

PROLIFERATION OF RELIGIOUS SECTS IN NIGERIA AND THEIR CRIMES AGAINST RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Abstract

The Nigeria citizens going by constitutional provisions are free to practice any religion of their choice, for this reason, the Nigerian government has no regulation of any form on establishment of religious sects and how these religions practice their faiths. Nigeria has a reputation of being the most religious nation in the world, the Proliferation of Religious sects in Nigeria is to a large extent violating the freedom of worship of individuals in Nigeria. Religious associated crimes as fast becoming a common feature of the Nigerian society. This paper is an attempt to x-ray crime against religious freedom as a result of proliferation of religious sects in Nigeria, the findings shows that the so called preachers of different regions apart from wining souls also indulge themselves in moral and unethical practices. The methodology adopted are both primary and secondary sources of data collection and the analysis done qualitatively. The research amongst others recommend that, religious bodies in Nigeria should be registered by relevant religious bodies and not cooperate affairs commission in order to help reduce proliferation of religious sects and to separate the authentic religious bodies from fake ones and to checkmate the growing cases of religious crimes in the country.

Key words: Proliferation, Sects, Crime and Freedom

Introduction

In Nigeria going by the constitutional provisions every Nigerian is free to practice whichever religion suits him/her but it is sad to note that religious freedom has been abused and to a great extent has become man's captivity. Nigerians have thrown away rationality in their dealings with religion and issues regarding religious beliefs. So many Nigerians have turned their irrationality as faith in God. Some 'Men of God' have encouraged their members to exercise their faith by not using orthodox medications which has resulted in the deaths of so many people in the name of faith. There are lots of horrible stories on social and print media that have been making waves all around Nigeria and other countries of the world associated with the so-called 'Men of God' in their dealings with people who have submitted themselves to them in the name of faith. This paper will examine some of the ungodly behaviours of 'Men of God' who hide under the umbrella of religion in committing atrocities using the name of God to achieve their personal and selfish heart desires at the detriment of the helpless victims.

Proliferation of Religious Sects in Nigeria and their Crimes against Religious Freedom

In Nigeria, officially and constitutionally, anyone can practise any religion of his or her choice. For this reason, the Nigerian government has no regulation of any form on establishment of religious sects and how these religions practice their faiths. Little attention has been given to the traditional/indigenous religions in Nigeria because of the two dominant religions in Nigeria. Apart from their numbers and different practices, there have been several cases of clashes between the indigenous religions which in itself is against freedom of worship. Although, often marginalized, traditional religion is not by any means insulated from religious violence. For instance, in parts of Kogi, Kwara and Nasarawa States, masquerade activities associated with traditional religion have been a major source of conflicts. In July, 1999 in Ogun State, there was a violent clash between Yoruba traditional worshippers and Hausa group in Sagamu, Ogun State. The crisis originated from the killing of a Hausa woman by the Oro masquerades for violating traditional rites (Osaghae and Suberu, 2005).

Many different traditions of Islam co-exist in Nigeria. These include the *Qadriyya*, *Tijaniyya*, *Tariqa*, *Malikiya*, *Ahmadiya*, *Islamiya*, *Boko Haram* and *Izala*. The newer and more fundamentalist Muslim sects include the *Izala*, *Shiites* and the *Boko Haram*. There exists tension among the different sects of Islam within the country which affects religious freedom. The *Izala* in particular tends to attract educated young people, the *Shiites* and sometimes the *Izala* are said to oppose applying Sharia in Nigeria until such time that religious leaders would have taken over political leadership of the country. Whereas the *Hisba* includes representatives of all sects, in Kano, it tends to be dominated by *Izala* and *Da'awa*. Just as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have sprung up to take advantage of opportunities created by Western donors calls for civil society parties, so also Muslim sects have arisen in the country in response to the calls for faith-based partners issued by Islamic governments and religious groups all over the world (Kariuki, 2015). An Islamic group known as *Yan Izala* that began in Zaria and Kaduna towns of Kaduna State in the 1960s protested innovations in Islam and was particularly opposed to by the Sufi Brotherhood Movement, the group that created unrest in the early 1980s. The *Maitatsine* or *YanTatsine* movement led by Alhaji Muhammadu Marwa incited religious crisis that claimed a lot of lives and property. Followers of this heretical Muslim sect opposed secular authority and demanded absolute obedience to Marwa.

