ISSN 2522-9400 **European Modern Studies Journal** *Vol 7 No 4*
available at www.journal-ems.com
DOI: 10.59573/emsj.7(4).2023.4

Religious Leadership and the Success of Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria (2020-2023): A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a call by the international community to produce and implement a set of universally accepted goals that meet the urgent economic, environmental and political challenges of our time by 2030. The paper examines Religious Leadership and Success of Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria. The research method is descriptive, and secondary sources of data were utilized. Qualitative approach was adopted. It was discovered that few religious leaders had contributed to the success of SDGs, while the actions of greater number of them were diametrically opposed to the success of it. Federal government of Nigeria should sponsor an executive bill titled 'Ethical Conduct and Limitations of Religious Leaders, 2024; to forestall their penchant for: child abuse, sexual molestation, ritualism, monetization of prayers; self-kidnap, and fake prophecies. Each State Government of the Federation should replicate Federal government's policy implementation guidelines on the matter. These measures will act as a deterrence to other institutions in Nigeria.
Key words: Millennium Development, Nigeria, Religious Leadership, Sustainable Goals

Introduction

In pursuant to a new set of universally accepted agenda for sustainable development, one hundred and ninety three (193) World leaders on 25 September, 2015 at the UN Headquarters in New York City, entered into an agreement to create a better World spanning from 2015 to 2030 with the aim of incorporating a Post-Millennium Development agenda of nipping the preponderance of global poverty and hunger, achieving universal economic development, social inclusion, including environmental sustainability in the bud by 2030.

To this end, 17 achievable Developmental Goals were agreed upon: (i) End poverty in all its forms everywhere; (ii) End hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture; (iii) Ensure healthy lives, and promote wellbeing for all at all ages; (iv) Ensure inclusive, and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all; (v) Achieve gender equality, and empower all women and girls; (vi) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; (vii) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; (viii) Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; (ix) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; (x) Reduce inequality within and among countries; (xi) Make cities and human settlements inclusive safe, resilient, and sustainable; (xii) Ensure sustainable consumption and production pattern; (xiii) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; (xiv) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and Marin resources for sustainable development; (xv) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystem, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reserve land degradation; (xvi) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; and (xvii) Strengthen the means of implementation, and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development (UNDP, 2015).

Nigeria is one amongst 193 countries of the world that entered into an agreement for the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with limited scope, and the attendant failure of its developmental objectives. The Nigerian road map according to Adoke for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals is to focus on six thematic areas: Policies, data management, institutions, partnership, communications and finance. Three specific needs were designed in consonance with the needs of each zone. Phase 1: 2016-2020, Phase 2: 2020-2026, Phase 3: 2026-2030.

As an off-shoot of the Millennium Development Goals, signatories to the agreement were expected to mobilize other institutions and/or stakeholders, towards building on the achievements recorded (2000-2015) in order to meet the SDGs by 2030. In Nigeria, the key stakeholders comprised of Governments, Civil societies, Religious institutions, the Media, Education sector, Health sector, Labour leaders, Legislature, Judiciary, and Nigerian citizens at large.

In recognition of religious institutions roles in the society, Tomalin et al. (2019) posits: "Religion is a major socio-cultural, political, and economic factor in many official development assistance (ODA) in recipient countries, and after decades of being ignored by global development processes, greater portions of development aids are now channeled via faith-based organizations". In this light, it is evident that religion is increasingly recognized as a human resource rather than just an obstacle to development (Tomalin et al., 2019).

Moreover, the Quranic verse; Sura 39:6 reads: "He makes you in the wombs of your mothers in stages, one after another in three veils of darkness". The provision of this verse might have informed the majority of Islamic scholars to believe that, the basic goal of development is to create an environment that enables people to enjoy moral, spiritual, and socio-economic wellbeing on the planet earth and thereafter (www.arabianjbmr.com>pdfs). In the same vein, Christian scholars believe that, religion informs social change which in-turn propels development that transcend the physical and material for the wellbeing of mankind. Hence, Christian religious leaders are instructed by Jesus Christ not to be selfish in the discharge of their roles in the society:

> *Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast but, be humble towards one another; always considering others better than yourselves. And, look out for one another's interest, not just for your own interest in (Philippians, 2:3-6, P. 246).*

In Matthew 20:25-28 religious leaders are further instructed thus:

> *You know that the rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it shall be among you. If one of you wants to be great he must be the servant of the rest, and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave like the son of man who did not come to be served but to serve and give his life to redeem many people (Matthew 20:25-28, P. 29).*

Can we rightly say that religious leaders in Nigeria have lived up to the expectations of these biblical and /or Quranic injunctions? Nonetheless, the study cannot lay claim that all religious leaders' conduct are inimical to the successful implementation of SDGs.

