



## A STUDY OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE IMMIGRATION PROCESS IN A LIGHT OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION THEORIES AMONG EAST AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN FINLAND

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### **Abstract:**

This study utilizes empirical data to focus on the role of religion in the migration process in light of two theories developed thus so far in the field of immigrant integration. This is achieved based on my own data collected in form of interviews in relation to east African immigrants living in Finland. I investigate whether the currently existing conceptual toolbox is sufficient enough to base an analysis of immigrant integration and how religion influences the process of immigration. Effects of religion are analysed based on individual east African and communal expressions of religious faith. I begin by exploring the concepts of migration and immigrant integration. I then proceed to evaluate the social exchange theory and the social bond theory while focusing on the experiences of east African immigrants in Finland that are captured via interviewing. I argue that despite the theoretical framework for analysing migration phenomena there is still a need for a deeper analysis of the key effects of religion on immigration processes. Additionally, east African immigrants in Finland often face difficulties in religious assimilation in the host society due to mainly language barriers and differences in religious practices. There is an equal need for more elaborate research on religious concepts since most of the currently existing theories are an amalgam of social factors appertaining to immigration processes. A separate focus on religion becomes a necessity since religion has become a juggernaut in migration phenomena.

**Keywords:** religion, migration, immigrant, integration, theoretical exploration

### **1. Background to the review**

In developing countries like the East African member countries, poor economic status is considered one of the main factors pushing their citizens to emigrate in the search of greener pastures (Hirvonen & Lilleør, 2015). However, the reality is that these immigrants are not from the lowest economic stratum in society since they are able to fund their

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migration to other countries while the poorest are left home in their misery (Sundari, 2005).

Immigration largely is comprised of the movement of people from areas considered low in the economic scale where life opportunities are scarce and the cost of living is high to established areas of economic stability (Castelli, 2018). East African countries are among the less developed states of Africa (African Development Bank, 2019). Majority of the East African immigrants are having a low level of education (Egharevba, 2006). Hence better educational training and prospects of a good life are the first and most influential factor which motivates them to migrate in order to better job opportunities (Ridderstad, 2007).

Statistics from recent migration trends show a high rate of immigrant influx into developed countries, with Europe being the most preferred immigrant destination (Abel & Sander, 2014; de Haas et al., 2019). However, there has been a sudden shift of events as the world has been affected by the outbreak of the Corona disease which has made movement across different territories almost impossible. The migration curve is relatively flat throughout the world and this has greatly affected patterns of migration. Previously, most of the immigrants were mainly from developing countries which comprise a great percentage of African countries (Hirvonen & Lilleør, 2015). Currently, the rate of migration has greatly reduced and this means there are yet to come new trends and patterns of migration.

As religion is being accepted as a significant mediator between immigrants and society; sociological scholars have begun once more to give it considerable attention (Cadge & Howard Ecklund, 2007; Ferriss, 2002; Maliepaard & Phalet, 2012). Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) are amongst the sociological scholars who illustrate religion and the social integration of immigrants. Hirschman (2004) articulated that there are three vital benefits which religion offers to immigrants. The three benefits, as postulated by Hirschman include: refuge, resources and respect. Portes and Rumbut (2006) similarly add weight to the religious discourse by arguing that religious practices are the foundations of social exchange and are the determinants of social integration within a multicultural society.

This study, therefore, endeavours to evaluate the influence and part of religion's involvement in the process of social integration of the East African immigrants in Finland. Given that contemporary sociological science studies other sociological aspects including culture and human traditions have been widely covered, the main focus of this study is to deliver a critical comprehension of the characteristic and historical aspects of religion in the social integration of East African immigrants living in Finland. A detailed analysis of differences between immigrants' and natives' religiosity and an evaluation of how the existing differences are hindering or promoting immigrant integration in Finland is discussed in the results section.

## **2. Theories of social integration**

This section presents integration by relating it to the social exchange theory as a conceptual framework that incorporates these key elements of integration. Without overlooking common factors like religion that have been greatly ignored as a factor of social integration, this study intends to capitalize on the usefulness of the social exchange theory in comprehending the multifarious impacts of sociological factors.