Most recently, according to Adeyemi (2015), there was a violent clash between two Islamic sects in Kano, thousands of Muslims in Kano stormed the Government House and the Palace of the Emir of Kano to protest the alleged blasphemy of Prophet Muhammed by a *Tijaniyya* preacher, Abdul-Inyas of the *Tijaniyya* Islamic sect by youths who were mainly members of *Ahbabu* Rasul S.A.W., another sect. They set ablaze Inyas' residence at Gaide, Kumbotso Local Government Area of Kano State and a Sharia Court at Rijia Lemo. Nyas Amina Mohammed and Abubakar Abdullahi were due to appear before the Sharia Court in connection with the alleged blasphemy, but when they did not show up on time, the protesters doused the building with petrol and set it on fire. It took the quick

intervention of security personnel to stop the protesters from gaining access in to the Government House.

As a follow-up of the Sharia Court's judgment against Inyas for alleged blasphemy that resulted in the protest as stated above, in a newspaper report by Iriekpen (2015), a Sharia Court of Appeal in Rijiyar Lemo of Kano State sentenced nine people, including Abdul-Inyas and Hajiya Mairoto to death for blasphemy against the Prophet of Islam. According to a press statement signed and issued by Malam Nasiru on behalf of the court, the nine people were found guilty under section 110 and section 382b of the Sharia Panel Court Law year 2000. They were sentenced to death because of the above offence which they committed in May, 2015 by making unguarded statements against Prophet Mohammed. It is obvious that with the introduction of the Sharia in some of the Northern states in Nigeria, we have two legal systems and two constitutions operating in the same country at the same time. If the system continues in this manner, there will be more abuse of religious freedom in the country.

Similarly, according to Harana (2016), a Sharia court in Kano again held that an Islamic cleric, Abdulaziz Dauda, and nine other persons should be hanged for blaspheming the Holy Prophet of Islam, Mohammed as well as inciting members of the public to perpetrate religious violence. The cleric had in August, 2015 during a public Islamic gathering in Kano allegedly equated the status of the Islam's Holy Prophet, Mohammed, with Sheikh Ibrahim Inyass, the late leader of the *Tijaniyya* movement. The trial of Abdulaziz and the nine others was carried out secretly under the watch of a Khadi (Sharia Court judge) who insisted his name should not be mentioned in the media. The trial lasted four months and Abdulaziz and 9 others were found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging.

Instead of the Kano State Government to condemn the death sentence and take sides with the Nigerian constitution and judicial system that is binding on all Nigerian citizens, the Kano State Government, according to *Premium Times news online* (2015) hailed the judgment that sentenced 9 persons to death for blasphemy. The government expressed satisfaction that the rule of law was allowed to triumph in the case of the above judgment by an

Upper Sharia Court judge, Rijiyar Lemo, in Kano State, which passed death sentences on nine persons for blasphemy against Prophet Mohammed (SAW). The government noted that the judgment was a clear pointer to the fact that whoever would break the law of the land would not be spared and also appreciated the patience and the calmness with which the general public allowed the law to take its course despite the unwarranted provocation.

In a statement signed by the Director-General, Media and Communication to the state governor, Bala Halilu Dantiye, it observed that, “The accused persons were convicted under section 110 and section 382b of the Kano Sharia Criminal Procedure Law (2000)”. The statement also appreciated the role played by the Ulama by calming frayed nerves and preaching for understanding during the whole saga and commended the court for the meticulous handling of the case, and for disposing it in good time without subjecting it to unnecessary delays. The statement further hoped that the death sentence would serve as deterrent to those who feel they could come and cause a breach of the peace and further justified government resolve to look into the existing law which provided for the regulation of preaching and preachers in the state through the State House of Assembly. The above reaction from the Kano State Government has only further confirmed the fact that, Nigeria as a country is operating with two parallel constitutions and legal systems. It is impossible for a country to survive where the supremacy of the constitution is not upheld and there is lack of patriotism by some citizens of the same country.

The advent of Christianity in Nigeria brought along with it converts and controversies. Christianity in its embryonic stage in Nigeria up to the present moment is confronted with problems. One of the major challenges confronting Christianity is the rate at which churches are proliferating within the Nigerian religious space. Adesanya (2011), Umosen (1995) and Diara (2011) observe that proliferation of churches in Nigeria is at an alarming and unprecedented rate. As a result, every available space, uncompleted buildings, shops, ware-houses, school buildings, hotels and even garages are converted into worship centres in Nigeria.

