

THE ORIGIN AND CHALLENGES OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS (NRMs): THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The end of World War II saw the emergence of new approaches to religious worship and doctrines originating from Japan. The New Movements, or Sects, as they were initially called, spread to the United States and Europe. With time, their teachings, methods of worship, and beliefs kept changing. The new groups were distinct from pre-existing traditional denominations. Responding to the challenge posed by the modernising world, they chose to form closely knit communities that were desirous of new religious experiences. These movements are a product of and answer to the modern processes of secularisation, globalisation, detraditionalisation, fragmentation, reflexivity, and individualism. Therefore, this paper examines the new religious movements, their emergence, characteristics, and challenges posed to society and the traditional Church. The study uses historical and phenomenological methods, which involve the use of secondary sources. The new religious movements (NRMs) represent the creativity of the human spirit, an expression of the universal human yearning for a deeper spiritual union, and a call to the reawakening of deeper religious consciousness.

Keywords: Sect, New Religious Movements, Secularisation, Globalisation

Introduction

The term *Shinshūkyō* (“new religion”) was first developed in Japan to describe the proliferation of Japan's new religions following the Second World War. It was then introduced to the United States in the 1960s. Gradually, the terminology gained acceptance and became increasingly used among scholars of religion, particularly sociologists of religion. Over the years, it became more acceptable than the more widely used term “cult,” which is considered derogatory. New religious movements can be novel in origin as part of a wider religion, but they are distinct from pre-existing denominations. Being a new area, “it is arguable that the field as a whole is still characterised by a certain ambiguity or incoherence”¹. Religious scholars contextualised the

¹ T. Robbins and P. Lucas. *From ‘Cult’ to New Religious Movements: Coherence, Definition, and Conceptual Framing in the Study of New religious Movements*, 2007, pp. 226-247. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net>. Accessed August 12, 2024.

rise of new religious movements in modernity, relating it as a product of and answer to the modern process of secularisation, fragmentation, reflexivity and individualisation². Reacting to the challenges posed by the modernising world, some new religious movements embraced individualism, while others sought tightly knit collective means. Others also regard new religious movements as "countercultural"; they are an alternative to mainstream Western religions, especially Christianity. They arose to satisfy specific needs that many people cannot satisfy through more traditional religious organisations or modern secularism and are visible products and responses to modernity, pluralism and the scientific worldview.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a number of highly visible new religious movements. Among them were – The Children of God (later called The Family), the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, the Rajneesh Movement, the Divine Right Mission, and ISKCON (Hare Krishnas). These and many other young religious groups burst into the scene and elicited frightening reactions from outsiders. They “seemed so outlandish that many people saw them as evil cults, fraudulent organisations, or seems that recruited unaware people by means of nefarious mind-control techniques”³. New religious movements emerge as products of human creativity and capacity for religious expression, providing spiritual meaning and social connections for their members, just as other religious groups do. Contemporary new religious movements manifest the increasing pluralism associated with greater ease of global travel and communication.

Terminology

There is a problem with what terminology to adopt when referring to these groups, and it is so because the reality itself is complex. The groups vary greatly in origin, belief, size, recruitment style, behaviour patterns, and attitude towards other established religious groups and society in general. This is why they do not have an agreed-upon name. They have been called different names by different scholars at different times. Here are some of the terms used.

² M. Rubenstein. *New Religious Movements (NRMs)*/Britannica, 2023, p. 3. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com>. Accessed June 15, 2024.

³ O. Hammer and M. Rothstein. “Introduction to New Religious Movements”. In O. Hammer (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2012. pp. 1-10.

Cults and Sects

In Sociological literature, cults and sects have been distinguished from “Church” and “denomination” according to variables such as the degree to which they are in tension with or accepted by the wider society and the degree to which they are either exclusive or universal in their outlook⁴. In popular parlance, the terms cult and sect are commonly used to indicate that the speaker places a negative evaluation on the religious group⁵.

In the Oxford dictionary⁶, the word ‘cult’ invokes emotions that are even more negative. From the 17th century Latin word ‘*cultus*’, there are clear links in its original application to satanic forms of worship. Mather and Nichols in the Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and Occult⁷ defines a cult as; “a relatively small, often transitively religious group that commonly follow a radical leader. A cult, unlike sect, espouses radically new religious beliefs and practices that are frequently seen as threatening the basic values and cultural norms of society”. It is also common to see authors use cult and sects interchangeably. For Shorter,

A cult is a sect or religious movement that is a total institution, one that deprives its members of their freedom. It does this by making the members dependent, taking away their material means of existence, in some cases depriving them of physical liberty, and especially by exercising undue influence on their capacity to think and choose for themselves.⁶

Even among scholars, there seem to be divergent opinions about cults; there are those who defend their right to exist and hold that there is no cult problem. Some oppose “cults” because they see them as dangerous groups: “A cult is a religious perversion. It is a belief and practice in the world of religion which calls for devotion to a religious view or leader centred in false doctrine. It is an organised heresy”⁷.

