

Effects of Islamic Conversion on Christian Churches in Isoka Township

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Abstract:

This study addresses the effects of Islamic conversion on Christian Churches in Isoka Township. Given the noticeable presence of Islam within the Namwanga Community of Isoka and its luring influence on poverty-stricken people in the area, the effects of local people converting from Christianity to Islam needed to be investigated to know the reaction and mitigation measures Christianity had put in place to accommodate the vice. Objectives of the study were: to analyse the concept of conversion based on Horton's (1971)¹ theory and assess the effects of Islamic conversion on Christianity. To explore these, the study drew upon a purposely selected sample of 24 participants from local Christian churches, a mosque and the general public. The Descriptive Qualitative Research Design was used as the foundation for data collection. Semi-structured and Open-ended interviews were applied to obtain the required data. The interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically for respondents' perceptions of the effects of Islamic conversion on Christianity. Findings: The effects of Islamic conversion on Christianity were determined. Three major themes from the results were religious competition, disintegration of Christian families and indoctrination. The study recommends the carrying out of follow-up studies on the progress of Islam in the area and urging the two contending religions in the area to take advantage of the stance taken by Zambia to promote religious pluralism in the nation to accommodate each other and co-exist.

Keywords: Islam, Isoka, Namwanga community, Religious Conversion, Zambia.

1.0 Introduction

This study investigates the effects of Islamic conversion on Christian churches in the Isoka Township of Zambia. Despite being the youngest religion in the area, its influence on the ground seems to be so profound, causing disturbing effects on Christian churches which worry about losing membership to Islam. Isoka Township is surrounded by the Namwanga people who are predominantly entrepreneurial and subsistent farmers. In terms of religious allegiance, the Namwanga community is predominantly Christian, with elements of the African Indigenous Religion still characterising people's lives alongside Christianity, which is a foreign religion introduced to the area by missionaries from Europe in the 19th century. Christians of the Mainline Churches in Zambia include the Roman Catholic, United Church of Zambia (UCZ), Pentecostal Assembly, Seventh Day Adventists (SDA), Baptist Church and New Apostolic Churches - Islam has just made inroads into the community of the Namangan people in Isoka in the late 20th century. Its sudden appearance in this area which has been predominantly a Christian zone has been viewed as a relatively curious development. Nevertheless, the study considers the prevalence

of Islam in the Isoka district and the influence it has on the Namwanga people as critical in understanding the role of Islam in a multi-faith Zambia.

1.1 The Problem Statement

Isoka district welcomed Islam in 2014. Upon its coming, this religion made an instant appeal to local people that caused many Christians in the area to abandon their faith as they converted to Islam. However, the effects of local people converting from Christianity to Islam were not known. This prompted the current study whose aim was to provide the information necessary to bridge the knowledge gap with regard to inter-faith religious conversion that took place in Isoka Township.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

1. To analyse the concept of conversion Isoka
2. To assess the effects the Islamic conversion caused on Christians.

2.0 Theoretical Locale and Brief Review of Literature

In terms of theoretical placement, the study is based on Horton's Intellectualist theory of conversion. Horton (1971)¹ put forward one of the most significant theories of conversion in the 1970s, postulating that African cosmology comprises lesser spirits denoted by the microcosm and the Supreme Being denoted by the macrocosm. According to Horton, human beings are active agents who seek to understand, predict, and control space and time events and their cognitive and intellectual activities are geared to the social and cultural world they inhabit. He observed that the fundamental worldview of small-scale African societies consisted of several spheres. One was the microcosm was the daily world that occupied most of a community's energy. Their religious concerns revolved around the explanation, prediction, and control of their concrete world.

Virtually all groups had a macrocosm, the wider world, which was only minimally developed because their daily life was focused on the microcosm. With increasing mobility and interaction with people from the wider social world, the Africans sought to expand their myths, rituals, and symbols to include the macrocosm. Africans then came into contact with Christianity and Islam. In order to make sense of the new situation and wider social, and cultural world, they expanded their cosmology. Horton (1971) argues that conversion took place differentially based on the degree to which a group was focused on the microcosm or macrocosm. He further contends that Africans converted to either Christianity or Islam owing to the changes that came along with colonial rule. These include commerce, schools, hospitals, and effective communication just to name a few. He further stated that with the coming of foreigners to the African continent, the indigenous people experienced change at personal and community levels.

