to protect their religious identity being altered by perceived changes in the society that are finding inroads into their religious worldview. The degree of fundamentalist actions or activities is most times determined by the extent to which the religion in question has influence to those who adhere. The resistance is not just to save the religion but also to save their concept of self and self ego that is founded on the religion. We found out that this is one strong factor for religious fanaticism and insurgence in modern Nigeria, especially the current onslaught of the Boko Haram Islamic sect (IHEANA-CHO; KOKO, 2013).

## 5. UNDERSTANDING PATTERNS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN NIGERIA

*Religious change as a process of evolution:* Central to the evolutionary concept of change is the idea that human society is characterized by an ever transitory movement, from lower to higher forms, from primitive, crude and simple to refined complex system. This idea was germane to Charles Darwin. The Darwinian idea was extensively used by other scholars like Herbert Spencer. In Spencer's theory of unilinear evolution, he contended that change has consistently moved society from homogeneous and simple units towards progressively heterogeneous and interdependent units. As societies pass through sequences of change, religious beliefs, practices and worldviews have also passed through varied sequences of change or modifications. Religious change therefore, can mean a dynamic process whereby living religions are changing and adapting to external or internal forces of change in human society. Functionalist, Marxists and Feminists while believing that religion is incapable of generating social change, however, held that changes in society can shape and reshape religion. This is where to locate what may be termed evolutionary concept of religious change which brings with it modifications and adjustments in religious beliefs/worldview and practices. Yinger (1970, p. 219-220) held that evolutionary development of religious beliefs brings enormous modifications into the religious worldview. Drawing from one of his examples with Jewish religion we note that the gradual transformation of Judaism from tribal religion, infused with magic, with a god of host (battles) who insists on the total destruction of the Canaanites, into a monotheistic, universalist religion, with a god of justice and love, is a process that affected the Jewish people's religious meaning system and their religious identity as well.

Similarly, historical research has shown that many of the elements of Christianity that were long thought by its adherents to be unique were common ideas, practices, and myths in the ancient world. Some of its doctrines and practices were added, during the course of several generations, as it developed from a small Jewish cult into a dominant cult.

In a similar manner, religions and votaries in Nigeria develop and change in the course of history as societies and human challenges evolve. As this happens, belief patterns or worldviews and practices of the religion in question are also modified. One case in point from the Nigeria Christian dimension is the foundation of the African Native Pastorates in the late 19th century, following the doctrinal disagreements between the Nigerian missionaries and their European counterparts (see OWETE; IHEANACHO, 2008, p. 146-147). The implication of the modification is that its adherents whose identities are formed based on their religious worldviews are also modified and reshaped. Religious development, to be sure, is not simply a matter of culture, or revision of its normative dimensions. It also involves structural shifts and the growth of new individual motives and values. Changes in the size and homogeneity of the congregational unit, the rise or decline of participation by laymen, redefinition of hierarchical patterns, and the extent of congregational isolation from or involvement with the surrounding community are among the important structural shifts, and they can occur in conjunction with, or to some degree independently of, cultural shifts. The cultural changes in religion – the redefinition of shared sacred beliefs and rites have an impact outside the specifically religious sphere, only if they are able to create new men, whose needs, values, motives redirect their energies (YINGER, 1970). This pattern of change can be identified in what Onunwa (1990, p. 122) calls the new symbiosis between christianity and African religion.

*Religious Change as a natural process of growth:* Change is a necessary part of human existence. Life is characterized by change. Change, they say is the only constant thing in nature. As man change, his identity also changes. As Samovar et al. (2007, p. 112) notes that, “identity is not static; people are constantly moving in and out of different identities”. Identity is not only maintained but is modified through interaction. For Martin and Nakayama (2005, p. 81), identity grows and change, and people develop multiple identities depending on the context. Identity construction process is a dynamic thing. Thus, like all identity perspectives, the individual’s religion develops and change over the life course. A person is not born with a set of religious beliefs and practices, rather they are