⁴ M. B. McGuire. *Sociology of Religion*. Rawat Booksellers, 2002, p. 72.

⁵ E. Barker. *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction*. London: HMSO Publication, p. 2 ⁶ Oxford Learner’s Dictionary. <https://www.oxfordlearner'sdictionary.com>. Accessed August 12, 2024. ⁷ A. G. Mather, A. George and Nichols, A. Larry. *Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religion and the Occults*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, 253.

⁶ A. Shorter, and J. N. Njiru. *New Religious Movement in Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2001, pp. 101-102.

⁷ D. Breese. *Know the Marks of Cults*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986, p. 16.

The word cult comes with a heavy bias, negative connotation, and cultural prejudice. The media portrays it in a negative light; writers in religion, especially those of the evangelical stock, attack cults with words that are derogatory, such as deviant, dangerous, pseudo-religious and many others. Sects are defined as a group of people with somewhat different religious beliefs (typically regarded as heretical) from those of a larger group to which they belong. The word “sects” would seem to refer more directly to small groups that broke away from a major religious group, mostly Christian, and that hold deviating beliefs or practices. The word is less exact when applied to groups which result from interactions between Christianity and oriental or African religions or to groups with backgrounds of psychological Gnostic types.

The word “sects” itself is not used in the same sense everywhere. In Latin America, for example, there is a tendency to apply the term to all non-Catholic groups, even when these are families of traditional protestant churches. But even in Latin America, in ecumenically more sensitive circles, the word “sects” is reserved for the more extreme or aggressive groups. In Western Europe, the word has a negative and derogative connotation. At the same time, in Japan, the new religions of Shinto or Buddhist origin are freely called sects in a non-derogatory sense.

New Religious Movements (NRMs)

The term 'new religious movement' is a relatively modern term that has become widely used to describe various groups or organisations that fit within the parameters the name suggests. Eileen Barker associates this terminology with organisations that have evolved from the 1950s and offer some spiritual or philosophical guidance. She suggests that while they may share a few characteristics, it is frankly absurd to categorise them all within the term “new religious movement” (NRM)⁸.

Nevertheless, the term “new religious movements” is more neutral, friendly and less derogatory than “sects” when referring to these groups. “New”, not just because they emerged after the Second World War, but also because they present themselves as alternatives to the institutional official religion and prevailing culture. They are called “religious” because they profess to offer a vision of the religious or sacred world or means to reach transcendental knowledge, spiritual illumination and self-realisation and also because they offer their members answers to such questions as the

⁸ E. Barker. *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.

meaning of life and one's place in the universe. Therefore, the term new religious movements is more appropriate to use.

Towards A Definition

There exists no singular acceptable and agreed-upon criteria for defining "new religious movements". However, all major attempts at defining the term require that the group be of recent origin and different from existing religions. Even the terminology of the new religious movement has its difficulties. New connotes that which is new, but not all new religious movements (NRMs) are new; many are offshoots of old established groups. For example, an Indian NRM, 'Muttappan Teyyam', became popular during the 1950s and can fit in as an NRM, but its origin goes back several centuries⁹. Some have "new" to refer to religions that had become visible since the Second World War¹⁰.

In contrast, others have taken it to refer to the movement's location at the fringe of the wider society; this will thus include not only nineteenth-century religions, such as the Jehovah's Witness, Mormons and Christadelphians, but also some religions that have newly become visible in the West. However, they may have been in existence in other Countries in one form or another for centuries or even millennia. The use of 'religious' is not helpful either, conscious that Christianity only became a religion in about the 3rd century AD.¹¹ The term 'movement' implies it is a more fluid, less tangible group than an 'organisation' as this would imply a formulated leadership with a hierarchical structure. At the same time, many NRMs are very well structured and could not be included within the definition that 'movement' implies.¹² The use of the term "new" has evolved great debate as to what it designates in this context. On the one hand, "new" connotes that the religion is of a more recent origin than old and well-established religions like Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, which are over a thousand years old. On the other hand, the term "new" designates that a religion is more recent in its formation, with scholars viewing the 1950s or the end of the Second World War in 1945 as the defining time.

⁹ C. Patridge. "Introduction". In *Encyclopaedia of New Religions*, edited by C. Patridge. Oxford: Oxford Lion Publishing PCC, 2004, p. 20.

¹⁰ E. Barker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 145.

¹¹ D. Barret. *The New Believers*. Cassell Plc, 2000, p. 4.

¹² D. Dereck and M. Ashcraft. "Introduction". *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, edited by D. Dereck and M. Ashcraft. New York: University Press, 2005, p.4.