In carrying out the study, we relied on descriptive method, and secondary sources of data were utilized. Qualitative approach was adopted, and a combination of theories for the legitimization of religious leaders' role was also adopted. The main objective of the study is to examine religious leadership and success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria; with a view to establishing the conforming and non-conforming roles religious leaders have made and still making towards the success of the SDGs in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification /Analysis

The concept of Sustainable Economic Development like every other concept suffers universally accepted definition. Edward Barbier (1987:1) clarifies the difficulties in defining the concept with precision. According to the scholar, the concept is difficult to define for one to grasp analytically. He contends that if one try to describe the environmental, economic and social features of an on-going process, the difficulty lies in arriving at a universally accepted definition that is also analytically proven. However, he described its characteristics capable of distinguishing the concept from other concept of development as follows: "First, it is one part of the total development of society, and can be distinguished and analyzed separately. Second, its quantitative dimension is associated with economic, or growth in real per capital output. Third, its Qualitative dimension is associated with technology and institutional change, or innovation broadly defined, and fourth, it should ideally be measured i.e. economic development is associated with direct readily measurable economic gain". He maintains that the total development of society involves not only changes in economic activities but also political, social and cultural transformations (Barkier, 1987:1).

In another perspective, Brundmam Report, cited in Jacumbus (2006:1) tries to define the concept as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generation to meet their own needs. As par the origin of Sustainable Development Goals, Jacombus posits that, the concept emerged in the context of a growing awareness of an imminent ecological crisis seems to have been one the driving forces of world history in the period around the end of the 20th century (Jacombus, 2006:1).

On the other hand, religion also suffers a universally accepted definition as a concept. It is better described than defined. However, it is a set of beliefs and practices in the worship of a supernatural being. For Emile Durkheim (1915), religious beliefs is a social glue that help to keep the society. Sigmund Freud (1927) sees religious beliefs as an illusion; a childlike yearning for a fatherly figure, and for Napoleon Bonaparte, religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich.

For Ajaegbu (2012), religion is a system of social coherence commonly understood as a group of beliefs or attitude concerning an object, person, unseen or imaginary being or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred or divine (Ajaegbu, 2012). Religion is a belief in spirits. Spirits were gods, animating powers, animal-spirit companions, all of which seemed to have a religious cast (Tylor, 1958). Alsatian (2006) cited in Casley (2008) provides two sided controversial discourses of religion. First, religion as a sanctimonious aspiration to peace and love that is often ignored in politics. Second, as the source of all terrorist extremism, particularly since the 9/11 attacks in the United States of America. The discussion on religion in the context of national and international affairs automatically raises the spectre of religious-based-conflicts. Alsatian cited in Smock (2011) contends that the contribution religious institutions can make to global peace-making as a flip aide to religious conflict is only beginning to be explored (Smock, 2011).

Above all, Karl Marx perceived religion with precision:

> *The State promotes inverted belief in religion just to pacify the exploited and the oppressed class, and consolidate the power of the owners and controllers of means of production (who invariably constituted the ruling class (Aja, 1997:-28-30). Religion is the spiritual aroma of the world. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of the spiritless situation. Religion is the opium of the people (Maynard, 1974:12; Aja, 1997:28).*

In point of analysis, Marx sees religion and its institutions as make-shift organizations only for the pacification of the downtrodden and helpless masses in the society. As it applies

to this study, the implication of Marx's viewpoint above is that, religious leaders have no obligation in the developmental objectives of the Nigerian State than to serve the interest of only one economically and politically dominant class (Nigerian political class). In other words, our expectations from the religious leaders for the success of Sustainable Development Goals to Marx, is a misplaced priority. But, the writer is opposed to this submission as religious leaders are part and parcel of the society, and should contribute their own quota towards sustainable economic growth and development in their countries.

