



Religion, Spirituality and Ethics on the Born-Again Youth: Conceptualizing the Christian Spirituality

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Abstract

There is clearly a strong link between religion, spirituality and identity. The formation of identity in especially the youth is an important developmental issue. Religion is evidently associated with identity formation and ethical conduct which is also motivated by parental influence. It is clear that youth whose parents are meaningfully religious and ethical are more likely to be considerably religious themselves. Christian spirituality in the youth is also promoted by community influences. This research paper examines the role of religion and spirituality in the development of ethics and the formation of identities in youth. It was conducted against the socio-religious status, where 85.6% of the overall population of South Africa appeared to affiliate with the Christian faith. The data for this research study was collected through qualitative exploratory interviews and focused group discussions. These were further supplemented by the review of related literature. All the participants who were considered for this research affiliated with Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches from East London, in the Eastern Cape Province. The study revealed that there are two categories of Christians within Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches. The first category is that of devout Christians; while the second is that of nominal Christians. Both categories classify themselves as 'Born-again' Christians even though the latter (nominal Christians) does not entirely subscribe or adhere to all the principles of the Christian faith.

Key words: Religion, Spirituality, Ethics, Youth, Christianity

Background

A considerable amount of research has emerged over the years which demonstrates the benefits of religious practice within society (Fagan, 2006:1; King, 2003:198; Seul, 1999:558; Ysseldyk *et al.*, 2010:60). Religious practice seems to play a central role in shaping human experiences and how individuals act, react and interact with one another in various aspects of the environment in which they live. This has resulted in the scientific study and exploration of the impact of religion and spirituality in the lives of people in various social contexts. Akinfenwa, Fagbamila, and Abdulganiyu (2014:8), for instance, assert that sociologists have studied and continue to study religion as both a belief system and as a social institution. As a belief system, sociologists regard religion as a phenomenon that shapes what people think and how they see the world; and as a social institution, religion is seen as a pattern of social action organised around the beliefs and practices that people develop to answer questions about the meaning of existence. From a sociological perspective however, what one believes about religion is not necessarily important. What is important is the ability to examine religion objectively in its social and cultural context (Akinfenwa *et al.* 2014:9). Religion is viewed as a belief system that provides a cultural framework - as its practice contributes to the cohesion of the society - and as a social institution that provides a sense of identity and belonging (Akinfenwa *et al.*, 2014:9).



On the other hand, theologians and social scientists do not only see religion as a belief system and a social institution, but perceive it as a discipline of meta-physics as well (Motlhabi, 2001:3). While meta-physics ask questions about the nature of reality, religion tries to find answers to practical questions concerning the human quest for meaning and fulfilment in relation to ultimate realities and values (Motlhabi, 2001:3; Cauthen, 1984:114). Thus, it also brings the aspect of spirituality into surface. In a religious backdrop, the quest for meaning and fulfilment is embedded within the strand of divinely given moral codes, identification, and an ideological perspective which ties the concepts of religion and spirituality together.

Religion and spirituality, in this sense, serve as resources for ethical responses to whatever is regarded as ultimate in Being. Such an active response becomes a part of the identification process among the worshippers of these deified entities. That is why, those who adhere to ethical demands of Christ identify themselves as Christians; while those who worship other deities identify and subject themselves to demands of such gods. Religious meaning and spirituality, in this sense, is closely attached to issues of moral codes and identification. The balance between the two: moral ethic and identification, is imperative - these two aspects determine the role, impact and continuity of religious meaning in the lives of believers. However, as Collins-Mayo (2010:1) noted, if we are to understand the meaning, role and impact of religion and spirituality within the modern society and glimpse its future, "we need to turn our attention to young people. Young people are the generation at the forefront of cultural and social change." It is through their active involvement in religion, religious ideologies and structures that we get to know how resilient and productive religious belief systems and practices are, and what they hold for the coming generations.

Furthermore, a number of scholars indicate that the youths' understanding of religion and spirituality does contribute to the development of self-concepts, which in turn permeates to other aspects of their lives (Ufimtseva, 2014:74; Seul, 1999:558; Ysseldyk *et al.*, 2010:60). In this conception, the involvement of youth in religious actions and spiritual exercises tends to promote good ethical standards and self-awareness. But this has not always been the case in South Africa. There are instances where this process is not evident. For instance, in South Africa, 85.6% of the overall population claims to be Christian (Statistic South Africa, 2013). The youth constitute 70% of the overall population (Malila, 2013:12), and a large number belongs, by identification, to the Christian faith (Statistic South Africa, 2013). Yet, the rates of crime, violence, rape, abuse and other inhumane activities are escalating.

Young people have become the primary source of social unrests and injustices (Malila, 2013:12). There is no correlation between their moral ethics and religious identification - the two main aspects which are supposed to be interwoven within the belief system and religious practices of the Christian faith. This stands against the norms and values of Christianity. Scholars like Donahue (1995:146) further states that major religious systems contain some prohibitions against substance abuse, risky sexual behaviours, violence, and crime; but these are the primary issues that continue to threaten the lives of young people in South Africa. Against this background, one wonders whether religion does have a significant role to play in the moral and spiritual lives of young people; whether it has an impact in the construction of their identities; or has any influence on their decision making, lifestyle and ethical values. This is further problematized by a group of Christians who claim to live a puritan life such as Pentecostals and Charismatics. The Pentecostals/Charismatics are a rapidly growing religious group within Christianity. According to Barrett and Johnson (1998:26), there were about 74 million Pentecostals/Charismatics in the world in 1970, and this constituted 6% of the global Christian population.