It is not only that division in Nigerian Christendom has multiplied beyond counting, but the church in Nigeria as a result of proliferation is riddled with rivalries, unhealthy competitions, unethical practices, syncretism, marked with mutual distrust and scepticism. There are stories of unusual events happening in some of the churches. Every Christian denomination and sect, from the extreme orthodox to the protestant fringe types, has found a safe place in Nigeria. Nigerians have not only divided Christianity, but have literally fragmented it, and are still doing so. Today, it is impossible for one to have an accurate census of churches in Nigeria. By the time one finishes counting churches on a single street, other people are establishing new ones on the same street (Ngbea, 2012).

In some places, it becomes ridiculous, seeing four churches in a particular building. Ekeanyanwu (1995) maintains that, in Onitsha, every street has about five different churches and in every ten flats one or two are used as ministries or as prayer houses. Adeleye (2011) avers that in Nigerian cities, it is common to see severally, three or four storey buildings with different churches on each storey worshipping at the same time on Sundays and maintaining the same time for mid-week services. Diara (2012) depicts a scenario that is likely to be the state of proliferation of churches in major cities in Nigeria in the following words:

It is not unusual to see two storey building of six flats that has four churches operating in it. In this way, most of the streets in our big towns have been turned into “Church Streets”. Good examples of such streets are found at Agbani Road in Enugu. On the stretch of the road from Nise Bus-Stop to Gariki Motor Park, a distance of about one and half kilometres are over 30 churches operating in the different buildings, mainly two or three storeys have about four or five churches in them. A particular storey building with six flats at Ebonyi Points Bus-Stop has four of the flats rented and converted to places of worship by different churches (p. 64).

It is as if there is competition in church establishment in Nigeria. It has become fashionable now to be called 'Man of God' in Nigeria. Everybody wants to bear man of God (MOG),

hence to proliferate churches. Nigeria is seen as having the highest number of Christians in the world today. In Africa, Nigeria has the highest number of churches. Nigeria has been identified as one of the most fertile grounds for proliferation of churches in the world (Olushola and Ateba, 2009).

According to Akinola, quoted in Falana (2010), the neo-Christian unabashed identification of God with Mammon by prosperity preachers has reduced the teaching of Jesus to a hankering after material success, including the acquisition of power and influence, often at the expense of the lives and happiness of others. Since quasi-blind faith in the new doctrine is guaranteed to produce a solution to all problems, many evangelicals cultivate or affect a bland optimism, whose effect is comparable to that of a narcotic. Merely “believing” and declaring that all is well without a reinforcing and pragmatic ethic that is yet to produce lasting results to problems.

The number of churches and mosques scattered all over the urban centres in Nigeria is to a large extent violating the freedom of worship of individuals in Nigeria. Places of worship are built indiscriminately in Nigeria; houses, schools, hotels, filling stations are turned to churches and mosques, and they can worship anytime not minding the sensitivity of other Nigerians. Keeping of vigils and sound of drums and heavy vibrations from the loudspeakers of churches and mosques that are pointed in all directions of the cities including hospitals, affect many Nigerians who are suffering because of abuse of freedom of others of expressing their faiths. According to Utaji and Achunike (2009), religious activities in churches and mosques in Nigeria are carried out both in the day and at night. The churches and mosques have megaphones, loudspeakers positioned within and outside the churches and mosques from where emanate loud sounds. They seem to be in competition with one another as each of the churches and mosques tries to outdo the others in the production of high or loud sound which is an abuse of religious freedom. The proliferation of religious sects in Nigeria has contributed a lot to the violation of the freedom of worship.

Religion despite its concerns with the spiritual, according to Kariuki (2015), affects the populace socially, and religious rights and freedom thus

remain an important topic in contemporary society. Manipulation of religion and the existence of multiple, doctrinally diverse religions within a single society like Nigeria can negatively affect social stability. It appears that many Nigerians turn to religion because they do not think they can rely on the Nigerian state any longer. Though the country is rich with oil wealth, the cities are full of beggars and prostitutes. It is common to see a police officer demanding money at checkpoints. Corruption and poverty are so embedded that it even disturbs those few Nigerians who can avoid the problems. Faith thus becomes the fix for many Nigerians. When people do not have much, religion becomes more important. The emergence of multiple religious sects and denominations weaken the influence of religion so that a single 'universe of meaning' shared by all members of the society no longer exists.

The wave of proliferation of churches in Nigeria, especially Pentecostalism, has left undeniable imprints on Nigerian Christians. One of the negative influences is the issue of commercialization of prayer. It is astonishing that among contemporary Nigerian Christians, the objectives of prayer have changed. Prayer has become for some Nigerian Christians, one of the strategies of making quick money. Some of these Christians with self-acclaimed power commercialize prayer, price miracles and cash on the boom. Some unemployed graduates, loafers and never-do-well groups have become seers, evangelists, men of God, “brothers”, “sisters” and prophets in a bid to make ends meet. Their emphasis is always on miracles and healing. Some pastors in the mainline churches too are not excluded. Some of them have private prayer ministries that bear different names to their credit (Uzoigwe, 2011).