Additionally, Horton (1971) along with Rambo (1993)² contend that every conversion starts with a crisis (deprivation or quest for something) in an individual's life. It is from the crisis that the quest for solutions springs out, and for as long as the individual continues the quest, they are most likely to have an encounter with what is sort, in this case, a new belief system in the form of religion. An interaction with the new belief system gives birth to a commitment and consequently, the benefits and demerits of the new belief system are experienced. In line with principles undergirding Horton's Intellectualist theory of conversion,

this study, therefore, explored the effects of Islamic conversion on Christian Churches in Isoka Township in Zambia.

2.1 Conversion to Islam

Conversion is described as a transition or leap from one worldview to another as a result of instability or breakdown of the existing one. It involves both the individual and the social (Neumueller, 2012)³. According to Neumueller (2012), conversion always has a double face, from the perspective of the receiving and of the departed religious group. There are different types of conversion, which may be loosely characterised as active, secondary, marital, forced, and deathbed conversion. The basic concept of religious conversion may be described as a change in affiliation from one religion to another, or the transition from non-involvement to belief in a religion. It also designates a change involving a transformation and re-orientation affecting every aspect of a person's life, which occurs suddenly or gradually (Goring, 1993)⁴.

In another account, Gooren (2016)⁵ defines Religious conversion as a process that entails a change in religious affiliation, worldview and identity. As a consequence, the conversion process dialectically establishes and changes the very entities to which and from which people convert. This entails that the religion that receives or is deprived of its followers changes in one way or the other, either positively or negatively. Conversion is naturally situated within the society and context of the individual undergoing the change, so the modern experience will differ substantially from that of a convert a hundred years ago, even within the same culture and location, just as individuals in the same time period will have a diversity of experiences. Social, political and demographic dynamics all have their part to play in understanding a particular conversion event. However, while accounting for such divergence, certain strands seem to connect to the experience generally, such as the conceptualization of conversion as a calling (*Ibid*)

According to Gooren, many Muslims reject the concept of conversion to Islam. Male circumcision is not usually required of adult converts; however, many undergo this procedure to feel more 'complete' and 'at one' with the faith. Many converts to Islam seem to choose a Muslim name. There is no obligation to do so, but it is often used to demonstrate affiliation with the new faith, and if the convert's first name has a meaning incompatible with Islam, then the name is 'corrected' with a Muslim name. For Islamic scholars, the turn to Islam happens in accordance with 'the natural disposition of man,' also known as fitrah. Nonetheless, this outlook encompasses the idea of conversion in European terms, at least if the person has moved within the Abrahamic religious horizon.

Conversion often included social, but also political and economic advantages. Becoming Muslim gave way to evading tyranny, participating in the trade, escaping (religious and status) discrimination and gaining a more advantageous position within society. Conversions to Islam during the early rise of the religion were as simple and straightforward, as conversion to Islam is today: no official registration was needed and the only 'formal' requirement was to pronounce the Islamic confession of faith. Marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims was permitted, and offspring from mixed-religious marriages were primarily brought up as Muslims. At the same time, it should not however be neglected that the conversion to Islam was seen as a one-way process. Apostasy from Islam often carried and still carries today in some nations with a Muslim majority society legal and social consequences (*Ibid*).

2.2 Entry of Islam into Africa and its Inroads into Zambia

Africa as a continent has been exposed to major world religions as far back as the first century. Carmody (2004:61)⁶ states that in 64 A.D., there was already the foundation of the first Christian community in Africa. Shortly afterwards, Muslims conquered the Maghrib region in 614 A.D. leaving North Africa predominantly Islamic up to today. Millions of African peoples have abandoned their African Traditional Religions and converted to either Christianity or Islam. In Africa, Islam came in through three routes. The first route was across the Sahara to West Africa reaching Mauritania in 1000 and River Niger a little later (Ibid).

The arrival of Islam in Zambia dates back to the fourteenth century when Muslims established emirates on the coast of East Africa and later spread their religion to the interior of the continent. During that period, Muslim slave merchants extended their business to the interior regions reaching Zambia in the period of the Omani dynasty under Al Bu Said. Arab slave traders entered Zambia from their trading bases on the coast of Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique. In more recent times, some Muslims from Somalia and Kenya settled in Zambia (Muma, 2015)⁷.

Not much has been written about Islam in Zambia. According to Cheyeka (2007:76)⁸, the history of Muslims in Zambia is a subject largely ignored by historians of religion despite the recognition that there are many Zambians who profess Islam today. Levtzion and Pouwels (2010:7)⁹ have asserted that there are no Zambian Muslims and the only main Mosque in Lusaka is known locally as the 'Indian Church'. However, Cheyeka (2007) has since refuted the duo's assertion. In his Rebuttal, Cheyeka argues that there are, instead, so many black Zambians professing Islam.