developed and nurtured (or ignored) in the socialization of the child. Although many have reached an identifiable religious conviction at the stage of young adulthood, yet, is not the end of their religious development. The individual's religion continues to develop and change, perhaps less dramatically, throughout the rest of life. Indeed, the very meaning of "being religious" changes in different periods of life, and the place of religion in the individual's life also changes. In keeping with this dynamic perspective on religious development, this section focuses on the life cycle of an individual believer in different stages of his/her development. It focuses (as does religious practice itself), on certain critical periods: early childhood, adolescence, marriage and procreation, and old age and dying. In the religions of Nigeria each of these stages of life has religious place, status and identity. Thus the identity therein is fluid as the votary grow, he pass from one stage to another. Among these stages of human development, adolescence is a developmental period crucial to identity development. During this period, adolescents have opportunities to explore their ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions. However, the freedom and flexibility of their exploration is typically within the constraints of their parents or caregiver. Religious affiliation and identity for adolescents remains fairly stable, as there is often, little or no chance of change in religious affiliation or worldview. This period is followed by emerging adulthood. The emerging adulthood, the years between late teens and late twenties, extends the identity formation process from adolescence. This transitional period is marked by constant changes in romantic love, work, and worldviews (religious worldviews inclusive). This period is generally a time of "semi-autonomy". With increased sense of autonomy, emerging adults may choose to further exert their independence by moving away from home, disobedience to parents and constituted authority, controlled more by the influence and worldview of peer group. Through whichever ways that emerging adults choose to exercise their autonomy, they are likely to find themselves in new, diverse environments teeming with a spectrum of vast worldviews. The new worldviews, more often than not conflicts with already existing religious system of meaning upon which one's identity was built. This can generate some internal crisis which often ends up

with questioning many religious belief assumptions, jettisoning of religious beliefs and eventual religious change. Foundation once destroyed, every other thing built on that foundation becomes significantly affected. When this happens to the Nigerian, everything in his life is restructured with different cultural and attitudinal changes. Again, this becomes true of the individual's identity which will be re-shaped and modified in line with the new found meaning system.

*Religious change as a process of conversion:* The word "conversion" is primarily a term symbolizing a radical change in personal religious beliefs and behaviour. In a broad sense, it refers to both personal and communal changes, and to changes both in beliefs and behaviour, and in community affiliation. Most social scientists argue that conversion experiences have a social quality to them and, that they are more of a process than a sudden transformation. Conversion experiences often (though not always) lead to social, psychological, and ideological change. Simply put religious change in this case can refer to mobility – a conversion from one religious tradition or denomination within a tradition or world religion, to another. The change scenario here involves a redirection of foundational trust. That is, before this change, trust is placed in one entity or systems of meaning or worldview, and afterwards it is placed in another one. In this sense, religious change is a process of conversion from one comprehensive meaning system to another. Indeed, one's meaning system and sense of self are transformed in the process of conversion. The Nigeria experience to the conversion process and religious change in society is well crystallised by Awoonor (1975, p. 103) poem, "Easter dawn":

the gods are crying, my father's gods are crying  
for a burial ...  
for a final ritual ...  
but they that should build the fallen shrines  
have joined the down marchers  
singing their way towards Gethsemane ...  
the gods cried, shedding clayey tears on the calico  
the drink offering had dried up in the harmattan  
the cola-nut is shrivelled  
the yam feast has been eaten by mice  
and the fetish priest is dressing for Easter service.



