THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS SUBORDINATION ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the influence of religious subordination, especially in neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal contexts, on the formation of personal identity and autonomy of the faithful. Using an interdisciplinary approach that combines psychological, sociological, and cultural perspectives, power dynamics between religious leaders and followers, the mechanisms of social control, and the emotional and behavioral impacts of this relationship are examined. The research identifies benefits, such as emotional support and a sense of belonging, and challenges, such as the loss of individual autonomy and the perpetuation of social inequalities.

Keywords: Religious Leadership. Religious Subordination. Personal Autonomy. Share capital.

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INTRODUCTION

Subordination to religious leadership, especially in neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches, is a phenomenon that has gained increasing academic and social attention. In a society where religion plays a central role in people's lives, investigating how believers abdicate their autonomy in favor of the guidance of religious leaders is crucial to understanding the power dynamics involved. This study seeks to analyze the influence of religious subordination on the formation of personal identity and autonomy of believers, using an interdisciplinary approach that combines psychological, sociological and cultural perspectives.

Religion, as a social institution, has the power to shape not only individual beliefs, but also everyday practices and social relations. In neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal contexts, religious leadership often exerts significant control over the personal decisions of believers, from intimate matters such as relationships and finances to professional and political choices. This power dynamic is marked by a strong emotional component, where charismatic leaders create affective bonds that reinforce the loyalty of followers. This relationship can be understood in the light of Giddens' (2002) theories on the search for emotional security in an uncertain world, and Freud's (1974) reflections on religion as a coping mechanism for existential anxieties.

Religious subordination is not a new phenomenon, but its manifestation in neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches has specific characteristics that deserve attention. These denominations often operate in well-defined hierarchical structures, where religious leaders serve as undisputed authority figures. The legitimacy of these leaders is often constructed through discourses that emphasize their connection to the divine, reinforcing the idea that their orientations are divinely inspired. This power dynamic can lead to a loss of individual autonomy, as believers increasingly rely on the guidance of their leaders to make important decisions in their lives.

However, religious subordination is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. It can offer significant benefits, such as emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a moral framework that helps believers navigate ethical dilemmas and challenges of everyday life. For many, religion is a source of comfort and security in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. The religious community can provide a welcoming space, where individuals find emotional and spiritual support in times of difficulty. Additionally, religion can

play an important role in shaping personal identity, offering a set of values and norms that help individuals situate themselves in the world.

On the other hand, religious subordination also presents significant challenges. The over-reliance of believers on religious leaders can undermine their self-efficacy by reducing confidence in their ability to make autonomous decisions. Bandura (1997) argues that self-efficacy is a crucial component of personal development, and its absence can lead to a sense of powerlessness and helplessness. In addition, religious subordination can perpetuate social inequalities, as religious leaders use their authority to reinforce existing power structures. Bourdieu (2007) highlights how religion can be used as a tool of domination, promoting the "domestication of the dominated" and discouraging criticism and autonomous reflection.

This work proposes a multidisciplinary analysis that combines psychological, sociological, and cultural approaches to explore how religious subordination shapes personal and collective identities. Concepts such as social capital (Bourdieu, 2007), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and cultural mediation (Vygotsky, 2007) are used to understand the mechanisms of social control and the emotional and behavioral impacts of this relationship. The research discusses how religious leadership can be both a source of emotional support and an element that reinforces inequalities and limits individual autonomy. It also examines the role of religious culture in internalizing values and norms, and how contemporary religious pluralism affects relationships between leaders and followers.

In addition, the research also examines the role of religious culture in the formation of collective identity. In neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches, participation in religious rituals and the sharing of communal practices create a sense of belonging that transcends individual experiences. Vygotsky (2007) highlights the crucial role of social interaction in the formation of thought and in the construction of identities. In the religious context, this interaction occurs through cults, ritual practices, and community discourses that strengthen the bonds between believers and consolidate a common worldview.