The first encounter between the people of Zambia and Islam occurred in the 1840s when the Arabs and Swahili ivory and Slave traders made contact with the Tabwa and Bemba people of Muchinga Province. The Arabs came from the ports of Kilwa, Zanzibar and Sofala on the east coast. The leading Arabs and Swahili traders either set themselves as local Chiefs among the indigenous people or in some cases installed a Chief of their own choice from among the local people.

2.3 Conversion of Zambian Locals to Islam

Muma's (2015) study reveals the Islamisation of Liteta in the Chibombo District in the Central Province of Zambia and reviews various strategies of Islamic conversion in Zambia. It further shows various Muslim strategies of conversion which include the provision of scholarships and bursaries for new converts (Cheyeka, 2007). Converts to study in some Arabic countries, building mosques or Cultural Centres, and monetary assistance. Others include the propagation of Islam through proselytism and encouraging mixed marriages where Muslim men prefer to marry Christian women so as to increase their membership (Mertens, 1980:16)¹⁰.

According to Phiri (2008)¹¹, there are four major types of people who have been converting to Islam in Zambia. These include adult males and females, the youth and children. Members of these categories are converted to Islam on an individual basis using different channels but applicable to the general conversion patterns. Male adults have a tendency to join Islam within their professional context, more so if they work for Muslim employers. Generally, women are considered as another category of those converting to Islam in that marriage has been a typical way for women to embrace Islam (Ibid).

2.4 Summary

This section has reviewed the meaning of the term ‘conversion’, Islam in Africa and its inroads into Zambia and the subsequent conversion of Zambians to Islam. The reviewed literature is useful to the current study’s investigation of the effects of Islamic conversion on Christian churches in the Isoka Township of Zambia.

3.0 Methodology

Methodically, the study used descriptive techniques of the qualitative strategy. This was considered appropriate since the study was essentially descriptive, in the sense that it aimed to discover answers to underlying questions by attempting to describe and define the problem (Blumberg, 2014)¹². To execute the study in this approach, researchers drew upon a sample of 26 respondents consisting of three (3) Imams, five (5) new Muslim converts and ten (18) ordinary citizens of Isoka district in Zambia. An Interpretivist Research design served as the foundation for data collection. Interpretivist researchers seek to understand participants’ subjective experiences of the world whereby, the goal of research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of their situation. The belief is that reality is socially constructed (Creswell, 2007)¹³. The Structured and Open-ended interview methods were used. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed thematically for respondents’ perceptions of the kind of Islam being practised in Isoka and the categories of people who converted to Islam in the District.

4.0 Findings

4.1 The Growth of Islam to the Detriment of Christianity Growth

Regarding the influence of Islam on Christianity in Isoka Township, interviews were conducted with Church leaders in order to hear their experiences and views. The findings of the study indicated that Islam grew at the expense of the growth of Christianity. Outlined below are some responses obtained from respondents. One respondent recounted thus:

Of course, in this era of religious liberalism, where diverse religious traditions have filtered through almost all societies, any religion that grows through converting people grows at the expense of other religions. It is an undeniable fact that we all want to convert the same people from the same communities. It is one that has a more enticing message that gets to be received. Now looking at the status of the majority of our community members, they are easily converted to Islam because of the material things that the religion offers. The coming of Islam in our country means that as Christians we have a lot of work to do, not only to evangelise to the lost souls but to bring back our brothers and sisters who have been converted to Islam (Interview with a Church Pastor, Isoka, March 7, 2019).

Another respondent narrated:

In both the Christian and Islamic circles, religious conversion is one of the most critical issues. Religious conversion determines the measure of impact that a religion has on a particular community. Not only does it determine the impact of a religion, it also determines the destiny of a particular religion. Islam and Christianity strive for the number of people that get converted to their religion on a daily basis. Since we have had Islam coming into the country, we have witnessed a lot of people being converted, starting from the young through to the old and the poor through to the rich. All this growth is at the expense of the growth of the Christian churches (Interview with a Local Christian X2, Isoka, March 7, 2019).

When asked for his opinion on the same matter, the third respondent said:

We have a lot of work to do as Christians because we are now losing out on a number of our potential converts. It is very worrying to see the rate at which youths, the old, women, girls and many more are being converted to Islam every day. Therefore, I think the biggest effect, which I believe is a negative one on Christianity is that Islam is growing at the expense of our growth (Interview with a Local Resident X3, Isoka, March 7, 2019).

