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- Strengthening the teaching and learning of sociology and the ethics of religions as academic disciplines.
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Correspondence and Inquiries

All correspondence and inquiries concerning publication, subscription and membership should be directed to:

ayantayokehinde@gmail.com and benesonigboin@gmail.com

c/o Prof. J.K. Ayantayo,
Department of Religious Studies,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
08034297780

All articles are the personal opinion of individual authors. Each author is responsible for all the statements in each article.

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

1. **Abdulsalam, Mikail Kolawole, PhD.** Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
2. **Ayo-Oladapo, John, PhD.** Baptist College of Theology, Igede Ekiti.
3. **Bienose-Osagiede, U. Belinda, PhD.** Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Nigeria.
4. **Ifatokun, Victor.** Baptist College of Theology, Benin City.
5. **Nathaniel Dominic Danjibo** Department of Peace, Security and Humanitarian Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan
6. **Odei Moses Adeiza, PhD.** Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria.
7. **Oguche, Jeremiah, PhD.** Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary, Igbein, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria.
8. **Olaleye, Azeezat Omolola** Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.
9. **Olaoba, Olaitan Oyedele, PhD.** Department of Religious Studies, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo.
10. **Olusanya, Kayode John, PhD.** Department of Religious Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun.
11. **Otunaya. Abdulazeez Olalekan** Department of Religious Studies, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun.
12. **Temitope Oluwafemi Olowolafe** Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution, National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja

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FAITH-BASED ORPHAN CARE AND ISLAMIC LEGAL COMPLIANCE: A STUDY OF FOMWAN ORPHANAGE IN IBADAN

Mikail Kolawole ABDULSALAM (PhD)

Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies,

University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Email: mkabdulsalam@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9298-1855>

&

Azeezat Omolola OLALEYE

Department of Arabic and Islamic Studies,

University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Email: olaleyeomolola208@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored faith-based orphan care and its alignment with Islamic legal principles by examining the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) Orphanage in Ibadan, Nigeria. The research examines how the orphanage, established and managed by the FOMWAN, adheres to key Islamic legal frameworks such as *Kafālah* (sponsorship), *Ḥaḍānah* (custody), and *Wilāyah* (guardianship) in its care for orphans and vulnerable children. Employing a qualitative research design, the study uncovered the underlying values, administrative structures, and daily practices that shape the institution's operations. A purposive sampling technique was used to select seven key informants aged 48 to 74 years, including senior leadership and administrative staff from the orphanage. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility and depth in exploring participants' perspectives. The findings revealed that while the orphanage did not facilitate adoption in line with Islamic prohibition of *tabannī*, it implements comprehensive support systems for children's education, welfare, moral development, and religious upbringing. The study concluded that FOMWAN's model of orphan care effectively integrates Islamic ethical and legal obligations with contemporary humanitarian practices, thereby serving as a viable framework for faith-based social welfare initiatives in Muslim communities.

Keywords: FOMWAN, Orphanage home, Islamic legal frameworks

Introduction

Orphanage homes are essential social institutions that provide care, shelter, and emotional support to children who have lost their parents or whose families are unable to care for them due to economic hardship, conflict, or disease. In many developing countries, including Nigeria, orphanages address the pressing needs of vulnerable children impacted by poverty, displacement, and public health crises (Mohammed *et al.* 2020). These institutions not only provide necessities such as food and shelter but also offer access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial support. However, the extent to which these services positively impact children largely depends on the quality of management within the orphanage system. Effective administration, encompassing financial planning, staff coordination, and policy implementation, is essential to ensure the consistent and sustainable delivery of care. Research indicates that the quality of services in orphanages is closely linked to the quality of management (Ashimolowo *et al.* 2013).

Nigeria, as Africa's most populous country, faces significant socio-economic challenges that have contributed to a high number of orphaned and vulnerable children. According to UNICEF (2018), Nigeria has one of the world's largest populations of orphans, many of whom have lost parents to diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and, more recently, COVID-19. In addition to public health issues, internal conflicts, especially in the North-East region, where insurgent groups like Boko Haram operate, have further exacerbated the plight of children through displacement, exploitation, and trauma. In response, both governmental and non-governmental bodies have established orphanage homes to care for these vulnerable populations. However, the government's capacity to fully meet these needs remains limited, increasing reliance on NGOs to fill gaps in child welfare provision.

One such NGO is the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), a nationally recognised organisation established in 1985 with a strong commitment to the welfare of women and children (Fahm 2017). As part of its broader mission of education, healthcare, and social development, FOMWAN has established orphanage homes across Nigeria to support orphans and vulnerable children. These homes aim not only to meet the children's immediate needs but also to support their long-term development through education, moral guidance, and spiritual nurturing. FOMWAN's Ibadan chapter, officially launched on January 10, 1987, stands out for its community-based

efforts, including women's empowerment, the establishment of schools, training centres, and welfare programs (Oladosu-Uthman 2011).

Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State and one of Nigeria's most populous cities, continues to face significant socio-economic difficulties, including widespread poverty and the breakdown of family structures, which contribute to the growing number of orphaned and vulnerable children. FOMWAN's orphanage in Ibadan was established to address this need. Since 1987, it has provided a safe and nurturing environment for children, combining formal education with Islamic moral instruction. The orphanage is sustained through donations, member contributions, and Zakat from Muslim benefactors. The children benefit from dedicated caregivers and a structured environment that promotes their holistic development. Some children are even placed with committed FOMWAN members who continue to support their education and upbringing beyond the orphanage (Imam 2024).

In addition, the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) plays a crucial role in advocating women's rights within an Islamic legal and moral framework. The organisation actively addresses critical issues such as women's access to education, equitable inheritance rights, and just treatment within marital relationships. Through seminars, workshops, and *Da'wah* (Islamic outreach) programs, FOMWAN educates the public on the rights and responsibilities of Muslim women as enshrined in the Qur'an and Sunnah. These efforts have contributed to the development of a strong religious and social identity among Muslim women in the city. Moreover, FOMWAN Ibadan collaborates with local community-based organisations and government agencies to influence policies that promote women's empowerment and child protection. This integrated strategy has positioned FOMWAN as a formidable voice in shaping socio-religious discourse and advocating for justice within both Islamic and civic spheres in Ibadan and beyond (Oladosu-Uthman 2011).

Recognising that financial autonomy is crucial to women's empowerment, FOMWAN Ibadan also operates vocational centres that offer training in skills such as tailoring, baking, and digital literacy. These initiatives aim to equip women with practical, income-generating abilities that enable them to contribute economically to their households and communities. Many beneficiaries of the programme have successfully established small-scale businesses, thereby enhancing their financial independence and uplifting their local economies (FOMWAN 2015). This model

of empowerment aligns with Islamic ethical principles that promote self-reliance and social responsibility, particularly among women who serve as primary caregivers and community builders. Against this backdrop, this study examined the management processes of the FOMWAN Orphanage Home through the lens of Islamic law, its impacts and challenges.

Islamic Conception of Orphanhood and the Mandate of Care

In Islam, the term *yatīm*, commonly translated as “orphan,” traditionally refers to a child who has lost their father, the primary caregiver in many patriarchal societies. However, contemporary Islamic scholars now use the term more broadly to include children who lack appropriate parental care, including those separated from their families due to abuse, neglect, conflict, or displacement. This expanded definition recognises the vulnerability of children beyond the classical notion, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (Putri 2018). According to Ibn Manzur, as cited by Putri (2018), an orphan is a child whose father has died before the child attains maturity (*bāligh*). If only the mother has passed away, the child is termed *al-‘Ajūl*, while a child who has lost both parents is referred to as *al-Kitīn*. Prominent reformist scholar Rashid Ridha also affirmed that a child is only considered an orphan until the onset of maturity. Once the child reaches adulthood, signalled by puberty and intellectual responsibility, they are no longer categorised as orphans in Islamic legal thought.

Specific physical and emotional indicators mark the attainment of *bāligh* in Islamic jurisprudence. For boys, this includes experiencing a nocturnal emission, and for girls, menstruation. However, the age of fifteen is generally accepted as a benchmark of maturity if such signs are delayed. Importantly, maturity in Islam is not only physical but also encompasses intellectual and emotional development. Full adulthood is achieved when an individual demonstrates the capacity to reason, manage their affairs, and regulate emotions responsibly. Until then, Islamic teachings emphasise the moral and communal obligation to provide care, guidance, and protection to orphans (Putri 2018). The Qur’an strongly encourages compassion and justice in the treatment of orphans. In *Sūrahs al-Baqarah* and *ad-Duḥā*, Allah says:

They ask you about orphans. Say, 'Improving their condition is best.' If you manage their affairs, remember they are your brothers. Allah knows who intends corruption and who intends good. Moreover, if Allah had willed, He could have put you in their place. Indeed, Allah is Almighty and Wise (Qur'an 2:220). The command is clear, so as for the orphan, do not oppress him (Qur'an 93:9).

These verses highlight the moral imperative to protect, support, and uplift orphans within the community. Moreover, righteousness, according to *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2:177), is not limited to acts of worship but extends to charitable deeds, particularly caring for orphans, the needy, and those in distress. Furthermore, in *Sūrah an-Nisā'* (4:2), Muslims are instructed:

Give orphans their property and do not substitute the defective with the good. Do not consume their wealth into your own. Indeed, that is a great sin.

When orphans reach maturity, guardians are required to return their property in full, ensuring they are empowered to begin independent lives (*Sūrah an-Nisā'*, 4:6). Any unjust consumption of orphan wealth is considered a grave offence, described metaphorically as "eating fire into their bellies" (*Sūrah an-Nisā'*, 4:10).

Corroborating the Qur'an, the Ḥadīth of Prophet Muhammad further consistently emphasised the care of orphans. In a famous Ḥadīth narrated by al-Bukhārī, he said: "*The one who cares for an orphan and I will be in Paradise like this,*" and he held two fingers together to illustrate the closeness" (Al-Bukhārī 1996). He also advised, "*Would you like your heart to become soft and your needs fulfilled? Be kind to the orphan, pat his head, and feed him from what you eat*" (Ibn Ḥanbal 2012). Another Ḥadīth recorded by Al-Bukhārī states: "*The best house among the Muslims is one where an orphan is treated well, and the worst is where an orphan is mistreated.*"

Furthermore, the Prophet warned against major sins, one of which includes misappropriating the wealth of orphans. Abu Hurayrah narrated that the Prophet said: "*Avoid the seven destructive sins,*" among which he listed "*consuming the wealth of an orphan*" (al-Bukhārī 2013). The Prophet also promised Paradise to those who provide long-term care and sustenance to orphans. According to a narration by Mālik ibn al-Ḥārith, the Prophet said: "*Whoever takes in an orphan of two Muslim parents, feeding and caring for him until he becomes independent, Paradise becomes obligatory for him. Whoever frees an enslaved Muslim, Allah*

will free him from Hellfire, each limb for a limb.” (Ibn Ḥanbal 2012). These teachings collectively form a comprehensive ethical and legal framework in Islam that prioritises the protection, care, and rights of orphans. The emphasis is not only on providing material support but also on integrating orphans into family and community life, ensuring their emotional well-being and future stability. Any institution or individual involved in orphan care, such as FOMWAN’s orphanage in Ibadan, is expected to uphold these sacred responsibilities by the dictates of the Qur’an and Sunnah.

Historical Background of the FOMWAN Orphanage Home in Ibadan

The FOMWAN orphanage home in Ibadan was established in 1987, rooted in a profoundly emotional and compassionate response to a tragic incident. A woman had given birth to quadruplets, two boys and two girls, at the University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan, but sadly passed away shortly after delivery. Her husband, already burdened with the responsibility of caring for five other children, abandoned the newborns, leaving them in a state of extreme vulnerability and neglect (Dairo 2024). At that time, the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), still a relatively new organisation, had been directed by its national leadership to initiate impactful, community-oriented projects at the state level.

The heartbreaking story of the quadruplets reached the Oyo State chapter of FOMWAN, prompting an immediate humanitarian response. Members visited the babies in the hospital, offering gifts and emotional support. With the guidance of respected elders such as the first Amirah, Alhaja Sakeenat Adekola (The current *Iya Adini* of Yorubaland), and the late Islamic philanthropist Alhaji Arisekola Alao, FOMWAN was encouraged to take full responsibility for the care and upbringing of the children, an act that aligned perfectly with its mission of service, compassion, and empowerment (Oloso 2024). Unfortunately, before custodial arrangements could be finalised, one of the male infants died. The three surviving children were temporarily placed under the care of a paediatrician who provided essential medical care, while FOMWAN worked quickly to arrange for a caregiver. An Islamic cleric who had initially been accompanying the mother to UCH played a critical role in facilitating the legal and custodial processes. Eventually, the babies were officially entrusted to FOMWAN’s care, marking the beginning of what would become a long-term institutional commitment to orphaned and vulnerable children (Oloso 2024).

The official inauguration of the orphanage was a landmark moment, graced by prominent community leaders, including Alhaji Arisekola Alao, who commended FOMWAN's initiative and encouraged the women to maintain their commitment to the children, emphasising the crucial role of women in supporting one another during times of crisis. Initially established as a motherless babies' home to reunite children with their extended families after two years, the home gradually transformed into a full-fledged orphanage as it became evident that some children could not be returned to their families due to circumstances such as abandonment or the death of their fathers. From these humble beginnings with just three infants, the FOMWAN orphanage has grown into a vital and respected institution in Ibadan (Oloso 2024). Today, it operates two separate facilities, one in Bashorun for boys and another in Akobo for girls, currently providing a safe and nurturing environment for seventy-four children. The orphanage remains a symbol of FOMWAN's enduring commitment to humanitarian service, Islamic values, and the protection of vulnerable children in society (Dairo 2024).

Administrative Structure of the Orphanage

Findings from the key interviewees revealed that the administrative structure of the FOMWAN Orphanage Home in Ibadan is intricately woven into the broader organisational framework of the FOMWAN Oyo State Chapter. According to Adeleye (2024), the apex leadership rests with the State Amirah, who oversees all chapter activities. She is supported by executive members, including the Naibatul Amirah I and II (Deputy Amirahs), the General Secretary, the Assistant General Secretaries, the Treasurer, the Public Relations Officer (PRO), and the Financial Secretary. This executive team is responsible for the strategic oversight of all FOMWAN projects, including the orphanage. Expanding on this, Idowu (2024), a member of the Orphanage Committee, explained that a dedicated committee manages the orphanage's day-to-day operations. She stated:

A dedicated Orphanage Committee runs the orphanage within the FOMWAN structure. The committee is chaired by a woman who coordinates all related activities. She works closely with a Secretary, while other members contribute their professional skills and resources to support the home's operations.

Within the physical orphanage, routine administration is led by the Administrative Secretary, also known as the Supervisor. This individual plays a central role in coordinating daily activities and ensuring the children's overall welfare. Imam (2024), another respondent, noted that:

The Supervisor is assisted by a team which includes caregivers, cooks, cleaners, housemasters and housemistresses, drivers, and security personnel. Everyone has a defined role that contributes to a nurturing and safe environment for the children.

Regarding decision-making, Dairo (2024) emphasised that while operational decisions are handled by the Orphanage Committee and its Chairperson, matters of greater significance are escalated to the executive leadership of FOMWAN in the state. She added that the committee submits reports to the executive body every two weeks. These reports cover progress, challenges, and key concerns. The leadership then discusses and makes decisions based on FOMWAN's overall vision and the welfare of the children.

Admission Processes

The process of admitting children into the FOMWAN Orphanage Home has undergone a marked evolution, shaped by the institution's expansion and the changing legal landscape governing child welfare in Nigeria. The interviewees, Dairo, Oloso and Idowu (2024) explained that in the early years, when the facility operated primarily as a motherless babies' home, admissions were relatively informal. Families or guardians approached the orphanage directly without governmental mediation, and children were accepted after undergoing medical check-ups, typically provided free of charge by Al-Ayu Hospital, a long-time partner of the orphanage. This direct method changed significantly following the enactment of the Child Rights Law, which legally placed all children under state protection. As a result, admissions now require the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development's involvement.

Under the current system, the admission of motherless babies begins with the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) unit of the Ministry. Families must first present their cases to the Ministry, which then conducts investigations, completes documentation, and refers the case to the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) for verification. Only after these steps are completed does the Ministry issue a referral letter to FOMWAN, subject to space availability and the completion of a mandatory medical check-up. Both maternal and paternal family members must be present and sign a formal agreement allowing the child to stay in the home for up to two years. However, Dairo (2024) noted that families often

fail to return for the children after this period. In such cases, FOMWAN continues to care for the children while making repeated efforts to contact their families. Imam (2024) recalled that in earlier times, abandoned children were raised at the orphanage and, upon reaching maturity, some were married off with the support and consent of their biological families, with FOMWAN frequently providing financial support.

The findings further show that children affected by crises such as divorce, separation, or severe poverty follow a similar referral pathway through the Ministry. These children are also required to undergo a medical check-up and have their records adequately documented before admission. However, there is no fixed duration for their stay at the home. Individual needs determine their care, and FOMWAN supports them with food, clothing, shelter, education, and vocational training. Upon completion, they are reintegrated into society, and follow-up visits are conducted to assess their well-being. Lawal (2024) reported that initially, FOMWAN did not demand any payment from families. However, due to some families' failure to maintain contact or support their children, a symbolic monthly contribution was introduced, beginning at ₦1,000 and later increased to ₦5,000, not for revenue generation but to foster a sense of responsibility and sustained involvement.

All interviewees confirmed that FOMWAN does not provide adoption services. The orphanage's role is limited to providing temporary care, while legal adoptions are handled exclusively by the Ministry of Women's Affairs to ensure compliance with statutory procedures. Oloso (2024) explained that in the early stages of the orphanage, before the formalisation of adoption laws, some children were integrated into the homes of FOMWAN members and were raised as their own, with marriage arrangements often supported by the biological families. However, due to recent legal reforms, all adoption matters must now be processed solely through government channels to ensure accountability and legal conformity.

Funding of the Orphanage

Qualitative findings from interviews conducted at the FOMWAN Orphanage Home illustrate a resilient funding model anchored in communal support, religious values, and strategic resource mobilisation. One of the respondents, Idowu (2024), recounted the early efforts of the orphanage to raise funds, stating, *"We used to go to mosques after Jumu'ah prayers to ask for donations, but it was not sustainable."*

People would give once or twice, and then it would stop.” This led the organisation to pivot towards more reliable support systems rooted in public goodwill. Lawal (2024), one of the administrators, explained that the orphanage now thrives primarily on consistent donations from individuals and community members. *“We have people who bring food, toiletries, clothes, or even cash regularly. Some are members of FOMWAN, others are just people who care,”* she said. These contributions, though informal, provide the bulk of the orphanage’s daily needs.

Beyond material support, the orphanage has also become a site of emotional and spiritual connection. Oloyedun (2024) described how donors integrate their charitable acts with personal celebrations: *“People celebrate their birthdays or anniversaries with the children. They bring food and gifts and spend time with them. It brings joy and makes the children feel special.”* Such engagements have become a unique way to reinforce social bonds and enhance children’s emotional well-being. Imam (2024) emphasised the role of the wider FOMWAN network in sustaining the home. *“Every local government chapter contributes in whatever way they can. Sometimes it is cash, sometimes it is materials. It is a collective effort,”* she noted. This decentralised model of support helps distribute responsibility and promotes broader community ownership of the orphanage’s mission.

Despite these efforts, funding challenges remain acute. Dairo (2024) noted that the government provides a monthly stipend of ₦36,000, which is insufficient to cover the costs of feeding, healthcare, and education for more than 70 children. *“It is the people who keep us going. Many give not because they are wealthy, but because they believe it is for the sake of Allah (Fī-sabīlillāh),”* she explained. This faith-driven sense of duty appears to be a vital sustaining force behind the orphanage’s operations.

Educational Provision and Care for the Children

FOMWAN, according to Lawal (2024), was initially established as a temporary shelter with a maximum stay of two years. The inability of many parents to reclaim their children necessitated a strategic shift. As a result, the orphanage established a nursery and primary school within the facility to begin the children's education. Recognising the need for continuity, FOMWAN later expanded this effort by founding a secondary school to support the children's academic progression further. However, the location of the secondary school posed a challenge for some

residents. The organisation addressed this by facilitating enrolment at nearby institutions, such as the Islamic High School. As reported by Oloyedun (2024), this inclusive approach ensures no child is excluded from educational access. The orphanage also supports children through higher levels of education, including NCE and BSc programs. This long-term investment is a deliberate effort to empower children with the skills and qualifications needed for a productive and independent future.

Health care is another core area of emphasis. Oloyedun (2024) explained that before admission, each child undergoes a comprehensive medical screening at a partner private hospital that often provides its services pro bono. In cases of illness, the children receive timely treatment, and when specialist attention is needed, they are referred to the University College Hospital (UCH) in Ibadan. Infants benefit from a structured immunisation program administered through UCH, and a Health Committee Chairperson monitors the children's ongoing well-being, providing medical guidance and oversight. Imam (2024) further stressed the orphanage's commitment to nutrition, noting that all children receive three nutritious meals a day, supplemented by healthy snacks. Health professionals design the meal plans to meet the children's developmental needs. For younger children, additional measures are taken, such as providing milk every three days to prevent malnutrition. This comprehensive system of support, spanning education, health care, and nutrition, demonstrates FOMWAN's commitment to nurturing the physical, intellectual, and emotional growth of every child in its care.

Moral and Spiritual Development Programs for the Children

The interview findings also indicated a deep institutional commitment to the children's moral and spiritual development, alongside their academic growth. According to Imam (2024), the orphanage has implemented a structured Islamic education programme tailored to build a strong moral foundation in the children. Dedicated Ustādhhs are assigned to the boys' and girls' facilities in Bashorun and Akobo, respectively, where they conduct daily teachings on Islamic principles, religious obligations, and ethical values. The programme places strong emphasis on instilling Islamic etiquette, responsibility, compassion, and honesty from an early age. Beyond regular instruction, children at the orphanage also participate in Islamic Vacation Courses (IVC), which offer immersive, socially enriching faith-based learning experiences. These courses serve to deepen their understanding of

Islamic teachings and connect them to broader religious networks and practices. As part of efforts to enhance Qur'anic literacy and memorisation skills, a visiting *Mu'allim* visits the orphanage three times a week. Imam (2024) noted that this teacher not only facilitates recitation and memorisation sessions but also uses storytelling and lessons from the story of Prophet Muhammad to teach practical moral lessons. This dual approach, combining in-house and external Islamic instruction, helps to instil in the children a strong religious identity and discipline.

Attention is also given to the children's psychological and emotional well-being. According to Idowu (2024), many of the children admitted into the home have experienced abandonment, neglect, or trauma, and the orphanage has developed counselling and mentorship programmes to address these challenges. Regular counselling sessions are conducted to support emotional resilience, manage stress, and foster healthy self-esteem. When needed, external professionals are invited to provide additional psychological support. In cases where deeper issues arise, they are escalated through an internal reporting mechanism that includes the administrative secretary and FOMWAN's executive leadership. This comprehensive spiritual and emotional care framework reflects the orphanage's holistic approach to child development. The combination of religious education, emotional support, and community mentorship ensures that children not only grow in knowledge and faith but also develop a strong sense of self-worth and psychological stability within a nurturing Islamic environment.