The experience of believing often originates in or is accompanied by the experience of conversion which is expressed in terms of radical change – a transformation that is almost always described in terms of a “before and an after”, to the point of leading to a kind of re-birth and, to a construction of a new identity. It is a process of re-socialization that can be described at least in some aspect, in terms of social mobility. Since each type of social mobility carries in itself a dynamics of uprooting and, a new rooting, religious change can jeopardize an existing equilibrium in order to work out a totally new one, as Awoonor’s (1975) poem above portrays in the early days of Christian in road into West Africa and, Nigeria in particular. It involves a break or separation from ones past. This separation operates on two dimensional levels: absolute or total separation (conversion) and relative or partial separation (conversion). Absolute conversion involves not just a total social disengagement but also a psychological and ideological disengagement. Relative or partial conversion often involves a social disengagement with no psychological and ideological disengagement. Perhaps, most conversion experiences operate on the relative rather than on absolute dimension of conversion. Taking Nigerian Christians for example – they are converted to Christianity with observable disengagement with their traditional religious affiliations, yet, to a significant extent they are ideologically and psychologically controlled by their traditional religious worldview, and particularly their small cultural groups’ paradigm.

Thus, this fracture of separation from one’s past cannot make us forget that, besides the issue of break are issues of continuity, hence one’s identity actually does not dissolve but is re-defined, is modified, both on the individual and on the social side: the old and new then find a form of co-existence, capable of giving meaning to everyday life. It is a new light that illuminates a previously existing reality in a different way. This conversion does not occur in a social or psychological vacuum. Instead, it occurs in a complex, multifaceted environment that can be better understood within the context of the change itself.

Religious paradigm of conversion may be a sudden or gradual process. The prototypical sudden conversion is the Biblical depiction of the conversion of Paul on the road to



Damascus. Sudden conversions are highly emotional but not necessarily rational. In these instances, the convert is a passive agent being acted upon by external forces, and the conversion entails a dramatic transformation of self. Emotion dominates this dramatic, irrational transformation leading to a shift in self and belief, with behaviour change to follow. For sudden converts, conversion is not a back and forth drawn out process, but rather happens in one single instance and is permanent thereafter. Often, sudden conversions are the result of overwhelming anxiety and guilt from sin, and crisis that becomes unbearable, making conversion a functional solution to ease these emotions. Emotional factors have been found to correlate with sudden conversions. Many Pentecostal ministers in Nigeria came into the business through such episode.

Gradual conversion takes a stage by stage process. In each of the instances, sudden or gradual conversion, noticeable changes in behaviourable pattern are observed. The specific form of attitudes and behaviours displayed by the convert may differ, depending upon the religion to which the person converts. There are diverse views of the nature of the fixed versus malleable aspects of human personality, and each one leads to different statements about what would constitute identity change in religious conversion. We also have cases of ministers who came into the vocation through this process. But it is more in the orthodox churches.

In other senses, conversion experiences can be radical, though not often so. A Moslem can become a Christian. They can be moderate: an Anglican can become a born again Christian or a denominational switching – an Anglican becoming a Catholic or vice versa, which often does not usually involve a conversion experience but a deepening in one's life. In many cases, individuals drop out of previous religious bodies and search for the one they feel might satisfy their emotional and psychological thirst of the moment. Indeed, people convert to different religious groups or affiliations for a variety of reasons: ideological reasons, material reasons, and psychological reasons, social reasons, emotional reasons, among others. In any of these instances, the new religious belief system changed to, will begin the process of de-orientation and re-orientation, de-conversion and reconversion in the social as well as personal identities of the convert.

One main strand in sociological explanation of religious change is the strain theory which states that persons join a religion in order to satisfy conventional desires that unusual personal or collective deprivation have frustrated. Such deprivation can either be relative, or absolute. In what could be considered an impressionistic expression of the strain theory, most people change their religious belief on grounds of economic rather than spiritual needs. For such people religious change is often motivated by the need to satisfy material problems. In any case mobility from one's religious tradition to another brings an alteration or modification in a person's identity. This accounts for why many Nigerians move from one religious movement and sect to another. Their conversion and change is need based.