In 1998, this figure had grown to 461 million, which constituted 25% of the overall world Christian population. Chetty (2009:4) asserts that "this figure accounted for more than the global numbers of 'Protestants' and 'Anglicans' combined together." In South Africa, according to Statistics South Africa (2001), the Pentecostals/Charismatics constituted an 8.2% of the overall 79.7% of the Christian population in 2001. Barrett and Johnson (1998:26) further estimates that by 2025, the



Pentecostals/Charismatics will constitute more than 28% of the world Christian population. This gives the impression that Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches are one of the fastest growing groups within Christianity. But if the number of Pentecostals/Charismatics is immensely growing, why are the levels of moral decay, promiscuity, violence and crime not decreasing? Are the puritan principles and *ethos* of Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity failing to bring about a positive change in the lives of young people, seeing that they are the primary cause of several social unrests and injustices? Or has Christianity lost its positive impact in society? No doubt, there are scholars who argue that religion is a positive reinforcement for ethical behaviour (King and Furrow, 2004; Donahue, 1995; Youniss, McLellan, Su, and Yates, 1999).

King (2003:200), for instance, notes that within the Judeo-Christian tradition, believers are taught to experience themselves as being in a special relationship with God. In this sense, believers are to understand themselves as “sons and daughters of God”. As “sons and daughters of God”, they are encouraged to live pious lives and to refrain from acts of crime, violence, promiscuity or any other practices that appear to stand against the principles of God. In light of this identification – “sons and daughters of God”, and the ethical demands of holiness, which are required from those who presume this identity, how come there is little or no impact extended on the lives of young people? That is why this research was undertaken. It sought to explore and evaluate the role of religion, in this case, Christianity, and spirituality in the lives of young people.

Methodology and Area of study

This research explored the role of religion and spirituality in the development of ethics and the formation of identities in youth. The data was gathered through qualitative exploratory one-on-one interviews and focused group discussions. These were further supplemented by the use of literature review, which focused on topics relevant to this area of study. Triangulation was done in the processes of data collection and analysis in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. The research study included 28 participants who were heterogeneous in terms of their denominational affiliation, age, sex and educational background. 14 participants between the ages of 18-35 years came from the Assemblies of God Church in East London, while another group of 14 participants between the same age range came from various Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations around the vicinity of East London, in the Eastern Cape. The participants were chosen following the purposive sampling technique. The Assemblies of God Church served as the experimental group, while the other Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches were the control group. The researcher took all the ethical procedures into consideration for this research. The ethical clearance for this study was granted by the University of the Free State.

Literature Review

The notion of religion

The modern world is quite religious; and religion has become a universal practice. O'Brien and Palmer (2007:14) state that 80 percent of people worldwide profess some religious affiliation. Knitter and Netland (2013:19) further state that there are roughly 2.1 billion Christians, 1.3 billion Muslims, 860 million Hindus, 380 million Buddhists, 25 million Sikhs, and 15 million Jews in the world. These numbers do not include many more millions of people who affiliate with or follow indigenous religious traditions and other new religious movements or sects. The statistical figures that are enumerated here prompt one to earnestly mull over the aspect of religiosity. Why are people so religious? What is the meaning of religion to these people? And, what does religion offer these people?

These questions and many more arise when one tries to comprehend the aspect of religiosity, and there are, of course, countless ways of responding to these questions. But the researcher



presumes that the last question will directly respond to the first two questions. What religion offers seems to make people want to be religious; and people seem to be religious because they find meaning in religion. This, however, cannot be entirely accurate until it has been ascertained. In order to appreciate what religion offers, we may have to look at the three general facets of religion, namely these are: (1) religion as a belief system, (2) religion as an identity, and (3) religion as a way of life. These three general facets relate to the essence or nature of religion. There may possibly be more facets of religion which are not identified here, but the three are most likely to be involved in the nature of religion (Gunn, 2003:199).

Religion as a belief system

According to Gunn (2003:199), religion as a belief system pertains to the convictions that people hold regarding such matters as God, truth, or doctrines of faith. These religious convictions may emphasise, for example, a strict adherence to doctrines such as the total depravity of man, the transmigration of souls, *karma*, *dharmā*, the wisdom of the *Lotus Sutra*, the five pillars of Islam, or the syncretistic message that many religious doctrines reveal an underlying reality. Religion, as a belief system, generally gives an emphasis to the significance of the individual's proper understanding of doctrines. These belief systems dictate the links and connections that people make within the society. They set boundaries as to who should be accepted and who is to be rejected. Under normal circumstances, individuals' belief system would naturally draw them closer to those of like-mindedness; and thus, deeming them acceptable to that particular community. The opposite is also true. People do not like to associate with other people who contradict or undermine their belief systems. Those who seem to disapprove the belief systems that an individual or a particular group holds are often ignored, and thus, rejected by that society. In order to belong, one must have the same belief systems as those they desire to associate with. Therefore, this is how the element of *belief systems* dictates social connections.