Impacts of the FOMWAN Orphanage Home

Interviews conducted with key figures involved in the administration of the FOMWAN Orphanage Home in Ibadan revealed that since its founding in 1987, the institution has recorded significant milestones in transforming the lives of orphaned and vulnerable children. According to Idowu (2024), the orphanage has created a stable and nurturing environment where children are not only cared for but also empowered to reach their full potential. Over the years, many of the home's wards have advanced to tertiary institutions, including Colleges of Education (NCE), Polytechnics, and Universities across Nigeria. Some of these former residents now work in respected government bodies such as the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs in Abuja. In contrast, others are teachers, civil servants, or have settled into family life. One notable alumnus, trained in carpentry

at the Federal Technical College, graduated as the top student in his department and now returns value to the orphanage by managing all its carpentry needs.

Adeleye (2024) emphasised that the success of the orphanage extends beyond individual outcomes. The institution has evolved into a hub of excellence, producing professionals, educators, and artisans who are making meaningful contributions to society. Current children in both primary and secondary school are closely monitored to ensure steady academic progress. The orphanage's ongoing investment in formal and vocational education, as well as emotional and spiritual support, has created a model for child development. This impact has inspired the establishment of other facilities, such as a new orphanage in Oyo town, facilitated by the donation of a sixteen-room building. Additionally, the Ibadan centre now includes a second home specifically for girls and has benefited from vehicle donations to improve logistics and transportation.

Oloyedun (2024) further explained that the influence of the FOMWAN orphanage reaches into the wider community. As the only Muslim orphanage in Ibadan and one of the few in Oyo State, it has earned a reputation as a dependable institution for child welfare among Muslim communities. Government agencies, particularly the Ministry of Women's Affairs, often refer cases to the orphanage based on its track record of ethical care. The orphanage also serves as a social support system, resolving family conflicts, supporting women and guardians in distress, and creating job opportunities through its operations. Most importantly, the home offers a refuge for children who might otherwise be left to roam the streets, exposed to abuse, neglect, and societal rejection. By providing shelter, education, and moral guidance, the orphanage offers these children renewed hope, dignity, and the foundation for a better future.

Challenges Faced by the FOMWAN Orphanage

Insights from interviews with key administrative personnel at the FOMWAN Orphanage Home in Ibadan indicate that the institution continues to face a range of challenges that hinder its ability to deliver optimal care. Financial instability emerged as the most critical concern. According to Oloso (2024), although the orphanage receives donations from individuals and FOMWAN chapters, these contributions are frequently insufficient or not aligned with the home's most pressing needs. While donors often supply food items, there is a recurring shortage of funds to cover essential operational costs such as medical care, utility bills, fuel,

and staff salaries. The worsening economic conditions in Nigeria have further intensified this problem, pushing daily running expenses beyond manageable limits. As a result, the orphanage finds it difficult to maintain financial planning, expand services, or ensure long-term sustainability.

Lawal (2024) noted that a significant challenge also lies in the lack of parental involvement and the growing tendency of abandonment. Initially, the orphanage was intended to serve as a temporary shelter, with a two-year limit on how long children would be separated from their families. However, many parents either become unreachable or deliberately avoid taking back their children. In some instances, guardians provide false contact details or change their phone numbers, making them impossible to trace. This abandonment has forced the orphanage to expand its services beyond its original scope. One significant consequence was the unplanned establishment of nursery and primary schools to accommodate children who had overstayed. Although this expansion has benefited the children's education, it has imposed additional financial and logistical burdens on the administration, raising broader concerns about the home assuming long-term care responsibilities without legal clarity or parental input.

The staffing situation, while structurally functional, is also under strain. According to Dairo (2024), the orphanage maintains a standard recruitment process for filling staff positions, including public advertisements and interviews to select qualified candidates. However, as the number of children and the scope of care increase, existing staff members are being stretched thin. They are now required to handle multiple responsibilities, from caregiving and academic support to medical supervision and emotional counselling, within an already resource-constrained setting. The inability to offer continuous professional training, staff incentives, or welfare packages due to limited funding further compounds the issue. Despite the dedication of FOMWAN members and volunteers, the demands of running a growing social welfare institution without corresponding structural support pose serious risks to staff well-being and service quality.

Assessing the FOMWAN Orphanage through the Lens of Islamic Law

The administrative hierarchy of the orphanage, as described by Adeleye (2024) and Idowu (2024), shows structured leadership under the State Amirah and a dedicated Orphanage Committee. This model aligns with the Islamic injunction for consultation (*shūrā*) in governance, as enjoined in the Qur'an: "...consult them

in affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah” (Qur’an 3:159). The Prophet regularly consulted his companions in matters of administration, including social welfare, reflecting the importance of collective leadership in managing public responsibilities. The Prophet Muhammad also entrusted administrative responsibilities to capable women, as seen in Umm Salamah’s counsel during the Hudaibiyyah treaty and in Ash-Shifā’ bint ‘Abdullāh’s leadership in marketplace oversight (Ibn Hishām 1995). In this light, the leadership roles occupied by women in FOMWAN are not only legitimate but exemplary. However, a potential point of critique arises in the delegation of excessive responsibilities without institutional financial backing. The burden placed on volunteer-based committees without structured funding contradicts the Prophetic principle of proportionate delegation. The Prophet warned against overburdening those in leadership: *“Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you is responsible for his flock...”* (al-Bukhārī, 2013:893; Muslim, 2000:1829), implying the need for sustainable support systems.

The shift from informal to Ministry-mediated admissions (Dairo 2024) is compliant with *fiqh al-nawāzil* (jurisprudence of contemporary issues), which upholds legal harmonisation with state systems for the *maṣlaḥah* (public interest). Nonetheless, from a *Sharī‘ah* perspective, abandonment by families after two years raises serious ethical and legal questions. Islam places strong emphasis on *ṣilat al-rahim* (maintaining family ties). The Prophet declared severing kinship ties as a major sin: *“No one who severs the ties of kinship will enter Paradise”* (al-Bukhārī, 2013:5984). Families who surrender children and fail to return violate this Qur’ānic mandate: *“And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs [that bore you] ...”* (Qur’an 4:1). In Islamic jurisprudence, the rights of children include paternal and maternal care, financial maintenance, and emotional protection. When families evade these responsibilities, the orphanage’s assumption of care becomes a form of *kafālah* (guardianship), which is highly meritorious but must remain within defined Islamic limits.

The principle of *kafālah* (foster care), as illustrated in the Qur’anic account of Prophet Zakariyya’s guardianship over Maryam, “Every time Zakariyya entered her chamber, he found with her provision...” (Qur’an 3:37), serves as a foundational model for orphan care in Islam. However, Islamic jurisprudence makes a clear distinction between *kafālah* and *wilāyah* (legal guardianship), emphasising that the former does not transfer full parental rights or legal lineage.

Within this framework, the FOMWAN orphanage's introduction of a symbolic monthly fee, as noted by Lawal (2024), is an innovative attempt to promote parental responsibility and engagement. This initiative aligns with the *tahsīnīyāt* (commendable social policy) category of the *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (higher objectives of Islamic law), which encourages socially beneficial practices. Nevertheless, the enforcement of such financial contributions must be carefully moderated to prevent *mashaqqah* (undue hardship), especially among economically disadvantaged families, by the legal maxim "*al-mashaqqah tajlib al-taysīr*" (hardship necessitates ease. Al-Shātibī 1996).

Historically, the Prophet Muhammad himself was an orphan and embodied both material and emotional support for orphans, serving as the highest ethical model of compassionate care. The Qur'an commands, "*They ask you about orphans, Say, 'Improving their condition is best'*" (Qur'an 2:220), affirming the imperative to protect and nurture them in a dignified manner. However, the Prophet did not institutionalise orphan care as a permanent solution; instead, he encouraged family-based and integrative community models. This approach, rooted in the preservation of *nasab* (lineage) and the promotion of social cohesion, raises ethical and legal concerns regarding the long-term institutionalisation of children at FOMWAN, particularly when efforts to reunite them with family or community-based alternatives prove abortive. In light of this, FOMWAN's practices must be continually reassessed to ensure they uphold both the spirit and letter of Islamic law.

FOMWAN's decision to abstain from legal adoption, as reported by Oloso (2024), is consistent with Islamic injunctions against *tabannī*, the formal adoption practice that attributes legal lineage to a non-biological child. The Qur'an unequivocally rejects this practice: "Nor has He made your adopted sons your [real] sons. That is but your saying with your mouths; but Allah says the truth and He guides to the [right] way" (Qur'an 33:4). While Islam prohibits the legal conflation of adoptive and biological lineage, it strongly encourages *kafālah* (foster care), whereby a child is raised and cared for without altering their identity or inheritance entitlements. This distinction ensures that the rights of biological lineage, particularly in matters of *nasab* (ancestry) and *mirāth* (inheritance), remain intact by the principles of Islamic law. FOMWAN's adherence to this guideline reflects a conscious effort to uphold both the ethical and legal parameters of child care as delineated in the *Sharī'ah*.

The funding model of the FOMWAN Orphanage Home reflects the Islamic tradition of *ṣadaqah* (voluntary charity), *zakāt* (obligatory almsgiving), and *waqf* (endowment). However, the orphanage's overreliance on informal, unpredictable donations raises a *fiqhī* concern regarding sustainability. Islamic jurisprudence encourages structured systems such as *waqf*, which historically ensured long-term financing for schools, orphanages, and hospitals during the Islamic golden age. According to Ibn Qudāmah (1997), *waqf* is "one of the best forms of charity because it provides continuous benefit". Establishing a permanent endowment or income-generating venture under a *waqf* framework could enhance the orphanage's financial resilience, ensuring a more stable provision of welfare in line with Islamic best practices. The Prophet Muhammad also linked righteousness with consistent care for orphans: "*The one who cares for an orphan and me will be together in Paradise like this,*" and he held his two fingers together to illustrate the closeness (al-Bukhārī, 2013:5304). This ḥadīth supports the sincerity of FOMWAN's volunteers and donors. However, sincerity alone does not absolve institutions of their Islamic obligation to plan and be sustainable. Thus, it is commendable but incomplete without a systemic, legally recognised framework such as a *waqf* or a dedicated *zakāt* allocation.

FOMWAN's commitment to holistic education and healthcare reflects the Prophet's model in caring for the physical and intellectual well-being of orphans. The Qur'an instructs: "*Do not approach the orphan's property except in the way that is best, until he reaches maturity*" (Qur'an 6:152). Muslim scholars interpret "the best way" to include their proper upbringing, education, and personal development. The orphanage's effort to support children through formal schooling and vocational training mirrors the early Islamic commitment to knowledge. The Prophet said: "*Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim*" (Ibn Mājah, 2007:224). Ensuring educational access for orphaned children is therefore not merely a social service but a legal and moral duty in Islam. In this regard, FOMWAN's expansion from basic care to secondary and tertiary educational support can be seen as a commendable realisation of *ta'līm* (Islamic pedagogy) and *tarbiyyah* (moral nurturing). Similarly, Health care, another pillar of FOMWAN's service, aligns with the Prophetic tradition of safeguarding physical well-being. During the Madinan period, the Prophet ensured that children under care were nurtured and protected from illness. In *Sīrah*, orphans such as Zayd ibn Ḥārithah and 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, both raised under the Prophet's direct or indirect

guardianship, received both material and emotional care (Ibn Hishām 1995). FOMWAN's integration of routine medical checks and dietary planning can be read as modern adaptations of these Sunnah-based precedents.

The orphanage's moral and spiritual programs reflect a deep alignment with the Qur'anic emphasis on *taqwā* (God-consciousness) and *adab* (etiquette). The Qur'an states: "*And they give food despite love for it to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [saying], 'We feed you only for the countenance of Allah. We wish not from you reward or gratitude'*" (Qur'an 76:8–9). This moral imperative is reflected in the nurturing of *īmān*, *akhlāq*, and Qur'anic memorisation within the home. The inclusion of structured Islamic education, such as regular Qur'an classes and IVCs, shows fidelity to the Prophet's directive to start moral education from a young age: "*Command your children to pray at the age of seven...*" (Abū Dāwūd, 2008:495). Moreover, the orphanage's use of biographical stories of the Prophet as a moral tool illustrates a didactic tradition present in classical Islamic pedagogy. This is consistent with the Qur'anic principle: "*Indeed, in the Messenger of Allah you have a good example to follow...*" (Qur'an 33:21).

From the perspective of Islamic law, the current staffing strain at the FOMWAN Orphanage raises serious ethical and legal concerns related to *maṣlahah* (public interest) and the *ḥuqūq al-ʿibād* (rights of individuals). Islam places a high premium on justice, fairness, and the protection of human dignity in all administrative affairs. The Qur'an commands: "*Give full measure and weight with justice and do not deprive people of their due*" (Qur'an 6:152). This principle applies not only to commercial dealings but to all forms of human responsibility, including employment. Overburdening staff without adequate support or training contradicts the prophetic model of compassionate and just leadership. The Prophet Muhammad warned: "*Every one of you is a shepherd, and every one of you is responsible for his flock*" (al-Bukhārī, 2013:893). This *ḥadīth* implies that leaders must ensure the well-being of those under their care, including employees, by providing sufficient resources, equitable workloads, and a conducive work environment.

5.0 Conclusion

The FOMWAN orphanage in Ibadan exemplifies a successful model of faith-based orphan care that harmoniously blends Islamic legal compliance with modern caregiving practices. By adhering to the principles of *Kafālah*, *Ḥaḍānah*, and *Wilāyah*, the institution ensures that Islamic teachings preserve the rights, dignity, and religious identity of orphaned and vulnerable children. The orphanage's approach, grounded in compassion, community support, and religious accountability, offers a compelling alternative to conventional models of child welfare, particularly in Muslim contexts where legal and cultural sensitivities around adoption and lineage are paramount. Despite financial constraints and challenges such as parental abandonment, the orphanage remains steadfast in its mission through collaborative efforts, effective leadership, and strategic resource management. The study highlights the potential of Islamic faith-based organisations to provide holistic child care that is both legally sound and spiritually nurturing. As such, the FOMWAN Orphanage serves not only as a sanctuary for vulnerable children but also as a replicable framework for other Muslim communities seeking to establish ethical and sustainable orphan care systems grounded in Islamic law.

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**CHURCH AND DIGITAL MEDIA:
SUSTAINING THE GREAT COMMISSION
AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

BY

Dr. John Ayo-Oladapo

Baptist College of Theology, Igede Ekiti

+2348035608098

johnayoladapo@gmail.com

&

Ifatokun, Victor

Baptist College of Theology, Benin City

+2349052240815

Abstract

Recently, interest in the religious use of digital media has increased. Because it has become an integral part of everyday life and increasingly influences religious affiliation, espoused religious beliefs, and identity. Digital media play an important role in communication and pastoral support for ministry. They provide new opportunities for mission and service. It is further strengthened by combining online and offline spaces. In this way, we can reimagine the worship environment and accompanying experiences. The church exists to bring each member to maturity and to demonstrate God's love to people around the world. Being an essential part of society, the church also has a critical mandate to encourage social transformation. There is a need to evaluate the integration of digital media in the church to establish its role in fulfilling the Great Commission and sustaining social transformation. In response to this challenge, the study used a descriptive method to assess the interface between the church and digital media, considering their benefits and limitations. The study found that, given current circumstances, churches need to understand how to build digital communities and cultivate an identity that represents and promotes the Great Commission and drives social transformation. As such, there is a need to create flows and links between the church's self-image and digital media. Also, the church must cultivate literacies that will reestablish theological ethics, the value of authority, and authenticity in digital media. The study concludes that digital media, an invaluable asset, must be used to fulfil the great commission and sustain social transformation.

Keywords: Church, digital media, great commission, social transformation, and Gospel.

1. Introduction

Digital media (also known as “new media” or “social media”) has been entrenched in church and daily life. The church has the purpose of equipping and building each member to maturity (Ephesians 4:12-14) and spreading the Gospel message across the world (Acts 1:8). Premised on the commands in the great commission, which also validates and prompts the utilization of media to further the spread of the Gospel message and facilitate social transformation (Matthew 28:18-20), Eyitope (2020:7) asserts that the biblical mandate commanded by Jesus “implies leaving where we are and advancing to where they (people) are and where we are to go- all nations.” Consequently, digital media is saturated with diverse platforms that enable churches to reach people in their unique contexts and geographic borders. Such platforms include Facebook, Instagram, Skype, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Zoom. These media platforms offer new opportunities for churches to reach a large audience in a relatively short time.

Digital media platforms allow people to commune with God and share the Gospel’s message through teaching and preaching. As such, this paper aimed to interrogate the integration of digital media in the church and its role in fulfilling the Great Commission and sustaining social transformation. Premised on this objective, the study utilised descriptive methods to assess the matter. The research problem is addressed through the following research questions:

1. What does digital media make possible for the church?
2. How does digital media limit Church practices and members’ involvement?
3. In what ways can the church use digital media to transform society?
4. How can the church effectively utilise digital media in fulfilling the Great Commission?

This qualitative research reviewed existing studies and utilised notable observations on the subject. The study focused mainly on churches in Nigeria that have fully leveraged digital media to supplement their conventional structures. These churches include Living Faith Church (also known as Winners), Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, Baptist Churches, Redeemed Christian Church of God, and Salvation Ministries.

2. The Church and Digital Media

The term “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning “called-out people.” The church is the body of baptized believers called by God through the Gospel message to salvation provided in Christ Jesus (Acts 4:12; Ephesians 4:12; 5:25; John 14:6). As the body of Christ, the church exists to strengthen fellowship among brethren (Acts 2:42), teaching of obedience, and faith (Romans 15:14; Mathew 28:20) and promoting prayer (Acts 2:24; Philippian 4:6-7). The church has no room for distinction of the people regarding race, gender, nationality, or social status. The church is where people dialogue with God and with one another, making communication an essential foundation of interaction.

The digital age is a modern environment in which “digital media” is ubiquitous across many aspects of life. The phrase “digital media” refers to various web-based platforms, programs, and technologies used to engage in social interaction by creating content, sharing information, and meeting new people. Lundby and Evolvi (2022:3) describe digital media as a basis for experiences that simultaneously connect online and offline environments. According to Dyikuk et al. (2021:297), digital media is always connected to the internet and is characterised by speed, interactivity, and media convergence, with elements such as text, audio, and video that communicate information to various people. On the other hand, the Internet is a computer network that facilitates communication across media.

The emergence of digital media has produced a new culture in modern society. Growing communication has become ephemerally “in the now” and permanently accessible. Virtual reality enables people to travel virtually to any location worldwide without leaving their seats. In the long run, it changes society by transforming institutions, cultures, and ways of doing things. Digital media offer the church a wider variety of voices, allowing congregants to actively participate in messages by commenting, sharing, and liking photos and posts about church activities, and by holding meetings and fellowship through Facebook, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Instagram. Many churches have taken full advantage of digital media platforms to supplement their conventional approaches and grow their ministries. Many churches in Nigeria over the past two decades have incorporated media platforms to strengthen their traditional structures.

Furthermore, churches in Nigeria use various digital media platforms to disseminate information and advertise programs and events. Most of these churches have media pages where devotionals are shared via phone and live streaming (Ogunsola and Raji 2019:190). Digital media platforms are used by churches such as Mountain of Fire and Miracle Ministries, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Baptist Churches, Daystar Christian Centres, Salvation Ministries, Living Faith Church (also known as Winners), and others to access their websites, podcasts, events, and disseminate information about their current, ongoing, and future programs, meetings, prayer, and live streaming services. For instance, the most frequent features on the Salvation Ministries Facebook page are “Youth Morning Devotion,” Dunamis International Gospel Centre page shares videos and advertisements of ongoing and future programs; the Winners Chapel International page features live streaming, previous videos and photos; Redeemed Christian Church of God page has Dove Television page, live streaming, among others.

The media platforms enable these churches to interact more deeply and meaningfully with their members. Ogunsola and Raji (2019:190) assert that the use of media platforms has improved the relationship between members of the Christian community and society.

Additionally, they use this platform to inform the people in their immediate district. For instance:

Twitter: Most churches mentioned above use their Twitter accounts to broadcast Sunday services, tweeting key points from sermons, sharing Bible studies, prayer points, motivational teachings, notable quotes, works, leadership development meetings, all-night services, and other events to keep their members informed.

Instagram: a platform for sharing and live-streaming, in addition to photos and videos. Users can access various content, including stories, photos, videos, and live videos. Most of the churches mentioned above use Instagram to share photos and flyers for church events and programs.

Facebook: These churches use Facebook to share sermons, teachings, messages, prayer meetings, and to livestream services.

YouTube: Most churches mentioned use YouTube to share videos, live-stream programs, and promote special activities. Enweani and Eke (2019:55) note that “Christian organisations use YouTube to share past messages, live programs... and promote church programs and special activities.”

3. **Benefits of Digital Media to the Church**

Digital media has also contributed to the church in many areas, including Liturgy, Spiritual formation, discipleship, Church membership, and the spread of the Great Commission. It has helped the church connect with members. It serves as a medium for sharing information about faith and deepening knowledge of God's Word without visiting a local church in person. The church has benefited from digital media in the following areas:

Liturgy: The structured act of worship known as the liturgy is completely articulated through words, hymns, prayers, ordinances, and other forms of worship. In the Catholic setting, according to Dyikuk (2018:65), liturgy refers to celebrations that frequently involve forms of prayer and worship through rites or ceremonies that employ signs and symbols fully articulated in the Eucharistic celebration. Dyikuk (2018:65) further notes that the Liturgy is the soul and source of the church's miraculous grace for divine experiences between God and worshipers that result in life transformation. Digital media has indisputably advanced worship and fostered closeness to God. Today's worship services, once held on Sundays in a church structure, are now held daily due to digitalisation. Churches provide numerous YouTube services, prayer meetings, and teachings that can be viewed anytime. Worship services are provided through various media platforms and can be observed in diverse settings, including offices, hotels, homes, and automobiles. They were reducing the need to visit a traditional facility and receive face-to-face counselling from a clergyperson. Digital media enable church members to download worship materials, such as hymns, various Bible versions, Sunday school lessons, sermons, and other religious texts. Media platforms expose many church practices and worship forms that are not scriptural or fake prophets. The words and actions of many pastors and prophets are increasingly scrutinised on digital media platforms.

Discipleship: "Discipleship" refers to modelling character and spiritual life after Jesus Christ in both the physical and virtual worlds, becoming like Jesus. Mary (1989:115) asserts that the purpose of discipleship is to align one's values and morals with those of Jesus. Therefore, a transformed life is the outcome of effective discipleship. The rapid growth of digital media has given rise to new terms in the Christian lexicon, including "digital discipleship." Elizabeth Drescher, cited by Hunt (2019:98), describes digital discipleship as a process in which connections and compassion are increasingly emphasised rather than the

proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ being presented pleasantly or plausibly. Digital discipleship goes beyond sharing inspirational messages, sermons, Bible lessons, and prayers without significant effort to foster spiritual formation and life transformation (Lewis, 2019:1).