In his speech at the second Biennial Conference of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) held in Lagos in 1997, late Benson Idahosa, quoted by Falana (2010), stated that, through the conference, the Pentecostals in the country should be able to identify the genuine ones and to say to the government, “These are whom we are and these are not ours ... false prophets, money extractors, gamblers, money doublers that are wearing cassocks and suckers of the public and are not priests.” Noting that such imitating shepherds are

everywhere, the PFN president urged the government to “help locate these men that are using tricks to suck people and get money from ... those who are selling prayers, government should get them arrested (p. 4).

The situation today in Nigeria is that some religious leaders are directly involved in large corrupt practices through various subtle means or encourage politicians in the act of looting public funds. Influential members of the political class are not left out when it comes to religious crimes. Some of them have taken the manipulation of religion to a ridiculous extent. A good example is the case of Ahmed Sani Yarima, former Zamfara State Governor that first introduced Sharia in the country, now a senator of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (law maker), who married a 13-year-old child in a grand ceremony conducted at Abuja. As soon as it was pointed out by the human rights community that the marriage contravened section 18 of the Child's Right Act 2003 which has prohibited child marriage in Nigeria, the senator justified his action under the Islamic religion. Similarly, the Deji of Akure, Oba Adesina engaged in a street fight with his enraged wife, Bolanle. With the aid of armed thugs, the Oba poured acid on her and justified his barbaric action under the customs of Akure people. According to the Oba, he invaded his father-in-law's house to perform some traditional rites on Bolanle in order to strip her of any claim to the queenship.

Owing to the above justification by Ahmed Sani Yerima under Islamic religion to marry an under-aged child, Yerima is currently standing trial on a 19-count charge bordering on misappropriation of public funds meant to repair the collapsed Gusau Dam and payment of compensation to victims affected by the incident. The collapsed dam resulted in a flooding which washed away farmlands, hundreds of houses, livestock and property worth billions of naira and not without attendant loss of human lives according to Obaro (2016).

Apart from the above justification of marrying an underaged girl (child) in the name of Islam, Senator Yerima was the first governor to implement Sharia law in Zamfara State on January 27, 2000. Since the adoption of the Sharia legal system in Zamfara State, hundreds of Zamfara citizens and residents have been tried and sentenced according to the

tenets and provisions of Islamic Sharia legal system instead of the Nigerian laws governing the entire country. Even when it became clear that Sharia law under Ahmed Sani Yerima was merely for the poor and helpless citizens of Zamfara State, the administration insisted on carrying on with it to the exclusion of the high and mighty in the society.

Going by what Ahmed Sani Yerima stands for by introducing Sharia while he was the governor of Zamfara State and using Sharia law to justify his actions, Yerima is supposed to submit himself to be judged under Sharia legal system and not a conventional court. It will be a great injustice against the people of Zamfara State, especially the hundreds of people who have been prosecuted and convicted by Sharia law under Yerima as governor of Zamfara State for him to be tried in a conventional court. Yerima as a good Muslim should be prosecuted and charged under the same Islamic law that he used for the people of Zamfara State and he continues to use to justify his deeds.

Bishop Katung of Maranatha Covenant Church in Jos Plateau State and two others, according to Hir (2016) have been dragged before a Federal High Court by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) on a 24-count charge for defrauding about 800 depositors of huge sums of money running into hundreds of millions of naira sometimes in 2012 through a business concern called Covenant Fadama Cooperative Society. Bishop Katung and one Okewale Dayo, Chairman and Secretary, respectively of the Covenant Fadama Cooperative Society have been standing trial over alleged offences including fraud and money laundering as well as swindling depositors of their investment. There are several of such cases involving religious leaders in Nigeria who hide under religion to swindle poor people of their hard-earned money.

The desire and search for property by Nigerians through whatever means accounts for the reason why prosperity churches are proliferating in contemporary Nigeria with all kinds of crimes committed by the so-called “Men of God” taking advantage of religious freedom. Generally, there is a sudden shift in emphasis of prosperity preachers in Nigeria from asceticism to materialism which probably favours the mushrooming of Pentecostal

churches in Nigeria. The Pentecostal churches have assumed a corporate identity in Nigeria. They now have their different logos, satellite networks, banks, petrol stations and directors with their founders/leaders as executive directors as dividends of prosperity theology. The deregulation of salvation occasioned by the economic crisis in Nigeria has transformed the Pentecostal churches to financial empires (Ayuba, 2010).