However, the influence of religious culture also presents challenges. In contexts of religious pluralism, where different traditions compete for believers, tensions arise that can fragment pastoral authority and intensify social polarization. In addition, the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes can reinforce inequalities and perpetuate cultural conflicts, as Morais (2012) points out. These dynamics underscore the

need for interfaith dialogue that promotes mutual respect and tolerance between different faiths.

Through this reflection, it is expected to contribute to a broader understanding of the effects of religious subordination on the formation of identity and human behavior, promoting a critical debate on the role of religions in contemporary society. Religious subordination should not be understood in a simplistic way as an exclusively positive or negative phenomenon. It is a complex and multifaceted relationship, which can both strengthen community bonds and offer emotional support, as well as limit individual autonomy and restrict critical thinking.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

RELIGIOUS SUBORDINATION: CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Religious subordination refers to the influence and control exerted by religious leaders over their followers, especially in neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches. This power dynamic involves the surrender of personal autonomy in exchange for emotional security, mentorship, and social belonging.

In churches with well-defined hierarchical structures, religious leaders act as charismatic and authority figures, using discourses that legitimize their position and reinforce the submission of followers. This relationship influences personal decisions, such as relationships, finances, and career choices, demonstrating how religion shapes everyday behaviors.

Religious subordination can be analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. Freud (1974) argues that religion acts as a defense mechanism against life's uncertainties, offering structure and belonging. Bandura (1997) suggests that the overdependence of believers on leaders can undermine their self-efficacy, reducing confidence in their ability to make decisions. Bourdieu (2007) highlights how religion reinforces existing social structures, promoting the "domestication of the dominated" and discouraging criticism.

In addition, religious subordination is permeated by cultural factors. Religious practices often incorporate local cultural elements, creating a collective identity that reinforces the authority of leaders and conformity to community norms. However, contemporary religious pluralism challenges this dynamic by fostering competition between denominations and fragmenting traditional authority.

While religious subordination can offer benefits, such as emotional support and a sense of belonging, it also comes with risks, such as the loss of individual autonomy and the perpetuation of social inequalities. Therefore, it is essential to take a critical and multidisciplinary approach to understand its implications.

PERSONAL IDENTITY AND RELIGION

Personal identity is a dynamic construct formed by social, cultural, and psychological influences. Religion often plays a central role in this process, serving as the fundamental basis of self-identification. According to Marques (2023), personal identity is built in a pluralistic context, where religion can become a preponderant factor in the attribution of meaning.

Subordination to religious leadership can lead to the internalization of norms and values that prevail over other identities of the individual. Religious doctrines often demand conformity, creating an environment where religious identity becomes dominant. This can result in internal conflicts when religious beliefs are at odds with other facets of identity, such as sexual orientation, political opinions, or personal aspirations (Dresch, 2023).

Freud (1974) argues that the internalization of religious norms can offer security, but also lead to internal conflicts when religious expectations are at odds with other aspects of life. Religious subordination shapes not only the individual identity, but also the collective identity of the faithful. Through persuasive speeches and ritual practices, religious leaders reinforce the sense of belonging to the community.

According to Vygotsky (2007), learning and thought formation occur in interaction with the social environment. Religion plays an educational role, helping individuals to internalize values and behaviors aligned with religious doctrines. However, this conformity can lead to emotional alienation and identity crises, especially in contexts where leadership exerts excessive control.

Still, the influence of religion on personal identity has positive aspects. Many find in the religious community emotional support, a sense of purpose, and social connection. Religious practice can also provide a solid moral framework, helping believers navigate ethical dilemmas and challenges of everyday life.

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS SUBORDINATION

POWER DYNAMICS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

The dynamics of power and social control in the religious context reveal a complex phenomenon, where leadership acts as a mediator of values and norms that shape the behavior of believers. These power relations are manifested through legitimizing discourses, ritual practices, and control mechanisms that reinforce submission and conformity.