Similarly, the social bond theory is later evaluated in this section as it connects integration as a process preceded by bonding as an element of social cohesion in a society. The social bond theory emphasises involvement and investment in society as being an obligation of members of the society with a strong attachment to the society. For the East African Protestant Christian immigrants in Finland to socially integrate there seems to be a need for developing social bonds with the Finnish social sphere.

## **3. Social exchange theory**

The most complicated part of understanding social exchange theory comes when its theoretical components are equated with reality (Leenders, 2014). So far, there exists no common agreement amongst many scholars of sociological sciences on the aspects or perspectives of reality that can be equivalent to social exchange (Jeannot, 2008). According to many sociological scholars, it is highly probable that one can come to a conclusion that social exchange can be either an enabling or a barrier to social integration (Adler & Kwon, 2002b). This makes it even more complex to comprehend and distinguish the various levels of this phenomenon.

In understanding the social exchange theory, it is important that we begin by evaluating one of the basic principles of this theory. This theory postulates that relationships start with interaction and with time they develop into trustworthy and loyal commitments (Westphal & Zajac, 1997). However, this development does not come easily or naturally but it must be based on certain guidelines of interaction that are core to the existence of social relationships (Konovsky, 2000). Thus, when individuals arrive in new societies, their perception of the first interaction with the natives of that society is what will either encourage or discourage the development of relationships to a trustworthy and loyal commitment (Conway, 2004).

When constituents participate in a social context the outcome of participation in general reference is what is considered as social interaction (Leenders, 2014). In this study, East African Protestant Christian immigrants access the Finnish sociological sphere at first through religious participation. Through this interaction, these immigrants get access to the Finnish social sphere through interactions with Finnish natives. This creates relationships that form links to different social aspects of the new societies consequently enhancing social integration (Schminke, 2004). Social exchange can be characterized by the mutual interrelations of individuals or groups in a society based on day-to-day interactions that build over trust, exchange of ideas or even participation in

similar social activities (Naik, 2018). In a general sense, social exchange is an amalgam of social activities that make a social structure like relations, norms, values and morals that bring constituents of a given society together and strengthens harmonious coexistence (Moore, 2010).

Fundamentally, social exchange theory is about morals and values that are held by members of a certain community and that those members remain truthful, and honest and are able to reciprocate the principles that hold that community together (Lin, 2005). This basically explains the instances when members of a given community can rely on networks established within that group to secure benefits (Sobel, 2002). From another perspective, the social exchange provides an environment for learning since it gives an opportunity for observation and practice of a combination of skills better performed by a given group of individuals (Field, 2005).

For there to be successful social integration, individuals living in a community must trust each other. This explains why trust is being taken as one of the basic entities that influence social interactions (Harper & Kelly, 2003). The success of social integration for immigrants in host societies can be evaluated from the perspective of social support within the country of residence or even the social networks created within (Leinonen, 2013). Social networks are basically understood as links created through interactions of immigrants with natives either at workplaces or contact made in involvement in social activities. On the other side, social support is regarded as the provision of services necessary to aid social integration and help immigrants cope easily with the new environment (Wallace & Pichler, 2007).

Social exchange is made up of rules such as reciprocity which assumes that something has to be given for something to be returned. In this context, immigrants anticipate that for successful social integration, a just and receptive treatment must be exhibited by the natives for the immigrants to display trust. The rule of reciprocity is one of the common rules of the social exchange theory and it has been a basis for solid connections that exist amongst constituents of a given group in a society like religious institutions, places of employment, schools or even family settings (Cook, 2017). These kinds of settings are very essential for the purpose of social integration since they connect immigrants to the host society by creating a sense of shared social identity. On the other side, they can cause a setback in social integration since they put pressure on immigrants to comply with the standards and requirements deemed necessary so as to fit in that group (Serageldin, Ismail & Grootaert, 2000). For reciprocity to successful aid in the process of social integration, it has to bind together different social groups in such a way that it bridges their differences and makes it acceptable to the people concerned (Evans & Peter, 1996).

In recent researches on the social exchange theory, one major hallmark that has been demonstrated by scholars is the attention of the exchange theory to connect with the theories of social status and influence. Homans (1961), one of the theorists of the social exchange theory argues that in any social interaction between individuals in society the dominant emphasis is on the individual behaviour of the elements of interaction.