According to the findings, the presence of Islam in Isoka Township has come at the expense of the growth of Christian Churches. Findings indicate that since Islam and Christianity are targeting the same communities, followers have to be shared between the two religions and it is the religion with the most strategic message that converts more community members. While Christianity discourages the use of charity to entice someone to convert against their will, Islam is using the same to win members. In Isoka, a lot of local people converted to Islam through arms giving, Compassion, social justice, sharing and strengthening which were encompassed in the strategic conversion plan of the Islamic community. These facets are consistent with the Quranic articulation of the ethical concept of charitable giving (Renard, 1999)¹⁴. As the citizens of the Isoka district are wallowing in poverty, many are more likely to be swept away from Christian churches into the mosque, hence Islam growing at the expense of the loss of Christianity.

4.2 Religious Competition

The findings of the study revealed that the coming and presence of Islam in Isoka had caused a religious competition between Christian Churches and Islam. The following verbatim came from four local church leaders in response to the question on the influence of Islam in their respective congregations. The first one responded thus:

The growth or expansion of Islam cannot be ignored. It is something that must be taken very seriously as Christians. Without knowing, we have entered into a competition with the Muslims over the same people that we want to have converted. We have entered a [religious] tag-of-war with Islam. I feel that in a way, this competition has awakened us to work harder in terms of winning souls for the body of Christ (Interview with Church Leader X4, Isoka, March 8, 2019).

The second leader of different church denomination said:

In a way, the expansion of the Islamic religion has been a wake-up call on the body of Christ. This is because while we slept, the Muslims have come and have taken our people making a greater impact on the communities. Having noticed how Islam is growing, we have seen churches becoming more radical in winning souls. Therefore, the growth of Islam has brought a positive competition on our side. We need to work hard and bring back the lost souls including our brothers who have been converted to Islam (Interview with Church Leader X5, Isoka, March 8, 2019).

The third leader from yet another denomination narrated:

The main problem with Islamic expansion is that these people are taking the people that we laboured so much to bring to our churches. In reality, we are fighting for people just the same way businesses fight for customers. And since they seem to have money to convince those who are in poverty to follow them, they are finding it easier to convert people in large numbers. Therefore, I can safely say that we have reached

a stage where we have to compete with them. As you know competition has its positive and negative sides which we have to be ready to cope with for our churches to remain relevant in the community (Interview with Church Leader X6, Isoka, March 8, 2019).

In recent years, ‘competition’ has become an ever more popular concept in the study of ancient religions. What transpired in Isoka seems to be in harmony with Beck’s (2006)¹⁵ observation that competition is a concept that has been gaining ground for the past twenty years in the history of religion. He contends that it is fairly obvious that there has always been a lot of interest in the subject of religious competition in the ancient world, especially the confrontation between monotheists, who have tended to label competition more often as conflict.

When asked on the effects of presence of Islam on Christian Churches, church leaders were in agreement that the presence of Islam had brought religious tension. The study recorded three responses in this regard, that depicted the majority respondents’ sentiments. One said:

We cannot deny that there has been tension in town ever since we saw the arrival of the Islamic religion. Although there is no confrontation between us - the Christian family and the Muslim community, the tension can be perceived. We have attended community gatherings where we have met Muslim leaders. Such meetings are always characterised with disagreements and a lot of tension between us and their leaders. The fact that we have to be sharing the same people makes the tension even more pronounced (Interview with Church Leader X7, Isoka, March 9, 2019).

Another one recounted:

I cannot say that our interactions with Muslims are hostile, but we can perceive the tension due to the fact that we are busy trying to win people in the same domain. Therefore, it is inevitable that there be tension between us. It is just the same with business. When a company operates in monopoly, there is not tension. But the moment another company is introduced, offering the same services to the same number of customers, then the tension begins (Interview with Church Leader X7, Isoka, March 9, 2019).

The third respondent narrated thus:

Religious tension is inevitable in places where we all have to depend on the available people and resources in a particular place to grow. Anywhere where people have to compete for shared resources, tension tends to grow. We are not experiencing physical tension between us and the Muslims but the atmosphere can show that we are not living in proper harmony. But on my side, I think we, as Christians, must be more committed to praying and working to win more souls regardless of what the Muslims have done so far. I believe we have the capacity to continue growing so that we will not worry about what other religions are doing (Interview with Church Leader X8, Isoka, March 9, 2019).

4.3 The Disintegration of Christian Families

Further findings of the study revealed that the presence of Islam caused the disintegration of some Christian families. Responding to the question concerning the influence of the presence of Islam on Christian families, a Clergy at one congregation said:

We as a church delight in building Christian families. We believe that if a Christian family is built upon the foundation of the word of God, the Christian values and beliefs are passed on from one generation to the next. Unfortunately, the growth of Islam has had a negative bearing on Christian families. What has

been noticed in recent years is that Muslim men are on a mission to marry Christian women and convert them to Islam as is the agreement before marriage. Therefore, we have seen a number of women who have been married off and automatically converted to Islam. We see Christian families disintegrating since every child now born in those marriages becomes Muslim. Therefore, it can be noted that the growth of Islam has affected our mandate, which is to build Christian families (Interview with Church Leader Y1, Isoka, March 10, 2019).