In a manner of speaking, it can be said that a belief system gives one a sense of belonging, particularly to a group that shares the same beliefs as those of that person. In terms of religion, a religious affiliation also offers one a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging can manifest itself in a number of ways. It can be found in various religious institutions such as the Church, Mosque, Temple, Synagogue or many other religious establishments that are considered to be sacred. It can also be found in social organisations such as clubs, associations, cults or many other religious engagements. People normally find meaning, discover themselves, and feel welcomed in these social structures. They look upon these social arrangements as a haven of safety against potential threats of rejection, isolation, exclusion and abandonment. In that way, they find a sense of belonging, direction and companionship from those who share their values. Even though this may not be enough, it does however bring them some form of satisfaction. This is probably why so many people are religious. Religion, as a belief system, offers them a sense of belonging.

Religion as an identity

Religion as an identity refers to the intimate link between religion and ethnicity. A number of scholars seem to think that there is little doubt about the intimate link between religion and ethnicity (Marty, 1972:5-21; Stout, 1975:204-224; Padgett, 1980:55-77). This means that religion can be used as a point of reference for ethnic identification. Abramson (1980:869-875) argues that in some instances, such as the Amish, Hutterites, Mormons, and Jews, ethnicity equals religion. By implication, this means that were it not for religion, these ethnic groups would have not existed. In this sense, religion is an identity.

The correlation therefore, between religion and ethnicity, holds that whether one perceives ethnicity subjectively or objectively, or whether ethnicity is measured along the lines of



acculturation or of assimilation, the involvement of religion in the characteristics of one's ethnic group is always judged to be dominant when correlated with ethnic identity (Hammond, 1980:2). The construct of identity, on the other hand, is not so apparent as the correlation between religion and ethnicity; it has a dualistic temperament. This means that there is no single way of defining identity, hence some scholars look at it in two different but complementary ways. Hammond (1980:2), citing Hans Mol, states that:

The first way of looking at identity suggests the immutable, or at least the slowly changing core of personality that shows up in all of a person's encounters, irrespective of differing role-partners. The second way suggests the transient and changeable self as persons move from one social encounter to another, offering a somewhat different identity, as it were, in each place.

Commenting on the two ways of looking at identity, Oppong (2013:13) states that the first way of conceptualising identity "brings up the issue of involuntary dimension of identity, while, the second raises the issue of adaptability of identity". The involuntary dimension of identity concerns the elementary core of personality which does not change or at least changes slowly over a long period of time. This kind of identity is enforced by primary groups, precisely parents or care-takers, arguably in the early stages of life and remains intact throughout one's lifespan. The adaptability of identity concerns the transitory changes and developments in identity that occurs due to new life experiences, and social milieu outside of primary groups. These two conceptualisations of identity seem to be suitable and therefore relevant to the concept of religion. Scholars such as Hammond (1980:2) and Oppong (2013:13) assert that some institutional spheres, especially in terms of family, are naturally important in the first sense, while other institutional spheres, such as religion and ethnicity stand out as examples of the second conceptualisation of identity. This means that both the primary and secondary groups play a significant role in the formation of an individual's or group identity. This is especially apparent when the elements of religion are involved in the characteristics of group or ethnic identities. Religion, in that case, becomes an identity.

Religion as a way of life

Religion as a way of life refers to the model of life in which the persons from one particular religion distinguish themselves from other religious or non-religious groups. This facet is rationally distinctive from the preceding two, but is closely attached to each in the mind of a religious person. Gunn (2003:204) states that this facet of religion "is associated with actions, rituals, customs, and traditions that may distinguish the believer from adherents of other religions". For example, religion as a way of life may motivate people to live in monasteries, religious communities, to observe many rituals, including praying, meditation, and circumcision or to refrain from certain practices such as the consumption of alcohol. This facet therefore accentuates the moral practice of religious beliefs and associated traditional obligations. The facet of religion as a way of life therefore implies that all religious groups demand a practical obligation. For some, it may demand that prayers be made five times a day, that they may wear certain types of clothes and that their beards be grown. To others, it may demand a constant effort to propagate the religion, the refusal to eat pork or it may require that one should go to church every Sunday.

Therefore, each religion has its demands and obligations, and these outline the distinction between one religious group and another. Hence, one can differentiate and draw a distinction between the demands and practical obligations of the Jewish faith, Islam or Christianity. These three facets therefore seem to respond to the aspect of people's religiosity. People are religious because religion has something to offer them. Religion gives them a *belief system* that enables them to understand themselves, their destiny and a way in which to make sense of their world. It provides a sense of belonging, in their potential threats against loneliness, exclusion and rejection. It makes them feel appreciated, welcomed and important in a group that shares their



values, aspiration and concerns. Religion gives them a sense of purpose, meaning and a place within the boarder context of society.

Religion further grounds their sense of self or identity. Whether this comes through the assistance of primary or secondary institutions, religion serves as an *identity*. It provides a significant link between their ethnic and group assimilation identity, which helps them to discover who they are, and how they should perceive themselves in relation to other religious or non-religious groups around them. Lastly, religion gives people a *way of life*. It guides and directs their behaviour, actions and attitudes, and challenges them to be socially and ethically responsible for their conduct within the societies in which they live. So, it is not difficult to understand why so many people in the world are religious. Religion gives them what they need but do not have.