Homans' main focus was to bring out important determinants of social behaviour that he names as leadership, power, conformity and social class. He further postulates that anything that emerges in society as a result of social interaction cannot be separated from the elements of the society but can be considered together as the characteristics of behaviour in society arise from individual behaviour.

Social exchange theory explains social interactions at the macro level in which individual behaviours are considered mainly as they form the basic unit of interactions in any society. The value of behaviour is determined by the actions of the constituents of a given society and it is generally provided at the beginning of a social relationship. Homan main focus was to show that social integration is majorly determined by the social behaviour of constituents of a given society and it can be encouraged by reinforcement or lack of it of given individual behaviours.

In conclusion, social exchange theory which explains social relationships within members in a social group sets precedence as an asset for productive coexistence to other components of social integration (Degenne, 2004). Social institutions such as churches have set expectations that greatly rely on the productivity of societal interactions and social exchanges by enabling its members to believe in the structures of a society and to invest trust in them (Platteau, 1994; Platteau & Moore, 1994; Woolcock, 1998).

#### **4. Social bond theory**

The social bond theory has been handy in the understanding of individual behaviours and how much they are influenced by society (Landale et al., 2011). Hirschi argues that all human beings have an innate tendency to delinquency but this tendency is controlled by social bonds that exist in society (Hirschi, 2017a). He further argues that people only restrain themselves from committing crimes against the social regulations of society if their attachment to that society is deeply connected. The bonds to society can be connected to an individual's respect for societal institutions like churches which provide a set of moral guidelines alongside which the individual is supposed to behave (Moskos et al., 2017).

Hirschi specifies four different bonding types that contribute to social integration: *attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief* (Bouffard & Petkovsek, 2014). In this study, because of the unique nature of the bond between immigrants and natives of the host society, emphasis is given chiefly to the observance of attachment and commitment elements, specifically towards the understanding of the social integration of immigrants into the host society.

To begin with, we assess the first element of the theory of the social bond which is *attachment*. Basically, attachment denotes the connection between an individual and other members of society including friends and family (Hirschi, 2017b). In a broader sense, the connection extends to accommodate emotional ties and values the individual attaches to the other members of society. Social bonds theory postulates that when an individual's

attachment to a given society is strong, there is a high chance that social integration will take place quite easily (Hirschi, 2017a).

Immigrants develop an attachment to religious values more easily since that is the only societal value that seems to connect them with the natives of host societies. Strong devotion towards religious activities and regular attendance of religious services shows signs of the strong attachment of the immigrants to the sociological aspect of religion. However, in some instances, the attachment of an individual needs a separate assessment since it cannot be generalized that everything in the society might be liked by all people settling there. There are some visitors that will be more attached to different aspects than others, for instance, immigrants can develop respect for old people and hence develop an attachment to them (Steketee & Aussems, 2018).

Secondly, Hirschi illustrates about *commitment*, which comes as the second element of the theory. He defines commitment as the total focus of resources, energy and time towards a given course so as to ascertain a set goal (Bouffard & Petkovsek, 2014). In that sense, therefore, when people develop strong commitments, they do not tolerate any behaviour that is going to work against achieving their set goals (Costello, 2012). For instance, most immigrants that arrive in new host societies report being committed members of the religious community in their places of residence. They do not want to jeopardize the commitment by excluding themselves from other Christians who assemble as a community to sing, listen and worship as trained or brought up in their home countries.

For many immigrants, commitment to the Christian community is very important. In this regard, therefore, commitment among members of a community forms a basis for a strong and unified community (Vaughan et al., 2017). When a member is committed to a certain group in a community it bestows upon the member responsibility of respecting and honouring social standards and societal norms that run that group in the community. The third element of the social bond theory is *involvement*. Involvement is a measure of time and resources an individual spends being part of a given group in a community for instance contributing towards the formation of a religious institution like a church (Mulgan et al., 2011). In social bond theory, when one becomes involved in a social activity, he or she becomes part of the community that is undertaking the activity (Porges, 2003). Involvement enhances social integration because it provides room for interaction and as well it offers an opportunity for individuals in a community to come out and play a role in something that they may perceive interesting. For many Christians, more especially immigrants, involvement is best demonstrated in their commitment to Church related activities or community-related activities (Macy & Cook, 2002).