It can be opined that Islamic conversions have affected the membership, polity, faith and practice of the established Christian churches. Since most of the Islamic communities claim to be renewal movements by implication, their main targets are the membership of non-religious individuals as well as those from established Christian churches. That is people who are already Christians, whom they intend to renew. The Islamic communities, therefore, draw away members of the established churches. The researcher opines that this atmosphere is capable of increasing tension between two religious groups which can be unhealthy for the wellbeing of community members. Consequently, in the worst case, due to the prevailing atmosphere, the area is unlikely to develop until peace returns. Furthermore, marriage and kinship relationships tend to suffer because of religious differences, as a result, wives have to be divorced their husbands men have to reject their wives, and young children are caught in between. These revelations seem to have backing from El Fadl (2005)¹⁶ who asserted that false images of the other developed in both the Islamic and Christian communities have resulted in fear and misunderstanding. He contends that in a community that is predominantly Christian, the growth of the Islamic community is bound to amplify the fears and tension between the two communities. Consequently, Christians and Muslims have often inherited ideas, images and stereotypes, mostly negative, which characterise their mutual perceptions.

4.4 Indoctrination of Christians

The findings of the study further showed that the presence of Islam caused indoctrination of people including Christians. One local informant narrated how the Islamic influence had caused indoctrination among Christian congregants, as follows:

Most Christians and non-Christians who are not strongly grounded in their faith are easily swayed by Islamic teachings. This has been the case with most African countries including Zambia which has seen a massive growth of Islam in the recent past. In the same vein, Islam is offering Christians and non-Christians a conversion experience and the must-awaited opportunity to get one's life in order, without needing to confess one's sin and need of salvation. In fact, Islam makes quite a point of denying these Christian truths. It tells people that they do not need to know anything about salvation and that all they need to do is follow the guidance of God's law and they would have a better life after death. Since the natural man is more inclined to the easier way of achieving good results, they would rather convert from Christianity and other religions to Islam (Interview with a Local Resident, Isoka, March 10, 2019).

In the same vein, yet another citizen of Isoka who was asked about the influence of the presence of Islam on Christian Churches had this to say:

We have seen a number of associations and schools being built by the Islamic community. I believe that this infrastructure is a strategy that has been fashioned by the Islamic community to indoctrinate those who have the privilege to use them. Since time immemorial we have seen how Islam has spread through apparent education which is one of the ways they use to inculcate Islamic beliefs and values in people.

Those who learn in Islamic schools can attest that Muslims try by all means to have their religious message conveyed to the learners in every way possible (Interview with a Senior Citizen, Isoka, March 10, 2019).

Indoctrination occurs when a person holds to a type of beliefs known as control beliefs that result in what El Fadl (2005) calls 'ideological totalism'. He asserts that the indoctrination of Christians in this context is a source of confusion in their life since it has to do with the impartation of two different religious values and beliefs. This, according to the study has been one of the greatest negative effects of the presence of Islam on Christian Churches in Isoka Township.

4.5 Theory and Findings: The Nexus

There is a connection between the effects of Islamic conversion on Christian Churches in Isoka Township and Horton's notion of Conversion that was used in the study to provide a theoretical framework, in order to make sense of the findings. The findings of the current study, therefore, seem to be in agreement with Horton's Intellectualist theory of conversion, since the inter-faith kind of conversion that took place in Isoka was, as his theory predicts, a result of the quest for a new belief system that would enable new converts to have more control of their lives.

5.0 Conclusion

Investigating the effects of Islamic conversion on the Christian Churches was the focus of this study. Given the noticeable presence of Islam within the Namwanga Community of Isoka and its luring influence on poverty-stricken people in the area, the effects of local people converting from Christianity to Islam needed to be investigated in order to know the reaction and mitigation measures Christianity had put in place to accommodate the vice. The effects of Islamic conversions on Christianity were determined. Three major themes from the findings include religious competition, disintegration of Christian families and indoctrination.

5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. To conduct follow-up studies on the progress of Islam as a new religion in the area and monitor its effects.
2. Since Zambia is a multi-faith nation, the co-existence of non-Christian religions with Christianity should be encouraged in the area as long as the religions in question do not practice destructive competition.

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