Subordination to religious leadership is often justified by interpretations of scripture that legitimize the authority of leaders, creating an environment in which followers feel compelled to follow guidance in various spheres of life.

Freud (1974) argues that religion functions as an illusion that offers solace in the face of life's uncertainties, but can also be used to reinforce structures of domination. The surrender of personal autonomy in favor of the guidance of leaders can be seen as a way of dealing with existential anxieties, but also as an abdication of individual decision-making power.

Another relevant aspect is the use of fear as an instrument of social control. Leaders often use narratives that emphasize spiritual or social consequences for those who challenge authority or community teachings. This emotional control is reinforced by the internalization of values that privilege obedience and conformity, restricting the space for criticism or autonomous reflection.

Moreover, cultural context plays a crucial role in perpetuating these power dynamics. Religious practices often incorporate local cultural elements, creating a collective identity that reinforces the authority of leaders and adherence to community norms. However, in a scenario of religious pluralism, leaders face the challenge of adapting to maintain their relevance, which can result in disputes for influence and the fragmentation of traditional authority.

While these dynamics of control can offer a sense of belonging and moral structure, they also present significant risks. The loss of individual autonomy, the perpetuation of social inequalities, and the stagnation of personal development are some of the negative consequences associated with excessive control. Thus, it is essential to adopt a critical perspective that considers not only the benefits provided by the community structure, but also the negative impacts on the individuals and societies in which these practices are embedded.

THE POWER OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Social capital, understood as the set of interpersonal relationships and social networks that influence behaviors and decisions (Bourdieu, 2007), is a powerful tool in the formation and maintenance of religious relationships. In neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal church contexts, trust and interaction between believers and their religious leaders play crucial roles in consolidating pastoral authority and subordinating followers.

Religious leadership, often exercised by charismatic figures, uses social capital to strengthen bonds of trust and loyalty. This process is evidenced by the dependence of believers on the advice and guidance of their leaders, which shape personal and collective choices. This dynamic is more than a simple power relationship: it is a phenomenon in which the trust and reciprocity present in religious communities create a network of emotional and spiritual support that reinforces obedience to established norms and values.

In addition, social capital in the religious context also acts as a mediator of cultural practices. Social interactions in churches offer the faithful a sense of belonging and collective identity, fundamental aspects for the internalization of religious beliefs and practices. In this sense, the influence of leaders transcends the spiritual realm, reaching practical decisions in everyday life, such as finances, relationships, and even professional choices.

However, this influence of social capital also presents challenges. When used in a way that reinforces dependence on or inhibits personal autonomy, social capital can limit the ability of individuals to make independent decisions. This is especially problematic in contexts where religious doctrines are presented as absolute truths, leaving little room for questioning or critical reflection.

COMPETITION AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Competition and religious pluralism are striking phenomena in the contemporary scenario, particularly in the context of neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches. The diversity of religious beliefs and practices creates an environment where different denominations vie for the attention and adherence of the faithful. This dynamic has profound implications for religious leaders, faith communities, and the individual behavior of followers.

The competition between religious denominations is reflected in the constant search for relevance and growth. Religious leaders often adapt their messages, strategies, and

practices to meet the expectations of believers, who have more and more spiritual options. This adaptation can include the incorporation of local cultural elements, liturgical changes, and even a discourse more aligned with contemporary social and political issues. As Peterlevitz (2019) points out, this dynamic leads to a fragmentation of traditional religious authority, where competition for believers weakens the unified control of leaders and fosters an environment of doctrinal innovation. The quest for political power by religious leaders, as noted by Oliveira and Moreira (2023), also highlights how these leaders use their influence to shape social and political behaviors, often to the detriment of the real needs of the communities they represent.

Religious pluralism, in turn, fosters a diversity that challenges power structures within faith communities. In contexts where multiple traditions coexist, believers can compare and evaluate different religious approaches, leading to greater spiritual mobility. This phenomenon, while positive in terms of freedom of choice, can also create internal tensions in religious communities. Leaders find themselves under pressure to maintain the loyalty of members, often resorting to speeches that reinforce their authority and the uniqueness of their spiritual vision.