The last element of the theory of the social bond that will be looked into in this section is *belief*. In his illustration, Hirschi describes belief as a set of social constructs that govern a given society through setting values and morals that are binding to the inhabitants of that society (Hirschi, 2017b). Different forms of morals and values form a belief system from which the entire society derives order and meaning from (Kim & Kim, 2017). When people share a belief system, they are bound together by the social norms

regulating the belief system (R. King & Christou, 2010). A shared belief system enhances social integration through the performance of the same social activities and as well through exhibiting similar social behaviours (Obokata et al., 2014). Observance of the morals and values that operationalize a belief system builds trust and togetherness among members of a given society (Gentina et al., 2017). Hirschi further illustrates that if the trust is taken away, there is a likelihood of weakening social integration because in that way there would be a violation of the belief system (Steketee & Aussems, 2018).

The major thesis in this study is grounded on the fact that most of the sociological practices involving social immigrant integration into social dimensions of the receiving countries are predominant in the social exchange and the social bond theories that have been explored above. A rigorous social analysis approach is therefore necessary for understanding the dynamics of immigrant integration into the sociological sphere of the host society. Good sociological research needs to illustrate and stress the processes followed in the search for reality practices of the subjects of the study (Mosander & Mikel, 2009).

## **5. East African immigrants in Finland**

Finland, unlike its neighbours in the Nordic region, has not been historically homogenous in its national culture and population. Finland's population was 5.5 million people (UN, 2009). Though a greater number of the people living in Finland are Finnish there are other minority communities that have been historically incorporated as part of the larger Finnish community without necessarily being immigrants. The largest minority community are the Swedish-speaking Finns who form an approximate of 5.4 percent of the Finnish total population (Matikainen, 2005). This group enjoys extensive rights as a Finnish community given that Swedish is the second official language of Finland. Besides this community, there is also another small indigenous community known as the Sami which occupies 2.3 percent of the Finnish total population.

Finland has been an emigration country for a long period of time in the past. A large number of the Finnish population migrated to Sweden following the economic superiority of Sweden over Finland (Pekkala, 2003). The situation maintained so until late 1990 when the first immigrant communities began to arrive. These immigrant communities that arrived were the Ingrian migrants from Russia and refugees from Somalia. However, the period of time in which the number of people coming into Finland exceeded the number of people leaving is said to be the year 1980 (Heikkila & Jarvinen, 2003).

Following this first increased rate of immigration exceeding the rate of emigration, Finland has progressively been a migrant destination country. Trends of migration in Finland indicate that currently, the largest number of immigrants arriving in Finland originate from African countries. A large percentage of the immigrants arriving in Finland have come there for employment purposes followed closely by those migrating for educational purposes.

The settlement of immigrants in Finland has however been mainly in the Finnish urban centres except for a few cases in which immigrants are forced by circumstances to settle in rural areas. This pattern of settlement has been greatly influenced by the degree of acceptability of the Finnish people to accommodate immigrants into their social sphere. The general perception of the common Finnish people is of a community that is generally culturally conservative. This has led to strong social identifiers within Finnish people that it becomes difficult for immigrant communities to penetrate. For if a community holds high their cultural perception and seems unwelcoming to new interactions it becomes almost impossible for outsiders to settle within and even integrate (Pollack, 2008).

Most parts of Finland are dominantly occupied by the Finnish people with the exception of cities and municipalities that have received immigrants in the past years making them multicultural regions (Saarela, 2009). Areas that have no immigrants' settlements seem to be disinterested in immigrant communities and are less welcoming to immigrants. Upon the arrival of immigrants in Finland, their area of settlement is definitely informed by the number of other immigrants that have settled in that area. This has continued the trend of progressive settlement of immigrants in the already immigrant settlements and a simultaneous avoidance of immigrants settling in areas with no any other immigrants (Saarela, 2009).