Digital media has provided an avenue for discipleship. Media platforms such as Zoom, Instagram, and WhatsApp made genuine life fellowship and interaction possible. They enhanced the experience to resemble a conventional worship structure, which is a prerequisite for an effective discipleship process that involves participation and enables a discipler to obtain crucial participant feedback. Boaheng and Abubekr (2022:34) argue that fellowship creates the ideal environment for pursuing discipleship, based on the lessons described in Acts 2:42-47. They note that genuine discipleship occurs in a community where there is real-time communication, whether online.

Spiritual Formation: Digital media has been contributing to the spiritual formation of Christians in modern times. The platform has inspired and edified some Christians by sharing significant life experiences and testimonies about others' spiritual journeys. It also enables Christians to access enriching information, engage in motivating discussions with influential thinkers, and hear sermons and messages that transform lives. Conversely, a platform such as YouTube provides a wealth of resources that strengthen faith and serve as a venue for spiritual transformation through the teaching of sensational pastors and religious leaders.

Church Membership: Digital media has enhanced relationships among church members through online communities, content sharing, and live video streaming across diverse platforms. According to Ayeni (2021:106), it has also been used to establish relationships among congregants, to develop a community that reaches out to and attracts new members, and to accommodate virtual worship services. Digital media has been used to build engaging communities that are relevant to and relatable to church members. It has also been used as a platform for training, teaching, soul-winning, holding prayer meetings, posting sermons for members to read at their convenience, and fostering a sense of community across age groups. Digital media also enables members whose work schedules prevent them from attending services in the physical church to access them online through various media platforms (Boaheng and Abubekr, 2022: 29).

Great Commission: According to Matthew 28:19–20, Mark 16:15–16, and Luke 24:47, the church has the purpose of joining God in His mission by making disciples of all nations. The digital media platform has made the scope of the Great Commission to all nations a reality. The media platform has made it possible for some unreached people groups and nations to access Christian teachings and messages, giving missions yet another impetus (Boaheng and Abubekr, 2022:28). It is also enabling missionaries and Christians to reach people from different nations, advancing the proclamation of the Gospel message to unreached people and nations.

4. Limitations of Digital Media on the Church's Practices

Despite the benefits of digital media to the church as a whole, it also posed a critical threat to its practices and smooth running. Such threats spread across faith, discipleship, liturgy, membership, and the Great Commission.

Liturgy: The increased use of digital media platforms by churches has been subversively breaking denominational lines of allegiance and making it less and less critical. Christians, especially the youth, are now following and listening to the messages and sermons of pastors and prophets regardless of denomination. Similarly, doctrinal practices such as the Lord's Supper, Baptism, and other ordinances are now being administered virtually, with or without the involvement of a designated administrator, leading to an upsurge in subverting their spiritual values and communal relevance. Also, some Christians have taken advantage of digital media not to attend church services because they can view the services in their comfort zone, making them embrace media spirituality over church spirituality. The conventional church building, which serves as the primary repository of religious knowledge and promotes authority, has been rendered obsolete (Cloete, 2015:5).

Discipleship: McIntosh (2015:133) states that the explosion of digital media has led many people to be passive and inactive in worship; they are now listeners and spectators rather than participants. He notes a decline in the congregation's spirituality and faith, as well as obstacles to the discipleship process, during online worship. It is also worth noting that young people who are more involved in digital media today remain the most spiritually disengaged generation.

Spiritual Formation: Using digital media platforms for spiritual formation encourages spirituality without religious affiliation, creating a unit of Christians who pursue spiritual formation independently. Such Christians choose from various spiritual and personal instructors who subvert them and often encourage them to turn away from their local church's practices and doctrine, following their own paths. People in this category include @DaddyFreeze, a self-proclaimed scripture Scholar, teacher, convener, and the founder of Free Nation Online Church, who consistently antagonises prominent pastors and spreads fallible Christian teaching, undermining religious leaders' authenticity, and misleading Christians. Digital media also subvert traditional religious structures and theological training systems for clergy.

Moreso, Ogunsola and Raji (2019:193) observe that "people assume pseudo identities and pretence in the name of being a Christian, thereby deceiving unsuspecting members... by posting scriptures and motivational words whereas their lifestyles are not in line with their posts."

Church Membership: Using digital media platforms for worship services reduces physical attendance at church. Some Christians are not attending worship services under the pretence that they can view the service on their media platforms. This contradicts the injunction of scripture not to forsake the assembly of believers (Hebrews 10:25). Lewis (2019:1) observes that "attending church is no longer part of the modern culture" in the digital age. It is also noted that the culture promotes an individualistic mindset rather than a communal orientation, emphasised by the church. In this condition, a person's inclinations override their sense of belonging to a religious community. Therefore, the upsurge in the use of digital media platforms for worship gives rise to a faith devoid of doctrinal and religious practices, a lack of denominational allegiance, and a community and atmosphere that prioritise individual needs over theological sensitivity.

Great Commission: It is no exaggeration to say that the media community is realising its potential by providing access to nations, thereby covering the scope of the great commission. However, the goal is to make disciples, baptise them and teach them to obey everything Christ commanded. As such, relying solely on social media as a church does not necessarily translate into achieving the Great Commission.

5. Social Transformation and Digital Media

The proliferation of digital media platforms has increased immorality and dehumanisation, manifesting addiction, isolation, exploitation, violence, and the loss of contact with concrete reality, creating mechanisms for manipulating conscience and disrupting transformation in modern society. The new perspectives on the world and ways of being that come from using digital media platforms have impacted how societies form in contemporary society. Social transformation has been hampered by antisocial behaviour, including a lack of empathy, fraudulent lifestyles, a disingenuous existence, isolation, cognitive fragmentation, pathological attachment, hostility, ignorance, canards, deceptive news, and propaganda (Utuedoye, 2019). Digital media is widening the gap between the affluent and the indigent, and between the educated and the uneducated.

However, the church can use digital media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs as tools to transform society both online and offline. Ethical and moral teachings that place a higher value on personal relationships with God and uphold decent ways of living that regulate public behaviour are necessary for social transformation. Churches can mould the character of their adherents through digital media platforms by disseminating sermons, songs, and videos that instil godly living and moral and ethical principles of brotherliness, love, peace, and respect for others' feelings and lives (Shehu, 2011:108). This will prompt transformation in both the physical and digital spaces. Therefore, the church can use digital media platforms to spread Christian ethical principles throughout society. Brown (2002:42) notes that "the media affects people's behaviour; Christians are no exception." The church needs to focus on the constructive use of media platforms, since they offer an excellent opportunity to share Christian ethical values and godly living principles that can facilitate societal transformation.

Sustaining the Great Commission and Social Transformation through Digital Media

Having highlighted the benefits and limitations of digital media for the church, this study recommends the following strategy to effectively integrate digital media, sustain the Great Commission, and foster social transformation. According to Heidi (2012: 24), effective online church ministries embrace authority, authenticity, identity, and community. Therefore, churches must reinstitute their

structural authority, authenticity, identity, and community in their online communities by developing appropriate policies and training to integrate digital media into church activities and practices efficiently.

Formulation of Online Community and Identity

Community is a concept that connotes intimate relations or strong social ties between individuals. One of the crucial characteristics of an effective and efficient online church or ministry is community relations among members. Strong community ties inspire and drive a sense of belonging and active commitment. (Baumeister and Leary, 1995:499). In a training program for the digital media community, the relationship between church leaders and members is essential to enhance effectiveness. This sense of community will help the church make intentional disciples, foster spiritual formation, maintain membership, strengthen liturgical practices, and intensify the dissemination of the gospel. Digital media literacy programs should be promoted to enhance the use of media platforms for small-group meetings, specific-interest classes, online worship and prayer, and Bible study, under the supervision and guidance of spiritual leaders or experts. However, members should be encouraged to hold such meetings and fellowships in person to foster effectiveness and productivity (Oentoro and Idayanti, 2021:204).

The effectiveness of discipleship requires a holistic, unified, and transformative digital discipleship approach that begins with an invitation to receive the saving grace of Jesus Christ, builds knowledge and faith, equips converts for the work of ministry, and sends them to people in their workplace and neighbourhood. This can serve as the community's identity. Building a service culture and inspiring others to serve will reduce passivity and inactivity among members, as Jesus stated in Luke 22:25-27: "The greatest are those who serve" (Cloete, 2015). This model should replace the usual sharing and posting of sermons, messages, pictures, videos, and information that saturate many contemporary churches in digital media platforms.

Formulation of Online Authority and Authenticity

Authority and authenticity are essential to religious practices and to religious structures in public space. One limitation of digital media for online churches and ministries is the challenge of authority and authenticity. Weber (1968: 212) defines authority as legitimised dominance. This definition has two word

dimensions. The first is dominance, the idea of power. In this view, authority can compel people to perform specific actions. The second view, legitimisation, implies that authority involves a certain measure of legitimacy in what is being done or the one who made the command. Therefore, authority depends on the notable benefit or the person's authenticity. The proliferation of media platforms discourages and subverts traditional religious denominational and authority structures. It also encourages practices that bypass the authority of accepted religious structures.

Churches must develop and provide training for members and religious leaders to enhance their knowledge and skills in digital media. Conventional religious structure and authority should be reinstated in online communities across diverse digital media platforms.

Continuity of the tradition of religious structures is essential for establishing authority and authenticity on digital media platforms (Cloete, 2016:5). Contemporary churches should also ensure a firm reliance on the Word of God, the ultimate source of authority. Authority and authenticity can be constructed on digital media platforms by formulating and implementing a viable policy that serves as a doctrinal and structural framework, clearly stating the structures and practices to be applied.

Conclusion

This study examined the incorporation of digital media in the church and its impact on the sustainability of the Great Commission and social transformation. The study highlighted how some churches in Nigeria used media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Zoom, and WhatsApp to supplement their existing structures and reach unreached people and nations. It was discovered that the fulfilment of the Great Commission and the social transformation drive are being advanced through digital media platforms. These platforms offer live streaming, which allows viewers to communicate with one another through chat, comments, and interaction during the video, sharing of edifying and inspiring content, holding spiritually enriching meetings and worship, and provision of transforming communities that enable discipleship and spiritual formation, essential for the Great Commission and social transformation.

However, as Dovich (2017:6) suggests, Churches must be more cautious and intentional in their use of digital media platforms. Churches must develop policies that guide the use of digital media platforms, focusing on community, identity, authority, and authenticity, to utilise them effectively to improve lives, relationships, and spirituality, rather than allowing them to dominate and divert time, attention, and spiritual resources. Digital media platforms are a huge blessing to the modern church, and we must not allow them to be a curse.

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RETHINKING SOCIO-RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: THE NEED TO REBUILD A BETTER POST-PANDEMIC NIGERIA

BY

Bienose-Osagiede, U. Belinda (PhD)

Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts,
University of Benin, Nigeria.
(belinda.bienose-osagiede@uniben.edu)

Abstract

In Nigeria, socio-religious violence has remained one of the biggest challenges ravaging the social cohesion and unity of the country. Millions of people in Nigeria constantly dread for their lives as a result of attacks by armed men, kidnappers, and Fulani cattle herders. At a point when Nigeria is struggling to reignite its economy amidst the damages already inflicted by the global pandemic, socio-religious violence has posed an enormous challenge to rebuilding the country in the post-pandemic era. The recurrent crises had impaired every effort at economic transformation, peaceful co-existence, national cohesion and stability. Although Nigeria has a history of lengthy civil unrest, unease among minorities, and violent socio-religious disputes, the worldwide pandemic poses a danger to aggravate the already precarious security conditions in the nation. The current post-pandemic crises in Nigeria have exposed significant weaknesses in the country's leadership, adversely affecting its socio-economic and political landscape. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to highlight the pressing need to rebuild a better post-pandemic Nigeria. Using a historical method of analysis, the issues will be discussed in three broad sections. The first section will be a conceptual elucidation of the key concepts. The second section will trace instances of socio-religious violence in Nigeria. Finally, the paper will conclude by offering solutions and strategies to bring about positive change and restore justice, equity, and peace in Nigeria.

Keywords: Socio-religious, Violence, Post-pandemic

1.0 Introduction

Nigeria's security has been worse since the EndSars protest in 2020 as a result of constant attacks by Unknown gunmen, kidnappers, bandits, and Fulani cattle herders. Millions of naira worth of property, including government buildings, have been destroyed, along with hundreds of thousands of deaths and internal displacements. Nigeria has a history of protracted civil unrest and deadly socio-religious clashes. Still, recent violent acts have intensified conflicts among the country's different ethnic and religious communities and raised concerns about national security. Therefore, there is a need for reform to be implemented in every sector of society to unify and reconstruct Nigeria's ethnically and religiously diverse population, especially in this post-pandemic era. Rebuilding trust and stabilising the country requires both economic development and religious reconciliation.¹

Isaac points out that while there are multiple causes of socio-religious violence in Nigeria, the focus has largely been on the underlying socio-political, economic, and governance challenges that fuel not just religious clashes but violent conflicts more broadly.² According to reports from International Religious Freedom, the significant causes of conflict in the North West area were banditry and ideologically neutral crime, even though religious persons and places of worship were usually the targets of violence.³ In the South East, various violent confrontations have occurred between the Nigerian military forces and the Eastern Security Networks (ESN). In recent months, electoral offices and police stations across the Southeast have been set on fire, as armed gangs in the region have carried out a series of attacks, including the killing of police officers. These incidents led to a police operation launched in May. Despite these security challenges, it is apparent that the government has not taken any significant steps to address insecurity across the country, including efforts to curb ethnoreligious violence. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to highlight the pressing need to

1United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Reconciliation Must Evolve to Reflect Growing Complexity of Today's Conflicts, Participants Stress during Day-Long Security Council Open Debate*. Accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14024.doc.htm>;

2T. S. Isaac, *Religious Violence in Nigeria: Causal Diagnoses and Strategic Recommendations to the State and Religious Communities*. Accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/view/78703/69042>.

3International Religious Freedom. *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nigeria*. Accessed October 10, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nigeria/>

rebuild a better post-pandemic Nigeria. As a point of departure, the first section will be a conceptual elucidation of the key concepts. The second section will trace instances of socio-religious violence in Nigeria. Finally, the paper will conclude by offering solutions and strategies to bring about positive change and restore justice, equity, and peace in Nigeria.

2.0 Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Socio-Religious

Religion is diverse in historical development; definitions shaped by either African or Western experiences often fall short of fully capturing its essence. In his book *Comparative Religion*, Bouquet argued that the term “religion” is of European origin and has acquired numerous meanings within that context.⁴ However, he also noted that ancient experts disagreed over the word’s etymology. Some academics have linked the Latin word *religio* to words such as *relegere*, which means to reread something, and *relinquish*; the term *religare* means to bind, unite, or connect. Bouquet explored two contrasting perspectives: one traces the word to *Cicero*, who derived it from the Latin verb *relegere*, meaning to gather things together or to go over the same ground repeatedly.⁵

Cicero suggested that “to count or observe” was another potential meaning. Cicero concentrated on the word “observe” to comprehend the word “religion. “Religion would be understood as ‘to identify manifestations of divine communication’ if the term “observe” were used. Servius and many others believed that the term *religion* originated from the Latin verb *religare*, meaning to bind or tie together. Since this concept captures a fundamental aspect of religion, it is reasonable to accept this root meaning, highlighting how religion unites people through shared beliefs and practices, bringing them together in a collective way of life. This interpretation presents religion as centred on relationships. Bouquet strongly supported the idea that both root meanings could be integrated to express the core of religion, namely “a connection or interaction between humans and a higher, supernatural power”.⁶

4A. C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1973), 22

5Cicero, *De natura deorum* Book II, Section 8.

6Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, 22

Humans seek meaning through religion to understand and connect with reality. In this sense, religious practice is an epistemic endeavour. However, religion is not merely an intellectual or abstract exercise, as it is sometimes perceived in Western contexts. Instead, it engages the whole person. Religion embodies a comprehensive relationship with reality, influencing all areas of human life. It is intricately embedded in the very essence of existence. Sundermeier, as cited in Beyers, suggests that religion serves as the foundation and origin of life, providing both purpose and meaning.⁷

Nmah defines religion as the way that Africans perceived God from both Christian and traditional viewpoints.⁸ Generally speaking, it is a response to what is thought of as the ultimate reality, the most intense experience a man can go through, and a whole response on the part of man to this ultimate truth. According to Tylor, it began as a widespread belief in ghosts and spirits and gradually evolved into the idea that a single spirit animates everything.⁹ People who practice a religion establish a united moral community—often called the Church—through their shared beliefs and rituals surrounding sacred objects, or things considered set apart and forbidden. (b) Through myth and ritual, religion serves as a society's means of self-validation.¹⁰

According to Idowu, religion is humanity's natural awareness of, and response to, a living power greater than oneself—yet this power also seeks to draw humanity into communion with itself.¹¹ Jegede believed that because religion is a social phenomenon, it interacts with the society in which it exists.¹² He contends that religion affects not only individuals and their social behaviour, but also the polity and the economy, two other social institutions. Therefore, the combination or interplay of religious and social aspects is referred to as “socio-religious.”

7J. Bayers, “What is religion? An African understanding”. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*. 66, no. 1 (2010): 1 - 8

8P. E Nmah, *Religion and Society in Africa* (Enugu: Rabboni Publishers International, 2008), 34

9E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture vol. 1*. (New York: Torchbooks, 1958), 87

10E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, (New York: Collier Books, 1964), 143

11Idowu, E. B., *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (Ibadan, SCM Press, 1875), 123

12Jegede, O.P., “Implications of religious conflicts on peace, National security and development in Nigeria,” *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*. 9, no. 1 (2019): 57

2.2 Violence

Violence, as defined by the World Health Organisation, involves deliberately using physical force or power—either threatened or actual—against oneself, another person, or a group, which is likely to result in harm, injury, psychological trauma, or death. It carries a significant risk of physical harm, death, psychological distress, maldevelopment, or deprivation.¹³ According to Riches, violence is an act of bodily harm that the offender considers lawful but that some onlookers find to be illegitimate.¹⁴ Violence is complex and manifests in many forms across diverse settings. It can be classified into several types, such as youth violence, gang-related violence, school-based violence, street violence, teenage violence, relationship misuse, partner aggression, household mistreatment, workplace aggression and even corporate or “suit” violence.

The National Research Council of the American Academy of Sciences, as cited in Reiss, defines violence as actions by individuals that are deliberately intended to threaten, try to cause, or actually cause physical harm to others.¹⁵ According to Galtung, violence is the gap between what is and what could have been—it is anything that widens the distance between potential and reality or prevents that distance from being reduced. He further explains that violence exists when individuals are impacted in ways that hinder them from achieving their full physical and mental potential.¹⁶

In political rhetoric and public discourse, “violence” is commonly used interchangeably with hostility or, less frequently, with direct violence. The term “violence” typically refers to an aggressive action that incorporates threats and is carried out by one or more identified actors to cause another identified individual pain, damage, trauma, or fear of such things.¹⁷ For the concept of violence to meet all five criteria, an act is considered violent if, and only if, a clearly identifiable actor intentionally targets another living being or their property, causing harm or trauma, or threatening to do so. Violence, in this context, is a deliberate method or

13World Health Organisation. *World Report on Violence and Health: Summary*, 2002. Accessed November 3, 2021 https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/world_report/en/summary_en.pdf.

14D. Riches, (Ed.), *The Anthropology of Violence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 47

15 A. J. J. Reiss and J. A. Roth, *Understanding and preventing violence*. Vol. 1. (National Academy Press; Washington, DC, 1994), 2

16J. Galtung,” Violence, Peace and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 6 (1969), 168.

17Galtung, *Violence, Peace and Peace Research*, 168

means used by the actor to pursue specific goals or outcomes that lie beyond the act itself. While these goals can vary widely, they are always tied to a particular context and shaped by the power dynamics between the perpetrator and the target.

3.0 Post-Pandemic Violence (2020-2021)

3.0.1 EndSars Protest

Widespread protests across Nigeria demanding an end to police force brutality and the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notoriously violent law enforcement division, drew significant international media attention. Even if the government took some steps in the direction of justice, security personnel harassed and attacked demonstrators, which resulted in the deaths of some of them. On October 20, 2020, a widely circulated video showed individuals suspected to be members of the Nigerian military opening fire on unarmed demonstrators at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, triggering international outrage. Condemnation and calls for accountability.¹⁸ Reports indicate that some lives were lost, though the precise number remains unclear.

3.0.2 Intercommunal Violence

Armed bandits attacked numerous communities in Katsina State in the North-West in April 2020, killing at least 47 persons in total. The UNCHR agency reports that due to the unrest in the northwest, at least 1,126 people perished there between January and June, 210,000 people, approximately, were displaced, while over 70,000 people sought refuge in Niger as of August.¹⁹ According to media reports, 178 individuals were slain between January and July in towns around southern Kaduna State, including at least 43 between July 21 and July 24, 2020.

3.0.3 Farmers-Herders Conflict

Thousands of people are alleged to have been killed by the Fulani herders, mainly in the southern and central regions of the nation. In the first half of 2018 alone, violence linked to herding conflicts resulted in over 1,300 deaths, surpassing the

¹⁸Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org>, 2020; BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com>, 2020. Accessed November 3, 2021

¹⁹ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Reconciliation Must Evolve to Reflect the Growing Complexity of Today's Conflicts, Participants Stress during Day-Long Security Council Open Debate*.

fatalities caused by clashes with Boko Haram.²⁰ The confrontation between herders and farmers has become more organised and sophisticated in the past few years. According to the Global Terrorism Index, the Fulani herders have been identified as one of the world's most violent groups due to their repeated involvement in deadly attacks across Nigeria. Their operations have placed them as the fourth deadliest terrorist group globally, following Boko Haram, ISIS, and al-Shabaab.²¹

4.0 Factors Driving Socio-Religious Violence in Nigeria

The limits of togetherness have been tested to the breaking point in Nigeria due to socio-religious violence, as we have seen so far in this study. The main factors that lead to social-religious violence in Nigeria are racism, bigotry, and allegations of disregard, suppression, control, use of others, victimisation, and favouritism. Salawu argued that leaders' inability to establish efficient administrations, promote national unity, and drive deliberate, structured economic policymaking has paradoxically contributed to rising poverty and higher unemployment rates.²² Conflicts between communities, ethnic groups, religions, and social classes have come to define Nigeria as a nation. The country's large population of impoverished individuals, who often serve as mercenary soldiers, means that persistent poverty and high unemployment have created conditions conducive to the escalation of ethno-religious tensions and conflicts. Theoretically, this suggests that unemployment and poverty raise the proportion of individuals willing to die or take lives in support of a cause, often with minimal benefit. We will now evaluate the causes of the violent socio-religious incidents in Nigeria.