Going by the constitutional provisions, every Nigerian is free to practise whichever religion suits him/her but it is sad to note that religious freedom has been abused and to a great extent has become man's captivity. Nigerians have thrown away rationality in their dealings with religion and issues regarding religious beliefs. So many Nigerians have turned their irrationality as faith in God. Some 'Men of God' have encouraged their members to exercise their faith by not using orthodox medications which has resulted in the deaths of so many people in the name of faith. There are lots of horrible stories on social and print media that have been making waves all around Africa and other countries of the world associated with so-called 'Men of God' in their dealings with people who have submitted themselves to them in the name of faith.

Examples of such stories include the following: Pastor Lesego Daniel, who is the founder and head pastor at Rabboni Centre Ministries, makes his members eat grass to prove the potency of the Holy Spirit. In a bid to deliver members of his congregation, he uses them as Holy Ghost footmats and walks on them during deliverance service. Another pastor prayed over a bottle of petrol and gave it to his congregation to drink as pineapple juice. Another controversial prophet Penueal was not satisfied with feeding his followers with live snake, he went on and asked them to take off their underwears and eat them. The 'Man of God' called one of his members simply identified as Thabiso, he commanded him by the power of God to turn into a horse and according to the church's Facebook update, and indeed it happened. The man of God was said to have ridden on the horse, a perfect replica of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

A church is discovered in Tanzania where the pastor's feet must not touch the ground until he finishes his preaching. Able-bodied brothers in the

church have to carry him on their back one after the other until the end of the service. Valdeci Sobrino Picanto, a Brazilian evangelical pastor, was arrested after deceiving the faithful using the name of the "Holy Spirit". He said his penis was blessed and that the Lord had consecrated him with divine milk of the Holy Spirit and, of course, he had to release it in order to evangelize. "I will give you the holy ejaculation" was his claim. After worship, he took his members to the back of the church and asked them to have oral sex with him until the Holy Spirit would come through ejaculation.

It is a hard fact that with the proliferation of churches in Nigeria because of religious freedom, religious associated crimes are fast becoming a common feature of the Nigerian society. The various religious sects in Nigeria are guilty of religious intolerance towards each other. This largely has to do with the ways of propagating the religious mistrust and suspicions, selfishness, ignorance, amongst others between the followers of the various religious and ethnic groups.

The above stories of religious crimes in other countries are common in Nigeria, too, according to Ukoima (2014), in the news of Monday 28th April, 2008, it was reported that a 47-year-old pastor of a church in Lagos, engaged in taking the sperm of his teenage boy church members. Similarly, *Tribune* (2008) reported that a 17-year-old lady was raped by her pastor in Ibadan. A randy priest at the Catholic Institute of Africa (CIWA), Port Harcourt, had on 13th May, 2005 raped a 12-year-old girl. In September, 2009 a pastor of a church in Lagos raped an 11-year-nursery school pupil to death in his room, a few metres to the church. She had been brought to the pastor for deliverance. In a related case, a pastor raped a 13-year-old girl. The incident reportedly happened within the church premises in Lagos, when the girl went to the church for a fasting and prayer crusade.

Onoyume (2013) of *Vanguard* newspaper reported that the Chairman of Bishops in Rivers State was arrested for raping a 15-year-old girl and sponsoring the abortion of the baby. Bishop Chibuike Nwabueze blamed it all on the devil, and also accused his host as the one who set him up. According to the cleric, after he had finished ministering at Calvary Army Ministry, Rumuoji

Eneka, in Obio Akpor Local Government, he retired to rest. Then the girl later came for deliverance. He said that while he was pleading the blood of Jesus on the little girl, she started removing her dress. Before he could restrain her, he said, he had found himself on top of her. Furthermore, he said that, "But to my greatest surprise, I was surprised when I saw her pulling off her blouse and skirt, but before I knew it, I had carnal knowledge of her. That is the truth of the matter." After parading the Bishop before journalists, the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of Rivers State Criminal Investigative Department (SCID), Samuel Okanla, cautioned the public to be conscious of where they worship. Reacting to the development, the Executive Director, Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (IHRHL), Aya, condemned in very strong terms the Bishop's act, as it was done by one in a position of spiritual trust. He said the incident was one case out of the many against women in the offices of randy bishops and clergymen.