For successive integration of immigrants into any host society, there must be acceptability of the immigrants by natives of the host society (Rodriguez & Garro, 2015). If immigrants are treated with coldness and dismissive attitudes it becomes almost impossible for social integration to take place. In the case of East African immigrants in Finland, a majority of them are residing in the Helsinki region owing to the fact that this region is multicultural. Settlement and integration in multicultural regions are at least easy as compared to regions that are culturally homogenous because there is a mixture of culture and the perception of the natives towards the immigrants is flexible since they interact almost on daily basis.

The perception by the East African immigrants that they might not be welcome in some other regions in Finland in which there are few or no other immigrants has been the basis for the settlement and integration patterns taken by this group of immigrants in Finland. Nevertheless, there are no verifiable cases in which immigrants have been discriminated against in areas within Finland that are sparsely occupied by immigrants. However, the general impression that carries most opinion goes that such regions are likely to subject immigrants to long periods of isolation before socially integrating into the Finnish social sphere (Saarinen, 2012).

Generally, immigrant integration into the Finnish social sphere involves many factors even when the right circumstances that influence integration patterns are favourable. First, the Finnish language presents a huge communication barrier for immigrants to reach the Finnish natives. The settlement of immigrants in areas where other immigrants have already settled lowers the necessity to learn the language since there are other options like integrating with other immigrants in the first place. This

affects the totality of the duration taken by the immigrants to understand the Finnish culture and to as well facilitate the process of social integration between the immigrants and the Finnish natives.

The notion of immigrant acceptability carries its effect as an influencer of patterns of integration and as well a facilitator of the process of social integration. Most African immigrants are prone to the natural fear of being racially discriminated against upon arrival in Finland given that Finland is dominantly white race country. These fears draw them to fellow African immigrants where they settle and initiate social cycles within themselves before opening up to Finnish natives. This also shows why most of the African immigrants are mainly concentrated in the Helsinki region where the population demographics are a mixture of different communities making the region a multicultural centre (Sahlberg, 2011).

Differences in cultural and communication barriers have been the main reason why most immigrants settle in areas occupied by fellow immigrants before getting access to the Finnish social sphere. Other factors such as uncertainty of the traditions and cultural preferences become among the reasons why the immigrants formulate a notion of being unwelcome in some parts of the country hence maintaining a specific settlement and integration protocol. There is no specific way in which this notion can be changed. It seems to come naturally from both the side of immigrants and the side of natives. However, the feeling of being acceptable plays a role greatly on the side of the immigrants more than natives. To the natives, there is a generalized attitude of indifference towards people of different origins and descent which as well creates a separation between the immigrants and the natives.

The willingness of the Finnish natives to express warm reception of the immigrants can as well determine the degree of the perception of acceptability by the immigrants. Free interactions in social meetings and generous moods can help in influencing patterns of settlement and integration since this plays a big role in shaping immigrants' perceptions towards the native society. Given that this view of feeling acceptable lies deeply in the social dimension, it can therefore be solved by social mechanisms. However, such a social factor as the acceptability of immigrants by the natives of host countries cannot be directly regulated by the policy since it is subject to personal attitude adjustment (Niemela et al., 2018).

Enhancing immigrant integration across the country of Finland will require that both immigrants and natives be in a neutral position whereby they will both accept adjustments to their normal routines. This prospect seems a solace to immigrants more than natives since with immigrants the change of their routines is something they can quickly harmonize with by the fact that they are away from their homeland. Conversely, natives of the receiver country in a way prefer to have their way of life as the dominant cultural path to be followed. This dissonance is what creates social divisions and the rigidity of either divide to compromise tightens the differences and makes each individual to be naturally attracted to people like them.

## 6. Methodology

### 6.1 Research questions

In this study, I analyze the role of religion in the immigration process in light of social integration theories among east African immigrants living in Finland. I am answering the following research questions:

- 1) What role does religion play in every day's lives of protestant Christian immigrants from East Africa?
- 2) What is the significance of religion as compared to other factors of social integration in relation to East African protestant Christians' integration into Finnish society?
- 3) What is the role of religion in social integration in relation to the integration of the East African protestant Christian immigrants?