Poverty and Unemployment: Ewetan and Urhie identify the inability of successive governments to address socioeconomic disparities, including poverty, unemployment, and the unequal distribution of wealth across ethnic groups, as a critical factor contributing to national insecurity.²³ According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria's unemployment rate rose to 42.5% in 2021. Adebayo contends that a significant proportion of the

20International Religious Freedom, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nigeria*.

21Global Terrorism Index. *Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism*. (New York: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021).

22B. Salawu, "Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Causal Analysis and Proposals for New Management Strategies," *European Journal of Social Sciences*. 13, (2010): 351

23O.O. Ewetan, and E. Urhie, "Insecurity and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria". *Journal of Sustainable Development Studies*. 5, no. 1 (2014): 40-63

approximately 100 million Nigerians who can meet necessities—such as food, housing, and clothing—and are therefore not classified as living in extreme poverty, are predominantly located in the northern part of the country. Despite this, the north-west records the highest poverty incidence, with 70% of its residents subsisting on less than one dollar per day. The north-east follows closely with a poverty rate of 69%, while the north-central region reports a rate of 59.5%.

Similarly, the southern regions face notable poverty levels, with rates ranging between 49.8% and 58.7%, highlighting the widespread nature of economic hardship across the country.²⁴ A growing number of Nigerian teenagers are risking their lives in emergencies due to the despair of their employment position, especially after learning that our so-called leaders and politicians steal billions of naira every day.

Marginalisation of the Minority group: According to Achumba et al., A widespread perception of marginalisation exists among certain groups regarding government development policies and political patronage, which fuels feelings of discontent, resentment, and ultimately, revolt.²⁵ Their protests aim to garner public support for equitable and just government treatment. Acute marginalisation and the Nigerian State's unwillingness to pay adequate attention to the region's developmental issues are to blame for the recent spate of violent conflicts seen in South-South and South-East Nigeria. The regions that contribute little to no income to the country are developed, while the Niger Delta, which produces the majority of the country's economic assets, is crumbling under the weight of underdevelopment cum poverty.²⁶

Religious intolerance: Adherents of both Islam and Christianity engage in efforts to assert the dominance of their respective faiths through active religious propagation. Also, fanaticism and religious intolerance have transformed into religious violence. This issue is prevalent in Nigeria's northern region. Within this framework, Lincoln argues that religious conflict emerges when the prevailing

24C. M. Austin Iwuoha, "Religion, Population Growth and Violence in Contemporary Nigerian Nation". *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 6, no. 7 (2020): 120-133

25I. C. Achumba, O. S. Ighomereho, and Akpan-Robaro, M. O. M., "Security Challenges in Nigeria and the Implications for Business Activities and Sustainable Development," *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*. 4, (2013): 98

26H. Haselbarth, *Christian Ethics in the African Context* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1976), 181

religion of the established order²⁷ is used to exert control over the “religions of resistance.”²⁸ Over time, this interaction may lead to religious tensions between the prevailing majority and the marginalised minority faiths. Consequently, Islam is often regarded as the religion of the established order, whereas Christianity is perceived as the faith rooted in opposition.

Nigeria has experienced considerable violence as a result of the government’s failure to manage the persistent conflict between herders and farmers adequately. According to the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) in Benue State, over 480,000 people were displaced within the state by early 2019. The Ruga settlement plan was cut short by the government’s attempt to impose it on residents without proper consultation.

Weak security system: Ewetan and Urhie stated that a weak security system forms a primary contributor to socio-religious violence in Nigeria.²⁹ He identified key challenges facing Nigeria’s security system, including inadequate funding for law enforcement and other security bodies, obsolete equipment and training methods, insufficient welfare for security personnel, and a shortage of personnel. It is important to note that while some law enforcement officers in Nigeria engage in corruption, including openly demanding bribes and illegally extorting money from motorists, often without accountability, religious institutions in Nigeria do not fulfil their intended roles.³⁰ All of the factors mentioned above send a negative message to society and encourage social vices, which often lead to conflicts. Consequently, there has been a rise in various forms of socio-violence across the nation, driven by efforts to resist perceived oppression, dominance, or marginalisation.

5.0 Impact on National Cohesion, Security, Stability, and Sustainable Development

Socio-religious violence in Nigeria has posed numerous challenges to the country’s security and corporate existence, which are the very reasons underlying

27B. Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*. (Chicago III: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

28Beyers, “What is religion? An African understanding”. 1-8

29Ewetan, and Urhie, “Insecurity and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria”. 40-63

30J. Attahiru, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Nigeria: Critical Essays*. (Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2007).

the implementation of the federal system. The consequences of the ongoing socio-religious conflict in Nigeria are undoubtedly harmful. Public and private properties are destroyed, and rebuilding is time-wasting, capital-intensive and an unnecessary waste of resources. The period of conflict is also a period of economic activity truncation. The youths who are the major participants lose their lives in the process, and maiming is a characteristic of socio-religious violence. The consequences of socio-religious violence could affect all aspects of human endeavours, including the political, societal, and economic spheres, as well as overall national development.

In Nigeria, socio-religious conflict has put the country's economic policies and national development agenda in grave peril. This is supported by the findings of Fawole and Bello, who observed that religiously motivated social conflict impedes the effective implementation of a genuine federal system in Nigeria, undermines social cohesion, and harms the country's economic stability.³¹ The socio-economic implications of socio-religious violence in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. Gamba identified nine areas in which socio-religious violence affects the nation.³² It deters foreign direct investment in the first place (FDI). The influx of foreign capital into the nation has been significantly curtailed both historically and currently due to recurrent socio-religious violence. No one would want to invest in a country where there is no religious tolerance, not even other countries. The majority of producing facilities in conflict-prone areas are either closed down or have made permanent moves. As Apuwabi correctly noted, socio-religious violence portrays our leaders as feeble, gullible, self-centred, and self-serving at all levels and in various spheres of life.³³ In an environment characterised by committed, visionary, and selfless leadership, Nigeria's diverse and complex. The social structure could have been effectively mobilised toward meaningful national development.³⁴

31O. A. Fawole and M. L. Bello, "The Impact of Ethno-Religious Conflict on Nigerian Federalism," *International NGO Journal*. 6, (2011): 211

32S. L. Gamba, "Economic Impacts of Ethno-Religious Conflicts on Nigerian Economy," *International Journal of Management Research and Review*. 9, (January, 2019).

33O. O. E. Apuwabi, "The Effects of Religious Crisis on Economic Development in Nigeria," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 8, (2018): 329

34R. I. Adebayo, "Ethno-Religious Crises and the Challenges of Sustainable Development in Nigeria," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*. 12, no. 4 (2010): 13-20

Ewetan and Urhie claimed that a nation's economic activity could be increased by its citizens living in harmony. Security is essential for sustaining socioeconomic development, as instability drains financial resources, human potential, and social cohesion.³⁵ The resurgence of insurgent and bandit-related violence in Northern Nigeria has nearly completely paralysed the local economy. Additionally, the geopolitical zones of South-South and South-East Nigeria are seriously threatened by the operations of separatist groups and "Unknown gunmen." Nigeria's current infrastructure is being destroyed by security issues, which also hinder the peaceful construction of new infrastructure and make it risky for individuals to do business. Economic empowerment enables households to provide for current generations, build wealth, and invest in the well-being of future generations.³⁶

6.0 Socio-Religious violence and the need to rebuild a better post-pandemic Nigeria

The different incidents of socio-religious violence in Nigeria that were examined and discussed in this research showed that the problem is widespread and affects every part of the nation. The government has constantly been challenged by the violence that occurs frequently and the effects it has on the socioeconomic well-being of Nigerians. As a result, various management strategies have been required to bring the violence under control. Every attempt at economic development, peaceful coexistence, national cohesiveness, and stability has been hampered by the frequent crises. Although Nigeria has a history of protracted civil unrest, unease among minorities, and violent socio-religious disputes, the global pandemic threatens to exacerbate the country's already difficult safety situation. The current post-pandemic crisis

The nation has highlighted the leadership's frailty, with detrimental consequences for the country's social, economic, and political activities. Omorogbe and Omohan, as cited in Salawu, aver that Nigerian governments typically rely on two primary conflict management strategies to address socio-religious violence whenever it arises.³⁷ These strategies are the coercive and the judicial approach. There are many signs that government strategies to fight socio-religious violent

35Ewetan, and Urhie, "Insecurity and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria". 40-63

36Ewetan, and Urhie, "Insecurity and Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria". 53

37B. Salawu, "Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Causal Analysis and Proposals for New Management Strategies," 351

activities are not producing results. If these threats are not addressed promptly, they could lead to a civil war. Given the above scenario, the researcher recommends that:

The matter of Muslim-Christian dialogue should be approached with utmost seriousness by all parties involved. During these discussions, emphasis should be placed on the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom in the Federal Republic of Nigeria. This focus can help foster lasting peace within the nation.

The federal character provisions should be taken into consideration when the Nigerian government allocates crucial positions. When addressing racial and religious issues, one should be against all sorts of nepotism, prejudice, negligence, and marginalisation. To minimise the pool of potential recruits for socio-religious conflict, the government should likewise focus on reducing poverty among Nigerians. Leaders are abdicating their duties, and it is well understood that a person who is both hungry and angry can be susceptible to all social vices. By creating jobs and ensuring that everyone has access to health services and education, poverty in the nation should be reduced to a bare minimum.

7.0 Conclusion

Socio-religious violence has detrimental effects on the development of any nation. This study has demonstrated that factors such as insurgency, armed banditry, farmer-herder conflicts, poverty and unemployment, ethnic diversity and differences, as well as the actions of religious extremists, have all contributed to violence in Nigeria. When properly guided, religion can serve as a powerful force for unity and peace. It calls for values such as love, tolerance, sacrifice, discipline, justice, dedication, and service to others. Truly, if everyone comes together to eliminate socio-religious violence from society, there will be renewed hope for Nigeria. However, achieving this depends on effectively responding to the foundational sources of these concerns. This is the researcher's urgent appeal to all Nigerians.

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ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN ALLEVIATING POVERTY IN NIGERIA

BY

JEREMIAH OGUCHE, PhD

Crowther Graduate Theological Seminary,
Igbein, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria
jeremiahoguche64@gmail.com

Abstract

The church has the mandate to care for the poor, to alleviate suffering, and to stand for justice. Jesus witnessed the state of poverty amongst the people and proclaimed the Gospel of liberation against socio-economic injustices and political oppression. In human history, poverty has been one of the most serious social issues. Poverty is said to be a state of being poor or deficient in amassing wealth to afford a flamboyant living. It is quite glaring that the majority of Nigerians live in abject poverty. This could be partly due to illiteracy, unemployment, and a poor health care delivery system. Scholars have written on empowerment, wealth creation, and drug abuse. However, the church's role in poverty alleviation has not been adequately addressed in scholarly literature. This lacuna necessitated this study. The study adopted historical and sociological methods, using descriptive analysis to draw conclusions and recommendations. The historical method was used to trace the history of poverty and its effects in Nigeria. The sociological method adopted was a survey. In-depth interviews were conducted with elders and youths who were custodians of information on poverty and its alleviation. The study concluded that the Nigerian government initiated and implemented several programs to alleviate poverty but failed to do so due to poor planning and execution. The study recommends that the church implement activities to improve the living standards of the poor and extend a hand of fellowship to well-meaning agencies to reduce poverty in Nigeria.

Word Count: 250

Introduction

Poverty can be defined as a lack of opportunity to develop human abilities and to control one's own life due to economic or material deprivation (Kunyahop 187). This basic definition connotes a material lack or deprivation, a lack of access to resources, and insecurity, among other things. From practical experience, wherever poverty exercises its way, undue resource control, physical weakness (as in the cases of malnutrition, disability, etc.), isolation (marginalization, discrimination, etc.), vulnerability (to contingencies which increase poverty e.g. war, climatic changes, etc.), powerlessness (the inability to avoid poverty itself or to modify the situation), etc. are not found wanting. These harsh situations do occur when people cannot access income and other resources needed to attain proper conditions of life, such as good diet, material goods, amenities, standards and services which, in turn, enable them to play their roles, meet the obligations and participate in the family relationships and customs of their society.

Concept of Poverty

Poverty can also be defined as the lack of essential resources needed to access the necessities of life. Okalow states: "Poverty essentially means lacking enough resources to provide the necessities of life (Okalow www.worldvision.ca). Poverty is essentially about the lack of provision of basic human needs. That is, a lack of a quantifiable amount of money, a lack of opportunity, a lack of empowerment in any form, and a lack of security of life and property, etc. Therefore, for people with low incomes, the window of opportunity is substantially closed, making them practically inactive (Ucha 46). People with low incomes are therefore limited in the area of making choices, exposed to diseases, eviction, social discrimination and hopelessness. Townsend states that poverty goes beyond a shortage of income to include the inability of people experiencing poverty to participate actively in society. Thus, poverty could be seen as a deprivation of basic capabilities, basically, well-being and freedom. The capacity to participate in society is limited, while well-being and freedom are denied to some segments of society because they are poor (Townsend 56).

As a result, the United Nations (cited in Ucha, 46) describes poverty as follows: "Poverty is a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity." It means a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe oneself; not having access to a school or clinic;

not having land to grow one's own food or a job to earn one's living; not having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness, and the exclusion of individuals, households, and communities. It means susceptibility to violence, and it often implies living in a marginal or fragile environment without access to clean water and sanitation (46).

This brings to the fore the living conditions of the urban poor who dwell in slums and informal settlements around large commercial cities. Urban poverty refers to a situation of deprivation, denial of social amenities, and social exclusion affecting a section of the urban population. Poverty and lack of basic amenities are the major characteristics of urban slums (Arcila 56). Emergency or informal settlements house the urban poor who lack the economic means to afford better living conditions in the cities. These communities are often neglected and left unattended, thereby deepening their poverty.

Panoramic View of Church and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

There is a strong link between what happens in society and the way religion is practised in any clime. In Nigeria, the Christian religion, through the proclamation of the Gospel, has had its way; hence its present expansion incidence. From a handful of missionaries who planted the Christian faith in Nigeria, the Church has expanded in many ways. For example, there are mission Churches, Indigenous Churches, and many privately owned by individuals. Recently, Pentecostalism has been noted for its overwhelming presence in Nigeria. These scenarios suggest one fact: the Church is growing, recording an increasing number of adherents. The growing numerical rate, however, is undermined by poverty, which has severely bedevilled its qualitative stance.

While so many worshippers gather in Cathedrals, Church Halls, Camps, Picnics, and prayer mountains on designated days, today, those who sincerely throng such centres to obey God further are seriously dwindling. The level of poverty in the land, occasioned by corruption, lack of proper planning, natural disaster, ethno-religious crises and terrorism in the form of Boko-Haram, ISWAP, and, quite recently, the ENDSARS protest in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria, injustice among others, from which people want to escape, has caused half-hearted religiosity in Church circles.

Poverty, as a socio-economic issue, cannot be defined in isolation; scholarly perspectives across disciplines and ideologies have shaped its meaning. Since World War II, a Western definition of poverty has been based on monetary terms,

using income or consumption levels to measure poverty and defining the poor as those who fall below a given income/consumption threshold, or “poverty line.” The definition has nevertheless been complemented by various approaches that view poverty more multidimensionally, including the basic needs approach, the capabilities approach, and the human development approach. These approaches have gained acceptance and there are widespread in the way United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Index (HDI) incorporated them into its view of poverty which takes into consideration three dimensions of human development: (i) Life expectancy; (ii) educational attainment; and (iii) standard of living, measured by income in terms of its purchasing power parity (UNDP, 2006).

Invariably, then, poverty can be defined as “lack of opportunity to develop human abilities and to control one's own human life because of economic or material deprivation (Kunyahop 187). This basic definition connotes a material lack or deprivation, a lack of access to resources, and insecurity, among other things. From practical experience, wherever poverty exercises its way, undue resource control and physical weakness present themselves, especially amongst the poor people in society. These harsh situations do occur when people cannot access income and other resources needed to attain proper conditions of life, such as good diet, material goods, amenities, standards and services which, in turn, enable them to play their roles, meet the obligations and participate in the family relationships and customs of their society.

While it is noteworthy to mention that some people are poor for lack of proper planning at the national, group, family or personal levels, some wallow in penury because of reasons beyond their control, such as natural, ecological, climatic or environmental factors (e.g. drought, flood, tsunami, earthquake, and so on. Others are poor because of ethno-religious wars, terrorism, and the like. In Nigeria, poverty “successfully” thrives due to faulty or absent national socio-economic planning. The table below from Nigeria Poverty Profile 2010, as shown by the National Bureau of Statistics, showcasing the percentage of Nigeria’s poverty situation from 1980 to 2010, is impressive because of its ever-increasing state despite the actualisation of the Millennium Development Goals:

Table 1

Year	Poverty Incidence %	Estimated Population (Million)	Population in Poverty (Million)
1980	27.2	65	17.1
1985	46.3	75	34.7
1992	42.7	91.5	39.2
1996	65.7	102.3	67.1
2004	54.4	126.3	68.7
2010	69.0	163	112.5

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (Harmonised Nigeria Living Standard Survey), 2010.

It is crystal clear that the derivable wealth from over 50 years of oil exploration, pathetically pursued in exchange for agricultural economics before the oil boom, in the country has not been appropriately managed for the common good. This is because, as Solomon Ademiluka rightly points out, “Just as the 8th century ushered in a period of unprecedented wealth in Israel, the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta placed Nigeria among the richest nations of the world” (11).

However, just as the upper class in Israel monopolised the wealth, Nigeria has been stratified into upper and lower classes, with the upper class controlling the resources and forcing others into destitution. Hence, its attendant corruption was inevitable, as most politicians and their cronies who view the Oil Money as a National Cake stash the country's wealth in their foreign bank accounts in Europe and America. Its attendant curse was joblessness and social vices. Unemployment alone has contributed in no small way to aggravating the scene of religious crises and tribal uproars in Nigeria; members of ethno-religious crises in the country have been teeming with unemployed youth, an incident which provides ready soldiers for such wars, and has plunged Nigeria into a bedlam of problems and challenges which have dire consequences for the country (Odeh 12). Other issues, such as the fuel crisis, the Fulani herders crisis, the water crisis, and even the food crisis, are crying for attention. Also, recently, there was the End SARS protest in which many of our youths were maimed and or killed. All of these were the result of the government's inability to manage the nation's resources effectively.

Although no society can be free of poverty, the table above shows that the poverty rate increased, and the share of the population affected rose to 69% as of 2010. All the measures put into place to stem the tide of poverty such as 1979 Green Revolution Programme (GRP), 1986 Directorate of Food, Roads, and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), 1993 Family Support Programme (FSP) and Family

Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP), 2001 National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) which were follow-up to 1972 National Accelerated Food Production Programme (NAFPP) and Nigerian Agricultural and Cooperative Bank, 1976 Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), have achieved only a little result. For example, according to the above National Bureau of Statistics (2007), Nigeria's poverty level in 1996 was 65.7%, and the poverty population was 67.1 million. The report indicates, among others, the magnitude of pain and agony into which the majority of the Nigerians have been immersed since then. All these tendencies have had a total effect on churches and communities in Nigeria as well.

Another Report, made available by the National Bureau of Statistics, presents poverty headcount figures for 2010 and forecasts/estimates for 2011, indicating that the "incidence of poverty in Nigeria worsened between 2004 and 2010." The Report shows that the number of Nigerians living below the poverty line rose from 68.7 million to 112.5 million (a 63.7% increase in poverty incidence) during the period, while the population rose from 139.2 million to 158.6 million (a 13.9% increase) between 2004 and 2010. During that period (i.e., 2004 – 2010), the Nigerian economy grew strongly, averaging more than 6.6%, making the country the fifth-fastest-growing economy in the World in 2010 at a 7.87% real growth rate. The paradox of growth amid poverty, inequality, and injustice in Nigeria's socio-politico-economic landscape, with 1% of the population (politicians and bureaucrats) appropriating the country's resources for themselves while the rest of the populace wallows in abject poverty (Ogbonaiya 45).

Nwagwu equally agrees with the submission above and attributes the persistence of poverty in Nigeria to income inequality, long-term ethno-religious conflicts, civil unrest and political instability (14). His assertion about income inequality is quite accurate, especially when considering that Nigeria's Members of Parliament (MPs) earn more than their counterparts worldwide. Only 31% of Nigerians lived above the poverty line in 2010. This is somewhat pathetic in a country (Nigeria) with a nominal GDP of \$207.11bn and a per capita income of \$1,401, which claims to be Africa's second-largest economy as of 2011 (Ayedogbon and Ohwosafa 12). In all these, the church had tried her best to alleviate the suffering of the poor.

Causes of Poverty in Nigeria

1. **Corruption:** This is unethical administrative or executive practices in government or business, including bribery. According to Transparency International (nd), corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Unethical practices have become commonplace in Nigeria, giving the country and its people a bad image, both domestically and internationally. Embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds have become a do-or-die affair. Public office holders now take pride in corruption and use it to purchase chieftaincy titles from our traditional rulers.

Nigeria's income is mainly generated from natural resources. This income, instead of being used for development, is circulated among political officeholders, government functionaries, their families, and cronies. Consequently, the few in the government circle enrich themselves while the vast majority wallow in abject poverty.
2. **Inadequate Funding of Education System:** Education, which is the process of imparting knowledge, skill and judgment, is not given the needed attention in Nigeria. Education is a sure way to empower individuals to realise their dreams in any society. It can reduce poverty and increase productivity. The nations with higher productivity are those with strong, functional education systems (Ucha 60). Many children and youths in Nigeria are deprived of education, which is a denial of their rights. Lack of education means a lack of capacity to participate in society. Most Nigerian children today are denied access to education and are seen begging on major streets and motor parks, which has become a national embarrassment.
3. **Total Dependence on Oil:** Dependence on oil revenue has become a significant cause of poverty in Nigeria. Since the discovery of oil, Nigeria's economy has been influenced by the commodity. Agriculture was the mainstay of Nigeria's economy. However, after the discovery of oil and gas, many of our youth moved in droves to the cities in search of white-collar jobs, and, as a result, agriculture was brought to its knees. Presently, the oil and gas sector cannot provide job opportunities for the teeming unemployed Nigerians. Overdependence on oil and gas has led to neglect of the agricultural, solid minerals, and other sectors of the economy. As a result, the government has failed to diversify the economy, thereby contributing to high poverty, unemployment, and other social vices in Nigeria.

4. **Alarming Rate of Unemployment:** Unemployment is one of the major contributors to poverty in Nigeria. Unemployment and poverty are interwoven. This is because if people are unable to secure employment, their standard of living falls, and they cannot meet the necessities of life. With unemployment, the standard of living goes down while the cost of living continues to rise (Ucha 56). Many Nigerians lack the opportunity to gainfully employ themselves. Yearly, educated Nigerians from our tertiary institutions roam the streets with no job opportunities in sight. Education is no longer a guarantee of securing a job in present-day Nigeria. The World Bank (2008) observes that education, which was once a sure way to secure gainful employment, no longer seems inevitable, as our youth roam the streets in search of a job.