The difficulty of defining NRMs is captured by John A. Saliba. For him, the word “New” has difficulties because many of the NRMs are not really new; most of their syncretistic teachings are found among the Gnostic teaching of ancient Greek, philosophy of ancient India, and some of them like Eckankar and Grail Message have attempted tracing their origin to the beginning of creation.¹³ The term “religious” also has some problems since many NRMs consciously avoid being associated with the term religion. They see religion as having something to do with superstition and dogmatism. The Raelian religion and New Age Movement claim that what they practice is not a religion but pure science; Grail message members believe that many NRMs are too personal, transient, and decentralised to fall into the concept of "movement", which suggests dynamism and social agitation. In spite of these shortcomings, Saliba thinks that the term NRMs is still better than other terminologies such as "alternative religion", "minor religions", "intense religions", or "cult".¹⁴

Consequently, the term new religious movements is the generally accepted term for what is sometimes called, often with pejorative connotation, a "cult". The term has been applied to all new faiths that have arisen worldwide over the past several centuries. David G. Bromley, in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*,

The term new religious movements (NRMs), sometimes referred to as alternative religious movements, marginal religious movements, or cults, identifies an important but difficult-to-demarcate set of religious entities. Although some NRMs are indeed of recent origin, many others constitute contemporary rediscoveries or recombinations of cultural themes explored by predecessor groups.¹⁵

Many new religious movements are not religious in the traditional sense. In them is found, “the mixture of contemporary forms of technological innovation, therapy and medicine, economic enterprise and global organisation has given some new religious movements a decidedly anomalous profile”¹⁸. Contemporary new religious movements, unlike movements in earlier times, make conscious decisions about how they want to be defined, either as religious or seek administrative/legal legitimation as religious bodies. Nevertheless, their origin is still tied to older and established groups. So, this coinage is a generic term referring to the literally thousands of

¹³ J. A. Saliba. *Understanding New Religious Movements*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, p. 40.

¹⁴ J. A. Saliba. *Understanding New Religious Movements*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997, p. 41.

¹⁵ G. B. David. “New Religious Movements”. In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*. Edited by William H. Swathos Jr. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998, p. 23. ¹⁸ G. B. David. “New Religious Movements”... p. 23

religious movements (and occasionally secular alternatives to religion) that have emerged worldwide, but especially in Africa, Japan and the West from 1945. The rituals and content of many of these new religions have been influenced, to a greater or lesser degree, by Buddhist, Christian and Hindu spiritual techniques and perspectives. Barret sees it as "a terminology brought into the vocabulary by sociologists of religion, as a way of avoiding terms such as 'sect' or 'cult', as when these descriptions are applied to groups, there is implied negativity".¹⁶ Adopting Ernst Troeltsch's distinction between Church and sects, Barret sees Churches as large hierarchical organisations whose authority came through the priesthood, its members usually being born into the Church and coming from higher status groups.

Meanwhile, sects (using the lowercase sect, unlike the capitalisation for Church) were smaller groups whose authority was taken from the Bible, and their members were recruited and came from lower-class groups. But due to cultural changes that have taken place, long-held typologies about NRMs and where they are drawn from are no longer valid; in fact, the reverse seems to be the case, "with membership now drawn from a middle class, well-educated, possibly disaffected but not disadvantaged person, currently proselytised"¹⁷. For him, the term new religious movements have four related meanings: (1) Independence; (2) a territory not under the control of any other power; (3) in ecclesiastical usage, the principle that individual congregation or Church is an autonomous and equalitarian society free from any external ecclesiastical control; and (4) the polity based on this principle.

Clark made three observations about new religious movements (NRMs): first, membership and belonging are different between old and new NRMs, and it is possible to belong to several NRMs simultaneously whilst retaining membership with the religion or Church of one's birth. It is because, the new religions had more in common with the traditions from which they emerged than they had with one another. Second, he stresses organisational working differences by noting the modern communication methods used, and the community focus that they now have. Finally, he contrasts the different ways that NRMs now react to mainstream religious groups and organisations while still professing a desire to change or transform existing religions that are far more inclusive than they had been previously.¹⁸

¹⁶ D. Barret. *The New Believers*. Cassell Plc, 2000, p. 21.

¹⁷ D. Barret. *The New Believers*. Cassell Plc, 2000, p. 23.

¹⁸ P. Clarke. *New Religions in Global Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 13.

New religious movements emerged from humans' creativity and capacity for religious expression, providing spiritual meaning and social connection for their members, just as mainstream religious groups do. Contemporary new religious movements manifest the increasing pluralism associated with greater ease of global travel and communication.