Obogo (2007) also reported a case of Rev. Fr. Patrick Okon of the Catholic Parish of Saints Peter and Paul, Somolu, Lagos and Ebere. Fr. Okon was accused of illicit sex, false exchange of engagement rings and abortion. Ebere told *Saturday Sun* that she met Father Okon at Tasty Fried Chicken (TFC), where the priest initially introduced himself as a lawyer on attachment with Saint Kizito Catholic Church, Iju, Agege, Lagos and both of them fell in love. Fr. Okon allegedly swore his immortal love for Ebere which culminated in the promise of marriage and an exchange of engagement ring with Ebere. By the time Ebere discovered that Okon was a Catholic Priest and not a lawyer, she was already pregnant for Fr. Okon.

Rattled by the news of her pregnancy, Ebere said that Fr. Okon did everything to ensure that she aborted what he described as unwanted distraction to his spiritual calling and provided money to facilitate the abortion process but Ebere refused abortion for fear of risking her life until Fr. Okon tricked her into going out for a ride with him in June, 2007 and at a spot along Lagos-Ibadan expressway, just after the crusade ground, Okon pulled up at a joint, where he ordered drinks (a Star beer for himself and a small bottle of Guinness stout for Ebere).

According to Ebere, just as she was about to take her drink, it was then the priest remembered he forgot something in the car and asked her to go get it for him. Unsuspectingly, she returned to take her drink, which she also alleged might have been laced with poison which later caused her to abort the pregnancy. Devastated by what she alleged Father Okon had done to her, by discreetly administering an abortion on her, she threatened to let the world know what he had done to her. Feeling used, betrayed and abandoned, she had to go public. But unfazed by Father Okon's threat to her life, Ebere, doggedly resolute to extract her pound of flesh, thereafter vowed to ensure that Father Okon, who hails from Cross River paid for ruining her life and for what she also said was the priest's act of perfidy. In a raunchy but outrageous video recording of their sexual orgy made available to *Saturday Sun*, Ebere defended that it was her own weapon against the Catholic Priest, in case he denied any lecherous liaison with her.

Eleke (2016) also reported a case of a 34-year-old pastor that had been arrested by the police for allegedly raping a 17-year-old girl in Phase 2, Site 1 Area of Kubwa, Abuja. The pastor was alleged to have raped the victim several times before he was eventually arrested. The suspect lured the young lady from Kaduna where he went for pastoral work in a church in Kaduna. The pastor who had been married for over two years without any issue had convinced the mother of the teenage girl that he would sponsor her in school if she lived with him in Abuja but instead of fulfilling his promise, he turned the girl to a sexual partner from the time he took her.

Trouble only ensued when the girl, who was unable to reach her parent as her phone, was seized by the suspect, became fed up with the whole situation and refused to go to bed with the pastor who brought out a pump action gun with which he threatened the teenager and eventually had his way. The girl later reported the matter to the wife of the pastor who quickly sent her away. The victim on reaching home narrated her ordeal to the mother who subsequently reported the case to the police in Kubwa. Confirming the incident, the Kubwa Divisional Police Officer, Nurrudeen Sabo, said the pastor had been arrested and the case was under investigation.

Similarly, Nwisi (2016) reported the parading of Pastor Opirite F. Amakiri, aged 50, a pastor of a Pentecostal church, Agape Baptist Church, located along Aka Base in Rumuolumeni area of Rivers State by the police in Port-Harcourt for allegedly raping a JSS 2 girl. The young girl said to be a member of the pastor's church, was allegedly raped for three consecutive days by the pastor. The pastor lured his victim into the room to help massage his waist for a cure from a protracted waist pain and claimed that his request was informed by divine revelation that if he could get a girl of between the ages of 12 and 18 years to massage the waist, the problem would be solved.

To assist her pastor, the elder sister to the victim, a young widow, who is also a member of the choir in the church, offered to give out her sister for the job. The pastor allegedly took undue advantage of the young girl and raped her. The pastor confessed the crime. Interestingly, instead of the usual practice of blaming such act on the devil, the pastor said, "Count the devil out of this, he did not do anything, I did it by myself. But I now regret my actions. God decided to expose and chastise me" (p. 55).

In an online news (2015), A prophet, Muiyiwa Adesoye, was arrested and charged before an Ejigbo Magistrate Court for obtaining sex, unlawful carnal knowledge under false pretence and stealing under the criminal code and was remanded in prison custody at Kirikiri. Adesoye allegedly prophesied to the victim, an auxiliary nurse, that she had a spiritual husband who usually had sex with her in her dream, and that had hindered her career progress. In order to deliver her, Adesoye informed her that she needed to be delivered through prayers and such prayers and deliverance would involve having sex with her in order to anoint her private part.