Church and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

The Federal Government of Nigeria has implemented several poverty-alleviation programs to reduce poverty. The failure of the government's various poverty alleviation programmes due to inadequate planning and implementation shows that the government alone cannot reduce the impact of poverty on the populace in Nigeria. This has called on all social responsibility players, including the church, to come to the rescue of the poor. The Church has a significant role to play in eradicating poverty and, in doing so, showcases God's love to the poor. As part of its mission, the church needs to integrate spiritual concerns with care for humanity's material needs. Such concern has been pursued by the church since the early missionaries, including the Portuguese Roman Catholic monks, the Baptists, and the Christ Apostolic Church missionaries, ventured into Nigeria. The church, from the days of the missionaries, has been striving to lift the literacy level of the people. (Urakpa 56) outlined the involvement of the Anglican Church in Educational Development in eastern Nigeria. Other mission bodies, such as the Roman Catholic Mission, have equally done marvellous work in the area of education.

In addition to focusing on education, the missionaries took practical steps to reduce hunger and poverty. Jakonda observes that they introduced crops such as cocoa, ginger, groundnut, tomatoes, and cotton, which helped boost the economy and people's incomes. Similarly, crops like cassava were equally introduced into Nigeria by white missionaries. Improved agricultural practices led to higher production and better living standards for people (46). Through education, health care services, agriculture, and trade, the income of Nigeria's natives was positively affected by the early missionaries.

In recent times, the church has not given up; it continues to play key roles in society, particularly in poverty reduction and the care of the poor. The church has continued to strive to free humanity from hunger, misery, oppression and hatred, which are rooted in man's selfishness (Achunike 50). The Church's concern for the poor reflects Jesus' concern for the poor and is part of what God has entrusted to the church on earth. The redeeming power of Christ makes sense to the poor only when their poverty is genuinely addressed. Engel observes that meeting people's basic needs and addressing their social challenges is a sure way to show the love of God in practice (67).

Therefore, churches such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Anglican Church, and the Roman Catholic Church have food reserves that provide food to the most vulnerable, thereby reducing poverty. Some other churches empower youths through entrepreneurship training.

Cumulative Effect of Poverty in Nigeria

Presently, poverty in Nigeria is compounded by the lack of social amenities, such as reliable electricity, good roads, potable water, and health facilities. To make matters worse, the ever-rising cases of militancy, kidnapping, which is very rampant in most communities in Nigeria, and terrorism do not help matters in this context. Coupled with this is the present conundrum of the shortfall in global Crude Oil Price, whereby Federal allocations to the federating states in the country have also drastically reduced to the point where most States and Local Governments cannot afford to pay their workers' monthly salaries. At the inauguration of President Muhammadu Buhari's government on May 29, 2015, 27 States of Nigeria were reported to be short of funds to pay their workers' monthly wages. Almost a year later, 24 states still cannot pay salaries despite receiving bailout funds through the Federal Government's initiative (Usigbe 68). Also, at the inauguration of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's government on May 29, 2023, several States in Nigeria found it quite challenging to pay monthly wages.

To compound the already worsening situation, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged the global economy, bringing it to a standstill. This study largely agrees with Augustine U. Nebechukwu, who avers that poverty is not the result of chance, destiny, or fate. In Nebechukwu's assertion, it is even less the will of God. It is rather the bad will of men and women rooted in social, political, religious, economic and cultural injustice (80). In its Joint Report on Social Inclusion (2004), the European Commission came up with the following statements on poverty:

People are said to be living in poverty if their income and resources are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living considered acceptable in the society in which they live. Because of their poverty, they may experience multiple disadvantages through unemployment, low income, poor housing, inadequate health care, barriers to lifelong learning, culture, sport, and recreation. They are often excluded and marginalised from participating in activities (economic, social and cultural) that are the norm for other people and their access to fundamental rights may be restricted (14).

The complicated scenario has occasioned infant mortality, a low standard of education, a reduction in human lifespan, and an increase in crimes such as robbery, kidnapping, and even terrorism.

E. J. Nwagwu says,

“The majority of Nigeria’s population, the poor people in an affluent society, is enmeshed in the net of poverty.” As he rightly affirms, “The Nigerian government seems to have failed in its contractual obligation to respect and sustain its social contract with the people’ (79).

As a result of the seemingly total collapse of social security, some elements have taken to alternative means – prostitution, brain drain, cheating, 419, scam and other fraudulent practices – to earn a living, incidents which have socio-economic, political and moral consequences on how religion is practised in the country. (George and Amusan 16) Teach the importance of religion in the national development programme of any nation in the following statements:

...It has been acknowledged as one of the bedrocks of socio-economic and political advancement of many countries in the world. Religion exemplifies morals and advocates uprightness and piety, rather than sacrilege and profanity. Religion is one of the most powerful social institutions, serving as an instrument of social cohesion, unity, and integration (310).

It is, however, unfortunate that poverty is a significant barrier, hindering the progress of religion in promoting morality and ethical development of citizens, particularly in Nigeria. It has led to pretence among worshippers; many throng to

religious centres in the hope of immediate material benefits to alleviate their impoverished circumstances. Moreover, this is not good for the church.

The Way Forward for Church and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

The failure of successive governments to reduce poverty in Nigeria calls for a response from all Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) players in society to come together to bail the poor out of poverty. One such player is the church, which often helps the poor. Moreover, this has made the church very relevant in recent times. The Church, which upholds the teachings of Jesus, has continued to minister to the needs of the poor spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically and economically. Since the days of white missionaries in Nigeria, the church has contributed to the spiritual and economic well-being of the people. Lack of education and hunger are seen as manifestations of poverty, and these are not lacking among the masses of Nigeria. The Church has done commendable work in education and food security. Western education was introduced into Nigeria by the missionaries.

The Methodist mission, the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM), and the Presbyterian mission, among others, established schools in Nigeria as early as the late 19th Century (Ajah 56). The church has upheld the trend of founding schools since the days of the missionaries. Urakpa observes that educational development has always been synonymous with the missionary enterprise. The mission schools offered quality education and strong moral values. Consequently, the human capital that drove the quest for independence was mainly a product of the mission school (66). The same human capital drove the nation's economy in those early days. It is well known that those who have received a quality education are more self-reliant and economically better off than those without education. The Church still strives to provide quality education that will lead to economic emancipation.

To address hunger and poverty, the missionaries introduced an improved agricultural system. Demonstration farms were established, and the natives were trained in modern farming methods that could improve productivity (Jakonda 67). In addition to introducing modern family techniques, some crops were introduced to boost productivity and income. Tomatoes, ginger, cocoa, and groundnuts were among the crops introduced by the missionaries. Agricultural produce became the mainstay of Nigeria's economy before the oil boom.

In all these understandable leaps, Nigeria still wallow in abject poverty. Many who were lucky enough to be educated lack life skills because the education they received did not equip them to create wealth and become job creators. They therefore depend on the government for jobs, which the government alone could not provide. The Church, on the other hand, appears to be overwhelmed by the situation. This is because the church's income is limited, and secondly, the church today appears more interested in receiving than in giving. Hence, the church is perceived as part of the problem rather than the solution to the issue of poverty in Nigeria.

The church can reduce poverty in the following ways:

1. **Education.** The poor need to be educated and equipped with the skills to become productive and self-reliant. Education here means education of the head and the hands. Education of the head refers to cognitive knowledge, while that of the hand refers to practical ability. Many graduates today have theoretical knowledge but lack the practical skills to apply it. The church should strive to provide education that will affect the head and the hands.
2. **Skill acquisition programmes.** Skill acquisition is a form of training that individuals or groups can undertake to acquire knowledge for self-sustenance (Idoko 58). Skill acquisition involves training people in different trades under a legal agreement between the trainer and the trainee. Establishing skill-acquisition centres equipped with the necessary workforce and equipment to enable trainees to acquire the skills needed for self-sustenance and wealth creation is a practical way for the church to reduce poverty. When the poor and unemployed are equipped with the necessary skills, they can fend for themselves.
3. **Provision of credit facility.** The church needs to set up funds to provide small loans to support small businesses. Materials and equipment, such as a sewing machine, could be provided to those trained in garment-making to help them get started. Again, the church could organise the poor and encourage them to form cooperative societies. These societies can apply for and secure government grants for agriculture and small businesses. Beneficiaries of this church's funds should be monitored to ensure proper utilisation and, if needed, repayment.

4. **Organising seminars and symposia.** Principles of financial management need to be inculcated in unemployed individuals before funds are disbursed to them. This could be done through seminars and symposia. The Church can leverage its reach into lower strata of society to identify and mobilise the poor within its area of influence for such programmes. They can work with their host communities to offer enlightenment programmes that equip the poor with knowledge that can help them lift themselves out of poverty.
5. **Extension of the hand of Fellowship to Well-meaning Agencies.** The church should reach out to both government and non-governmental agencies, as well as donor agencies, to secure the funds needed to implement meaningful poverty-reduction interventions in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, poverty is a tremendous social problem ravaging the poor, and the impact is visible in the socio-economic life of people experiencing poverty in Nigeria. The majority of Nigerians live on the fringes of poverty, and that has created an unbelievably wide gap between the rich and poor, which has continued to widen with no end in sight. The Federal government of Nigeria has attempted to reduce poverty level using several alternatives, but failed due to a lack of proper planning and implementation, and this has brought untold hardship on the poor citizenry in the country. Though the church has been active in its Christian Corporate Social Responsibility (CCSR), there are still many more areas to be harnessed and addressed to reduce poverty in Nigeria.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the study recommends that:

1. The church should step up its intervention in poverty alleviation programmes in the area of empowerment and acquisition of skills to brighten the financial fortunes of the poor in society.
2. The church should come together to create a shared pool where money could be deposited, saved and well-managed and from there, offer quality education that would help the poor live a quality life.
3. The church should extend a hand of fellowship to agencies, well-meaning Nigerians and NGOs for assistance to enable them to function optimally.

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CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION WITHIN AFRICAN HERMENEUTICS

BY

Odei Moses Adeiza. Ph.D,

Department of Religious Studies,
Ajayi Crowther University

E-mail: venodei4real2019@gmail.com; am.odei@acu.edu.ng

&

Olaoba, Olaitan Oyedele, Ph.D,

Department of Religious Studies,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo.

E-mail: olaitanola2002@gmail.com; oo.olaoba@acu.edu.ng. Tel: 08033966560

Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between culture and biblical interpretation, emphasising how cultural contexts shape the understanding and application of Scripture. Focusing on African hermeneutics, the research explores the development of interpretive methods, including inculturation, liberation theology, and reconstruction theology, which have made the Bible relevant to Africa's unique social and historical context. The study highlights the role of contextual theology, which adapts biblical teachings to fit contemporary cultural settings while preserving the core message of Scripture. Additionally, it explores the Christian interpretation of culture, the influence of culture on biblical hermeneutics in Africa, and the connection between African culture and the Bible's artistic expressions. This paper concludes with recommendations, suggesting that African and other non-Western scholars be encouraged and supported in developing hermeneutical methods rooted in their cultural experiences. This approach would foster more authentic and meaningful engagement with Scripture, allowing communities to connect with it in ways that resonate with their lived experiences.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Biblical Hermeneutics, Exegesis, Contextual Theology, Intercultural Interpretation

Introduction

Cultural identity encompasses the customs, beliefs, language, and social behaviours of a particular group or society. It influences how individuals perceive and interpret texts, including sacred texts such as the Bible. Biblical interpretation, also known as hermeneutics, refers to the process of interpreting the Scriptures. Historically, interpretation has involved uncovering the meaning of a passage within its original context and understanding how it can be applied in contemporary contexts. This process involves a careful examination of language, cultural background, theological assumptions, and literary forms. Culture existed before the adoption of Christianity. Culture is the structured way of life of a group of people. The gospel's creation, dissemination, and adaptation were influenced by culture. A group's culture represents them. It emphasises their customs and accomplishments. Aiyegboyin, Deji (2021).

Culture signifies different things. To put it broadly, "culture" is simply the way we do things that are significant to us, whether they be clothing, vehicles, boats, food, religion, sports, the arts, or anything else. As a means of self-definition, culture must pique people's curiosity and convince them to devote a portion of themselves to it. Individuals enjoy knowing who they are in a tribe and feeling like they belong. People feel important and needed within their small communities, and this works well there. However, mass culture allows individuals to identify themselves with all members of mass society. We have to struggle more to discover and maintain our identity, and it makes the ballpark a lot bigger, in a way. One subset of culture is known as Christian culture. In every civilisation, the dominant culture is Christian. Christians' daily lives are shaped by their cultural movements, wants and aspirations, and relationships with one another. Gatwa, Tharcisse (2013). Practices related to cooking, dressing, the media, and entertainment, such as sports and reading, can all be included.

The advent of new technologies for sound and image broadcasting and recording, the development of industrial mass production, the expansion of the mass media industries, including radio, television, film, and book publishing, as well as print and electronic news media, have all had a significant impact on Christian pop culture in contemporary urban mass societies. A wide range of Christians are usually drawn to Christian cultural items. (Douglas, 2001)

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Culture

The term “culture” typically refers to the way of life of a specific group of people, encompassing their socio-political and economic activities, practices, and traditions passed down from generation to generation. More specifically, culture encompasses the arts, beliefs, social institutions, behaviours, dress, language, rituals, and norms (Waweru, 2011, pp. 6-7). According to Kathy Black, as cited by Aniol (2012:41), culture encompasses the attitudes, customs, and beliefs that differentiate one group from another.

Language, tangible items, customs, organisations, and artistic expressions are all ways that culture is transmitted from one generation to the next. Bacon (2003) defines culture as the body of knowledge and behaviour an individual acquires and can also be interpreted as the common customs, values, and beliefs that characterise a social group, transmitted across generations (62). For this discussion, Bacon’s definition of culture is adopted, as it is comprehensive and encompasses a range of cultural expressions.

Christian Interpretation of Culture

The institution of the Gospel has established a clear difference between Christianity and Culture. Although Christianity can thrive in any cultural context, every culture inevitably holds certain beliefs, values, or practices that conflict with Christian teachings and must therefore be set aside. For example, the Jewish emphasis on outward righteousness through strict adherence to the law had to be abandoned, as salvation is attained through faith alone, independent of works. Similarly, Gentiles’ custom of idol worship and immorality were incompatible with the Christian calling and had to be rejected. Any cultural agreement that obstructs the gospel’s message must also be abandoned. This might seem straightforward, but history shows how challenging it has been for believers to navigate the relationship between Christianity and culture consistently.

Over time, the church has made considerable efforts to engage with modern culture without becoming either segregated from it or indistinguishable within it. The church has tried, with varying degrees of success, to engage with contemporary culture without forming a counterculture or succumbing to secular values. However, it has not always succeeded in maintaining this delicate balance. In the early Jerusalem church, Jewish culture was deeply at odds with Christianity,

and the most significant threat came from Judaizing Christians who wanted to impose Jewish customs on Gentile believers. As Christianity grew among the Gentiles, churches like the one in Corinth struggled to keep worldly influences out of the church. When persecution from Rome intensified, this threat subsided for a period of time, which the church considers modern culture to be corrupt. It often reacts by creating its own counter-culture, instructing Christians to adopt this new way of life instead of their previous one. In times of greater influence, the church may even try to impose the “Christian culture” on society as a whole, as happened in the second century when the Roman government became involved in religion.

Christians must understand the relationship between culture and faith, as various aspects of culture can both influence faith and threaten Christian values in today's society. Culture is a key factor in foreign missions. Western missions have often been hindered by cultural misunderstandings among missionaries and the organisations they represent. Failure to differentiate between cultural practices and Christian teachings has led missionaries to impose Western Christianity on foreign lands, rather than allowing the gospel to be integrated into native cultures. As a result, Christianity has often been seen as paternalistic and capitalist, with churches constructed in Western styles and funded by Western resources, and converts often adopt Western clothing. Indigenous leaders are sent to Western countries for education, and control of newly established churches remained under Western control.

Culture also plays an essential role in evangelism. Paul advised the Corinthians to carefully consider how his own culture might affect the preaching of the gospel, adjusting his cultural practices in any biblically appropriate way to remove unnecessary barriers (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Many people find that their failure to witness effectively is related to their cultural rigidity. True believers often set themselves apart from the world by creating strict rules, which can alienate non-Christian neighbours.

In the church's worship, culture has also played a key role. In America, the 1960s brought a new generation that strongly opposed their parents' values and lifestyle. Movements like the “Hippies” and “Jesus People” emerged. At the same time, the revolutionary elements have faded. Many younger Christians today are influenced by this counterculture, particularly in music. Instead of traditional hymns played on pianos or organs, contemporary worship often features guitars and modern

songs. Older generations may view this new music as disrespectful, while younger Christians find traditional forms uninspiring. These cultural contrasts have threatened the church's unity in worship. However, recognising and reacting to these differences in a biblical manner allowed the church to grow, as seen in the Book of Acts, where people from diverse cultures came to faith in Christ. Nonetheless, cultural differences can also threaten church unity. To preserve fellowship, Christians must be sensitive to what offends people from different cultures and set those things aside for the sake of harmony. The church is often bound by culture, which can hinder its mission. Several religious scholars have noted that the church often falls behind in cultural developments rather than leading them. One reason for this is cultural paralysis, as Tillapaugh describes in *The Church Unleashed*.

In the 19th century, Baptist and Methodist denominations grew rapidly because they adapted to societal changes. As the population shifted westward and the number of trained ministers remained insufficient, the Baptists introduced "farmer-preachers," while the Methodists had "circuit riders." This responsiveness to cultural shifts led to rapid church growth. Today, however, the church is often so entrenched in its own culture that change is difficult and even distressing. The tendency to uphold traditions, with the reasoning that "we have always done it this way," limits the church's ability to engage with an evolving cultural context. The church must become more aware of these cultural shifts and respond creatively yet biblically. Creativity in ministry relies, in part, on understanding the relationship between culture and the gospel.

Cultural Impact on Bible Hermeneutics in Africa African culture has significantly shaped the interpretation of the Bible in several ways, reflecting the continent's diverse social, political, and historical experiences. Here are some of the key ways in which this influence manifests:

a. **Development of African Hermeneutical Methods**

In response to the desire among African scholars to engage in theology and biblical interpretation that resonates with the African context, various hermeneutical approaches have been developed. These include inculturation, contextualization, Liberation Theology, Theology of Reconstruction, Intercultural Hermeneutics, and Integrated Hermeneutics. According to Loba Mkole (2008:548), inculturation and liberation theology have emerged as the dominant trends, offering the most persuasive paradigms in African biblical scholarship. The overarching aim of this

scholarship has been to connect biblical interpretation to real-life concerns, fostering both spiritual upliftment and social transformation. Each of these hermeneutical methods is deeply rooted in the specific experiences of African communities. For instance, Liberation Theology arose out of the African struggle for independence.

During the colonial era, African Christians often re-read the Exodus narrative through the lens of their fight for freedom, identifying with the Israelites as the oppressed people whose cries for deliverance reached the ears of God. The narrative of Moses as a liberator held great significance, particularly in South Africa, where the oppressive system of apartheid intensified the longing for freedom. In this context, Moses was revered as a symbol of liberation, reflecting the broader African desire for a theology that recognises and addresses the injustices experienced by oppressed peoples.

Similarly, the Theology of Reconstruction emerged in the aftermath of the liberation struggles of the 1980s and early 1990s, when many African nations gained independence, and apartheid in South Africa began to collapse. This theological approach draws on biblical texts such as Ezra-Nehemiah, which focus on rebuilding after destruction. The emphasis is on reconstructing societies devastated by colonialism, with special attention to the equitable distribution of resources and land ownership, and on fostering interdependent relationships rooted in justice and liberation (Dube, 2012, p. 21).

b. Renewed Interest in African Biblical Scholarship

Before the 1960s, biblical interpretation in Africa was predominantly shaped by Western cultural perspectives. However, since the post-colonial period, African scholars have developed models of interpretation that engage in dialogue between the Bible and Africa's diverse cultures (Gatti & Ossom-Batsa, 2011, p. 168). This shift marked a significant turning point, as African biblical scholars began to assert their voices in global theological discourse. The result of these efforts is a vibrant body of African biblical scholarship that offers fresh insights into the interpretation of Scripture.

African scholars bring a unique perspective, shaped by the continent's history, communal values, and struggles for justice, thus enriching the broader field of biblical hermeneutics. Through their work, African biblical scholars have contributed to global discussions on theology, ethics, and the church's role in

addressing contemporary social issues. In conclusion, the impact of African culture on biblical hermeneutics is evident in the development of distinct interpretive methods that resonate with the continent's historical and cultural experiences. This cultural influence not only enriches African theology but also contributes to the global understanding of the Bible and its relevance to diverse contexts.

The Relationship Between The Bible and African Culture

The Bible is presented through the lens of Jewish culture. Its content is conveyed to us through the experiences and context of the Jewish people, whose assumptions and motives are reflected in the Scriptures they preserved. More broadly, the Bible is a product of the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious environment of the Ancient Near East (West, 2006, p. 399). The Hebrew Scriptures are rooted in the cultural practices of Canaanite Palestine. Similarly, the New Testament world reflects the Greco-Roman civilisation, and many issues within it are best understood through familiarity with Greco-Roman worldviews and customs (Ntreh, 2016, p. 10).

The Bible is viewed differently across various cultures. For some, it has been seen as an oppressive tool historically used to alienate and dehumanise, justifying the discrimination and marginalisation of minority groups. However, for the church, the Bible is a transformative tool vital to its mission and spiritual life. Engaging with the Bible brings believers into dialogue with the cultural assumptions it conveys (Mojola, 2013). To understand the Bible's relevance, one cannot separate it from culture.

Scholars have developed several models to explain the relationship between the Bible and culture. One such model is exclusivism, which holds that there is only one true religion and, by extension, one authentic culture. This view, often associated with Western missionaries in Africa, disregards other religions and cultures as false and seeks to convert others to Western religion and culture (Ntreh, 2016, pp. 11-12). In contrast, the inclusivism model acknowledges that both the Bible and African culture contain elements of truth unique to their respective traditions. This model promotes tolerance and respect for different religions and cultures, though it stops short of fully accepting them (Ntreh, 2016, p. 13).

A more accommodating model is pluralism, which encourages genuine acceptance of different cultures. It posits that both biblical and African cultures are equally valid ways of life (Ntreh, 2016, p. 14). However, at the same time, pluralism allows for meaningful dialogue between the Bible and African culture; it is not entirely accurate, as some African cultural practices clearly contradict biblical teachings. Still, this model provides a framework for dialogue and mutual respect between the Bible and African culture, even if it does not claim that all aspects of both are compatible.