Incidentally, there are three major religious institutions in Nigeria: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion. However, two dominant religious institutions are Christianity and Islam. These religious denominations constituted Christian and Islamic religious institutions in Nigeria. According to Pew Forum (2006); Odumosu & Simbine (2011) cited in Omobolaji (2012:231), Roman Catholic is the largest denomination that constitutes 28%. The Protestants comprised of Anglicans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists and Lutherans 31%. The Evangelical and Pentecostal institutional churches make up the rest of the Christian population in Nigeria. The Muslim faith in Nigeria follows the broad line that exists within the Muslim faith worldwide; Sunni and Shi'a. Majority of Nigerian Muslims belong to the Malaki School of the Sunni branch of Islam. The different is that, what is refer to as the Shi'a movement in Nigeria is actually a blend of Shi'a and Sunni Islam introduced by Ibrahim Elzakzaky (Umar, 2001; Omobolaji, 2012:231).

Interestingly, religious institutions are involved in various economic activities, and remains very important institutions that have mass audience to influence the policy direction of the Nigerian government. Observably, religious leaders are into real estate, some own hospitals, schools: nursery, primary, and secondary up to world class universities. To mention but a few; Al- Hikmah University at Ilorin, Kwara state belongs to a Muslim Cleric - Abdulraheed Oladimeji, Benson Idahosa University belongs to the Idahosa, and Babcock University is owned by the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and Ajayi Crowther University is being run by Anglican Communion, and Redeemers' University belongs to Pastor Adegboye while, the Covenant University is for Bishop Oyedepo of the Winners' Chapel, Bowen University is owned by a Baptist Convention, and Madonna University is owned by the Catholic Church (Enegho, 2017).

Arising from the findings above, it is evident that a good number of religious leaders in Nigeria have contributed tremendously in education sector of the Nigerian economy; even though their schools and tuition fees are not within the reach of the Hoi pol-loi. Invariably, the high cost of tuition fees constitutes serious setback to the attainment of quality education for all as in Goal 4 of SDGs.

Theoretical Framework

Structural Functionalism and Multi-Tracks Diplomacy

There are plurality of scholars that theorized on the justification for and against the role of religion in nation building. They provides useful insights into how the society is structured in conformity for solidarity and the survival of the state.

In 19th century, functionalism as a sociological theory had its exponents as; Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Robert K. Merton. They unanimously came to a conclusion that society is a complex social system whose independent component parts work in unison to promote solidarity and stability needed for the survival of the society. The implication of this assumption is that institutions such as; the Family, Religious institutions, the Media, Civil society groups, Government, Education sector, Judiciary, Legislature, and the Executive arm etcetera across the globe are potential constituent parts of the society. However, they have divergent views on how those institutions functions for the survival of the whole system.

Durkheim, from macro level of social structure perspectives, posits that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts that work together to maintain stability (Durkheim, 1893). Talcott parson (1930s) came up with "Functional prerequisites": Adaptation, Goal Attainment, Integration and Pattern Maintenance (AGIP) as alternative sociological theory that, the society is like a system with component parts that must adapt to the prevailing environment, pursue developmental objective of the state in collaboration with other stakeholders for solidarity and survival of the state. He believed in functional indispensability of all the independent parts.

However, the theory has been criticized by Robert Merton, a lecturer in Harvard University in America. He opposed the views of Talcott Parsons on functional indispensability of the component parts of a system. He argues that, there is no way the society will have a complete functional unity in a workable system. He contends that if religion, for instance, is removed as component part of the state, citizens will go back to what they were known for in the past. For him therefore, no component part of a system is indispensable hence, his functional alternative proposition. Herbert Spencer also opposed Parsons' theory of functionalism by looking at social system as an organism/ human being that is naturally saddled with emotions, sentiments, feelings of self, and the consciousness that will surely bring about change in behavior in a social environment.

Nevertheless, the theory provides useful insights into the conforming roles of social institutions, particularly what the religious institutions can contribute on peaceful co-existence, maintenance, and the survival of the state. Aside from its immense contribution towards character reformation, it also calls for cooperation and harmonious relationship based on mutual trust in the society. As corroborated by Parsons, the institution treats all social institutions in a state as equal partners in progress for the solidarity and survival of the state in general (Parsons, 1975).