Types of New Religious Movements (NRMS)

Over time, scholars have attempted to categorise NRMs. Francis Cardinal Arinze identified them in two ways: types related to Christianity and types related to background knowledge systems.¹⁹

Types with Reference to Christianity

With reference to Christianity, the distinction is made between new movements coming from the protestant reform sects with Christian roots but with considerable doctrinal differences, movements stemming from humanitarian or so-called “human potential” backgrounds (such as new age and religious therapeutic groups) or from “divine potential movements” found particularly in Eastern religious traditions. New religious movements which are born through contact between universal religion and primal religious cultures are different.

Types with Reference to Background Knowledge System

Here, four types can be distinguished. There are movements based on Holy Scripture. These are, therefore, Christian or of Christian origin. A second group of new religious movements are those derived from other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism or traditional religions. Many of these assume a syncretistic way, which is an element of Christianity. A third group of new religious movements show signs of a decomposition of the genuine idea of religion and a return to paganism – a fourth set of new religious movements, the Gnostics²⁰.

Roy Wallis classified new religious movements (NRMs) using 'response to the world' as the principle distinguishing criterion. Wallis suggests that new religious movements (NRMs) fall basically into three categories. The world rejecting, the world-affirming, and the world

¹⁹ Arinze, Cardinal Francis. *The Challenges of New Religious Movements* – EWTN (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.ewtn.com> and retrieved 26/03/2017.

²⁰ Arinze, Cardinal Francis. *The Challenges of...*

accommodating.²¹ *The World Rejecting Group* condemns the materialistic world, condemning any personal success that arrives from it. This group desire a return to rural values that will bring members closer to the Divine. They are participants of the counterculture. Somewhat disillusioned with its approach and objectives, it began to turn to religions such as Hare Krishna, the Divine Light Mission, and Aladura churches. They see their leaders as either occupying the role of Christ or, at times, as returned Christ figures. *The World Affirming Group* is the opposite of the first. They believe that goodness and advancement come from within; there is no need to withdraw from the world. It is only necessary to unlock the human potential inside all of humankind and eradicate problems in the world. *The World-Accommodating Movements* (or self-or psycho-religions) aim to transform the individual by providing the means for complete self-realisation, by being fully aware that the real or inner self is divine and the ultimate goals of the religious of vast is not to know but to become God. The world's accommodating group has a set of beliefs that are centred on a personal orientation, and the basis of worship and ritual is performed through a collective format. The remonstrance for them is not against society but rather against the religious grouping they consider to have lost some of their vitality or zeal. The Charismatic Renewal Movement is a good example.

On their part, Dereck Daschke and Michael Ashcraft classified NRMs into a five-tier level typology fitting into a series of five 'themes', namely, the new understanding group, the new selfgroup, the new family group, the new society group, and the new world group.²² The new understanding group see life as an illusion and seeks a new understanding of the cosmos. It is open to all people as long as they can differentiate between illusion and reality. Buddhism plays a large role here. The new self-group sees the potential within all human beings that needs to be unlocked and liberated from the corrupt world they live in; the ultimate goal is to become individually Godlike. The new family group strive to offer an alternative or new style of family. These groups belong to world-rejecting groups where members are encouraged to sever existing family ties. Because of how they are seen to break up existing families, many movements belonging to this

²¹ R. Wallis. "Three Types of New Religious Movements". In *Cults and New Religious Movement: A Reader*, edited by Lorne L. Dawson, 36-44. London: Blackwell Publishing., 2003, p. 37.

²² D. Dereck and M. Ashcraft. "Introduction". *New Religious Movements: A Documentary Reader*, edited by D. Dereck and M. Ashcraft. New York: University Press, 2005, pp. 11-13.

group have received a lot of attention from the anti-cultic movements. The new society group want to change society, transforming it with their code of morality or social understanding. They seek to right injustice. Finally, the new world group are apocalyptic in outlook, expecting the emergence of a new world order. Though different in their belief structure, both Christian and non-Christian groups believe and wait for the new world. The Christians expect the battle at Armageddon, while the non-theistic traditions wait for the intervention of a superior, alien-based life form.

In contemporary Africa, according to Friday Mbon, there are two kinds of new Christian religious movements. The first is those who, for various reasons, migrated from the historic missionary-founded churches. Often called “schismatic” or “separated” movements, this category generally continues to reflect some of the ideologies of their mother churches despite intensive internal changes, adaptations, inculturation, incarnation and particular emphases. Second are those new religious movements that charismatic Africans independent of any mother church have founded.²³ These are commonly referred to, often pejoratively, as “spiritual” or “spiritualist” (sometimes “spiritist”) movements or churches because of their emphasis on pneumatology and practices of glossolalia and spiritual healing.