The concept of spirituality

The concept of spirituality is very broad and subjective. It means a number of things to different people. It refers to the “human quest for personal meaning, mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and for some, God” (Canda *et al.*, 1999:243). Others argue that spirituality refers to “a subjective experience of the sacred” (Vaughan, 1991:105). The sacred, in this case, means anything that people can revere as an ultimate object of devotion. Yet again, others obscure this concept by stating that spirituality refers to “that vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, with higher entities, with God, with love, with compassion, with purpose” (Tart, 1983:4).

Spirituality, in this regard, acquires a very broad but subjective interpretation in which there is not a single meaning. Even though the concept of spirituality is broad and subjective, a number of scholars agree that spirituality can be expressed “through participation in religious institutions or traditions... or through philosophical views...,” (Miller and Martin, 1988:14; Canda *at al.*, 1999:4). Religious institutions and their philosophical views seem to be valuable instruments that can offer a rich context for spiritual growth. Citing a number of scholars, Williams and Lindsey (2005:19) argues that spiritual beliefs that are associated with religious practices are “a source of potential healing that can provide a sense of connectedness to self, others and/or a larger meaning or purpose..., a way of providing protection and coping with the trials of everyday life...”

This means that the aspect of spirituality is closely connected to religiosity. Scholars like Rossiter (2010:7) argue that religiosity is “spirituality that is clearly referenced to religion”. Spirituality offers individuals a personal belief system, which seeks to develop a sense of connectedness to self, and others; thus, its complimentary expressions are adequately realised through religious practices that are afforded by religious institutions. However, this does not mean that the expressions of spirituality are restricted to religious institutions. Spirituality can be expressed and practised beyond the confines of institutional religions. But, its practices are closely connected to religious institutions as well as their philosophical views. Hence, there is a profound correlation between religion and spirituality.

The link between religion and spirituality

There appears to be a great link between religion and spirituality as both constructs can be practised harmoniously. According to Zinnbauer *et al.*, (1997:550), historically, spirituality was not distinguished from religiousness until the rise of secularism in the 21st century. The distinction between the two arose out of the popular disillusionment with religious institutions as a hindrance to personal experiences of the sacred. Bender (2007:2) further notes that until recently, the terms *religion* and *spirituality* have been used more or less interchangeably. Nowadays, religion denotes something different from spirituality. The construct of religion, within the field of social research, has adopted either a functionalist or substantive approach (Pargament, 1997:6), while spirituality has acquired a positive undertone through its association with personal experiences of the transcendent (Zinnbauer *et al.*, 1997:551). The functionalist approach to religion looks at



the functions that religion offers in the lives of individuals while the substantive approach focuses on the beliefs, emotions, practices, and relationships of individuals in relation to a higher power or divine being (Zinnbauer *et al.*, 1997:551). Currently, religion denotes something different from spirituality; so, it is worth exploring how religion differs from, and/or links with spirituality.

Remarking on the current distinctions and overlap between religion and spirituality, Hill *et al.* (2000:60) states that religion, historically, was a “broad-band construct” that included both individual and institutional elements, but it is now seen as a “narrow-band construct” that has much more to do with the institutional alone. The conceptualisation of religion as a “narrow-band construct” creates the impression that religion is a rigid and structured institution that restricts or inhibits human potential (Pargament, 1997:6). Spirituality, on the other hand, seems to be “the favoured term to describe individual experience and is identified with such things as personal transcendence, supra-conscious sensitivity, and meaningfulness” (Hill *et al.* 2000:60). As a result, spirituality is “increasingly reserved for the loftier/functional side of life” (Pargament, 1997:6). Even though religion is perceived to be different from spirituality, Cashwell and Young (2011:9) maintain that religion “provides a structure for human spirituality.” This means that religion offers a sympathetic setting for people to engage in the quest for meaning, purpose and relations with the sacred (Magaldi-Dopman and Park-Taylor, 2010:383). In this sense, religion becomes the institutional means by which spirituality is expressed, and this forges the link between religion and spirituality.

Discussion and interpretations

The meaning of Christianity to the ‘born-again’ youth

The ‘born-again’ participants portrayed their conceptualization of Christianity in two but complementary ways. They saw Christianity firstly, as the imitation of Christ, and secondly, as a lifestyle. These two complementary ways fit the conceptual make up or a facet of major religious beliefs - that of “religion as a way of life” (Gunn, 2003:204). Since this facet implies a specific pattern of life, it “is associated with actions, rituals, customs, and traditions that may distinguish the believer from adherents of other religions” (Gunn, 2003:204). It is this aspect that motivates people to imitate an idolized person, such as Christ or Muhammad and prompts others to live in a certain way. This facet therefore accentuates the moral practices of religious beliefs and their associated traditional obligations.