## 6. FACTORS LEADING TO RELIGIOUS AND IDENTITY CHANGE

*Crisis of meaning factor:* In Nigeria, human life is characterized by meaning-threatening experiences. When such experience come, the individual try to search for solution from one's stock of meaning system. The meaning system of the individual or group can integrate most routine events into an understandable pattern, a meaning whole. Some events and experiences, however, are not so easily interpreted within the existing meaning system. The individual who experiences the death of a loved one, a painful illness, or serious economic misfortune may not be helped by the existing personal meaning system, especially as informed by the shallow traditional pattern of thought in Nigerian cultures. An entire group can undergo similar meaning-threatening experiences: oppression by an enemy, famine, earthquake, or economic depression etc. Such events are particularly meaning-threatening if they appear to contradict important aspects of the existing meaning system. Groups who believe in a loving, personal god have more difficulty reconciling disastrous events with their meaning system than do groups whose god is remote and capricious. When the individual meaning system fails, the person in question looks outside of self in order to draw strength

or interpret his or her situation. The easy resource for most individuals is religion. Religion as we know is a meaning system. In religion, theodicies are religious explanations that provide meaning for meaning-threatening, experiences. Most religions, for example, offer theodicies of suffering and death. The content of these explanations differ among the various religions, but the desire to find meaning for such experiences appears virtually universal. Disaster and death create a problem of theodicy not because they are unpleasant, but because they threaten the fundamental assumptions of order underlying society itself (BERGER, 1967). Theodicies tell the individual or group that their experiences are not meaningless but are rather part of a larger system of order. Some successful theodicies are, in fact, nothing but assertions of order. Theodicies nonetheless, do not necessarily make the believer happy or even promise future happiness. A person suffering poverty and disease may be satisfied with the explanation that the situation has resulted from sins committed by the ancestors. Such an interpretation offer meaning. It answers the question, “Why do I suffer?”.

The capability of religion to provide meaning can be illustrated by how an individual or a society handles the more meaning-threatening situations that confront them, such as death and other misfortunes of human life. Death seems to negate the individual or group’s sense of order. For this reason, the way in which a religion handles the process of dying is revealing of its larger meaning system. Long before most individuals face death, their religion has been providing meaning for their various life stages (e.g., rites of passage into adulthood, legitimating the norms and prerogatives of old age). In many societies, the meaning system somewhat normalizes dying as a further stage of human development. Some meaning systems affirm an afterlife or a rebirth; others emphasize that people live on through their offspring or tribe. This is the background of Nigerian Pentecostal Pastors’ situational reference to ancestor and generational curse as responsible for some of their votary and clients crisis situations in life.

Another situation that creates a problem of meaning is serious discrepancy between the ideal that a group promulgates and the actual practice. Inequality and injustice can be serious meaning-threatening facts when they are inconsistent

with the group's ideals. Because the threat of the meaninglessness of such events is so great, individuals and groups try to build special legitimations into their meaning systems to justify these apparent contradictions or discrepancies. In other words, part of the meaning system itself interprets events and experiences that would seem to contradict the meaning system. However, when an individual sees his/her religious belief system as incapable of sustaining him/her in such moments of crisis or that his religious meaning system is weak or incapable of managing such a meaning-threatening moment, confusion sets in. The confusion not only puts the integrity and the credibility of the religious meaning system to question, but also breeds a volatile ground for a change of foundational trust, leading to eventual change. Many Nigerians do not hesitate to change their religion and or denomination. The change as a matter of fact revokes and reshapes the individual identity leading to identity reconstruction. In moments of such great confusion, individual's identity as a matter of necessity will be searching for an integrating symbol which will serve as bedrock upon which to find an anchor and meaning once again. As Ihejirika (2006, p. 101) noted, "A person whose religious foundational trust is questioned always often undertakes a religious change in order to re-establish their existential identity". Of course, religious change is centered on the central symbol around which people integrate their religious meaning which helps them maintain or rediscover the existential meaning of their lives.