Common Characteristics of New Religious Movements (NRMs)

NRMs are a complex phenomenon, one that is very difficult to generalise because they differ in the traditions from which they emerged, in their particular beliefs and practices, and their relation with the rest of society. The NRMs exhibit many characteristics, some of which are unique to individual groups. Baker sustains;

It can be extremely difficult to generalise about new religious movements; they differ in their beliefs, practices, lifestyle, leadership, finances, attitudes, and potential for harm. No activity is typical of new religious movements and atypical of older religions. Each movement has to be considered according to what it believes and does at a particular time and place.²⁴

However, there exist a few characteristics that are common to many new religious movements. These are: First, predominantly first-generation membership in these movements consists of converts, and converts tend to be far more enthusiastic, even fanatic, than those who have been

²³ F. M. Mbon. New Religious Movements (NRMs). Unpublished Lecture Note, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, p. 10.

²⁴ E. Barker. Ageing in New Religions: The Varieties of Later Experiences. *The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religion*, (12), 2011, 1-8.

born into a religion. They are also likely to be familiar with alternative beliefs and practices and potentially vulnerable to outside influence, so it is not uncommon for novices 'true believers' to leave as quickly as they join. Secondly, NRMs are likely to appeal to an atypical segment of the general population. In the past, they have often appealed to the socially, politically, or economically oppressed, offering them, perhaps, a millennial expectation and better conditions in this or the next life. However, new religious movements that were visible in the late 1960s and 1970s appealed disproportionately to the young, well-educated, white middle classes. Rastafarians are an exception.

Thirdly, Barker states, new religions are rarely initiated by a committee. They are usually led by a founder who, having been accorded a Charismatic authority by their followers, is unlikely to be restrained by either rules or tradition and tends, thus, to be both unpredictable and unaccountable to anyone except, perhaps, God.²⁵ This authority can extend from where they live, what they eat and with whom they have sexual or social relationships. This makes them highly unpredictable and capable of dramatic changes without warning. If the movement grows, then a bureaucratic structure may be set up with a charismatic leader at the top and a top-down hierarchical and communication structure underneath. James Lewis holds that charismatic leaders are often the reason that members are attracted to any particular group. He argues that whilst followers appeal to the charismatic leader for legitimacy and belonging, the charismatic leader often appeals for legitimacy themselves. To achieve this, they look to science, tradition, or ancient teachings in search of an acknowledgement of legitimacy.

A fourth characteristic often found in many NRMs, particularly those classified by Roy Willis as world-rejecting movements, have relatively dichotomous worldviews that draw a sharp distinction between Godly and Satanic, good and bad – and, significantly, "them" and "us", resulting in the members cutting themselves off, socially if not geographically, from the rest of society. Throughout history, such sharp boundaries have helped to protect members of new religious movements from prevarication and alternative worldviews.

A fifth characteristic of NRMs is that, insofar as the movements offer an alternative vision and way of life, tensions are likely to arise between the group and the rest of society, especially the

²⁵ E. Barker. Ageing in New Religions: The Varieties of Later Experiences. *The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religion*, (12), 2011, p. 13.

families of converts and those with an interest in preserving the status quo. This is not entirely surprising, as they are implying or declaring that everyone else has got it wrong, and they alone have the New Truth.

Six, new religions change far more rapidly and radically than older, more established religions. Usually, it is not long before a second generation is born into the movement. Although there are exceptions because of the practice of celibacy or birth control, it is inevitable that the charismatic founder will die and that the initial convert will age, leading to the demographic composition of the movement undergoing a marked transformation.

The Nigerian Experience

Nigeria is the most populous black nation on earth, with over 200 million people. Christianity and Islam are the largest religious groups and account for ninety per cent of the population. African traditional religion, which is the original religion of the people and was practised by all, began to lose devotees with the arrival of Islam and Christianity. Now, it has been relegated to the rural areas, with few followers. But there are still a large number of Nigerians who are neither Christians nor Moslems, who are practitioners of a new form of worship which is very syncretic, drawing its teachings and liturgy from African traditional religions, Christianity and Islam.

The 1970s saw an increase in the influx of NRMs into Nigeria, and the majority of them were in southern Nigeria. Among the new arrivals are the Hare Krishna movement (ISKCON), Raelian Religion, Aetherious society, Grail message, Sa'i Baba mission, Brahma Kumaris, Eckankar, AMORC, Guru Maharaji, Scientology, Baha'ism and many others.²⁶ Many of these groups have grown and become very visible with large membership and aggressive means of expansion. AMORC has 76 centres, Grail Message has about 29 Grail centres, and Aetherius Society has three centres. Eckanker and Hare Krishna are the most prominent NRMs in Nigeria; this is seen in Eckanker's 114 centres in 26 states and Hare Krishna's nine temples across the nation.