However, religious competition also presents significant challenges. The instrumentalization of religion for political purposes, for example, is an increasingly common practice. As Morais (2012) observes, religious leaders can use their influence to shape social and political behaviors, often to the detriment of the real needs of the communities they represent. This strategic use of religious power can lead to social polarization, where different religious groups compete not only for believers but also for space and influence in the public sphere.

Despite these challenges, religious pluralism also provides opportunities for interfaith dialogue and for building bridges between different traditions. The coexistence of diverse faiths can foster a culture of tolerance and mutual respect, challenging exclusivist tendencies and promoting a more inclusive society.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS SUBORDINATION
UNDERLYING PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS

Religious subordination is deeply rooted in several psychological mechanisms that shape the way individuals perceive themselves, their decisions, and their social

relationships. These processes reveal how faith, religious leadership, and community dynamics interact to influence the behaviors and choices of believers.

One of the main psychological mechanisms that underpin religious subordination is identification. In this process, believers recognize themselves as an integral part of the religious community, adopting beliefs and values as central elements of their personal identity. Freud (1974) describes this phenomenon as a way of coping with existential anxieties, offering individuals a sense of security and stability in an uncertain world. This identification often extends to the figure of the religious leader, seen as a divine mediator who holds moral and spiritual authority.

Another relevant mechanism is the internalization of religious norms and values. When individuals accept the doctrines of their faith communities as absolute truths, these beliefs are embedded in their cognitive and emotional structure. This internalization is reinforced by ritual practices and discourses that legitimize the authority of leaders, creating a cycle of reaffirmation of values within the group. Amatuzzi (2000) points out that this process, although natural in community contexts, can lead to blind conformity and alienation of personal autonomy.

Fear also plays a significant role in the psychological mechanisms underlying religious subordination. Speeches that emphasize spiritual punishment or social ostracism for those who challenge leadership are commonly used to enforce obedience. This fear not only shapes individual behavior, but also strengthens the social control exercised by religious leaders. In many communities, fear of spiritual consequences acts as a barrier to dissent, fostering a loyalty that does not always reflect the true conviction of the believer.

The theory of self-efficacy, proposed by Bandura (1997), also offers *insights* into the psychological effects of religious subordination. Over-reliance on the guidance of spiritual leaders can undermine individuals' belief in their own abilities, compromising their ability to make autonomous decisions. When the validation of their choices depends solely on the approval of leadership, believers can experience a significant reduction in their self-confidence and their perception of independence.

On the other hand, the psychological mechanisms involved in religious subordination are not entirely negative. Many believers find comfort, security, and a sense of purpose in the guidance offered by their religious communities. Social interaction in these spaces often provides emotional support and validation, which are crucial elements

for psychological well-being. However, it is essential to balance this support with the promotion of autonomy and individual decision-making capacity.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL IMPACTS

Religious subordination exerts a significant influence on the emotions and behaviors of the faithful. This dynamic reflects both the emotional benefits provided by joining the religious community and the challenges related to dependence on leadership and conformity to group norms.

In the emotional realm, subordination can offer comfort and security. The faithful often find in their communities a welcoming space, where emotional support is shared in times of difficulty. As Freud (1974) argues, religion works as a defense mechanism against existential anxieties, providing a sense of protection in the face of life's uncertainties. Belonging to a religious community provides individuals with a sense of purpose, helping them cope with personal challenges such as loss, financial crises, or health issues.

On the other hand, emotional dependence on religious leadership can lead to negative effects, such as personal alienation. When religious norms and the counsel of leaders are internalized as absolute truths, the individual can suppress his or her own needs and desires to align with the expectations of the community. This alienation can generate feelings of frustration and disconnection, especially in situations where personal values conflict with religious doctrines.