*Secularization factor:* Secularization is "the process whereby religion loses its influence over the various spheres of social life" (GIDDENS, 2009, p. 465). Auguste Comte, who coined the term sociology, claimed that society had moved from the theological through the metaphysical to the scientific stage – the last typified by the triumph of reason over dogma and the withering away of religious thinking (MCGUIRE, 2002). Marx, Durkheim and Weber all theorize that secularization was bound to occur as societies modernize and become more reliant on science and technology to control and explain the social world. Indeed, Max Weber anticipated a progressive decline in the importance of religion (HARALAMBOS; HOLBORN, 2008, p. 406-408), portraying the modern world as a disenchanting world (MCGUIRE, 2002, p. 81). However, the

enduring popularity of new religious movements even in the modern world seems to question the credibility of secularization. The diversity and dynamism of new religious movements have proven religion and spirituality as a central facet of modern Nigeria's life. As traditional religions lose their hold, religion is not disappearing, but is being channeled to new directions (GIDDENS, 2009, p. 466-468). In this trend we see many religious movements in Nigeria introduce elements of traditional religious and tolerant conditions. This has made the understanding of secularization to take a new turn, hence, the secularization narrative is not a unified story of religious decline, but comes in several interconnected versions. The first version emphasizes institutional differentiation, that is, the fragmentation of social life as specialized roles and institutions are created to handle specific tasks or functions that were formally joined. The second is societalization whereby life is increasingly enmeshed and organized, not locally but societally. Almost everywhere in the modern world, small-scale communities have lost power to large-scale organizations: huge corporations, mass media and marketing, political bureaucracies among others. Thus, religion that is tied up with the life of the local community, has suffered that community's erosion (MCGUIRE, 2002, p. 91). When Nigerians find themselves in this process, their religion's ability to form the basis of personal construction of meaning system becomes doubtful. Therefore, religion has to compete with other meaning systems or worldviews in shaping or ordering the lives and identities of individuals in society.

The survival of the fittest principle becomes operational and individuals have to dance or change according to the tune of the winning force and ideological worldview. Change here becomes a matter of affiliation to the winning or reigning worldview. This stand is given credence by the third version of secularization that emphasizes privatization, that is, the increasing relegation of religion to the private sphere. Religion is a matter of personal, and rational choice. Rational choice theory alerts us of the immense religious universe that is open to people who decide that the religious groups within which they have been affiliated are no longer serving them well (JOHNSTONE, 2007). From this forgoing, we can deduce that secularization brings with it religious autonomization.

Nigerians therefore, pick and choose among the various religious and social options in respect to their needs. Accordingly, the construction of social and personal identities in Nigeria are no longer dependent on singular meaning system as in the purely traditional religious system but on many that compete on aggressively equal bases, at times. Thus, the people often find themselves submerged in flexible and changing identities, depending on where swing force of the pendulum moves more.

*Globalization factors:* Assessment of the impact of mass media on identity and religious change in the age of globalization, is an issue for serious concern. The subject of globalization and the function of mass media are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them. Some scholars like Castells (2005), argue that the crisis of legitimacy has engulfed all institutions, since the development of globalization has dried up the fountain of legitimate identities. Institutions are becoming increasingly superficial and are unable to address the living values of most people. The deterioration of common identity is synonymous with a decline of meaningful social orders, which vividly depicts our status. Globalization is indeed, redesigning our life vis-a-vis religious life. The crumbling of real interpersonal relationships for the sake of virtual ones, the compression or compacting of time and space, of styles of life and culture, of plurality of religious ideologies and worldviews, and the restructuring of our way of life are the coordinates within which the new generations are growing up and within which they build their identity. There is a knot of interculturality in our communities – the dense network of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious environment made possible through media globalization have led to religious and cultural pluralism and *ipso facto* relativism and to the loss of meaning and value systems. In other words, personal identity, cultural identity and religious identity are undergoing crisis due to globalization. This scenario make people to fall into unfortunate forms of hybridism and syncretism resulting to confusion of identity. The pluralistic nature of the modern society has made many Nigerians to flexibly switch their affiliation to one or different competing meaning systems, as often as situation and circumstances arise. Since each religion has its peculiar worldview, they shape peoples identities differently. Thus, in the pluralistic religious environment,

of the modern society, many religious meaning systems compete, and as often as Nigerians change affiliations to each of these religious tradition – in faith and practice, new worldviews sets into their minds and the meaning systems begin to deconstruct and reconstruct their personal as well as their social identities. This is the process of de-conversion and reconversion.