On the other hand, the theory of Multi-Tracks Diplomacy propounded by McDonald and Diamond (1996) holds the need to evolve a comprehensive approach to peace building by engaging a variety of actors in which track seven represents religious institutions. The theory brings the relevance of faith-based institutions as indispensable partners in national development to the fore. The theory equally suggests that, Governments in Track 1 is no longer an effective institution for securing international co-operation for conflict resolution, and developmental programmes without other stake-holders such as ; the religious institutions. Interestingly, religious leaders have formidable mass audience at their disposal to influence peace processes globally. They are expected in SDG 16 to exhibit and dramatize nonviolent strategies: apology, dialogue, prayer and fasting, commendation, condemnation, mediation, conciliation, social justice, forgiveness and repentance, and by extension, show the fear of God as policy thrusts in them (Emeaku, 2019 Field work).

The Conduct of Religious Leaders that Negates the Successful Implementation of SDGs in Nigeria

The section finds it necessary to explore what obtained from religious leaders in other climes that fought the spread of COVID-19 to a standstill in 2020 as opposed to our religious leaders in Nigeria.

For instance, the objective of Goal 3 of SD agenda is to "*Ensure healthy lives, and promote wellbeing for all at all ages."* During the COVID-19 Pandemic, it was expected that given the mass audience at the disposal of religious leaders, they would assist in the awareness campaigns by Federal government to stemming the spread of the scourge as quickly as possible. Rather, we discovered that greater number of the leading religious institutions indulged in falsehood prophesy whereas in other saner climes, as in South Korea, the Meeting of the Shincheonji Church of Jesus; a secretive doomsday group according to Bremmer (2020)

complied with all safety measures put in place by the Korean Government without rancour. In Saudi Arabia, one of the Islamic centre piece across the World, closed all worship centres, and limited social gatherings in which a religious pilgrimage was cancelled; arrivals and visits to Mecca and Medina for Umrah were outlawed. Also cancelled in Kuwait, Malaysia and Thailand in 2020 were Friday services and Call for prayers (Bremmer, 2020).

Whereas in Nigeria, many people believed unscientifically that the climatic condition of Africa could not have allowed the virus to survive as it lasted. For others, the virus was for the rich and the aged persons. It was only few Nigerians that believed the existence of the virus. The most worrisome aspect of the whole issue was that the majority of those who did not believe in the existence of the virus were from the Mega religious institutions, especially the Pentecostals in the country. The congregants have had so much confidence and trust in whatever their spiritual leaders would tell them, and not what governments' policy objectives require from the citizens as corresponding obligations.

For instance, the Federal government of Nigeria through the Center for Disease Control (NCDC) issued guidelines on lockdown and social distancing measures to curtail the spread of the pandemic. In a swift reaction to these guidelines, Prophet Temitope Joshua of the Synagogue church of all nations falsely raised the hope of the unsuspecting congregants that, there is nothing to fear about Corona virus. He boasted that *"by 27 March, 2020, whether we like it or not, no matter the medicine they might have produced to cure whatever, it will go the way it come*" (The Punch, 17 July, 2020:3). Meanwhile, COVID-19 report from NCDC as at 23 August, 2020 showed confirmed cases of 50,964 patients; recovered figure was 37,304; death cases was 9, 92 persons while, death cases globally recorded 792,475 persons.

In New Zealand, the virus was detected in February 28, and the Country in less than three weeks shut its borders to outside travellers, and a week later, shut down both essential businesses as well as coming up with total lockdown in which people could only communicate within homes (Bremmer, 2020). In South Africa, the Buddhist New year public water fights to mark the celebration was brought to a halt, the same in other Asian countries. It is important to note that these countries have functional institutions that can withstand the vagaries of diseases yet, their religious leaders complied with the safety measures adopted by their various Governments. In Nigeria, the case was / is too far from being the same even though, we borrowed religious doctrines from the above core Islamic countries.