Nigerian Tribune gathered that Adesoye also told her that she would pay him ~25, 000 for the prayers and warned her to do so to avoid further threat to her future. The victim accepted, paid the money and gave him her two phones and a gift. The prophet then took the young nurse to a popular hotel located at Abule Oduin Egbeda area and had sex with her several times and thereafter, gave her a soap to use to take her bath daily. The victim only reported when she realised that she was duped by the prophet who was introduced to her by her friend.

Pastor Greatman Ita and four others, according to Otabor (2015), have recently been arrested by operatives of the Edo State Police Command for the murder of a welder, identified as Abu Iboje. Lazarus Anthony who led other members of his cult group to kill Abu testified that the pastor was the driver of the vehicle they used to commit the murder. According to him in his confessions, he admitted that: "I am a cultist and belong to Black Axe. Abu and his squad killed Kelvin at Upper Sokponba. The next day, I led my squad to kill Abu at his workshop. I used locally made gun" (p.13). He then pleaded with the government for forgiveness and promised to renounce cult membership.

Uwujare (2015) reported a case of a 43-year-old General Overseer of Divine Order of Cherubim Church, Prophet Ndubuisi Okeobi, who had been arrested by security operatives in Imo State for allegedly specializing in organizing crusades where he usually invited pregnant women who delivered their babies in his church and thereafter sold the babies for between ~300,000 and ~600,000. As at the time he was arrested at Umuohia in Mbaitoli Local Government of Imo State, more than five babies had been allegedly stolen and sold by the church leader who worked in cahoots with a syndicate that usually bought babies from him. On 24th January, Ndubuisi stole a baby girl from her mother and sold her for ~600, 000 after her mother delivered her in the church.

There was another incident in February when a baby girl was stolen from her mother, Chika Chubuike, and sold for ~600, 000. The prophet usually organised crusades for pregnant women where he used to prophesy that if he could not pray for them, demons would attack their babies. Speaking on what transpired, Prophet Okeobi told *Saturday Sun* that the allegations against him were true but blamed the devil for luring him into the crime and pleaded with Nigerians to forgive him.

On so many occasions, Nigerian Christian pastors from Evangelical and some orthodox churches have involved themselves in the crime of torturing and killing of innocent children accused of witchcraft. Over the past decade, around 15,000 children have been accused, and around 1,000 murdered.

These children are often accused of witchcraft, very often after some kind of calamity, like the death of a family member, loss of job, infertility, etc. Young children who are naughty or hyperactive, children who like to sleep outside at night when the weather is hot or babies who cry a lot are all accused of witchcraft. The so-called 'Men of God' often instigate the accusations, induce hatred between children and their parents, and then extort huge amounts of money from families for "deliverance". The children are then subjected to abusive 'deliverance' ceremonies designed to drive out the spirit of the witch. They are often abandoned or neglected by their families and end up living on the streets (Ukoima, 2015).

Children in Nigeria accused of witchcraft are often incarcerated in churches for weeks on end, beaten, starved and tortured in order to extract a confession. The children are normally blamed for causing illness, death and destruction, prompting some communities to put them through harrowing punishments to "cleanse" them of their supposed magical powers. Many of the children targeted have traits that make them stand out, including learning disabilities, stubbornness and ailments such as epilepsy. According to CRIN (2011, p. 5) "The states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River have about 15,000 children branded as witches and most of them ended up being abandoned and abused on the streets."

There was outrage in Enugu State following the discovery of corpses buried in shallow graves along the Enugu-Port-Harcourt express road at the Ugwuaji area of Enugu State. The corpses were buried inside the foundation of the building suspected to be a church under construction and totally covered with concrete. It was gathered that construction of the building whose owner could not be immediately ascertained, commenced recently and was at the foundation level before the gory discovery. Some residents of the neighbourhood alleged that the building believed to be a proposed place of worship, belonged to a ritualist who disguised to be a 'Man of God' (Uzodinma, 2016).

Similarly, the police in Benin, Edo State arrested one Apostle Ikenna Okafor for allegedly burying an object suspected to be charm in his church premises. The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN)

reported that the identity of what the suspect buried was unknown even though residents around the church located along Esigie Street in Benin alleged it was a live animal (*Daily Independent*, 2015). In another related incidence, a pastor identified as Stephen Maduabuchi was caught at Umuika Okwu Olokoru in Umuahia while trying to bury charms ahead of a church crusade in the area. According to an eyewitness who was one of the people who caught the young pastor in the process of burying the charm, he allegedly confessed that he was sent by the founder and general overseer of the church whose name he gave as Chubuike John, to bury the charm so that he would be able to perform miracles and healing at the crusade as well as making people to come out in droves. The residents of the area who could not believe what they saw and heard later forced Maduabuchi to burn the charm (Dachen, 2016).