### 6.2 Data collection

This study employed snowball sampling to collect qualitative data where the method of selection was arrived at through personal contacts (Schonlau & Liebau, 2012). The snowball sampling stands on assumptions that through personal contact there exists a link that connects the first contact and the proceeding contacts within the same population that is targeted. Through that link, numerous referrals can be initiated within a short time and within a circle of acquaintances (Atkinson & Flint, 2001).

This study preferred snowball sampling because it provides a way to identify interviewees who otherwise might not have been included in the sample (Etikan, 2016). Again, in snowball sampling the efficiency of the technique is high since the access of samples takes less time because of the introduction by other respondents (Handcock & Gile, 2011). Being an East African immigrant and a member of the same culture, it was not easy to find people who are willing to be interviewed since there was suspicion that the interview might be used to expose them to some trouble.

Interviews were done in the respondents' preferred place. Given that most respondents were working in the city, they chose to meet in the city centre or places nearby the city because they thought it was easier to meet in a restaurant or even in their Churches, especially before the Bible studies. There were some other interviews that took place outside the city as well in the respondents' homes, but that depended on how much the respondent trusted the researcher. During the conducting of the interviews, this study generally focused on inquiring from the respondents about their background from their countries of origin. Similarly, this study inquired about their relations with the Finnish government and the reason for migration, immigration status and so on.

### 6.3 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was purposely employed because this approach gives a combined interpretation of texts or speech and explains with clarity why a certain concept was interpreted in a certain manner with justification from the applicable context

(Collector & Module, 2011). Qualitative content analysis is often preferred because it takes a thematic approach whereby concepts carried in texts of speech or writing are taken as a whole rather than analysing single units like words or even sentences (Flick, 2014). I went through the data collected and transcribed the interviews after which I based my interpretation and analysis based on my research questions. My analysis was based on themes that were interpreted across all the data that I had collected. This aspect was essential since analysis of each word would have been tiresome and to an extent irrelevant and unnecessary.

## 7. Results

The results show that many East African immigrants in Finland have higher expectations of Finland as their host country. The decision to come to Finland is motivated by the provision of services and better life opportunities that cannot be available back in their home countries. Finland's educational facilities are among the best in the world and this has attracted many students worldwide although Finland has got rather the smallest immigration rate in the Nordic. Statistics in Finland reveal that in 2018 there was a total of 20,000 foreign students enrolled on higher education institutions in Finland and a further 9,000 foreign nationals that studied partly in Finland over exchange programs (Finnish national agency for education, 2019). A great number of the students were coming from non-EU countries while the number of European country nationals was declining. The prospects of the students after finishing education in Finland are developing the professional competence of being able to work in Finland or secure a job in an international job market (Wickström, 2015). The following transcriptions from three interviews conducted show the importance of educational opportunities and the opportunity for better life conditions:

*"I have lived in Finland for the last ten years, by the way you have to understand the education status back and so my intention of moving to Finland was due to studies. I had a desire to get studies in computer science and Finland came number among many choices that I thought of. Finland has good reputation as an excellent academic environment. Having completed first degree I got a job and later after two years of work experience, I applied into a master's degree which I completed and continue working since then."* (Mwakasenge)

*"I moved to Finland from my home country for the sake of education. I found that education was cheaper and affordable here in Finland more than my home country. Back home it is only the rich who succeed while people like me are nobody. So, after my graduation with a nursing degree, I got a job immediately and then got married here."* (Samia)

*"I have lived here in Finland for the last 28 yrs. I moved to Finland for further studies. Back home it was very hard to get into university and so my parents advised me to look for place of study abroad and so one of my friends recommended Finland due to its free education by then. Those day's bachelors were on granted in Polytechnics unlike these days when Polytechnics have changed to university of applied sciences. Anyhow I graduated with sociology degree and got a job and later got married and settled here."*  
(Lulu)

Mwakasenge, Samia and Lulu all strongly believe that their home countries cannot offer educational opportunities that can match their country of residence. They also tend to believe that it is easy to get access to education in Finland than in their home countries. These East African immigrants often find that they are unable to attend University colleges in their home countries as they cannot afford to pay tuition fees. It has become a trend in many African countries that rich people usually find their way to schools as they can pay fees while the poor are left out (Hardman et al., 2011).