*Modernization factor:* In many cases, religion and its other-worldly concerns were deemed a serious impediment to progress in most societies. But unlike traditional societies where age old customs determine everything, a host of scholars connect the incredible changes experienced in the modern time with modernization. Modernization is defined as a complex set of changes that takes place in almost every part of society. This affects the entire life and aspects of that society, religion inclusive. With modernization, there is always a paradigm shift from the simple to the complex, from undifferentiated to a differentiated society. Modernization is an offshoot of civilization. Civilization comes as a dynamic interplay of change-and-response. A challenge from the natural or social environment provokes a creative response in a society which induces that society to enter the process of civilization. The civilization continues to grow when its successful response to the initial challenges generate socio-cultural current that carries the society beyond a state of equilibrium into an overbalance that presents itself as a fresh challenge. In this way, the initial pattern of challenge-and-response is repeated in successive phases of growth, with each response producing a disequilibrium that requires new creative adjustments and, so on.

Modernization brings societal disintegration accompanied by a general loss of harmony among its elements, leading to the outbreak of social discord and disruption. However, during the process of disintegration, the society and individual's creativity including ability to respond to changes is not completely lost. Though the cultural mainstream has become ossified by clinging to fixed ideas and rigid patterns of behaviour, creative minorities will appear on the scene and carry on the process of challenge-and-response. The dominant social institutions will refuse to hand over their leading roles to these new social forces, but they will inevitably go on to decline and disintegrate, and the creative minorities may be able to transform some of the old elements into new configurations.



Modernization in Nigeria induced a shift away from cultural harmony, a change that shows up first in the form of increased individual stress. A growing number of individuals find that they are unable to meet certain cultural expectations. At first this is perceived by both the individual and the society at large, as an individual problem. But as the number of these individual deviations grew, it began to weaken the social fabric, eventually to the point where the society acknowledged that the problem is more than personal. At this stage, it is difficult for the society to return to a state of equilibrium without undergoing a process of revitalization. The revitalization process is either reactionary or innovative in its basic thrust. The reactionary mode is characterized by a belief that present problems can be resolved by “doing the old way harder”, and generally tries to undo or suppress recent changes that are seen as the cause of the problem. The innovative mode, on the other hand, attempts to get “lagging” parts of the culture to catch up to recent changes that are seen by the innovators as either positive or unchangeable.

In a complex society like Nigeria, under stress, there are usually many revival and revitalization movements competing for attention and converts as the culture begins to disintegrate. It is however common for a culture to attempt a “let’s do the old way harder”, revitalization as the first response to realizing that something must be done to get society back on track. It is only after the failure of a reactionary revitalization attempt that a culture is willing to risk fundamental change. This shift from innovation to reaction and back again is often described in common parlance in terms of a swinging pendulum. In the Nigeria experience, while this process goes on, fundamentalist groups often arise with the aim of resisting change, which not only changes their religious worldview and practices but which invariably alter their perceived religious identity.

*Migration factor:* Migration is the movement of people from one place to another, from one cultural and religious background to another. Factors such as war, famine, enslavement, persecution, urbanization, economic viability, social status concerns, education, among others account for why people migrate from their places of birth to another or, from their cultural spaces to another. No two cultures are the same, they may be similar but cannot be exactly the same. Nigerians,



we know are good migrants. This brings the people to cultural, social and religious spaces other than their own. In urban centres where there is mass convergence of people, there exists a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-social spaces into which the people mix. Nigerian migrants who find themselves in such environments are thrown into far greater cultural, religious and social challenges than those who migrated to less densely populated environments. No doubt, people change social, cultural and religious spaces through migration from a primary cultural context to a new one. Thus, migration involves a different kind of change in cultural spaces than travelling. Migrants suffer from cultural, religious and social shocks. They find it difficult to adjust to the new environment (MARTIN; NAKAYAMA, 2005, p. 168). However, they must adapt to the differences in their new socio-cultural and socio-religious environments. The initial response of Nigerians in this situation is resistance to the new dimensions of life in the host's social systems. However, with time the resistance gives way to adjustments, adaptation, and modifications. The adaptation, adjustments and modifications create syncretic and hybridized individuals. Consequently, such experience create individuals whose identities, social and self identities are modified in relation to the changes.