The last three decades also witnessed the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, giving rise to a geometric increase in the number of Prophets and cases of Propheying. The influx of

²⁶ M. Ibrahim. The Rise and Proliferation of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Nigeria. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(15), 2013, pp. 1-15.

worshippers to these centres and the influence of these prophets and their prophecies have affected even the traditionally conservative denominations²⁷. These movements are the result of an interaction of a tribal or primal society and its religion with one of the more powerful and sophisticated cultures and its major religion, involving some substantial departure from the classical religious traditions of both the cultures concerned in order to find renewal by reworking the contributing traditions into a different religious system²⁸. The emergence of these NRMs in Nigeria is influenced by a variety of reasons: "the quest for personal identity, religious identity, ethnic identity, cultural identity, and academic identity. Other factors include economic factors, political factors, social factors, false prophecy, doctrinal factors, ecclesiastical maladministration, among others"²⁹.

Reasons for the spread of New Religious Movements

The Effect of Globalisation:

The ease of travel, growth in telecommunication, migration, and availability of the internet have tremendously improved the process of interaction and integration among people around the world. This also created a fertile ground for interaction between peoples of different religions far more than was possible, giving rise to the spread of NRMs in Nigeria. Influenced by the liberalism associated with globalisation, people became more willing to worship however they chose to. It allowed the growth of new religious thinking, and the new groups could share their ideologies the world over without pressure to conform to socially acceptable standards. War, insecurity, and the search for a better life forced many people to move away from their original homes. As they went, immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America brought along many NRMs to the West; these groups eventually arrived in Nigeria. Advocacy for religious freedom in a globalised world gave recognition to different types of NRMs. The growth of these NRMs in a very competitive economic environment led to the emergence of the concept of a religious economy put forth by Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, and Roger Finke. This theory sees religion as a commodity in the market, which has been craftily put together and delivered to religious consumers. Producers of religious

²⁷ R. B. Etta. Identifying the True and False Prophets (Deut. 18:22): The Nigerian Situation. A Paper Presented at the Zonal Conference of the National Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), Benue State University, Markudi, Benue State, Wednesday, April 30 – May 3, 2024, p. 16.

²⁸ H. W. Turner. *The History of an African Independent Church: The Church of the Lord (Aladura)*, Volume I. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

²⁹ N. I. Ndiokwere, *Prophecy and Revolution*. London: SPCK, 1995, p. 54.

goods and services make conscious efforts to meet the yearnings of consumers, employing most of the modern techniques of marketing in order to succeed in the highly pluralistic and competitive religious market. Based on the concept of rational choice, religious consumers also select among a plethora of religious commodities that suit their needs and put into it by becoming members.³⁰ According to Upal, the entrepreneurship theory propounded by Stark and Bainbridge considers NRM founders to be entrepreneurs who produce, market, and sell compensators in exchange for other rewards³⁴. A compensator is an unverifiable promise of a future reward that is in low supply or unavailable at present. According to the theory stated above, in a situation where some rewards are in low supply or not available at all, people are willing to accept compensators in lieu of the actual rewards. The effect is a visible increase in the number of groups engaged in the sale of well-packaged messages, coded with religious undertones and geared towards extortion of an already impoverished population³¹.

The success of most NRMs all over the world is their aggressive use of media as an effective medium for advertising their religious products. In the past millennium, contact between members of religious movements was mainly by face-to-face contact. "Earlier, new global religions were spread through the personal efforts of the leaders, who, at great cost and with considerable personal hardship, set out on worldwide missionary tours. Present-day NRMs benefit from the ease and low cost of global communications"³². NRMs have made judicious use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), an important ingredient of globalisation in marketing themselves. People from all over the world have access to their information and products without the hindrance of borders and immigration officers. NRMs have tapped into the huge market available on the internet for the advertisement of their products. Through ICT, these NRMs are able to connect with people from different parts of the world from the comfort of their homes and advertise their religious beliefs and teachings. Many of them have recorded tremendous success. Chryssides notes, "Many of the new religions have availed themselves of the opportunity to go on the Net for a variety of reasons. The prestige value of a web page is no doubt a contributory reason; however, more importantly, numerous religious organisations have realised that some net surfers

³⁰ G. Lang, Temple and Religious Economy. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 1(1), 2005, pp. 5-10

³⁴ M. A. Upal, *Towards a Cognitive Science of New Religious Movements*. Available: <http://faculty.oxy.edu/aupal/res/05/jcc.pdf>. Accessed June 23, 2024.

³¹ R. B. Etta. Identifying the True and False Prophets (Deut. 18:22): The Nigerian Situation, p. 17.

³² O. Hammer and M. Rothstein. "Introduction to New Religious Movements, p. 5

are using the Net to find varieties of religions that may fulfil their spiritual needs.³³ The plethora of religions that feature on the Net can enable the seeker to choose from the widest possible range.

The effort of globalisation on NRMs can be seen across the board. It enabled movements that emanated from the West to gain acceptance across the globe. NRMs originated from outside North America and Western Europe to become conscious of happenings in the West, and some were able to spread to the West.