From a behavioral point of view, religious subordination directly impacts personal choices. Many decisions, such as relationships, career, and finances, are made based on the guidance of religious leaders, often to the detriment of individual preferences. This phenomenon is particularly evident in neo-Pentecostal communities, where the idea of obedience and sacrifice is promoted as a virtue. Although this conformity can strengthen group cohesion, it can also restrict the autonomy and self-efficacy of individuals, as highlighted by Bandura (1997).

Additionally, the pressure to meet the expectations of the religious community can result in significant psychological stress. Anxiety associated with adhering to strict norms or seeking approval from leadership can lead to mental health issues such as depression and low self-esteem. On the other hand, living in a supportive environment can offer emotional resilience and favor overcoming adversity, as long as interpersonal relationships are healthy and not overly controlling.

The emotional and behavioral impacts of religious subordination highlight the complexity of the relationships between individuals and their faith communities. While religion can offer psychological support and a solid social network, it can also create challenges that limit autonomy and personal development.

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF RELIGIOUS SUBORDINATION

THE CULTURAL INFLUENCE OF RELIGION

Religion plays a central role in the formation and perpetuation of cultures, influencing values, norms, and behaviors that shape both individual and collective identities. In the context of neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches, this cultural influence is particularly evident, as their practices and discourses not only reflect the spiritual beliefs of their members, but also operate as tools for socialization and social control.

Neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches often incorporate local cultural elements into their liturgies, which contributes to the creation of a religious identity that resonates with the everyday experiences of the faithful. This cultural adaptation allows these churches to expand their social relevance, establishing a strong connection between faith and practical life.

Language and religious discourse are fundamental instruments in this cultural influence. Religious leaders use narratives and symbols that legitimize their authority and reinforce the obedience of the faithful. As Pinheiro and Tonini (1992) point out, religious discourse often appeals to emotional aspects, such as fear of spiritual punishment or the desire for salvation, to consolidate the loyalty of adherents. This strategy creates an atmosphere in which religious values become inseparable from cultural norms, strengthening conformity to community expectations.

In addition, religion plays a crucial role in the construction of collective identities. Participation in religious rituals, sharing community practices, and adhering to group norms create a sense of belonging that transcends individual experiences. According to Vygotsky (2007), learning and internalizing values occur largely through social interaction, and, in the religious context, this dynamic shapes both personal decisions and collective cultural practices.

However, the cultural influence of religion also presents challenges. In contexts of religious pluralism, where different traditions compete for believers, tensions arise that can

fragment pastoral authority and intensify social polarization. In addition, the instrumentalization of religion for political purposes can reinforce inequalities and perpetuate cultural conflicts, as Morais (2012) points out. These dynamics underscore the need for interfaith dialogue that promotes mutual respect and tolerance between different faiths.

The cultural influence of religion is a powerful force that shapes both social structures and individual experiences. In the context of neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches, this influence is manifested through adapted liturgical practices, persuasive discourses, and the creation of collective identities. Despite its benefits, this dynamic also brings challenges that require critical analysis to ensure that religious expression contributes to individual and collective well-being in a culturally diverse world.

SUBORDINATION AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Religious subordination is deeply linked to the construction of the collective identity of the faithful, especially in the context of neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches. In these communities, religious values, norms, and practices not only shape individual behavior but also create a shared identity that reinforces a sense of belonging and unity among members.

Collective identity is formed from the internalization of the beliefs and values of the religious community. In this process, individuals begin to adopt as their own the norms and guidelines transmitted by religious leadership. Vygotsky (2007) highlights the crucial role of social interaction in the formation of thought and in the construction of identities. In the church environment, this interaction occurs through cults, ritual practices, and community discourses that strengthen the bonds between the faithful and consolidate a common worldview.