*Self expression and psychological fulfilment factor:* In the social context, the self will always want to express and assert itself. The self even though a part of a social group would not want to be swallowed up in the larger group. In fact, the core of an identity for most people is the categorization of the self as an occupant of a role, incorporating into the self, the meanings and expectations associated with the role and its performance in the group to which one belongs. This is grounded in the role identity theory. McCall and Simmons (1978, p. 224) defines role identity as “the character and the role that an individual devises for himself as an occupant of a particular social position”. A role identity has “conventional” and “idiosyncratic” dimensions. The self would want to carve a niche for itself, to be heard and listened to. It is within this ideological frame that many Nigerian Pastors’ passionate claim to charismatic identity may be found. They see themselves as specially anointed and destined for certain mission and functional value. This claim comes with the believe and urge that

they have divine messages to communicate, and are more capable and qualified than those already doing it. Social psychologists see persons as always acting within the context of social structure in which others and themselves are labeled and recognized as occupants of certain positions in the group. The occupancy of such positions create for people structures of self-expression and self assertion. However, in most institutionalized religions, the structure of self expression and assertions are standardized in such a way that people and, only few amongst the larger number of members have the privilege, given the criteria mapped out for having people ascend to such positions. The desire for self expression and assertion are in fact, among the main causes of religious proliferation in Nigeria (OWETE; IHEANACHO, 2008, p. 145-146). Many Nigerians move from one religious affiliation to another, in search of recognition and for democratized spaces/structures of self expression, in the absence of which they open up their own churches.

*Doctrinal disagreement factor:* Doctrines are articles of faith articulating and explaining the faith of a religious group and their interpretations of reality. Doctrines define what a group believes and tell adherents the values and norms that should guide actions, to which they are obliged to abide. Doctrines are not revealed truths originating from the gods but are common sense interpretations of what the gods seem to be saying and through which a religious group characteristically identify with the gods and the entire members of the group in question.

Throughout human history men have not been in agreement about the understanding and interpretation of reality. Philosophers, scientists, sociologists scholars of religion and other disciplines have never been in agreement about the nature and interpretation of reality. In the Nigeria religious space, the same thing is happening. Religious adherents disagree in their interpretations of reality and in the formulation of religious meaning systems. Disputes and disagreements over religious doctrines, religious beliefs and religious discipline can generate identity crisis and consequently religious changes if the disagreements and disputes are not settled in amicable and convincing ways. When the contrary happens, possibilities

abound for changes in religious affiliation. Owete and Iheanacho (2008, p. 144-146) underscore this point as a factor for proliferation of new religious movements in Nigeria.

*Social status identity factor:* Social identity theory may acknowledge the private part of the self, but then, more often than not, the question of self concept is often answered by social affiliations, social belongingness and social titles. People define themselves more by their social status, class and social belongingness. Social identity gives people more global image than their private sense of self. In the Nigeria religious space, some religious groups have better global image, better global outlook and celebrated global recognition than others. Such religious groups most times have hegemonic dominance over the socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-political spaces. This stand as reasons of attraction to all those who want to have high social status and high sense of self to affiliate or change to the dominant religious group. In so doing, the individual enlarges the self by his/her identification with and/or affiliation to the religion in question. Therefore, in Nigeria religious change here becomes a matter of enlargement of the self in a competitive world of ego showmanship.