Nigeria, as a member of the international community, is not immune to the effects of globalisation. As a nation, she has seen a geometric growth in the number of NRMs within her borders, and many have been very successful. The 1970s witnessed an increase in the number of NRM missionaries who came to Nigeria. The ease of travel brought many Nigerians in contact with NRMs across the world, and the growth of the internet made it much easier for them to have access to NRMs in their homes. *Search for new religious experience*

The majority of those drawn to the NRMs are people in search of a new religious experience. Although a religious experience is complex and lacks a generally acceptable definition, it "can be characterised generally as experience that seems to the person having them to be of some objective reality and to have some religious import. That reality can be an individual, a state of affairs, a fact, or even an absence, depending on the religious tradition of the experience is a part of"³⁴. As an important ingredient of religion, the search for a new religious experience is itself an indication of the existence of a spiritual need not yet identified by the older Churches and other religious institutions that have either not been perceived or not succeeded in meeting³⁵. The majority of Christians are drawn to them in the quest to satisfy their thirst for a new way of worship characterised by Scripture reading, singing, dancing, emotional satisfaction, and a feeling of ecstasy.

³³ G. Chryssides, New Religions and the Internet. *Diskus*, 4(2), 1996, pp. 1-16 <http://www.skepsis.nl/online/op.hta>. Accessed May 31, 2024.

³⁴ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *Religious Experience*, 2011. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religiousexperience>. Accessed July 10, 2024.

³⁵ F. C. Arinze. *The Challenges of New Religious Movements – EWTN* (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.ewtn.com> and retrieved 26/03/2017.

Ecstasy is seen as a way of ascending to a higher form of living or at least a way which renders possible the receiving of supernormal endowments. Ndiokwere notes:

A withdrawal of consciousness from circumference to centre; a state in which the absorption of the mind in one idea, in one desire, is so profound that everything else is blotted out, a state in which consciousness of self disappears. Such a condition could be brought about by preparation and could be induced by the use of narcotics, alcohol, music and dancing. It could also come by contemplating and complete spiritual concentration as well as by prayer.³⁶

Answers to life's problems

In Africa and other developing nations, many people seek in religion answers and solutions to daily problems of life, such as protection against witchcraft, sickness, failure in life, growth in business, success in politics, death and many others. The NRMs willingly talk about these problems and many other existential problems and offer immediate physical reminders for them. The Pentecostal movement in Nigeria is a classic example of religion becoming an answer to the daily challenges of life. Pastors and Prophets offer solutions to very new problems as long the person is willing to pay³⁷. There seem to be more sick people in prayer houses and crusade centres than in government hospitals, and "the man of God" has an answer to all.

Secularism

Towards the end of the 20th century, there was a growing debate about the role of religion in public life. There were two main positions: those who supported the place of religion in society and the secularists who claimed that the separation of Church and state provides the best framework for upholding the rights and freedoms of all citizens regardless of their religion or belief³⁸. The rise and spread of NRMs in Nigeria was greatly influenced by secularisation. Efforts by the Nigerian government to intervene or regulate religion, especially in education and health services, led to a reduction in the standards, diminished effectively and destroyed institutions that were the bedrock of a new nation. The takeover of mission schools after the Civil War led to a drastic decline of standards in the education subsector and a rise of moral decadence. Secularism

³⁶ N. I. Ndiokwere, *Prophecy and Revolution*. London: SPCK, 1995, p. 163.

³⁷ R. B. Etta. Identifying the True and False Prophets (Deut. 18:22): *The Nigerian Situation*, p. 18.

³⁸ S. Kettle. Secularism and Religion. Oxford Research Encyclopedia. <http://oxfordre.com>. Accessed July 10, 2024.

gave many people newfound freedom to think differently and the willingness to try new beliefs.

This contributed to the rapid spread of NRMs in Nigeria

Pastoral lukewarmness

Many NRMs came into being and spread in Nigeria because of the pastoral lukewarm attitude of many traditionally dominant religious groups. The NRMs identified these weaknesses in the life of the Christian communities and exploited them maximally.

Where priests are few and scarce, these movements supply many forceful leaders and “evangelists” who are trained in a relatively short time. Where the Catholics are ignorant of Catholic doctrine, they bring aggressive biblical fundamentalism. Where there is lukewarmness and indifference of the sons and daughters of the Church who are not up to the level of the evangelising mission, the sects bring infectious dynamism and remarkable commitment. Where genuine catholic teaching on salvation only in Christ, on the necessity of the Church, and the urgency of missionary work and conversion are obscured, the new religious movements make alternative offers. Where homilies are intellectually above the heads of the people, the new religious movements urge personal commitment to Jesus Christ and strict and literary adherence to the Bible. Where the Church seems presented too much as an institution marked by structures and hierarchy, the new religious movements stress personal relationships with God³⁹.