Subordination to religious leadership occurs not only out of a desire for conformity, but also as part of an identity process in which community values are internalized by individuals (Taylor, 1997). By following the guidance of their leaders, believers demonstrate loyalty and conformity to the group's expectations, which reinforces collective values. This process, as Bandura (1997) points out, can compromise the self-efficacy of individuals, as their personal decisions become subordinated to the directives of leadership. However, it also offers emotional security and a sense of belonging, which are essential elements for social cohesion.

The relationship between subordination and collective identity is also manifested in the way believers perceive and respond to external influences. In a context of religious pluralism, collective identity is often reinforced as a barrier against ideas or practices that may challenge community values. This creates an "us versus them" dynamic, where loyalty to the group becomes even more pronounced. On the other hand, this dynamic can limit members' ability to question norms or explore other religious and cultural perspectives.

The emotional aspects of this subordination are equally relevant. Surrender to religious leadership is often mediated by a strong emotional bond with the group and its leaders, which helps believers deal with life's uncertainties. However, this relationship can also lead to personal alienation when individual wants and needs are suppressed in favor of conformity to the expectations of the group.

CONCLUSION

Subordination to religious leadership in neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal churches is a phenomenon of great complexity, which impacts both the individual identity of the faithful and the social structures in which they are inserted. As discussed throughout this study, this relationship is crossed by multiple psychological, sociological and cultural factors, being driven by the search for emotional security, belonging and moral guidance, but it can also result in excessive dependence, limitation of individual autonomy and reinforcement of hierarchical power structures.

From the analyses carried out, it was found that religious subordination can operate as a mechanism of social cohesion, offering emotional and community support to its adherents. Many people find in religion a welcoming space, where norms and values share collective meanings that give meaning to their lives. The influence of religious leaders, in this context, can be perceived as a stabilizing factor amid the uncertainties of modern life, providing clear guidelines on existential, moral, and practical issues. However, this same influence can also restrict freedom of thought and self-expression, leading to conformity and acceptance of norms without due question.

The interdisciplinary approach used in this study allowed us to understand how different theoretical currents interpret this phenomenon. Freud (1974) suggests that religion can act as a defense mechanism against existential anxieties, while Bourdieu (2007) argues that it reinforces preexisting social structures, perpetuating inequalities and relations of domination. Bandura (1997) warns of the impacts of religious subordination on

the self-efficacy of individuals, demonstrating how dependence on the orientations of leaders can undermine the ability to make autonomous decisions. Vygotsky (2007), in turn, highlights the role of cultural mediation in the internalization of religious values, showing how social interaction within faith communities influences the construction of personal and collective identity.

In addition to the psychological and social aspects, the cultural dimension of religious subordination is also central to understanding this phenomenon. The religious context not only reflects individual beliefs, but also establishes a set of norms and practices that guide community life. Language, rituals, and interpersonal interactions play a key role in maintaining the authority of religious leaders while reinforcing the group's identity. However, contemporary religious pluralism and social transformations challenge these traditional structures, promoting new forms of religious engagement and encouraging greater mobility between different denominations.

Thus, religious subordination should not be understood in a simplistic way as an exclusively positive or negative phenomenon. It is a complex and multifaceted relationship, which can both strengthen community bonds and offer emotional support, as well as limit individual autonomy and restrict critical thinking. The challenge, therefore, is to find a balance between these two aspects, allowing religion to continue to play its social and spiritual role, without this implying the suppression of individuals' freedom of choice.

In this sense, it is essential to foster an ongoing debate on the role of religion in contemporary society, encouraging critical reflections on its influences on the formation of identity and social organization. At the same time, it is essential that public policies and educational initiatives promote respect for religious diversity and encourage the autonomy of individuals, ensuring that faith and freedom can coexist harmoniously.

Finally, this study paves the way for future investigations on religious subordination in different contexts, exploring how different religious traditions deal with the tensions between authority and autonomy. Understanding these dynamics is essential to build more inclusive societies, where religion can be a space for welcome and personal growth, without compromising the freedom of its members.

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