Some scholars advocate for a dialectic or dialogic approach to understanding the relationship between the Bible and culture. The dialectic approach views the Bible and culture as fundamentally incompatible, with no possibility of reconciliation. In contrast, the dialogic approach sees compatibility between the essential values of both traditions (Ezeogu, 2022). Ezeogu further argues that African Christian theologians generally believe one can be both fully Christian and entirely African without compromising the core tenets of either. The Bible and African culture can complement each other, nurturing positive values while discarding outdated or harmful practices (Ezeogu, 2022). However, Ezeogu (2022) also notes that many African

Christians often adopt a dialectical perspective, viewing the Bible as the unquestionable word of God. For them, the Bible holds authority over culture and must be accepted without critical examination. Those who question the Bible are often labelled as heretical or unfaithful, reinforcing a rigid distinction between biblical teachings and cultural practices. Richard Niebuhr outlines five models for understanding the relationship between Christ and culture. These include the “Christ opposed to culture” model, the “Christ of Culture” model, the “Christ Transcending culture” model, and the “Christ and Culture” model, which associates culture with human corruption and views the relationship as paradoxical. Finally, the conversionist model advocates the radical transformation of culture through Christ (Ogbonnaya, 2017, p. 12). These models, however, lack a pluralistic perspective that emphasises that no culture is inherently inferior or illegitimate, as God shows no favouritism (Ogbonnaya, 2017, p. 13).

Ogbonnaya (2017) criticises the negative impact of missionaries’ condemnation of African culture on Christianity in Africa. Missionaries often portrayed African culture as barbaric and heathen, which led to syncretism and hindered the integration of Christian faith within African traditions and values (Ogbonnaya, 2017, p. 16). When European missionaries arrived in Africa, they did not attempt

to understand or appreciate African culture, seeing Africans as uncivilised. This resulted in the imposition of Western culture on Africans, leading to inequalities between European and African societies. As a result, Africans have adopted elements of European culture while retaining some traditional practices (Waweru, 2011, p. 10). Efforts to foster dialogue between African culture and the Bible have led to the establishment of African Independent Churches (AICs), whose goal is to express Christianity in ways more relevant to African experiences. This highlights that Africans do not engage with the Bible in isolation from their cultural and social realities (Waweru, 2011, pp. 49-50). The dialogical approach, therefore, holds promise for integrating Christianity into African culture. African Christians tend to understand the Bible in light of their cultural experiences, making it futile to separate the two. Instead, Africans should allow the Bible's message to transform those aspects of their culture that conflict with its teachings.

Theoretical framework

Contextual Theology Contextual theology emphasises that theology should not be developed in isolation from the cultural, social, and political context in which it is practised. This theory argues that the context of the reader, whether historical, social, or cultural, must influence the interpretation of religious texts. Contextual theology refers to the process by which the church adapts its teachings to align with the cultural context in which it exists. A clear example of this appears in 1 Corinthians 11:4-7, where Paul addresses the issue of women wearing head coverings. In the Corinthian culture of the time, it was customary for women to wear their heads as a symbol of submission to their husbands, which also symbolised submission to God. For a woman to go without a head covering was culturally unacceptable and considered a challenge to the established social order. Paul supported the practice, affirming that women should adhere to this cultural norm to avoid sending the wrong message to their society.

Paul even states that if a Christian woman refuses to wear a head covering, she may as well shave her head, an act that would bring public shame (verse 6). In essence, a woman's refusal to cover her head in that context was a declaration of defiance against God's order. Paul taught that the head covering was an outward expression of an inward attitude of submission to both God and His established authority. Adapting this teaching to other cultures, where head coverings may not carry the same meaning, is a key example of contextual theology at work. While the Bible's teachings sometimes require interpretation in a cultural context, the underlying principles remain unchanged. In 1 Corinthians, the principle means

that Christ is the head of the church and that the husband is the head of the wife, with the wife demonstrating her submission in culturally appropriate ways.

Contextual theology applies these biblical principles through the lens of contemporary cultural reference points, taking into account factors like language, socio-political realities, cultural norms, and ideological beliefs. However, this process requires caution. If not applied carefully, contextualization can lead to a syncretistic blend of beliefs, diluting or losing the true meaning of the gospel. For example, “following Jesus” might look quite different in one culture than in another, and without careful discernment, it could stray far from biblical Christianity. Thus, while contextual theology is vital for making the gospel relevant to different cultural contexts, it must always guard against compromising biblical truth. There is always a risk that, in adapting the gospel to a culture, essential truths could be obscured, or that the gospel's message could be misunderstood or lost in translation.

Conclusion

Culture plays a pivotal role in shaping how biblical texts are understood and applied. Throughout history, different cultures have influenced the way Scripture is interpreted, often leading to diverse theological perspectives and practices. This dynamic is particularly evident in African biblical hermeneutics, where African scholars have developed methods like inculturation, liberation theology, and reconstruction theology to make the Bible relevant to their unique social, political, and historical experiences. While the cultural context influences interpretation, the underlying principles of Scripture remain constant. Contextual theology enables the Bible's timeless truths to be expressed in ways that resonate with specific cultural contexts, ensuring the gospel remains relevant to contemporary life.

However, this process requires careful balance to avoid distorting biblical truth or allowing cultural norms to override Scriptural authority. In essence, culture and biblical interpretation are intertwined. Cultural sensitivity enhances the relevance of Scripture, while faithful interpretation safeguards its integrity across diverse contexts. A nuanced understanding of this relationship is essential to developing a theology that speaks to the real-world concerns of various communities while remaining faithful to the core message of the Bible.

Recommendations

Interpreters and scholars should consider the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the communities they are addressing. Understanding local customs, languages, and values enables the Bible's message to be communicated in meaningful, relevant ways, fostering deeper spiritual engagement without compromising its integrity.

Churches and theological institutions should establish guidelines to help distinguish between necessary cultural adaptation and the risk of syncretism. This will ensure that, while the gospel is adapted to different cultural settings, its core truths are preserved rather than compromised.

African and other non-Western scholars should be encouraged and supported to develop hermeneutical methods rooted in their own cultural experiences. This will foster a more authentic and meaningful engagement with the Bible, allowing communities to connect with Scripture in ways that reflect their own realities.

Communities should be empowered to engage directly with Scripture, developing interpretations that resonate with their lived experiences. This local ownership of biblical interpretation enhances the Bible's relevance and fosters a deeper sense of spiritual connection within the community.

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PERCEPTIONS OF GOSPEL APOSTOLIC CHURCH PASTORS TOWARDS MEDICAL INTERVENTIONS FOR INFERTILITY IN IJEBU-ODE, OGUN STATE

Dr. Kayode John OLUSANYA,

Department of Religious Studies,
Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun
Email: olusanyakj@tasued.edu.ng

&

Abdulazeez Olalekan OTUNAYA,

Department of Religious Studies,
Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun
Email: otunayaazeez@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Infertility, as a complex issue among Christian couples and beyond, has generated numerous social, emotional, and theological concerns within the context of African Pentecostal churches. In an effort to proffer solutions, medically inclined approaches have been proposed as alternatives. However, these medical solutions to infertility—Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) such as in-vitro fertilization (IVF) and intrauterine insemination (IUI)—remain underutilized due to ethical problems and other related issues. This study, therefore, explores the perception of pastors in the Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC) regarding medical interventions in the management of infertility among couples. Employing a qualitative approach, both questionnaire and interview guide were used to gather information from GAC pastors, deacons/deaconesses, and elders across three (3) GAC assemblies in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State. The study reveals that although a majority of pastors still interpret infertility in spiritual terms, there is a noticeable awareness and growing acceptance of medical interventions, particularly among those who are well-versed and theologically grounded. While GAC pastors affirmed that prayer and fasting remain significant in addressing infertility, they also recognized the complementary role of biomedical care. The study concludes that a theological reorientation is needed to harmonize faith-based practices with scientific advancements. It advocates for greater pastoral education, interfaith dialogue, and collaborative engagement with reproductive health professionals to provide holistic care for couples facing infertility.

Keywords: Infertility, Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), IVF, Gospel Apostolic Church, Faith and Medicine

1. Introduction

Africans are deeply religious people, persistent in the worship of deities through various forms of worship³⁸. The religious consciousness is evident in their day-to-day activities, as they hardly engage in any activity without some form of religious attachment. This implies that Africans rarely attribute incidences to natural causes without considering the interference of the supernatural. They believe that things do not just happen on their own without the backing of spiritual forces. In the African sociocultural context, childbearing occupies a central position in the continuation of family lineage. As such, childbearing is given serious attention, especially among newly-wedded couples, who are yet to have children. One of the reasons couples find it difficult to have children is infertility. Infertility is a culturally significant social problem, deeply spiritualized among Africans, where childbearing is linked to personal fulfillment, institution of motherhood and fatherhood, marital stability, and community continuity. In Nigeria, childlessness is often considered as both a physical (biological) and spiritual problem, raising different concerns across traditional, religious and medical fields³⁹. While Yoruba attach so much importance to procreation and childbearing due to its cultural significance, they frown at infertility and perceive it a spiritual spell.⁴⁰ Within various African Christian communities, particularly Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, infertility is usually perceived as a spiritual illness, attributing it to the interference of demonic forces, inherited curses, lack of faith, therefore suggesting divine healing as the prime solution.⁴¹

The Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC) is one of the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, founded on a theology of holiness, deliverance, and divine healing, with strong emphasis on spiritual interventions in matters of health, including infertility. Pastors act as both religious leaders and custodians of divine authority, leading prayer sessions such as night vigils, deliverance sessions, hours of victory,

³⁸ Aderibigbe, Ibigbolade, S. "Religious traditions in Africa: An overview of origins, basic beliefs, and practices". *Contemporary perspectives on religions in Africa and the African diaspora*, 2015, p. 8.

³⁹ Muasya, R. M. "The challenge of infertility to the Christian marriage in some African societies: A plea for an ethical response in the light of Donum Vitae". *Am J Hum Soc Sci Res*, vol. 2, no., 2018, 11, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Okonofua, Friday E., et al. "The social meaning of infertility in Southwest Nigeria." *Health transition review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1997, p. 206.

⁴¹ Yusuf, P. T. *Challenges confronting infertile couples in Africa: a pastoral care approach*. Diss. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University, 2018, p. 1.

anointing services, as spiritual solutions to infertility⁴². As such, the use of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs)—such as In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF), Intrauterine Insemination (IUI), and hormonal therapy, often contradicts Christian convictions regarding the divine concept of childbirth, leading to outright rejection of alternative methods of conception through scientific discovery⁴³. However, religion and science have things in common. No wonder, Otunaya remarks that both religion and science are doing the same work, that is, while religion is pointing to God, science is taking us back to God.⁴⁴

Regardless of these spiritual convictions, Nigeria has experienced a growth in the expansion of fertility clinics, as many couples who are yet to have children turn to biomedical solutions for remedies. The problem, thus, lies in how religious leaders, particularly in the context of Pentecostal churches, such as Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC), manage and respond to the pressure and tension between faith-based healing (spiritual healing) and medical intervention (assisted reproductive technologies). Existing research has explored Christian perceptions of infertility⁴⁵, but limited work has focused specifically on the attitudes of Pentecostal pastors in indigenous Nigerian churches toward modern fertility treatments. Therefore, examining pastors' attitudes is very important as they play a key role in shaping congregants' beliefs, counseling practices, and health-seeking behaviours, especially those that are having issues with birthing children. This study therefore investigated the perceptions of Gospel Apostolic Church pastors in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, toward medical interventions for infertility, with a focus on how doctrinal beliefs, theological training, and pastoral experience influence their acceptance or rejection of biomedical options. The findings aim to contribute to pastoral theology, reproductive ethics, and public health discourse in faith-based settings. This study employed a qualitative research design, using an interview guide and a questionnaire. This method was chosen to obtain in-depth

⁴² Adetunmibi, M. A. *Yoruba Spiritual Heritage and Its Implications for the Yoruba Indigenous Churches in Nigeria*. 2017, Academia.edu, p.12.

⁴³ Schenker, J. G. "Assisted reproduction practice: religious perspectives". *Reproductive biomedicine online*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2005, p. 311.

⁴⁴ Otunaya, A. O. "Religion and science: A short history of the existing skirmish and implications for Christianity today". *Pharos Journal of Theology*, vol. 101, 2020, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Hiadzi, et al, "'God helps those who help themselves'... religion and Assisted Reproductive Technology usage amongst urban Ghanaians." *Plos one*, vol. 16, no. 12, 2021, pp. 1-13; see also Pearce, T. O. "Cultural Production and Reproductive Issues: The Significance of the Charismatic Movement in Nigeria." *Religion and Sexuality in Cross-cultural Perspective*. Routledge, 2014, 21-50.

information on infertility and GAC pastors' perceptions of the medical solutions available in Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State. The information extracted through interviews were collated and analysed using content analysis.

2. Infertility and Medical Fertility Solutions in Nigeria: IVF, IUI, and ARTs

The word – 'infertility' is the direct opposite of 'fertility'. Therefore, to understand what infertility connotes, the term fertility must be taken into consideration. Etymologically, the term 'infertility' was derived from the Latin word–*fertilis*, that is, bearing abundance or fruitful or productive.⁴⁶ Automatically, the opposite side of this is, not bearing, unfruitful, or unproductive. One can now put that infertility is the inability to produce or bear in abundance. Some scholarly definitions of infertility are put forward in order to have a full grasp of what infertility connotes. Makar cited in Muasya defines infertility as the “inability to conceive as well as to produce by natural means”.⁴⁷ WHO defines it as a disease of the male or female reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.⁴⁸ Another definition that is similar to that of WHO is that of Duncan and Dunstan. The authors define 'infertility' as the failure of a couple to conceive a pregnancy after trying to do so for at least one full year.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, Sule and Erigbali define infertility as the inability of couples of reproductive ages to conceive or to bring pregnancy to term after one year of unprotected intercourse.⁵⁰ All these authors peg the waiting period for conception to take place at 12 calendar months, which means anything later than one year is considered infertility.

⁴⁶ Harper, Douglas. *Etymology of Fertile*. Online Etymology Dictionary, www.etymonline.com/word/fertile. . Accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

⁴⁷ Muasya, R. M. “The Challenge of Infertility to the Christian Marriage in Some African Societies: A Plea for an Ethical Response in the Light of *Donum Vitae*.” *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research*, vol. 2, 2018, p.5.

⁴⁸ World Health Organization. *Infertility*. 2022, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility>. Accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

⁴⁹ Duncan, A. S., and G. W. Dunstan, editors. *Dictionary of Medical Ethics*. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977, p. 179.

⁵⁰ Sule, J. O., and P. Erigbali. “Prevalence of Infertility in Women.” *African Journal of Biomedical Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2008, p. 227. Ibadan Biomedical Communications Group. African Journal of Biomedical Research.

Infertility may be classified as either primary (no prior pregnancy) or secondary (inability to conceive after a previous birth).⁵¹ In the world population, 48 million couples are projected to experience infertility, with higher prevalence rates in sub-Saharan Africa due to untreated infections, poor reproductive healthcare, and traditional practices.⁵² In Nigerian society, infertility carries a severe social stigma, particularly for women. It is often associated with spiritual failure, divine punishment, or demonic oppression. The cultural premium placed on childbearing means that infertility can lead to emotional distress, marital instability, and societal exclusion.⁵³ Women are often unreasonably blamed and may face prosecution from extended families, in-laws, and even church communities. In such environments, infertility transcends medical speculations and becomes a deeply spiritual and moral concern. In many Pentecostal settings, including the Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC), infertility is frequently interpreted in the lens of the gospel. It is seen as a test of faith, the result of generational curses, or the influence of spiritual enemies.⁵⁴ This perception has a significant impact on the acceptance or rejection of medical fertility solutions, as believers may prefer to seek divine intervention through prayer, fasting, and deliverance rather than pursue clinical options

Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) include medical procedures designed to provide medical solutions to infertility, most especially assisting people with conception. However, ARTs remain controversial due to its associated risks on both the mother and child.⁵⁵ Among the most widely used are:

⁵¹ Rowe, P. J., Frank H. C., Timothy, B. H., Ahmed M. A. Mahmoud, and World Health Organization. *WHO Manual for the Standardized Investigation, Diagnosis and Management of the Infertile Male*. Cambridge University Press, 2000. p. 4.

⁵² Ombelet, W. "WHO Fact Sheet on Infertility Gives Hope to Millions of Infertile Couples Worldwide." *Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2020, p. 249.

⁵³ Okoro, D. C. *African Women and the Shame and Pain of Infertility: An Ethico-cultural Study of Christian Response to Childlessness among the Igbo People of West Africa*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020. p 5.

⁵⁴ Moss, C. R., and Joel S. Baden. *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*. Princeton University Press, 2015. pp. 3–5.

⁵⁵ Kawwass, Jennifer F., and Martina L. Badell. "Maternal and Fetal Risk Associated with Assisted Reproductive Technology." *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, vol. 132, no. 3, 2018, p. 765.

In-Vitro Fertilization (IVF): A process where an egg is fertilized by sperm outside the body and later implanted into the uterus.⁵⁶

Intrauterine Insemination (IUI): A method involving the direct placement of sperm into a woman's uterus to facilitate fertilization.⁵⁷

Donor Gametes and Surrogacy: In cases of severe infertility, donor eggs, sperm, or even surrogacy arrangements are utilized to aid reproduction.⁵⁸

These technologies, though increasingly available in Nigeria, are limited by cost, accessibility, and cultural resistance. IVF treatment in Nigeria can cost between ₦800,000 to ₦2 million per cycle, making it unaffordable to the average family or less-privileged.⁵⁹ Apart from the economic challenge posed by ARTs, its ethical concerns remain problematic among religious leaders across various Christian denominations in Nigeria. While some liberal Christians see ARTs as a welcome development, others see it as alternating God's creation order regardless of its benefits, particularly bringing joy and happiness to homes that have been filled with sorrow due to inability to conceive and have children. Meanwhile, awareness and education about how Assisted Reproductive Technologies work remain low among the general population, and even among clergy.⁶⁰ Many pastors lack adequate knowledge about the science and ethics of these procedures, leading to misinformation, doubts and condemnation. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition among progressive faith leaders that medical and spiritual approaches can coexist, offering couples a more holistic path to addressing infertility.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Iketubosin, Faye. "In Vitro Fertilization Embryo Transfer Processes and Pathway: A Review from Practice Perspective." *Tropical Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2018, p. 228.

⁵⁷ Cohlen, Ben, Aartjan Bijkerk, Sheryl Van der Poel, and Willem Ombelet. "IUI: Review and Systematic Assessment of the Evidence That Supports Global Recommendations." *Human Reproduction Update*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2018, p. 301.

⁵⁸ Zadeh, Sophie, Eleni C. Ilioi, Vasanti Jadva, and Susan Golombok. "The Perspectives of Adolescents Conceived Using Surrogacy, Egg or Sperm Donation." *Human Reproduction*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2018, p. 1100.

⁵⁹ Olorunfemi, O., N. O. Osunde, Eunice Amaechi Osian, Lawrenta Ateso Tope-Fakua, and Omolayo Ololade Fadipe. "The Relationship between Religion, Culture, Cost, Ethics, and Husband Perception with the Decision of Women's Utilization of Assisted Reproductive Technology as Method of Infertility Management." *Journal of Nursing and Midwifery Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2021, p. 270.

⁶⁰ Hiadzi, Rosemond Akpene, Isaac Mensah Boafo, and Peace Mamle Tetteh. "'God helps those who help themselves'... religion and Assisted Reproductive Technology usage amongst urban Ghanaians." *Plos one*, vol. 16, no. 12, 2021, p. 2.

⁶¹ Jimoh, et. al. "Assisted Reproductive Technology: The Perspectives of Religious Leaders in Ogun State, South-Western Nigeria." *African Journal of Reproduction and Gynaecological Endoscopy*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2022, p. 29.

3. Pastoral Responses to Medical Interventions

The relationship between religion and science remain a challenge for theologians and scientists as they overlap each other. Although science prioritizes reasoning and facts, religion prioritizes faith over reasoning, leading to skirmish between them due to methodological inconsistencies.⁶² Science offers a reasonable non-supernatural explanation to occurrences, religion attributes every occurrence to the interference of a supernatural being, but that does not change the fact that they both agree to natural occurrences. In this context, the relationship between religion and reproductive health, particularly regarding abortion and infertility treatment, has been the subject of growing scholarly interest. Scholars have explained how Pentecostal and Charismatic movements in Africa promote divine healing as a core tenet of their theology.⁶³ As such, medical intervention is often viewed as secondary or even contradictory to Christian convictions. These beliefs deeply influence how infertility and abortion are perceived and addressed within church settings.

Christian ethicists have played important roles in discussing the ethical problems that concern Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs), notable among these Christian denominations that showed interest in the discussion is the Roman Catholic Church. The church perceives ARTs as an artificial method of conception and as such, it should not be replaced with the natural method of conception.⁶⁴ The church took a position regarding ARTs when Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 asserted that ARTs are artificial and not natural, replacing divine order on conception and childbearing, highlight that it stands in striking contrast to God's will – the only one who can create life.⁶⁵ The Catholic's Donum Vitae is a statement released to condemn assisted reproductive technologies because it destroys conception through sexual intercourse among couples, jeopardizing God's commandment on

⁶² Otunaya, A. O. "Religion and science: A short history of the existing skirmish and implications for Christianity today". *Pharos Journal of Theology*, vol. 101, 2020, p. 7.

⁶³ Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena. "Spirit, Mission and Transnational Influence: Nigerian-Led Pentecostalism in Eastern Europe." *PentecoStudies*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2010, pp. 78–80. See also Ojo, Matthews A. "Pentecostalism, Public Accountability and Governance in Nigeria." *Africa Development*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2007, pp. 44-46.

⁶⁴ Awojobi, K. E., C. G. Ukenyi, and V. C. Uwom. "IVF as a Means of Securing the Sacredness of the Marriage Institution: An African Theologian Perspective." *Humanus Discourse*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2023, p. 6.

⁶⁵ Jones, D. Gareth. "Christian Responses to Challenging Developments in Biomedical Science: The Case of In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF)." *Science and Christian Belief*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 145–148.

multiplication between men and women. However, a devoted Catholic in 1987 opposed the Catholic position on IVF and ARTs due to its role in bridging gaps in different homes and stabilizing marriages and parenthood.⁶⁶

The Catholic Church opposed IVF and other forms of assisted reproductive technologies because some of the embryos are discarded.⁶⁷ Thus, the Catholic Church does not support IVF, Surrogacy, Gamete donation, Embryo donation through IVF. Meanwhile, there is a great divergence of views on complexities surrounding the assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) among the three main divisions of Christianity – Eastern orthodox, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Reformation. Unlike the Catholic Church that outrightly rejected ARTs, the Eastern Orthodox in some situations allows the use of IVF among Christians without discarding any embryo, instead fertilizing as many as possible to avoid any wastage. In Protestant churches, there is no unified position on the use of IVF, that is, there are different views on IVF. However, other scientific methods of conception are probed.⁶⁸

Akande examined attitudes toward IVF among Pentecostal pastors in Southwest Nigeria, showing that many of these pastors still perceive IVF as unnatural, unholy, evil or spiritually risky. They noted, however, a gradual shift among educated clergy who see no contradiction between faith and medicine.⁶⁹ Similarly, Omokanye et al. explored the cultural and ethical challenges facing ARTs implementation in Nigeria, stressing the need for interfaith dialogue and ethical education.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ McDowell, Janet D. "Ethical Implications of In Vitro Fertilization." *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, edited by Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey, 2nd ed., Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, p. 507.