*Ethnoreligious identification factor:* Undoubtedly, religion is an important component of any cultural heritage, and is generally considered to be one of the earliest and most fundamental forms of collective distinction. Religion represents one of the most important factors in the creation of cultural consciousness. Ethnoreligious identification is a phenomenon by which the members of a religious denomination are able to obtain from their religion, means of defining who they are and where they stand in a large and complex society. Nigerians want their religion to speak about them, and, to reflect their culture. Even where proselytizing religions convert people to themselves, the people will not stay long and begin to incorporate their cultural traits and traditions into it. This is what Owete and Iheanacho (2008, p. 146-147) identified as the quest for cultural identity in the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria. Failure to allow such legitimate demand and desire for inculturation leads to religious change. It should also be recalled that this was a strong factor for the emergence of Aladura churches and, other African Independent Churches, in Nigeria.

*Variations in personal religious needs and interests factor:* As Nigerians grow in life, meet challenges or are confronted by the vicissitudes and exigencies of life, they are bound to make some adjustments in their personal outlook and convictions. These exigencies sometimes affect the core of their being, and their identity. These often come with variations in personal religious needs and interests that will soothe human tension and problems. When these needs are not met by one's religious affiliation, an alternative is sought. In the atmosphere of religious pluralism, supply to human religious demands are readily met by religious product suppliers.

*Search for personal identity factor:* The search towards discovering and understanding the self, and the search to discovering answers to human puzzles are as old as man. The Socrates' maxim "Man know thyself" is still on. Despite many centuries gone by, with millions of great minds given to this search, yet, answers have not been found. The search is still on, and religion through all its variants, along with other disciplines is still trying to find answers to the fundamental questions. Man, typified by the inquisitive Nigerian votary is seriously in this search, moving from one end to the other. As religion is a meaning system to reckon with, thus, Nigerians are found moving from one religious affiliation to the other. Perhaps, one day, answers would be found to all their life puzzles, there and then, they would discover who they are and the search will cease.

## 7. CONCLUSION

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No doubt, religion as part of Nigerian peoples culture is not static. Every religion however, is dynamic in that it grows, develops, modifies and changes over time. Religion is not an isolated entity, rather it is a social institution peopled by changing individual personalities in a changing environment. Changes in society occasioned by social forces not only affect every institution within the society but also the human persons who operate within the social systems. If religion plays a key role in the construction of social and personal identities, then, changes in the religious worldview also bring with it

a characteristic modification and adjustments to all whose identities are built on or, are anchored on the religious worldview in question. Similarly, changes in individual persons can also generate an alteration, a break, a change in their religious affiliations or religious worldview. This is more so in modern Nigeria society where religion compete with other meaning systems in the construction of the individual's systems of meaning and in establishing the individual's self concept. Not only this, individual personal needs and challenges also tend to make and remake them, altering their sense of self-worth and self-concept which surely determine their religious inclination and affiliations. This is so, because religion tries to address fundamental human puzzles.

## IDENTIDADE E MUDANÇA RELIGIOSA: A EXPERIÊNCIA NIGERIANA

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### RESUMO

A posição deste ensaio é que o eu e as vertentes da existência são orientados por impulso e essência religiosa, que funcionam como plataforma para construir e moldar visões de mundo. Assim, a mudança de identidade na religião afeta o homem e seu ser fundamental, pois propicia ao indivíduo um novo sentido de vida, como a ampliação e/ou diminuição de novos sistemas de crenças e práticas. Acredita-se que essa mudança tem o poder de aplacar a crise humana de significado e as mudanças ambivalentes na sociedade. Contra o pano de fundo da experiência da Nigéria, o trabalho identifica ainda mais as forças de identidade e mudança religiosa catalisadas principalmente pela secularização e pelos índices de modernização, migração, realização psicológica do eu, conflito doutrinário, identidade e *status* social, identidade etnorreligiosa e procura por outros motivos pessoais.

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### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Identidade. Religião. Mudança. Nigéria. Experiência.

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