According to Ikhilae (2016), Jibueze (2016), Uguru and Duru (2016), the Supreme Court's affirmation of the conviction and death sentence given to Chukwuemeka Ezengo, G.K.G Reverend King, His Holiness, the general overseer of Lagos based Christian Praying Assembly (CPA) on 26 February, 2016 was only a confirmation of the peak of religious crimes in Nigeria. Reverend King was arraigned on September 26, 2006 on six counts of attempted murder and murder. It was alleged that he poured petrol on six devotees for an offence which he classified as acts of fornication and set them ablaze. One of the victims, Ann Uzor suffered severe burns and died on August 2, 2006, 11 days after the incident.

Following allegations of misconduct, including fornication, the victims were made to kneel before the pastor who believed in instant punishment of sins. He directed that fuel be poured on Chiejina Olise, Chizoba Onuorah, Vivian Ezeocha, Jesica Nwene, Kosisochukwu Ezenwankwo and Ann Uzor. The rest sustained burns but survived while Ann Uzor died. Reverend King was found guilty of the offence and was sentenced to death. He was convicted on the first five counts of attempted murder and sentenced to 20 years with hard labour on each count. The sentences were to run concurrently while for the sixth count of murder, he was sentenced to death by hanging.

Dissatisfied with the judgement delivered by Justice Oyewole of the Lagos High Court, Ikeja, on January 11, 2007, Reverend King challenged the verdict before the Court of Appeal in Lagos, but the appeal was thrown out and the judgment of the High Court was affirmed. King, not still satisfied with the Appeal Court's verdict, approached the Supreme Court of Nigeria for invalidation of the judgement, but the apex court affirmed the conviction and death sentence given to him by the High Court on January 11, 2007 for attempted murder and murder.

During Reverend King's trial, female witnesses, who were mostly his church members, narrated how King turned them to sex slaves. One recalled aborting four pregnancies for the self-acclaimed 'Man of God'. Susan Chizobar Onuorah told the High Court that she was always stark naked whenever she wanted to serve Reverend King. Another witness said King operated a "Lord Army" which he used to intimidate church members, including disciplining noise-makers and those who caused distractions during worship. On the incident that led to Ann's death, nearly all the prosecution witnesses corroborated the fact that King set them on fire by pouring fuel on them following allegations that they were committing fornication.

Despite the allegations, King continued to attract large followership even while in prison. While in Kaduna prisons, he was said to have organised prayer sessions for devotees, thereby causing undue tension at the prisons, and was reportedly transferred to Katsina prisons. After his conviction, King was taken to Kirikiri prisons in Lagos. It was alleged that while awaiting his appeal, King had sex with female guests in prison. In spite of his absence, members of King's church did not abandon him; they marked his birthdays and hoped his death sentence would be overturned. It was learnt that before he went to prison, the church had less than 60 branches. According to reports, some members believed Reverend King was the Christ that had come the second time, and that people would not recognise him. Before Reverend King's conviction, members were said to have been attracted to him by miracles.

Conclusion

Religion has the capacity for great good and great evil, and society is not duty-bound by any constitutional right to let them avoid duly enacted

laws, especially where their actions can harm others. It is true that in theory, there is a constitutional provision for religious freedom in Nigeria, but in practice as indicated in this paper, there is gross abuse of religious freedom in Nigeria. Preachers of different religions in Nigeria instead of preaching to covert people from indulging in immoral acts, turned to engaged themselves more in immoral activities like sexual exploitation, using of charms to attract followers and using all kinds of means to extort money from their followers. Genuine religion is where moral values are supposed to be thought to clean the entire world of evil for the good of the society and not to be used as a way of promoting evil and exploiting the masses.

There is a need for the Nigerian government to embark on a comprehensive nationwide economic empowerment programme, for democracy does not thrive in poverty. Political zealots and religious chauvinists find ready tools in the teeming unemployed youth whose idle minds provide spacious workshop for the devil. In order to reduce proliferation of religious sects and the ever-increasing cases of fake Pastors and Islamic clerics, Churches and Mosques should be registered by relevant Islamic and Christian bodies and not Corporate Affairs Commission. The registration will help to separate the authentic religious bodies from the fake ones and to checkmate the growing cases of religious crimes in the country. There is every need for the government to censor proliferation of religious sect in Nigeria and monitor carefully the activities of Nigerian religious leaders to avoid religious crimes.

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