⁶⁷ Awojobi, K. E., C. G. Ukenyi, and V. C. Uwom. "IVF as a Means of Securing the Sacredness of the Marriage Institution: An African Theologian Perspective." *Humanus Discourse*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2023, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Awojobi, K. E., C. G. Ukenyi, and V. C. Uwom. "IVF as a Means of Securing the Sacredness of the Marriage Institution: An African Theologian Perspective." *Humanus Discourse*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2023, p. 7.

⁶⁹ Akande, Oluwayemi Samson. *Attitude and Willingness of Infertile Persons Towards the Uptake of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in Ibadan North Local Government Area*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Ibadan, 2016, p. 36.

⁷⁰ Omokanye, Lukman O., Abdulwaheed O. Olatinwo, Ganiyu A. Salaudeen, Kabir A. Durowade, Abubakar A. Panti, and Rabiu O. Balogun. "Assisted Reproduction Technology in Nigeria: Challenges and the Way Forward." *African Journal of Reproduction and Gynaecological Endoscopy*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2018, p. 2.

On a global level, the World Health Organization has emphasized the importance of integrating reproductive health education into public health frameworks, especially in countries with strong religious influence.⁷¹ This has implications for Christian communities, suggesting a role for churches not only as moral guides but also as partners in health education and counseling. Despite the ethical challenges facing the use of IVF and other assisted reproductive technologies, we cannot pretend that ARTs have no benefits to human general wellbeing, especially in the aspect of reproduction and procreation in contemporary African society. However, its ethical position remains a challenge for Christian homes who are suffering from the agony of childlessness but find it difficult to navigate assisted reproductive technologies such as IVF because of their church doctrine. More importantly, the role of religious leaders—Pastors, Deacons/Deaconess, Elders, Evangelists in Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC), Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State as part of the Protestant churches in Nigeria, in managing the issue of infertility among congregants is examined in this study. This is done in order to ascertain the position of GAC pastors and other leaders in the Church on the use of IVF or other ARTs, whether members of GAC are permitted to use IVF or other ART methods in the face of challenges like infertility, inability to carry a pregnancy to term etc.

4. The Position of GAC Pastors on Medical Interventions for Infertility
Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC) was founded by Reverend Samuel Akinbode Sadela in 1976, upon the instruction of his mentor and spiritual father Apostle Joseph Ayo Babalola, who specified that the name ‘Apostolic’, must feature in the name that would eventually be coined for the Commission. Before the advent of Ikeja Parish, the church had about 200 branches across Nigeria, Benin Republic, Togo and other parts of the world.⁷² Pastors in the GAC have different perceptions about medical interventions (ARTs) for infertility. The information gathered from the interviews with six (6) pastors revealed a wide range of perspectives on the interaction between faith, biomedical science, and infertility. These perspectives reflect both conservative and liberal theological orientations within contemporary Christianity in Nigeria. The analysis of the issues raised during the interviews provides inferences on how Christian leaders interpret the collaboration between divine healing, medical intervention, and pastoral responsibility. Thematic issues raised during the interviews were highlighted below.

⁷¹ World Health Organization. *Infertility: Definitions and Terminology*. World Health Organization, 2020. Accessed 18th August 2023.

⁷² Gospel Apostolic Church. *About Us – GAC Ikeja*. GAC Ikeja, 2023, <https://gacikeja.org/about-us/>

Infertility as Spiritual Problems: In response to this issue, there were mixed reactions as to whether infertility is a spiritual problem caused by demonic influence. Interviewee I disagrees with the above statement and gives his own explanation... *I have seen cases where prayer brought breakthrough, but many couples had clear medical diagnoses; treating everything as demonic brought disappointments.*⁷³ On the contrary, Interviewee II agrees that infertility is a serious problem that requires spiritual attention, explaining that, *in many testimonies, spiritual oppression explained situations that medical tests could not fully provide explanations to.*⁷⁴ A pastor narrates that his pastoral experience points to spiritual roots in many cases.⁷⁵ This position is profound, as the majority of the respondents to the questionnaire item agreed that infertility is primarily a spiritual issue caused by demonic influence (63.4%). Whereas, another Interviewee holds a balanced view recognising both spiritual and medical factors. Spiritual factors alongside medical ones were perceived by some GAC pastors.⁷⁶ Another Interviewee believes that infertility issues are caused by medical conditions and must be addressed.⁷⁷ This was also supported by respondents' responses to the issues raised in the questionnaire as 36.6% disagreed that infertility is a spiritual problem.

IVF and Divine Healing: In regards to the question raised about whether medical treatments like In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) compromise divine healing, opinions vary depending on each respondent's perspective. Five out of six Interviewees were not satisfied with the notion that IVF undermines divine healing. These respondents perceived biomedical care and medical science as instruments through which God manifests His supremacy and dominance over everyone. This is not the case in the analysis of the questionnaire items as 60% agreed that medical treatments such as IVF are contrary to divine healing, while 40% disagreed. They

⁷³ Interview held with Deacon Okuewu, A. 55+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁷⁴ Interview held with Deacon Pa. F. Adelana, A. 72+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁷⁵ Interview held with Elder Oluwole Olubunmi Adeyemi, A. 40+, Elder – GAC Oshilalu, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁷⁶ Interview held with Pst. David Olumide, 54+, Pastor – GAC Ejinrin Road, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023. See also Deaconess Aladejobi A., A. 40+, GAC Oshilalu, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁷⁷ Interview held with Pst. David Olumide, 54+, Pastor – GAC Ejinrin Road, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

stressed that divine intervention does occur through medical practitioners, who are perceived as channels of God's wisdom and grace. However, one of the Interviewees held a differing opinion, arguing that IVF disrupts God's creation will. His view aligns with a traditionalist theological perspective that interprets any form of assisted reproduction as a human attempt to sabotage God's divine order.⁷⁸ This difference reflects the tension in Christian ethics between divine sovereignty and human agency. However, what matters most here is the shift within Christian theology that shows a possible trend towards the integration of faith and reason.

Pastoral Encouragement Toward Medical Options: Respondents' responses show that the majority of them approved of both spiritual and medical guidance for Christian couples who are faced with infertility challenges. This is evident in the analysis of the questionnaire items as majority of the respondents (96.7%) agreed that pastors should encourage infertile couples to explore medical fertility options. In this regard, Deacon Okuwu, Deacon Adelana, Deaconess Aladejobi, Evang. Daniel Adelana, and Pastor Olumide believed pastors should provide both spiritual and practical guidance. Their responses provide a holistic understanding of healing that is rooted in both pastoral and medical disciplines. Deaconess Aladejobi categorically emphasized the importance of pastoral guidance in helping the affected couples navigate ethical concerns surrounding medical treatments for infertility. Contrarily, Deacon Adelana disagreed, emphasizing the need to prioritize prayer, faith, and spiritual deliverance over medical treatments for infertility.⁷⁹ His position reflects a strong religious conviction rather than reliance on medicine. This shows the perseverance of conservative ideology among Christians. However, majority of the Interviewees believe that faith and medicine complement each other.

Compatibility of Faith and Science: Five out of six Interviewees agreed on the principle that both faith and medical sciences can be used to address infertility among Christian couples. This finding is in consonance with the analysis of the questionnaire since a higher percentage of the respondents (80%) agreed on compatibility of faith and science. Adefolarin perceived faith and science as two

⁷⁸ Interview held with Deacon Pa. F. Adelana, A. 72+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁷⁹ Interview held with Deacon Pa. F. Adelana, A. 72+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

sides of the same coin, complementing each other. This corroborates the statement that goes thus: while religion is pointing to God, science is taking us back to God.⁸⁰ The responses of Deacons Okuewu and Adefolarin align with the Christian humanist perspective that faith and reason work hand in hand and do not in any way contradict each other. Meanwhile, Deacon Adeyemi's skepticism raises an important question: does the use of science undermine divine faith? His concern was about God's divine order on procreation, suggesting that reliance on science may likely undermine Christian faith.⁸¹

Regardless, the strong belief among the respondents suggests that the majority of the Christian leaders now believe in the combination of faith and science in addressing infertility. Also, five interviewees out of six would refer Christian couples who are faced with the problem of infertility to fertility clinics for medical care. Their affirmative responses show a growing feeling among pastors to cooperate with medical practitioners in addressing infertility spiritually and medically. Both Deacons Okuewu and Adefolarin emphasized the importance for ethical judgement in endorsing credible fertility, ensuring moral alignment with Christian values.⁸² In the same vein, Pastor Olumide and Deacon Adelana stressed that spiritual support and medical guidance must work together.⁸³ Whereas Elder Adeyemi did not find fertility clinics reliable when dealing with infertility. His pastoral model reflects healing strictly ties to spiritual processes. While his stance on faith is worthwhile, it's risky for couples that are supposed to seek medical solutions under spiritual guidance. The common form among other respondents thus reflects a change toward integrative pastoral ministry that embraces both divine and medical interventions in addressing infertility.

Also, respondents were asked whether prayer and fasting should be the sole Christian response to infertility. In response to this, five interviewees out of six strongly disagreed, warning that such an exclusive understanding can lead to psychological pain and misplaced priority among infertile couples. The above

⁸⁰ Otunaya, A. O. "Religion and science: A short history of the existing skirmish and implications for Christianity today". *Pharos Journal of Theology*, vol. 101, 2020, p. 8.

⁸¹ Interview held with Elder Oluwole Olubunmi Adeyemi, A. 40+, Elder – GAC Oshilalu, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁸² Interview held with Deacon Okuewu, A. 55+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁸³ Interview held with Pst. David Olumide, 54+, Pastor – GAC Ejinrin Road, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

finding corresponds with the results derived from the analysis of the questionnaire items as the higher percentage (73.3%) of respondents disagreed on the premise that prayer and fasting should be the only response to infertility in the church. For instance, Adefolarin and Adebola, maintained that restricting divine healing to prayers and deliverance undermines God's revelation through science since medicine is inspired by God through His knowledge.⁸⁴

Also, Deacons Okuewu and Adelana emphasized the potency of prayers but they must be accompanied by medical care when dealing with infertility issues. On the contrary, Elder Adeyemi perceived that prayer and fasting are the only solution to infertility, suggesting that infertility is caused by spiritual warfare and not a medical problem.⁸⁵ His opinion reflects the population narrative in Pentecostalism that attributes infertility to spiritual or demonic forces. However, the dominant idea among the interviewees reveals a contextual theology of healing that interprets God's sovereignty as working in different ways, transcending the spiritual aspect to include medicine and therapy. All the Interviewees also emphasized the importance of education on infertility by educating church members about the causes of infertility among Christian couples. Correspondingly, 96.7% of the respondents agreed to the questionnaire item on educating church members on infertility and its causes. Ignorance and superstition were linked to marital instability. Two Interviewees believed that open dialogue on reproductive health can help address infertility challenges by clarifying the possible causes and promoting sympathy within Christian communities.⁸⁶ Adeyemi took a sharp turn as he began to support educational initiatives on infertility issues, focusing on biblical teaching.⁸⁷ The consensus here shows a significant pastoral insight on the need to raise awareness on infertility issues, which aligns with public theology, seeking to apply biblical values to social realities.

⁸⁴ Interview held with Deacon Pa. F. Adelana, A. 72+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁸⁵ Interview held with Elder Oluwole Olubunmi Adeyemi, A. 40+, Elder – GAC Oshilalu, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁸⁶ Interview held with Deacon Okuewu, A. 55+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁸⁷ Interview held with Elder Oluwole Olubunmi Adeyemi. A. 40+, Elder – GAC Oshilalu, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

Medical Intervention as Weak Faith: In response to this question, whether medical intervention for infertility predicts ‘weak faith’, five out of six Interviewees refuted this assumption. Remarkably, 83.4% disagreed that medical intervention in infertility is a sign of weak faith while majority of the respondents. They argued that finding medical help does not undermine God’s power on procreation and divine order but rather implies trust in His provision through science since God has been described as the ‘greatest scientist’.⁸⁸ Adefolarin and Adebola were radical in their response to this question, describing it as both confusing and unbiblical. While they outrightly rejected the statement that separates the physical from the spiritual, Adeyemi diverged, emphasizing that total reliance on medical care reflects misplaced priority.⁸⁹ This shows how literal interpretations in religious matter can discourage believers from seeking medical solutions when necessary. However, the majority of Interviewees expressed a theology of faith that understands human knowledge as part of God’s saving plan.

Furthermore, there was a mixed reaction when respondents were asked about their theological skill in counselling infertile couples. Three respondents (Deacons Okuewu, Adefolarin, and Pastor Adebola) acknowledged that they lack formal training, and as such, they depend on pastoral experience.⁹⁰ Two (Deacon Adelana and Pastor Olumide) demonstrated confidence due to their exposure to theological education. Meanwhile, Adeyemi strongly expressed his deficiency in biomedical and bioethical counselling.⁹¹ This finding is similar with the results derived from the questionnaire item as a higher percentage of the respondents (60%) agreed that they have sufficient theological training to counsel couples dealing with infertility while 40% disagreed. The diversity in their responses is an indication to a training gap among church leaders in biomedical ethics and theological education. Although the acknowledgement of limitations like that clearly indicates humility, it also calls for an urgent need for Bible colleges to integrate biomedical ethics, and counselling lessons into their curriculum in order to bolster pastoral activities across all spheres of life.

⁸⁸ Otunaya, A. O. “Religion and science: A short history of the existing skirmish and implications for Christianity today”, 7.

⁸⁹ Interview held with Elder Oluwole Olubunmi Adeyemi.

⁹⁰ Interview held with Deacon Okuewu, A. 55+, Deacon – GAC Sabo II, Ijebu-Ode, on 15th August, 2023.

⁹¹ Interview held with Elder Oluwole Olubunmi Adeyemi.

God's Healing through Doctors: There were positive reactions from the respondents to the question of whether God can heal through doctors as well as through His divine authority. All six respondents acknowledge that God can heal through doctors. Results from the analysis of the questionnaire also showed that 93.3% agreed that God can heal through doctors as well as through divine power. However, Elder Adeyemi did so with mild caution. Their responses indicate a strong belief in God's authority over everyone, including all knowledge related to healing. This agreement culminated into a perception that recognizes medicine as part of divine wisdom. What this means for the respondents is that both divine and medical healing come from God. The intersection of faith and science demonstrated in the study aligns with theological scholars such as Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, who believed that revelation operates through human knowledge and spiritual experience.⁹² In summary, the respondents' perceptions regarding medical intervention reveal an evolving contextual theology of healing among Christians in Nigeria—one that integrates faith and medicine.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Infertility is a serious problem within the church and society at large. Opinions vary on how infertility can be addressed, as it remains a major cause of childlessness among Christian couples. The cultural importance of childbearing in contemporary Nigerian society cannot be overemphasized, particularly given the value attached to it within Nigerian Pentecostalism. Most infertility problems have been attributed to spiritual or demonic causes. However, with the advancement of science and technology, medical solutions have been proposed, since some causes of infertility are purely medical. Considering the social stigma placed on childless couples, particularly barren women, there is a need to find alternative approaches to infertility beyond the conventional methods previously applied. Therefore, the development of Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) raises a troubling issue, as it questions the ethical implications of such methods within the context of Nigerian Christianity.

⁹² Hunsinger, George. 'Karl Barth and Paul Tillich'. *Theology Today*, 2018, vol. 75, no. 2, 123-138.

To understand the perception of Christian leaders in the Gospel Apostolic Church (GAC), a Pentecostal denomination, interviews were conducted with six (6) Interviewees, and questionnaires were administered to thirty (30) GAC pastors, elders, deacons/deaconesses. Findings obtained through the interview guide and questionnaires revealed that while a majority of religious leaders (pastors, deacons, elders, and evangelists) still interpret infertility as a spiritual problem and rely on prayer and deliverance, a significant shift is occurring, particularly among pastors with theological or medical experience. Most participants believed in the synthesis of faith and medical science in addressing infertility and were willing to encourage couples facing infertility to seek medical solutions. Meanwhile, doctrinal concerns remain prevalent. The results emphasize the need for theological education that harmonizes faith and medicine.

The study concludes that although spiritual interpretations of infertility remain significant, there is a growing openness among these pastors to consider medical solutions, particularly among those who believe that divine healing can manifest through science and medical practitioners. The findings reflect a Nigerian Pentecostal community in transition, seeking to strike a balance between conservative Christians who rely solely on divine power and those who embrace modern medical science. To bridge this gap, there is a need for theological education, pastoral training, and bioethical and biomedical discourse. These measures will help promote a more empathetic and balanced approach to addressing infertility challenges within Pentecostal churches and Christian communities in Nigeria.

The following recommendations were suggested in line with the result findings:

1. The GAC should organize seminars to educate pastors on the ethical, scientific, and theological implications of ARTs.
2. Pastors in GAC should be trained to offer both spiritual and medical guidance. As such, counseling will be done with sensitivity, empathy, and knowledge about infertility treatment options.
3. The church can collaborate with Christian-friendly fertility clinics and professionals who understand the balance between faith and medicine to counsel couples in need.
4. The church should engage in public awareness programs within its assemblies to reduce stigma against infertile couples and normalize informed medical consultations.

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Appendix

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

<i>Respondents' Age</i>		
Items	Frequency	Percentage
20-30	4	13.3
31-40	18	60.0
41-50	3	10.0
above 60	5	16.7
Total	30	100.0
<i>Respondents' Education</i>		
SSCE	12	40.0
OND/NCE	9	30.0
B.A/B.Th	9	30.0
Total	30	100.0
<i>Years of Pastoral Experience</i>		
1-5	2	6.7
6-10	8	26.7
10-15	19	63.3
16 and above	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0
<i>Have you ever counseled an infertile couple?</i>		
Yes	20	66.7
No	10	33.3
Total	30	100.0

Table 2: Analysis of Questionnaire Items

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Infertility is primarily a spiritual issue caused by demonic influence.	14 46.7%	5 16.7%	5 16.7%	6 20%
2	Medical treatments such as IVF are contrary to divine healing.	6 20%	12 40%	10 33.3%	2 6.7%
3	Pastors should encourage infertile couples to explore medical fertility options.	6 20%	23 76.7%	1 3.3%	-
4	Faith and medical science can work together in addressing infertility.	13 43.3%	11 36.7%	5 16.7%	1 3.3%
5	I would refer a couple in my congregation to a fertility clinic.	12 40%	17 56.7%	1 3.3%	-
6	Prayer and fasting should be the only response to infertility in the church.	2 6.7%	6 20%	10 33.3%	12 40%
7	Educating church members on infertility and its causes is necessary.	12 40%	17 56.7%	1 3.3%	-
8	Medical intervention in infertility is a sign of weak faith.	1 3.3%	4 13.3%	12 40%	13 43.3%
9	I have sufficient theological training to counsel couples dealing with infertility.	3 10%	15 50%	8 26.7%	4 13.3%
10	God can heal through doctors as well as through divine power.	21 70%	7 23.3%	2 6.7%	-

RECLAIMING FAITH-BASED STEWARDSHIP FOR TARGETED YOUTH PEACEBUILDING AND THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NIGERIA

Professor Nathaniel Dominic Danjibo

Department of Peace, Security and Humanitarian Studies,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan
&

Temitope Oluwafemi Olowolafe

Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution,
National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja
tolowolafe@noun.edu.ng
<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6284-7839>

ABSTRACT

Protracted violent extremism, ethno-religious conflicts and escalating youth involvement in organised violence burden Nigeria's security landscape. Religious institutions have long positioned themselves as moral authorities capable of promoting peace, yet youth radicalisation persists at alarming rates. This paper argues that the persistence of the problem is not the absence of religious peace advocacy but rather a structural failure to intentionally target the most vulnerable young people. Drawing on qualitative desk-based analysis of existing academic literature, policy documents and documented faith-based peacebuilding initiatives, the paper develops the concept of faith-based stewardship as a preventive framework for youth engagement and counter-radicalisation. Stewardship, rooted in moral responsibility, care and structured accountability, is positioned as a bridge between abstract religious values and the lived behavioural transformations that peacebuilding demands. The analysis demonstrates that without deliberate targeting of at-risk youth populations, interfaith dialogue and institutional coordination, religious interventions will continue to fall short. We offer recommendations for faith actors, policymakers, and civil society organisations committed to preventive peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Keywords: Faith-based stewardship, Violent extremism, Youth peacebuilding, Nigeria, Radicalisation, Religious institutions

Introduction

The relationship between religion and violence in Nigeria is neither simple nor accidental. Across the country's northern and central zones, decades of Boko Haram insurgency, farmer-herder conflicts and the activities of armed militias have illustrated how political entrepreneurs and ideological recruiters can weaponise religious identity. Youth, who constitute approximately 60 per cent of Nigeria's population according to the National Population Commission (2020), occupy a position at the intersection of victimhood and perpetration. They are the primary targets of radical recruitment, the foot soldiers of communal violence and, just as importantly, the demographic with the greatest potential to transform conflict dynamics if adequately engaged.

Successive Nigerian governments have responded to violent extremism primarily through military deployments, state of emergency declarations and security-sector reforms. The Operation Safe Corridor programme, for instance, was designed to rehabilitate former Boko Haram combatants through deradicalisation modules and vocational training. Scholars like Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos have critiqued these efforts for their surface-level engagement with the ideological and social roots of radicalisation, noting that securitised responses rarely dismantle the grievances that sustain extremism (Perouse de Montclos 47). Similarly, Emmanuel Kwasi Aning and John Pokoo have argued that West African counter-terrorism architectures consistently underestimate the role of community-level actors, particularly religious institutions, in both enabling and resolving violent conflict (Aning and Pokoo 112).

Religious institutions in Nigeria command a moral authority that state institutions struggle to replicate. With approximately 50 per cent of Nigerians identifying as Muslim and around 46 per cent as Christian, according to Pew Research Centre data compiled by Philip Connor and Josephine Mayger Okafor, mosques and churches reach millions of citizens weekly through sermons, community programs and informal social support networks (Connor and Okafor 34). Interfaith organisations such as the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have facilitated dialogues aimed at reducing tensions, particularly in conflict-prone states such as Plateau, Kaduna, and Borno. However, the persistence of youth involvement in violence raises a pointed question: if religious institutions command such authority, why have their peace messages not translated into measurable reductions in youth radicalisation?

The answer, this paper contends, lies not in the absence of peace preaching but in the generalised and structurally thin nature of existing religious interventions. Matthew Hassan Kukah, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese and one of Nigeria's foremost religious peacebuilders, has long argued that Nigerian religious leaders possess moral credibility that exceeds their institutional capacity to act (Kukah 88). Peace sermons reach congregations, but they are rarely designed with vulnerable, marginalised, or at-risk youth as the primary audience. The young person who feels socially excluded, economically abandoned and politically invisible does not necessarily self-identify with mainstream religious gatherings, and generic calls to peace are unlikely to reach him.