Christianity as imitating Christ

According to Capes (2003:3), the moralists in the Greco-Roman era used a variety of literary and rhetorical conventions to exhort followers to live virtuous lives. Personal exemplars were a common device, considered more persuasive than other devices. Due to the influence of the Greco-Romans, Christians inherited a culture in which imitation and exemplars were part of the moral dialogue. The Greco-Romans believed that “the closer the example the more likely it would affect one to lead the right kind of life (Capes, 2003:4).” So, Christians admonished and handed down this culture from one generation to the next. Since the notion of imitation considered personal exemplars as more persuasive than literary devices, followers were implored to follow the example of people who did not only teach with their words but practiced what was right (Seneca, *Epistle* 52:1-9). According to Capes (2003:11), appeals to personal exemplars for Christians never overshadowed the appeal to imitate Christ. Christ was seen as the most excellent of exemplars. In the writings of Peter (1Pet. 2:21-23KJV), for example, the Christian followers are urged to follow the example of Christ, even at the point of suffering:

For even hereunto were you called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile



found in his mouth; who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

The primary reason, for Christian authors, to urge followers to follow the example of Christ is that Christ was/is the epitome of righteousness. As the above cited verse states, he did not indulge himself in the practice of evil acts, nor propagate deceit because there was no guile found in his mouth. He represented goodness both by his words and his character. He did not just teach by words but practiced what was right. Astonished by his character, Christians looked up to him and found him to be a worthy model to be imitated. As a personal example of goodness, Christ became the model that his followers aspired to emulate. The participants depicted their understanding of Christianity in this manner, even though not entirely; for some saw it as a lifestyle. Christianity meant to learn or copy the things that Christ by trying to have his character. This entailed doing the things that Christ did or that he would do; and living the way he lived or would live if he were still on earth. In essence, they equated Christianity to the emulation of Christ. Christ represents the epitome of goodness and is seen as a model that they aspire to become.

Christianity as a way of life

Christianity as a way of life denotes a pattern of life that a person from a particular religious orientation distinguishes themselves from another religious or non-religious group. As Gunn (2003:204) noted, this facet of religion is associated with actions, rituals, customs, and religious traditions. The inclusion of rituals, customs and religious traditions in this facet forms part of the religious belief system. The definitive goal therefore of mingling the belief system and actions in the facet is that there should be an ideal concord between the theoretical components of belief and intended practice. According to Freddosso (2004:15), the theoretical components of belief are meant “to validate and sustain the practices.” By portraying Christianity as a lifestyle, the participants meant that they are patterning their lives according to the Christian principles, and are validating and sustaining the theoretical components of Christianity by their practices. This is reflected by the expression that Christianity is seen as a way of life and the manner in which they are to walk before God. This implies that these youths follow a particular belief system, which informs them when they are morally failing to measure up to the required Christian standards. Hence, they noted that Christians should watch what they do, and how they behave because their lives say a lot to others about what they believe.

In line with Freddosso’s (2004:17) view, the youths’ desire to measure up to the Christian standards, concurs with Socrates’ notion that “human beings should be consistently reflecting on the nature of the best sort of life and on how their own lives compare with that ideal.” By patterning their lives after the Christian principles and belief systems, the participants were aspiring to live the best sort of life and to compare their actions with the ideal embodiment of Christian living. When expressed in this manner, this way of life links with that of imitating Christ. This is because Christ serves as a guideline for holy living. Even though they did not specifically claim to imitate Christ, Christ is the ultimate ideal in which their noble acts or a way of life is aimed to reflect. These two, therefore communed with each other in the conceptualisation of Christianity.

Why the ‘born-again’ youth chose to be Christians

The youth mentioned a number of reasons why they were Christians and these reasons were different, with some more solemn than others. They said that they were Christians because they: (a) were convicted by the word; (b) were responding to the Christian call; (c) were influenced by their parents or family members; (d) admired the Christian life style; and (e) out of socio-religious factors. This means that some of the participants become Christians in response to God’s call of grace, while others became Christians because of the influence of the significant others, or because of some socio-religious factors. Therefore, some deliberate distinctions can be made between these participants in order to categorise their preferences for Christianity. *Firstly*, there



were those who became Christians out of reverence for, and in response to God's call wrought by the word of God in their lives. These are the participants who said they were convicted by the word or responded to God's call of salvation. A majority of these youths did not come from a Christian background, even though they may have been religious or came from families that were affiliated with the African Religion.

Secondly, there were those who grew up within Christian families - some devout and some nominal, who were influenced by their significant others to become Christians. Some of these youths may have not initially intended to become Christians but since they were forced by their circumstances, they followed that route. Because their parents or significant others were Christian, they adopted the Christian lifestyle and classified themselves as Christians. Thus, they became Christians because they were born into Christian families. *Lastly*, some youths became Christians because they were the recipients of Christian charitable benefits. These were the participants who said that they became Christians because Christians would visit their sick loved ones, bring them food or perform a number of philanthropic acts for them. These participants were influenced by their social needs, which were somehow met by Christian organisations. Due to charitable acts that the Christians did for them, they looked upon Christianity as the means by which they can escape their desperate situations and transform their social, health and spiritual problems.

The role of spirituality in constructing the self-concept on youth

According to Lippman and McIntosh (2010:1), spirituality (spiritual beliefs and practices) among youth is important enough to be monitored because a number of research studies from developmental science, sociology and character education has found out that spirituality is related to positive identity formation and moral development on youth. Spirituality in this sense plays a significant role in the construction of the self-concept and lays a solid foundation for the youth to explore and discover their identity (King, 2003:200).