Previous research shows that many young East African immigrants that are from poor families search for free education possibilities outside their countries to better their lives (Kirigia et al., 2006). It has been realised that most poor families can dare to sell their land so as to be able to raise funds to support the education of their children in foreign countries where they believe there are better educational opportunities (Wangenge-Ouma, 2008). This shows that when individuals decide to make migration decisions a lot is involved and many people have been involved especially the family of the migrant.

Decisions to migrate are accompanied by expectations of improving the status of life through obtaining a better education or by getting better employment opportunities (De Jong, 2000). Migrants from developing countries especially East African countries encompass a lot of expectations from a single migration process. Ranging from better educational opportunities to employment East African immigrants look further to immigration to help in relieving political pressures, poor economic status and weak social systems (McKenzie et al., 2013). This shows that despite it being viewed as a voluntary decision, migration of the East African natives in a sense is pushed by desires of life such as hopes for a better life in a foreign country than it is at home (O'Reilly & Benson, 2009).

Cases of migration being a salvage for a low life seems to be a trend for people coming from low-income earning families (Delavande et al., 2011). With such kinds of individuals, migration serves as an escape route that leads away from poverty to economic stability. The increasing use of technology has contributed to more cases of migration since now travelling has become easy and people can obtain information concerning a country on the internet (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). When individuals identify opportunities in a place they compare and if they find life is promising in those places then a migration decision is made.

Findings obtained from this study through interviewing revealed to a great extent that immigrant religiosity maintains even after arrival in a foreign land. The East African immigrants who were largely Lutheran Protestants from their home countries remained

Lutheran even after settling in Finland and they attended religious services in Lutheran congregations in Finland. In some cases, the immigrants expressed more interest in religion in Finland than they were in their home countries. This is supported by the fact that religion is one of the social institutions that provide a connection between fellow immigrants and natives of the host country (Koopmans, 2013).

Accordingly, religion is both individual and social (Crul & Schneider, 2010). Settling in a foreign land throws the immigrant into a social crisis. The apparent cultural differences make them feel excluded and completely bound to societal norms and morals of the new society (Faaborq et al., 2010). Since they cannot jump in that direction immediately, immigrants have often resorted to religion to develop social identity and to feel involved in society (Beckers & Blumberg, 2013). The desire for institutional attachment has also been a contributing factor to immigrants' involvement in religious institutions like churches (Moskos et al., 2017). Given that they cannot identify themselves based on their ethnicity when in a foreign land, the question of "who am I" is best addressed within the channels of religion (Christou & King, 2010).

Relying on these findings, it can be concluded that religion plays a great part in the integration of East African immigrants since it forms a primary social identity for immigrants in a foreign land. A similar finding has been observed in another study (Omenyo, 2011). This is more common, especially for migrants coming from developing countries like East African countries where culture and ethnicity precede religion and identity through the tribe, not even nationality (Koopmans, 2013). When these immigrants arrive in Finland, a nationalistic society they get thrown into an identity crisis because they cannot identify themselves by their tribes which are unknown (Délano, 2014). The only chance to connect remains and lies in religion. Religion, therefore, connects most of them to fellow immigrants and as well Finnish natives.

*"...religion is a moral compass in life. It directs our footsteps and ensures that we walk with God while living here on earth. It always reminds me to live in harmony with fellow human beings. Out of the belief in the existence of God, it comes to me naturally that in every situation I face there is someone above who has control over it and I need not to panic." (Walter)*

*"As for me religion is an identification of life both from the liberal and conservative point of view." (Joshua).*

*"...Religion plays quite a number of roles in our daily lives. Religion actually dictates on what I eat, for example, Muslims don't eat pork and this in one way or the other will affect the kind of friends they keep. Because of these religious confines, when people migrate to new societies, it would be almost impossible to have personal relationships across religions. This will affect social integration and it will in turn take a long time before relationships are created. Take for example a Muslim thinking of visiting a Christian in his or her residence. The first thing to come to mind will be food and if for*

*once they think that the food offered is not acceptable in their religion there is a possibility of reconsidering the visit. Conversely, people sharing religion have a lot in common and this gives a leeway to inter-personal interaction. For instance, Muslims differ from us Christians when it comes to marriage because our religion does not permit polygamy while the Muslims allow somebody to marry up to four wives. Due to such kind of striking differences across our religions it would narrow down the choices as to whom we relate to.” (Rebecca).*

Taking cognisance of the above accounts from Walter and Rebecca, it can be presumed that religious convictions can be central to human conscience and can be understood as the voice that determines on what is right to do and the wrong to be avoided (Hjarvard, 2008). Although the basis of categorization of good or bad differs among various religions, it can be arguably said that by means of religion, or other spiritual beliefs, human beings can identify beneficial factors in others and create relationships, more especially in the context of being foreigners in a new land (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2009).