In Nigeria's case, one of the safety guidelines by Federal government via NCDC was that the social distancing measures should be adhered to by all Nigerians. But, at the heat of the dreaded COVID-19 virus, the Muslim religious leaders came together for the burial of Abba Kyari in April 18, 2020 (BBC, 2020). The implication of this action is that religious leaders in Nigeria have the penchant for violating health policies that has direct impact on the lives of the masses they pretend to serve. The policy thrusts of SDG 8 & 16 are targeted on the betterment and sustainability of human life, and not to expose it to infections.

Incidentally, when the entire world was passing through a delicate virus in 2020; COVI-19 pandemic, and it was up to every country to halt its spread or risk the colossal loss of her citizens to the virus. So, when thousands of worshippers were falsely assured of their safety under the ravaging COVID-19 pandemic, the implication is the tendency to ignore all safety measures such as; social distancing and face masks, and the entire nation were at risk. For instance, Sheik Ismaila Alkashnawi had criticized the Northern Governors' resolution to evacuate Almajirai on the street to curb the wide spread of Corona virus. He maintained that Almajirai had come to stay, and cannot be outlawed as the concept started from the time of the great prophet Mohammed. The cleric advised Federal and State governments to establish a body similar to the Universal Basic Education to coordinate Islammiyya and local Islamic schools, and he concluded by saying that, "any one supporting the evacuation of Almajirai is Anti- Islam" (The Punch, 27 July, 2020:2).

The implication of the Sheik Ismail's position is that, the federal government lock-down, and Social distancing measures to curb the spread of the scourge were inconsequential to them. For him, the movement of the Almajirai children from one place to another in the North has been an age-long history, and as such, cannot be discontinued even when the increasing cases of the infected persons were being reported. Similarly, in Niger state, the Police command handed over 15 children rescued from one Umar Ahmed who runs an Almajirai school, and cases of brutal torture; chains were used to tie their legs, and scars all over their bodies were reported. This dehumanizing treatment by a cleric is in conflict with the objectives of Goals 3, 4, and 5 of Sustainable Development strategy of the federal government. Religious leaders are supposed to be educating their followers on the dangers of not adhering to those safety guidelines from the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control in order to help in the fight against the virus but, the reverse is the case (Punch, 27 July, 2020).

A cursory look at Goals 3: *Good health and wellbeing for people* shows the urgent need to reducing the alarming rate of premature death, and decline in life expectancy rate due to the preponderance of diseases such as; malaria parasite, tuberculosis, polio, HIV/AIDS, and the recently reported cases of Lassa fever with 72% in three states bordering Cameroun: Ondo (32), Edo (29), and Bauchi (11), according to World Health Organization (2023). In Goal 16: *Peace, justice, and strong institutions* are required by countries for the successful implementation of SDGs. This is because without peaceful environment, social justice and fairness, successful implementation of SDGs, driven by humans will be elusive. Furthermore, arising from our deductions from the objectives of the Goals above, it is evident that, the death sentence passed on a -22 year Yahaya Sharif on Monday 10, 2020 in Kano state of Nigeria by Muslim leaders was antithetical to the cardinal objectives of SDGs in Nigeria. This is because, for Nigeria to achieve success in Goals 3 & 16, human lives must have been protected in a peaceful and safe environment at all cost by 2030.

In the same vein, Goal 10 is about how to reduce income inequality within Nigeria and not to aggravate it. Going by the incessant warnings and threats that those who don't pay their tithes irrespective of the situation they found themselves during COVI-19 pandemic will not go to heaven. There is every tendency that some members who might have spent the supposedly tithe sum may steal or go a- borrowing for the fear of not missing heaven as if; the very key to heaven is in their pastors' pocket. The Goal 10, otherwise known as shared prosperity is to complement Goal l1; the eradication of extreme poverty, and it was targeted poor countries of the world. How can the Nigerian Government succeed in realizing these objectives when religious leaders kept on impoverishing their members?

In Goal 16 of the Sustainable development programme, various institutions are expected to promote peaceful co-existence; act and behave peacefully. Without peaceful environment, no meaningful development takes place (silent lege inter armo). But, on the contrary, actions and inactions of religious leaders in recent past had generated interreligious violence, and many lives were lost. Nigerians are known to be too religious, and if it comes to taking instructions from their religious leaders, we are the best in the world, and yet, at the slightest provocative statement from other religious denominations, interreligious conflict is bound to occur. For instance, the sporadic attacks on Christians in Kaduna state on the 16 May 2020 as reported by the Punch Newspaper alleged that, it was carried out by the armed Muslim bandits, and about 15000 Christians were displaced. It was also reported that the Christians in Southern Kaduna had resolved to defend themselves (The Punch, 16 May, 2020).