The meaning of spirituality to the 'born-again' youth

The participants gave a range of answers that sought to express how they understand the concept of spirituality. They depicted spirituality as: (1) a connection with God; (2) a belief in something; (3) living according to the spirit; and (4) as an agent that awakens the conscience and brings about the element of control to their morals. Each participant defined spirituality in a general way and yet from a personal perspective. These conceptual variations in the depiction of spirituality by participants indicate that the concept of spirituality is not simplistic. This relates to Zinnbauer's *et al.*, (1997:550) observation regarding the current definitions of spirituality; they are diverse and subjective. Scholars such as Benner (1989:20) also understood and defined spirituality as a connection with God. He posited that spirituality is "the human response to God's gracious call to a relationship with himself" (Benner, 1989:20). Spirituality, in this context, implies a connection or a relationship with God or supernatural entities. Tart (1983:4) further argued that spirituality includes "that vast realm of human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, with higher entities, with God, with love, with compassion, with purpose".

In Tart's (1983:4) view, the human potential to connect or form relationships with God or higher entities is attached to emotive components of human expression such as love, compassion and a sense of purpose. This means that spirituality, in its broadest sense, is about forming and maintaining sacred relationships with God or higher entities. Furthermore, these sacred connections are enacted through human emotive components such as love, compassion, and the sense of purpose. This is done to symbolise the essential unity needed between the sacred entities and humans. According to Vaughan (1991:105), the connection of human beings with God or supernatural entities, includes an element of subjectivity. Vaughan (1991:105) argues



that spirituality concerns “a subjective experience of the sacred.” This implies that even though the concept of spirituality may be general and practised in a similar manner, it holds a subjective or personal meaning for each practitioner. This implies that the practice of spirituality does not grant each practitioner the same personal experiences as everyone else but that each practitioner internalises and evaluates their relationship with God or supernatural entities differently from others.

For this reason, the youth elevated the aspect of conscience and moral ethic in the understanding of spirituality. They noted that spirituality implies that one has to live according to the spirit. Living according to the spirit for them meant upholding the ethical demands of the Christian faith, which seeks to acclaim God rather than defame him. There are however, no basic standards that require one to act in a certain manner in order to fit the description of those practitioners who live by the spirit. The realism of living according to the spirit is determined by the intimacy and personal relationship that one has with God or higher entities. In this sense, living according to the spirit entails avoiding all the things that can hinder or dissolve the relationship that has been created with God.

From this perspective, practitioners are free to practise their spirituality in a manner that they want, as long as they are not breaking the ethical demands of the Christian faith. In this way, spirituality enables them to adhere to Christian ethical guidelines and to keep their morals in check. King (2003:200) has also noted that spirituality has the capacity to enhance the moral ethic and a sense of awareness to self and others in youth. She asserted that spirituality brings an awareness of the self in relationship to others: “Engaging in the spiritual provides connectedness with the divine, human, or natural other, giving a young person an opportunity to experience himself or herself in relationship to God, a community of believers, or nature for example” (King, 2003:200). Spirituality, in this context, does appear to be an agent that awakens the conscience and brings some form of control to the moral ethic.

How spirituality assists the youth in defining who they are

The definition of the self or identity is a component that is largely influenced by internal and individual factors such as personal traits, characteristics and values, but it can also be influenced by external sources like parents, social or religious groups (Deng, 1995:1). How one defines himself or herself therefore brings into surface the elements of personal values and social categories (Jenkins, 1996:4; Deaux, 2001:2). This is primarily because the definition of ‘self’ reveals the “peoples’ concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg and Abrams 1988:2). The participants said that spirituality enables them to define themselves in terms of their uniqueness; as children, sons and daughters of God; and as moral persons. As King (2003:200) noted that religion offers a positive context for the formation of youth identities and provides some solid answers to existential questions such as, who am I? And, what is the meaning of Life? Spirituality therefore seems to improve their understanding of the self by strengthening their connections with God and others. That is probably why they tend to define themselves in terms of their uniqueness to God.

King (2003:200) further argues that the conception of the youth of defining themselves as ‘children’, ‘sons’, and ‘daughters’ of God is embedded within the Judeo-Christian traditions. King (2003:200) asserts that the Jewish tradition encourages its followers to look upon themselves as a special people, chosen by God and as a race that is part of the royal priesthood in whose lineage the Messiah came. The Christian tradition also encourages believers to understand themselves as the ‘chosen people’ (Thessalonians 2:13), and as the ‘children of God’ (John 1:12) and as ‘sons and daughters of God’ (Galatians 3:26). Therefore, the youths who follow these traditions get to see themselves as special, unique and highly valued by God. Ultimately, this exerts a positive influence in the manner in which these youths perceive and define themselves. The Judeo-Christian spirituality therefore seems to play a significant role in the promotion self-concept and worth to the youth.



The impact of religion and spirituality on youth

The positive role of religion and Spirituality seems to be evident in the lives of young people (King and Furrow, 2004:704; Seul, 1999:558; Ysseldyk *et al.*, 2010:6), but less has been said about how both religion and spirituality impact youth decision-making, lifestyles and roles in society. According to Heidt (2010:6), people live according to a set of principles or ethical codes. Nolan (1995:120) defines principles as the standards by which we judge whether a moral action is right or wrong. He (1995:120) further states that the terms morals and ethics are closely related in their original meaning. The term morals come from the Latin *moralis*, while ethics comes from the Greek *ethos*. Both of these terms refer to “the custom or way of life” (Nolan, 1995:120). In context of this study, the participants were asked to mention some of the most important principles of being a Christian. The participants listed the following: a godly character; showing kindness; being considerate to others; humility; obedience; compliance; imitating Christ; reading the Bible; being prayerful; confession; fasting; witnessing; non-judgmentalism; loving; forgiving; and respecting others.