In true essence, many immigrants have found refuge in Christian communities in that they find a place where they connect to other people. Hence, it can be concluded that the inclination to religion by immigrants upon arrival in a foreign land is actually a response to developing a social connection between them and the natives of their host society and as well it helps them to develop a social identity (Moskos et al., 2017). East African immigrants when in a foreign land have exhibited the capacity for strong religious beliefs and their religiosity has been an anchor for basing a meaning of life and as well developing an identity (Kastoryano, 2004). This can be understood by the underlying fact that those immigrants tend to interact in most cases with the people they think have similar religious views as them because in such a context most things are understood in common. This, however, does not indicate that in so doing they are connected to the Finnish society but rather it can also mean that they isolate themselves.

The role of religion/religious community would thus be instrumental to themselves and not that it can also help in the integration process. While the expression of religious traits and the apparent religiosity of the immigrants can be helpful in finding life meaning as well as developing an identity, it can as well bring frustration since the host society does not see religion the same way as the East African immigrants. Religious values according to the East African immigrants have shared values of an (ethnic) group which manifest in religious beliefs although this might as well block them from being open to integration as they will finally exclude themselves from others who are not of the same religion

## **8. Conclusion**

Findings of this study concerning the social integration of East African immigrants into the Finnish social sphere outline that even though migration scholars have put attention

to the integration of immigrants into the social dimension of their host countries, still yet there exist obstacles that have not been fully addressed. Similarly, even with the address of social integration by most migration scholars, an extensive hub of knowledge has not been achieved and the understanding of social integration in different contexts is still far from complete.

To begin with, the understanding of social integration in the Finnish context is limited and lacks clarity. Researches that have been done in Finland about migration have majorly focused on the movement of people, reasons for migration and areas of settlement with few talking about the integration of people in their areas of settlement (Saarinen, 2012). On the side of religion, previous studies have focused on minority religious groups and their emergency in Finland, still lacking in the concept of the integration of minority groups into the larger Finnish society.

This research reveals that East African immigrants hold religion in high regard. Not only do they believe and practise their religions but they do look at everything from a religious point of view. They tend to work out their lives through the eye-glass of religion. This perhaps lies behind the fact that East African immigrants maintain their religiosity even upon settling in a new society. Similarly, it was noted that the religiosity of the immigrants increases as they settle in new societies far away from home where they cannot express their cultural practices hence religion playing as the only social identity.

Most East African immigrants believe that for a community to be peaceful there has to be a unifying belief in religion which dictates the morals and values of the society. Therefore, for them, to talk of social integration would be only realistic if there is a mention of religion since other aspects of social interaction present inequality between the immigrant and the natives. Concerning religion, it should be known to Finnish religious leaders that the structure of the Finnish religious system should be reset to accommodate newcomers. This, if done, will be of great advantage for social integration and immigrants will feel part of the Finnish religious system. In the long run, when these issues are addressed, the misconception of exclusion that most immigrants hold can be reversed and more trust will be earned by the Finnish citizens from immigrants. When an understanding of each party exists, Finnish natives can learn and understand the problems of the immigrants and immigrants can well understand the situations of the natives.

This study provides a basis for other scholars to address the needs that arise within the discipline of migration and social integration. It also poses a challenge for scholars to investigate religion and its impact on the social integration of immigrants in contemporary Finland. More so, the understanding of social integration in the Finnish context has been based on unsubstantiated information that has created notions about Finnish society which cannot as well be confirmed. It is, therefore, necessary for scholars to investigate this topic and present scholarly knowledge that will be reliable in the case of understanding social integration in Finland.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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