These and many other pastoral weaknesses made the people lukewarm in the practice of their faith, and eventually, they began to search for alternative religious platforms that would satisfy this lack and bring new vigour. ***The search for wealth***

Research shows that because of the bad economic situation in Nigeria, most young people are drawn to many NRMs in search of a quick way to become rich and successful in the political space. During the period of the oil boom in the 70s, Nigeria had the highest per capita income in Africa, and the manufacturing sector was doing very well. But in the last four decades, Nigeria became a mono-export-dependent nation, with oil being the mainstay of her economy. The neartotal collapse of the manufacturing sector, corruption, and insecurity have driven young people to desperation. Many are ready to make money by cutting corners and getting involved in practices that are not acceptable. Many find in the NRMs a new alternative to actualising their dreams, so it

³⁹ F. C. Arinze. *The Challenges of New Religious Movements* – EWTN (2017) Retrieved from <https://www.ewtn.com> and retrieved 26/03/2017.

is common to find young people in Hare Krishna temple, Eckanker Centre, and Grail Centre who are there principally in search of wealth.

A universal Occurrence

The early 1970s and 1980s saw a dramatic rise and universal spread of new religious movements. In the United States, the majority of them came from a Protestant background and from Eastern religions with a fusion of religious and psychological elements. Subsequently, many are exported from the United States to Latin America, the Philippines and Europe. Most NRMs in Latin America and the Philippines are of Christian origin and tend to be very critical of the Catholic Church, which is the most predominant religious group there. In Africa and Nigeria, in particular, the spread of NRMs was influenced by post-colonial political, cultural, and social crises, inculturation, the desire for healing, and the need to face the existential challenges of daily life. New religious movements which are of local origin in Asia are not a threat where Christians are the majority. Their syncretistic and esoteric offer of relaxation, peace and illumination is a major source of attraction and a factor that facilitates their exportation to Europe and America. Europe has witnessed a crisis of a highly secularised technological society; this has caused fragmentation of a culture which no longer encourages shared values and beliefs. This atmosphere has greatly favoured the spread of new religious movements, and most of them came from the USA or the East.

Resemblance of New Religious Movements to African Traditional Religion

Many are drawn to the NRMs because they find in many of them some of the practices that are acceptable in African Traditional Religion (ATR) but not accepted in traditional Christian denominations. Practices such as magic, divination, sorcery, polygamy, dancing, drumming, ecstasy, fortune telling, protection against witchcraft, and intercessions for the death of the enemy. Although many Nigerians are either Christians or Muslims, they carry along with them to these religions some of the influence of their first religion- African Traditional Religion (ATR). It is very common in Nigeria to still find among Christians and Moslems remnants of belief in spirits, the spirit world, magic, ancestors, and many others. While professing Christianity or Islam, in times of difficulty, they find themselves secretly returning to traditional practices in search of solutions. NRMs and ATR show very close semblance in the concept of a Supreme Being, the pantheon of

gods, reincarnation, the spiritual world and many others. Most of the NRMs that came to Nigeria were more relaxed in doctrine and practice than the dominant religious groups. They allowed their new convert to keep some of the cultural practices of the people that were not permitted by the older religions. This made them attractive to many who desired some religious freedom and also kept to their cultural practices.

Conclusion

While the number of people involved in new religious movements is small, the attention they have received in the popular media and academic discourse suggests a greater significance. However, the new religious movements mean different things to different groups. "In the popular media, new religious movements are most often seen as a social problem. In academic studies, they are more often associated with processes of social change and the critique of modernity"⁴⁰. The phenomenon of the new religious movements is a challenge and an opportunity. This is so because,

The presence of the so-called 'sects' is a more than sufficient reason to make a deep examination of the local Church's ministerial life, along with a simultaneous search for answers and unified guidelines which allow for preserving and strengthening the unity of God's people. Faced with this challenge, you have the opportunity to set up pastoral options... These options are concrete ways to deepen the faith and Christian life of your communities⁴⁵.

When viewed as a response to the social conditions of modernity, new religious movements have different interpretive frameworks. They can be seen as part of the protest against modernity, which has led to a very liberal way of living. Others see them as forums for modern social experimentation. The method of operation may be strange, loud, and critical of older religious views; they possess a high level of syncretism. But they represent the creativity of the human spirit. They are new, alternative, and unconventional in their cultural milieu and thus live in some level of tension with society. Nonetheless, the NRMs express the universal human yearning for change.

⁴⁰ L. Dawson, *Cults, and New Religious Movements: A Reader*. London: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 2 ⁴⁵ John Paul II. *L'osservatore Romano* English edition May 14, 1990, p. 2.

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