Most of the principles which were listed by the participants concerned the issues of intimate relationship with God, and that of moral character or ethical conduct. They sought to develop one’s connections with God through the practice of prayer, reading the Bible, confessions, and fasting; while promoting the welfare of others through the display of kindness, by being considerate, showing humility, being compliant, being non-judgemental, more loving and by forgiving. These principles therefore do not only benefit the participants but the society as well. When they are being morally upright, they refrain from acts of violence, crime, social unrest and avoid a number of risky behaviours like alcohol consumption, drug use, premarital sex and other related issues. They instead try to uphold the ethical principles of the Christian faith. According to Nolan (1995:129), the Christian need for good morals or ethical conduct is derived from the teachings of Jesus Christ. This seems to suggest that the need to piously is a requirement for Christians. A true Christian has the obligation to live a pious life which is guided by principles of love, unselfishness, humility, equal regard and generosity of spirit, not only for one’s self but for others as well.

Christian expectations from the youth in terms of morality

As indicated that Christianity is a way of life, the youth is expected to uphold the ethical values that comes with such a way of life. This way of life is often measured in terms of morality and behaviour (King and Furrow, 2004:704). Those who hold and commit to the principles of the Christian faith are considered to be devout Christians; while those who fail to live up to these principles are regarded as nominal Christians (Wilberforce, 1797:126). Nominal Christians according to Bulacan (2011:1) refers “to Christians whose Christianity does not go beyond mere identification with a Christian group and their cause with affiliation to that cause in name only”. In order to assess the category in which the participants belonged into, the researcher asked the participants to explain what was expected from them in terms of morality and behaviour in their respective churches. The participants said that they are expected to be exclusively Christian, imitate Christ, bring a positive change in society, to be accountable for their actions, to have a good conduct, to be submissive, and to uphold their Church’s principles. These behavioural expectations revealed the commitment of participants to their Christian faith and to their respective Churches.

Being exclusively Christian meant that they are not expected in any way to conform to the standards of this world, but those of the Christian faith. Their exclusiveness is represented by a godly conduct which is aligned with the imitation of Christ and an act of submission to the Church and its principles. From this perspective, the behavioural expectations placed upon the participants by their respective Churches seek to bring a sense of responsibility to the issue of



ethical conduct. This also addresses the issue of personal accountability which is intended to validate the participants' commitment to Christianity and their respective Churches. This sentiment has also been endorsed by scholars such as Idler (2008:3). Idler asserts that "religious congregations offer rich social resources with a strong sense of ethics" (Idler, 2008:3). The behavioural expectations placed upon the youth by their respective Churches therefore worked as an incentive for good moral conduct.

The role of the youth as Christians in society

The youth has been negatively portrayed by the public and the media (Cnaan, Gelles and Sinha, 2004:176). This tends to undermine the valuable contribution of the youth in social issues. Cnaan, Gelles and Sinha (2004:176), for instance, states that:

At best, we see many teenagers as a generation of consumer, detached from the community, self-interested and isolated in front of a computer or Gameboy, who engage in acts of defiance through their dress, tattooing, and body piercing. At worse, both the public and media envision teenagers as a cauldron of violence, and drug use, which spills over into mass killings in schools and random violence on the street and in homes.

This means that the actions of the youth have attracted a negative attention in the society; so much that the public and the media chooses to focus on the negative rather the positive things that they do. The negative things include the following: "violence, drugs, suicide, and other youth risk behaviours..." (Cnaan *et al.*, 2004:176). In this manner, they are only perceived as notorious, violent, and good in committing acts of crime. They are further regarded as those highly involved in issues of drug abuse and are mixed up with other risky behaviours. Their positive roles in society have been overshadowed by their negative actions.

On the contrary, the youth said that they exist to bring change in their societies; to be a beacon of hope; to pursue peace; to empower others; to be philanthropic; to be exemplary; to intercede on behalf of others; and to witness for Christ. This means that the participants, as young people, see themselves as positive contributors to their society even though they are perceived in a negative way. Some of the roles, which the participants highlighted are very crucial and are needed for the development of society. They assertively stated that they want to be perceived as beacons of hope, as exemplary, as empowering others through giving and as people who pursue peace. This implies that even though there may be young people, who are involved in acts of crime, violence, social unrests or xenophobic attacks (Malila, 2013:12), with some given to drunkenness, promiscuity and other related risky behaviours (Cnaan *et al.*, 2004:176); there are also those who are morally upright, who take responsibility for their actions, are compassionate, and constructive in societies in which they live.