This paper addresses this gap by developing the concept of faith-based stewardship as a targeted and preventive framework for youth engagement in Nigeria. Stewardship, understood in the tradition of moral theology as a responsibility to care for others and exercise accountability in one's social role, provides a conceptual foundation for shifting religious peace engagement from passive proclamation to active, structured intervention. By reviewing existing literature and documented peacebuilding practice, the paper argues that faith actors who adopt a stewardship orientation and intentionally direct it toward at-risk youth populations can make a substantive contribution to preventing violent extremism and building durable peace.

The paper is organised as follows. It begins with a clear statement of the problem, followed by a single research objective. The methodology section details the desk-based qualitative approach, including data sources and analytical framework. The discussion of findings engages with themes drawn from the literature, and the paper closes with a conclusion and practical recommendations.

Statement of the Problem

Religious institutions in Nigeria consistently promote peace, tolerance and nonviolence through sermons, interfaith platforms and community programmes. However, these efforts have not produced a discernible reduction in youth involvement in violent extremism. The contradiction invites scrutiny not of the sincerity of religious leaders but of the structural effectiveness of their interventions.

The dominant pattern in religious peace messaging in Nigeria is broadcast rather than targeted. Sermons reach entire congregations and community gatherings. Interfaith communiques address national audiences through the media. Public religious proclamations denounce violence after it has already occurred. While these activities contribute to a general moral climate that values peace, they are not designed to reach the young person who has already been approached by a Boko Haram recruiter, who has grown up in a household displaced by farmer-herder violence, or who sees ethnic militia membership as the only available avenue for economic survival and communal belonging.

John Horgan, whose work on the psychology of terrorism has been widely cited in Nigerian security studies, argues that radicalisation is a deeply personal process shaped by individual grievances, social networks and identity needs that generic ideological messaging cannot address (Horgan 56). Quintan Wiktorowicz, writing on Islamist radicalisation, similarly demonstrates that susceptibility to extremist recruitment increases precisely when individuals feel unrecognised, unvalued, or abandoned by mainstream community institutions, including religious ones (Wiktorowicz 78). If religious institutions are to function as preventive actors rather than mere commentators on violence, they need frameworks that can bridge the gap between their public peace advocacy and the specific vulnerabilities of individual young people.

This gap, between what religious institutions say about peace and what they structurally do to prevent radicalisation among the most vulnerable youth, is the problem this paper addresses. The argument is not that religious institutions are failing in good faith. It is that good faith alone, without intentional targeting, structured engagement and accountability mechanisms, is insufficient.

Research Objective

This paper has one objective: to examine how the concept of faith-based stewardship can serve as a targeted and preventive framework for youth engagement in counter-radicalisation and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Vulnerability and Violent Extremism in Nigeria

The literature on youth radicalisation in Nigeria has developed substantially since the emergence of Boko Haram as a national security threat in the late 2000s. Early

accounts tended to emphasise poverty and unemployment as primary drivers. Nnamdi Ekeanyanwu and Victor Ayedun-Aluma's analysis of northern Nigerian youth drew a direct line between educational deprivation and susceptibility to extremist indoctrination, particularly in states where Boko Haram's condemnation of Western education resonated with pre-existing anti-establishment sentiment (Ekeanyanwu and Ayedun-Aluma 93). However, more recent scholarship has complicated the poverty hypothesis, pointing out that many recruits are not the most economically deprived but are individuals seeking identity, status and belonging.

Adam Higazi's field research on farmer-herder conflicts in the Middle Belt illuminates how economic marginalisation intersects with ethnic and religious grievances to produce localised patterns of youth violence distinct from jihadist insurgency but equally destabilising (Higazi 210). Idayat Hassan of the Centre for Democracy and Development has documented how Boko Haram has evolved its recruitment strategies to target secondary school and university students who are ideologically curious but institutionally disenchanted (Hassan 45). These accounts converge on the understanding that youth radicalisation in Nigeria is not a monolithic phenomenon but a set of overlapping vulnerabilities shaped by geography, ethnicity, religious identity, economic position and individual psychology.

The policy literature from the United Nations Development Programme's 2017 report, 'Journey to Extremism in Africa,' provides quantitative support for the qualitative patterns identified by scholars. Based on interviews with 495 former combatants across eight African countries, including Nigeria, the report found that government action, specifically security force abuses and the failure of the government to provide basic services, was the most common proximate trigger for joining an extremist group, cited by 71 per cent of respondents (UNDP 5). This finding does not absolve extremist recruiters but places in sharp relief how state failures create the conditions that faith-based actors could potentially address.

Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding

The relationship between religion and conflict in Nigeria has generated a substantial scholarly literature. Simeon Ilesanmi's philosophical analysis of religious pluralism and political ethics in Nigeria frames the country's recurring ethno-religious tensions as products of the unresolved tension between

constitutional secularism and the deeply theocratic aspirations of significant portions of both Muslim and Christian communities (Ilesanmi 77). Olufemi Vaughan's historical account traces how British colonial administrators instrumentalised religious identity, creating the communal fault lines along which contemporary conflicts run (Vaughan 156).

Scott Appleby's concept of the 'ambivalence of the sacred' provides a useful theoretical anchor for understanding religion's dual role in conflict dynamics. Appleby argues that religion's capacity to legitimate violence and to inspire peacemaking derives from the same source: its claim to ultimate authority over questions of life, death and collective identity (Appleby 29). In the Nigerian context, this ambivalence is visible in the way religious leaders can cite the same Quranic or Biblical texts to denounce violence and by extremist recruiters to justify it. The question is not whether religion is capable of promoting peace but under what institutional conditions and through what interpretive frameworks it does so effectively.

Catherine Orsborn and Tarek Maassarani, writing on faith-based peacebuilding in conflict-affected contexts, identify three modes through which religious actors typically engage: prophetic witness, meaning public denunciation of injustice and violence; pastoral care, which involves direct engagement with affected individuals and communities; and structural transformation, meaning efforts to address the institutional causes of conflict (Orsborn and Maassarani 67). Nigerian religious institutions have operated primarily in the first mode. NIREC communiques, pastoral letters from the Catholic Bishops' Conference and JNI statements routinely condemn violence and call for dialogue. The second and third modes of engagement, which demand sustained, structured and resource-intensive commitment, remain comparatively underdeveloped.

Luc Reyhler's framework for durable peace similarly distinguishes between negative peace, the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, which requires transforming structural conditions that make violence likely (Reyhler 22). The peace advocacy of Nigerian religious institutions has largely operated at the level of negative peace: calling for a ceasefire, condemning attacks and appealing for calm. The harder work of positive peace, which would require engaging with the social exclusion, economic marginalisation and identity crises of at-risk youth, has not been systematically undertaken.

Faith-Based Stewardship: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of stewardship has a long tradition in both Christian and Islamic theology, referring broadly to the responsibility entrusted to human beings as caretakers of creation, community and one another. In Christian thought, the steward manages resources and relationships not for personal gain but for the common good, ultimately accountable to God and, secondarily, to the community (Wright 44). In Islamic jurisprudence, the concept of khilafa carries an analogous meaning: human beings as trustees who are answerable for how they exercise authority over those in their care (Sachedina 112).

Within peace studies, stewardship has received limited systematic attention as a framework for conflict prevention. Robert Schreiter's work on reconciliation theology comes closest to operationalising stewardship as a peacebuilding practice, insisting that reconciliation is not a programme to be implemented but a way of life to be inhabited, requiring ongoing moral responsibility toward those who have been harmed and those who are vulnerable (Schreiter 54). Johan Galtung's structural approach to peace similarly implies a stewardship orientation, arguing that genuine peacebuilding requires active responsibility for the conditions that make violence likely, not merely reactive condemnation of violence after it occurs (Galtung 183).

The application of stewardship to faith-based youth engagement is most visible in the practice-oriented literature emerging from organisations such as Search for Common Ground and Interpeace, both of which have documented community-based peacebuilding programmes in West Africa that rely on religious mentors to provide structured guidance, moral accountability, and social support to at-risk youth. These programmes do not simply preach at young people; they build ongoing relationships of care and accountability that the stewardship framework theoretically grounds (Search for Common Ground 17).

The Limitations of Generalised Peace Messaging

The scholarly literature on counter-radicalisation is consistent in questioning the effectiveness of ideological messaging that is not matched with structural engagement. Brian Forst's analysis of terrorism prevention distinguishes between 'broadcast' prevention, which involves general public messaging, and 'targeted' prevention, which engages individuals identified as being on pathways toward

violence (Forst 134). Broadcast prevention has modest effects at best and can sometimes be counterproductive by signalling to marginalised individuals that institutions are more concerned with their public image than with the specific conditions of vulnerable people.

In the Nigerian context, Abdul Raufu Mustapha and Kate Meagher have documented how the proliferation of peace sermons and interfaith statements following each violent incident has produced what they call 'dialogue fatigue,' a condition in which communities exposed to repeated peace proclamations without structural follow-through become increasingly cynical about the capacity of religious institutions to address the real drivers of violence (Mustapha and Meagher 89). This cynicism is particularly pronounced among youth who feel that religious leaders, like political leaders, speak the language of peace while being disconnected from the conditions of ordinary people.

Cecelia Lynch's ethnographic work on faith-based organisations in conflict zones provides theoretical support for understanding why targeted engagement matters. Lynch argues that religious peacebuilding is most effective when it operates through what she calls 'intimate encounters,' direct, sustained and personalised relationships between faith actors and the individuals they seek to influence (Lynch 103). Generic sermons and public statements cannot produce intimate encounters. Only deliberate, structured and resourced outreach can.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative desk-based research design, which is appropriate for the analytical aims of a paper that seeks to interrogate concepts, examine institutional practices and draw connections between theoretical frameworks and documented peacebuilding interventions. The choice of desk-based methodology is not a concession to convenience but a recognition that the questions driving this paper are fundamentally interpretive rather than empirical in the fieldwork sense. The paper seeks to understand what faith-based stewardship can mean as a preventive framework, not to measure the outcomes of a specific programme.

Data for this study were drawn from four categories of sources. The first category comprises peer-reviewed academic literature in peace and conflict studies, religious studies, terrorism studies and African politics. Journals consulted include the *Journal of Peace Research*, *African Affairs*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*,

Religion, State and Society and the Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, among others. The second category includes policy reports and grey literature produced by international organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme, the United States Institute of Peace and the International Crisis Group, as well as Nigerian national institutions, including the Office of the National Security Adviser and the Kaduna State Peace Commission.

The third category encompasses publications and programme documentation from faith-based organisations actively engaged in peacebuilding in Nigeria, including the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council, the Justice Development and Peace Commission and the Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum. The fourth category comprises media reporting, public statements and documented sermons by prominent Nigerian religious leaders, analysed not as primary sources of data but as illustrative material that grounds theoretical claims in observable practice.

Source selection was guided by three criteria: relevance to the themes of youth radicalisation, faith-based peacebuilding and stewardship; temporal currency, prioritising materials published between 2005 and 2024 to capture the period of Boko Haram's emergence and evolution; and methodological credibility, favouring peer-reviewed and institutionally vetted sources over unverified commentary. Where grey literature and policy reports are cited, their institutional provenance and methodological transparency are noted.

The method of analysis is thematic, following the approach articulated by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, which involves a systematic process of data familiarisation, initial coding, theme development and interpretive synthesis (Braun and Clarke 87). The study identified four primary thematic clusters through iterative reading of sources: first, the structural conditions of youth vulnerability to radicalisation in Nigeria; second, the institutional capacity and limitations of religious actors in preventive peacebuilding; third, the theoretical and practical content of faith-based stewardship as a concept; and fourth, the conditions under which targeted religious engagement with at-risk youth has produced demonstrable outcomes.

It is important to be transparent about this approach's limitations. Desk-based qualitative analysis cannot generate the granular, contextualised and individual-level data that primary fieldwork can provide. Claims about the experiences of at-risk youth, the practices of specific religious communities and the outcomes of

particular interventions are necessarily mediated through the accounts of other researchers and practitioners. This study does not pretend to offer empirical measurement of programme effectiveness. Its contribution is theoretical and analytical: to provide a coherent conceptual framework that can inform future empirical work and practical programme design.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The Structural Gap Between Peace Advocacy and Preventive Practice

The most consistently recurring finding across the literature reviewed is the existence of a structural gap between what religious institutions say about peace and what they do to prevent violence among the most vulnerable youth. This gap is not, to be clear, a product of hypocrisy or indifference. Nigerian religious leaders have shown genuine and often courageous commitment to peace advocacy, as Matthew Hassan Kukah's public interventions during periods of intense communal violence in Kaduna and Plateau states demonstrate (Kukah 91). The gap is structural: it reflects an institutional design that equips religious organisations for public proclamation far better than for intimate, sustained, and targeted engagement with individuals on pathways toward radicalisation.

Mustapha and Meagher identify this pattern in their analysis of northern Nigerian religious institutions, noting that mosque and church governance structures in Nigeria are typically organised around congregational services, pastoral care for existing members and community welfare activities directed at the broad membership base (Mustapha and Meagher 92). Outreach to non-members, including the marginalised youth who are most likely to be recruited by extremist organisations, falls outside the normal remit of most religious institutions. The young man who has dropped out of school, is unemployed, and has lost faith in community institutions, including religious ones, is precisely the person who will not show up for a Friday sermon or a Sunday service. Moreover, he is precisely the person religious institutions most need to reach.

The UNDP's 2017 'Journey to Extremism' report reinforces this finding with data. Among the former combatants interviewed, only 17 per cent reported that religious leaders had tried to reach them or engage with them in the period before they joined an extremist group. This figure stands in stark contrast to the frequency of public peace proclamations by religious leaders during the same period (UNDP 32). The gap is not rhetorical; it is relational. Religious institutions speak to society

about peace; they do not consistently seek out and accompany the individuals most at risk of choosing violence.

Faith-Based Stewardship as a Framework for Targeted Engagement

The concept of faith-based stewardship offers a way to close this gap by reframing the religious actor's responsibility toward at-risk youth not as optional outreach but as an inherent moral obligation. If stewardship means that religious leaders are accountable for the conditions of those in their care, then the marginalised youth who has drifted away from the congregation, or who was never part of it, remains within the steward's sphere of moral responsibility. This reframing has practical implications. It means that doing nothing, or doing only what is convenient within the normal institutional routine, is itself a moral failure from a stewardship perspective.

Robert Schreiter's theology of reconciliation provides a rich theoretical basis for this argument. Schreiter insists that communities of faith bear a particular responsibility toward those who have been rendered invisible by social structures, not because they are strategically useful for peacebuilding but because their dignity makes a claim on the community's conscience (Schreiter 67). Applied to Nigerian youth radicalisation, this means that the young person who is susceptible to extremist recruitment is not simply a security risk to be managed but a moral claimant whose needs impose obligations on religious institutions.

The stewardship framework also provides a basis for institutionalising what Cecelia Lynch calls intimate encounters between religious actors and at-risk youth (Lynch 107). Stewardship, by its nature, is relational and ongoing rather than episodic and transactional. A stewardship-oriented religious institution does not simply host a peace seminar once a year and consider its obligations discharged. It establishes mentorship relationships, creates safe spaces for young people to process grievances and explore identity questions and provides material and social support that makes the choice of nonviolence practically viable as well as morally compelling.

This distinction between episodic and sustained engagement is critical. Horgan's psychology of terrorism demonstrates that radicalisation is a process, not an event, that unfolds over months or years through gradual exposure, social reinforcement and identity consolidation (Horgan 71). Effective counter-radicalisation must therefore also be a process, not a single intervention. A stewardship model

supports this processual orientation by framing the religious actor's commitment as ongoing and relational rather than programmatic and bounded.

Youth Agency and the Limits of Moral Socialisation

A significant finding from the literature concerns the importance of youth agency in peacebuilding. Empirical work by Alcinda Honwana has challenged development and security paradigms that treat young people in conflict-affected contexts purely as vulnerable subjects requiring protection or intervention (Honwana 38). Honwana's concept of 'waithood,' the prolonged state of social and economic limbo that characterises the transition to adulthood for millions of African youth, captures the structural dimensions of youth vulnerability without reducing young people to passive objects of circumstance.

The stewardship framework is most productive when it recognises and activates youth agency rather than simply directing it. Young people who are engaged as co-designers and co-implementers of peacebuilding activities within their communities develop a stake in peaceful outcomes that external sermons and programmes cannot produce. The work of Interpeace in northern Nigeria, documented in their 2020 programme evaluation, found that community peacebuilding initiatives led by youth themselves, with religious mentors playing a facilitative rather than directive role, produced more durable attitudinal changes than adult-led programmes in which youth were passive participants (Interpeace 24).

This finding aligns with the theoretical literature on participatory development, which emphasises that individuals are more likely to internalise values and commitments when they have been actively involved in constructing them (Chambers 67). For a stewardship framework, this implies that the religious actor's role is not to hand down predetermined values to youth but to create conditions in which young people can critically engage with their own moral commitments, test them against their experiences of conflict and exclusion and develop them into practical orientations for nonviolence.

Institutional Challenges and Political Constraints

The literature also documents significant institutional challenges that constrain the practical application of faith-based stewardship in Nigeria. The first and most frequently noted is the politicisation of religion. Afe Adogame's analysis of Pentecostalism and politics in Nigeria identifies a systematic pattern in which

religious leaders align with political patrons, compromising their moral independence and credibility as peace actors (Adogame 145). When a pastor or imam is publicly associated with a political party or political faction, their capacity to speak to youth across ethnic and political lines is severely diminished. Young people who are politically alienated have little reason to trust religious leaders who appear embedded in the same political structures that have failed them.

A second challenge concerns the fragmentation of the religious landscape. Nigeria has thousands of independent churches and mosques, each with its own theological orientation, political positioning and community base. Coordinating these institutions around a shared stewardship framework for youth engagement would require levels of institutional trust and operational collaboration that currently do not exist at scale. However, organisations like NIREC have made progress in establishing dialogue among mainstream religious bodies (Abdu 78). A third challenge is resource scarcity. Targeted youth engagement, mentorship programmes and sustained community outreach require financial and human resources that most faith-based organisations in Nigeria lack. International donors have funded some faith-based peacebuilding initiatives, particularly in the Borno and Adamawa states, most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. However, funding is typically project-based and short-term, which sits uncomfortably with the sustained, processual logic that a stewardship model demands.

Murray Last's historical analysis of Islam in northern Nigeria adds another layer of complexity: the very concept of religious authority is contested in the region, with tensions between Sufi brotherhoods, Salafi movements and reform-oriented groups producing a fragmented religious landscape in which no single institution or leader can claim to speak for Muslim youth (Last 33). Christian communities face analogous fractures between mainline churches, Pentecostal congregations and indigenous African Christian movements. Stewardship frameworks must be adapted to this plural and contested religious ecology rather than assuming a unified religious community that does not exist.

Documented Practices and Proxies for Stewardship

Despite these challenges, the literature documents several examples of faith-based engagement with at-risk youth that embody elements of the stewardship framework, even when they do not use that language. The Interfaith Mediation Centre (IMC) in Kaduna, founded by Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad

Nurayn Ashafa, is one of the most extensively documented cases. The IMC's work began as personal reconciliation between two former combatants and evolved into a structured programme of interfaith youth dialogue, community conflict mediation and religious mentorship (Wuye and Ashafa 12). The programme targets youth in high-risk communities, builds ongoing relationships between religious mentors and young participants and explicitly addresses the identity and belonging needs that extremist recruiters exploit.

Search for Common Ground's 'Voices for Peace' programme, documented in their 2019 West Africa programme report, provides a further example. The programme trained religious leaders in Borno and Plateau states as community peace advocates with specific mandates to identify and engage marginalised youth, facilitate structured dialogue sessions and connect young people with economic opportunity programmes. The programme's evaluation found significant attitudinal shifts among participants, with young people reporting increased trust in religious institutions and decreased receptiveness to extremist messaging (Search for Common Ground 22).

These examples are instructive but limited. The IMC has achieved recognition and scale, but it operates in Kaduna, and its replication elsewhere has been partial. The 'Voices for Peace' programme had positive outcomes but was donor-funded and has not been systematically sustained. What the stewardship framework can offer is not a single programme model but a principled orientation that can shape institutional behaviour across diverse religious contexts, providing a normative basis for prioritising targeted youth engagement over generic peace proclamation.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the persistence of youth involvement in violent extremism in Nigeria, despite consistent peace advocacy by religious institutions, reflects a structural failure to target the most vulnerable young people with intentional, sustained and relational engagement. The problem is not the absence of goodwill among religious leaders but the institutional design of religious peace advocacy, which favours broadcast proclamation over intimate encounter, episodic intervention over sustained relationship and congregational audiences over marginalised individuals who have drifted outside institutional reach.

Faith-based stewardship, understood as a moral responsibility grounded in care, accountability and active engagement with those who are vulnerable, provides a conceptual framework for reorienting religious peace engagement in Nigeria. Stewardship moves the question from what religious institutions say about peace to what they do for and with the young people most at risk of choosing violence. It provides a normative basis for prioritising targeted outreach, sustaining mentorship relationships and measuring religious peace engagement not by the frequency of public proclamations but by the depth of transformation in the lives of vulnerable youth.

The framework is not without limits. Political constraints on religious independence, institutional fragmentation, resource scarcity and the plural religious ecology of Nigeria all present genuine obstacles to the operationalisation of stewardship-based youth engagement at scale. These obstacles are acknowledged, not dismissed. However, they do not negate the analytical contribution of the framework, which is to provide a principled direction for institutional reform that can guide both large organisations with national reach and small community-based religious groups working in single neighbourhoods.

The literature reviewed in this paper makes one thing clear: the young people most susceptible to extremist recruitment are not waiting for institutions to figure out how to engage them. They are being approached daily by recruiters who offer belonging, purpose and material resources. Religious institutions that understand themselves as stewards of community life have both a moral obligation and a practical opportunity to offer something more compelling, not through sermons alone but through the kind of sustained, relational and structurally aware engagement that the concept of stewardship demands.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this analysis, the following recommendations are for faith institutions, policymakers, and civil society organisations engaged in preventive peacebuilding in Nigeria. Faith institutions should develop dedicated youth-focused stewardship programmes that move beyond general congregational outreach. These programmes should identify at-risk youth through community mapping, train religious mentors specifically for relational engagement rather than proclamation and establish accountability structures that measure engagement depth rather than programme attendance.

Peacebuilding educators should integrate stewardship principles into religious education curricula at secondary and tertiary levels. Young people who understand religious identity as entailing active moral responsibility for the well-being of their communities are less likely to be susceptible to recruiters who exploit religious identity for violent ends.

Interfaith bodies, including NIREC, should develop shared stewardship protocols for youth engagement that foster collaboration across denominational and sectarian lines. Shared protocols reduce the risk that targeted youth programmes become tools for competitive religious recruitment rather than genuine peacebuilding.

Donors and international development organisations should restructure funding instruments for faith-based peacebuilding to support sustained, multi-year engagement rather than project-based programming. Short-term funding cycles are structurally incompatible with the processual logic of stewardship-based counter-radicalisation.

Nigerian policymakers should formally recognise the role of faith-based stewardship in national prevention strategies against violent extremism, providing regulatory frameworks, capacity-building support, and funding partnerships that enable religious institutions to sustain targeted youth engagement without reliance on volatile donor cycles.

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