The influence of the Christian identity on youth

According to Oyserman, Elmore and Smith (2012:77), the self and identity are forces for action. They argue that "how one thinks about oneself produces action rather than simply being associated with it." This means that the people's understanding of the self or identity is normally expressed through their actions rather than mere associations or identifications. This implies that one's sense of identity produces the actions that seek to maintain or elevate the components of that identity rather than lower or sever them. Due to this, people become sensitive to meaningful features of their immediate environment and adjust their thinking and doing to what seems contextually relevant to them (Oyserman *et al.*, 2012:84). The participants were therefore asked to explain how their Christian identity influences their decision-making, lifestyle and roles in society. They said that it influences them positive by helping them make good decisions and improve their moral ethic; but it also limits their freedom and actions.



The Christian identification and its positive influence

The youth said that their Christian identity has a positive influence in their decision-making process, lifestyle and roles in society. Since they are Christians, they noted that they do not take the decision-making process lightly. Before they can decide on an issue, they have to first consult God, and think on how their decision will affect their relationship with Him. That sense of awareness and the need for God's approval brings about a sense of accountability to the youth, which without, the youth would act anyhow. By seeking God's approval, the youth indicate that they place a high value on the spiritual connection that they have with God, and are willing to maintain such connections by making right choices.

In this sense, their accountability to God tends to improve their moral ethic. As a practical technique in the process of decision making, the participants said that they use the "What Would Jesus Do" (WWJD) motto to respond to some ethical challenges in their lives. The WWJD motto seeks to help young people in making the right choices following the example of Christ. This is the same motto which Sheldon (2000:10) used to implore members of the First Church to adopt when confronted by issues that challenge their lives in the imitation of Christ.

The Christian identification and its negative influence

Even though the participants clearly stated that their Christian identification has a positive influence on both their decisions and morals, they also said that there are restrictions or limitations which are associated with the Christian identity. The first concerns the issue of freedom. The participants said that their liberty to choose is sometimes restricted by the expectations that people have about the Christian identification. People always expect Christians to be perfect and to make no mistakes. More especially when they claim to be 'Born-again'. This tends to make them feel as if deprived of their freedom. When they make mistakes, the society tends to judge them harshly. They described this phenomenon as a disadvantage in their Christian identification. The expectations that are placed by the society upon them appear to prevent the exercise of their liberty.

The second issue pertains to the way in which Christianity has been communicated. They said that the current presentation of Christianity does not communicate to their African context. They insisted that the elements of their Christianity do not connect with their African culture. This is because they are taught to regard their dead loved ones as demons, or to cut ties with everything that comes from their African traditional customs. This experience challenges their identity, as they battle to understand how best they can be Africans while Christians. This is further problematized by the fact that some of their parents do combine Christianity with their African traditional customs. This sentiment is also highlighted by Ntombana (2015:105). Ntombana (2015:105) discovered that there are Christians who continue to practise their African traditional customs in secret.

This practice appears to send mixed signals to the youth and challenges their Christian identification. It separates their being Christians from their being Africans. They struggle to synchronise the Christian identity with their Africanness. The distinction between Christianity and their being Africans makes them question some of the elements of Christianity. More especially because some of the things which Christianity forbids them to do are part of their upbringing, such as *imbeleko* - the inclusion ritual of babies into the clan or *ukwaluka* - the rite of passage into adulthood (Ntombana, 2015:105). Because of these two reasons, the participants said that their Christian identification is somehow restrictive or limiting.



The findings of the study

The study discovered that even though 85.6 percent of the population of South Africa may be Christian, some are nominal Christians. This means that a great number of Christians only identify with Christianity by name and do not uphold the ethical principles of the Christian faith. These could be Christians who engage in violent acts, social unrests and risky behaviours like drug abuse or premarital sex. This however cannot be established with certainty because no Christian would admit of being a nominal Christian. It gives a negative impression about one's Christian status. Above that, the study established that religion and spirituality do have a positive role in the construction of youth identities. Religion provides the youth with an environment in which they can explore themselves in relation to the connections they make with others and develop their moral ethic by following a set of religious guidelines and principles. Spirituality further gives them a spiritual context in which they can discover their identity and establish their sense of self-worth in relation to God. Therefore, both religion and spirituality are imperative in the construction of the self-concept in youth.

Recommendations of the study

In light of the current socio-religious background of South Africa, the study found out that there are two categories of Christians within Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches. The first category is that of devout Christians while the second is that of nominal Christians. In line with these findings, the researcher therefore recommends that:

- There should be more research studies exploring the relationship between devout and nominal Christianity in South Africa.
- There should be more research studies that explore the relationship between Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity and African traditional cultures.
- There should be more research studies conducted on the issue of societal expectations and the pressure to perform in terms of moral conduct (perfectionism) on the 'born-again' youth.

Conclusions

This research study explored the role of religion and spirituality in the development of ethics and formation of identities in youth by focusing on the 'born-again' youth from the Assemblies of God, which is part of the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in South Africa. The purpose was to evaluate the impact of religion and spirituality in the lives of young people in light of the current socio-religious status of Christianity in the country. The study established that there are two categories of Christians within the Pentecostal/Charismatic Churches. The first category is that of devout Christians, who are committed to their faith and abide by the guidelines and principles of the Christian faith. The second category is that of nominal Christians, who only identify themselves with Christianity by name without adhering to the guidelines and principles of the Christian faith. Both these categories classify themselves as Christians, while the latter does not uphold the guidelines and principles of the Christian faith.

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