The implication is that the crisis was not resolved amicably till date. To this end, making cities and settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, sustainable, and having access to justice for all in Goals; 11 and 16 will be difficult to be achieved by 2030.

In another development, the general overseer of new Life Church of God, Pastor Adetokunbo and his gang on 29 July, 2020, were apprehended and paraded by the Police Public

Relation officer, Frank Mba for the abduction of a dispatch rider who had come to the church to deliver an item for a church member, and was kidnapped and kept in an underground cabin inside the pastor's church building in Ogijo in Ogun state, who demanded the sum of N20 million naira ransom. When they were caught, the pastor confessed that he embarked on the evil venture for the expansion of his church, charity works, and Ileya.

On 4 July 2020, Punch newspaper also reported the arrest of one Pastor Caleb Agu in collaboration with a community leader in Owerri, Imo state by the Anti-kidnapping unit and special Ant-robbery squad for the alleged killing of two NDLEA personnel and recovered the sum of N4.2 million naira ransom they collected from one of the victims, including AK-47 riffle , one riffle belonging to the slain NDLEA officer, 120 rounds of live ammunition , one Lexus Suv vehicle, and other exhibits (The Punch, 4 July, 2020:5).

In another development, a religious leader in Kaduna, James Clement staged his own kidnap and demanded 5million ransom from his followers (Vanguard 29, 2020). In the same vein, a Methodist Pastor-- Adegoke at Shagamu branch Lagos was reported by the Sahara Reporters to have lodged himself in a hotel, and claimed that he had been kidnapped and demanded the sum of 3million ransom, and when it was uncovered by the Police, he claimed it was spiritual attack on him that was responsible (Sahara Reporters, 2020).

In May, 2020, the President of love world incorporated otherwise known as the Christ Embassy kicked against the lockdown measure by the Federal Government, saying that churches should be opened for healing. In a broad cast at the pulpit posted on the social media on the August 1 2020, he criticized the new guidelines for the re-opening of worship centers this way:

> *I am appalled that some people have the audacity to tell us how many hours we can spend in church. How dare you! What in the world do you think you are? You cannot tell God's people how long they can spend in Church. If you built the building for them and you are saying you are not going to let them enter the building, may be because you built it. But, if you did not, you have no right to tell God's people you are going to spend one hour or two hours in church. I tell you, the number of hours you tell them they have in the church is the number of hours you have left (The Punch, July 17, 2020:3).*

In the like manner, the Presiding Bishop of Living Faith Church worldwide: Winning Chapel International, Oyedepo Posits:

> *The decision by the Federal Government to open market and keep churches closed was a demonic plot to silence the body of Christ. There is something wrong; for people to be allowed to be in the market for six hours and cannot be in the church for two hours, it is an upside down way of looking at things. Which one is more orderly? The market or the church? I can smell a rat. Behind all this, how do we stop the church from exploding? The voice of darkness is influencing people at various levels, targeting the church because the growth and expansion of the church is the greatest headache of the devil. But the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The devil and all his agents shall pay for this.*

Pastor Chris Okotie, the founder of the household of God's Church international Ministries stated that COVID-19 is grand scheme by international forces to reduce the world population. He condemned Christians listening to sermons on line rather than attending churches. He said it is unbiblical for not worshipping together as God commanded. However, some Nigerians have argued that Jesus Christ did not lay hands on every one he healed. But, spoke the word and they were healed *(The Punch, July 17, 2020:3-4).*

Adegboye's sermon on Tithing is most disappointing. He places much of his energy at the pulpit on Tithing and offering regardless of the state of extreme poverty which Goals 1 and 2 of Sustainable development intend to address in Nigeria. Many Nigerians are casual workers,

and as such, they are grossly underpaid in their place of work, as at March, 2020 when the Federal government rolled out a set of safety guidelines to curtail the spread of COVID-19 virus, including : lockdowns; sit-at home orders; wearing of face masks; social distancing; closure of government schools; borders; restriction of social engagements, and economic activities at work places, including worshipping in churches and mosques, and as a result, many Nigerian have lost their sources of livelihood, living from hands to mouth. In the face of the hardship in the country, pastors were threatening to pass a curse on its members for not paying their tithes. When has tithing become more important than the gospel for survival and salvation? Adegboye warns the pastors and the congregants thus:

> *I am going to give every one of you pastors and opportunity to repent tonight and then to go back immediately after this convention and restitute your ways with your congregation, make it clear to them. Anyone who is not paying his/her Tithe is not going to heaven, full-stop! Pay your Tithes to avoid a divine curse. When we say pay your Tithes it is because it attract a curse, particularly to your generation (BBC, 2018*).

This warning is more of a threat to the congregation, and someone may wonder if the Pastor has the key to heaven in his pocket. Many of the pastors have functional Universities, and cruises in their private jets while, greater number of their followers are passing through untold hardship due to Corona Virus pandemic.

Another worrisome dimension in the conduct of some religious leaders in Northern part of the country is their look warm attitude in the cases of gruesome killings without recourse to due process in the law of the Federation. Nigeria is not being governed under theocratic laws but, a constitutional democracy in which fair hearing remains its core tenet. What our leaders must know, is that, an unlawful killing without thorough investigation and punitive measures being meted to the culprits, will beget many more killings in the future. For example, on the 12 may, 2022, a 200 level student of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto was gruesomely murdered, and burnt to ashes under the aegis of 'blasphemy' in a broad day light by her colleagues (The Guardia, 2022). And, as a follow-up, Usman Buda; a butcher was beaten to death for the same alleged blasphemy during an argument with a trader in the same state (The Punch, 6 June, 2023).

Although, there were condemnations from Islamic leaders after the dastardly act in the case of Deborah, but, it's over one year, and counting without any body being prosecuted. It is a known fact that, the culprits have leaders in various Mosques on whose instructions they always obeyed. The look warm attitude being exhibited by our religious leaders in the North is antithetical to the cardinal objectives of Goal 3, 11, and 16; which placed much premium on safety and sanctity of human life.

False Prophecies

According to the Daily Post Nigeria (2022):

> *Most of the prophecies released concerning President Muhammadu Buhari, the Presidency, Nigeria and some popular figures in 2021 did not come to pass. Some of these prophecies include but not limited to the death of President Buhari, crises in the Presidency, Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo suddenly becoming President.*

On the 12th of June, 2021, the leader of INRI Evangelical Spiritual Church, Primate Ayodele came up with a Prophecy of a Clash between Buhari and Osinbajo as well as their Aides clashing against each other. He went further to claim that he saw a Presidential convoy attacked. The Primate concluded his unfounded prophecy thus:

> *There will be threats in the Villa, I'm seeing confusion in the Villa, Buhari will lose one of his aides. There is going to be a clash between Buhari and Osinbajo and their aides, mark my word (Daily Post Nigeria, 16 Jan., 2022)*

Discussion

This study cannot lay claim to the effect that all religious leaders' conducts are inimical to the successful implementation of SDGs. However, the conduct of greater number of them were diametrically opposed to the developmental objectives of the Federal Government on SDGs within the period under review. For instance, in *Goal 5: of the SDGs is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.* Whereas, the report cases of sexual molestation and rape by some religious leaders were, and still common place in Nigeria.

The sexual exploitation of Women and Girls in the name of spiritual cleansing negates the objective of Goal 5. This is because, achieving gender equality begins from the elimination of practices that tend to retard Women and Girls' freedom and safety. The implementation of Goal 5 would be seen as successful, if their priorities and needs are taken into account by all institutions, especially, the religious institutions that controls greater number of women and girls. Child marriage is another impeding factor to the success of SDGs in Nigeria, and some religious leaders, particularly, in Northern part of Nigeria, do not see child marriage as an act of child abuse with concomitant health implications. In the Northern part of the country untold number of girl below 18 years of age were married by religious clerics, and in most cases without their consent. Many observers attributes this early marriage to the rate of poverty and hunger ravaging many families in the North.

In Goal 16: *Peace, justice, and strong institutions* are required by countries for the successful implementation of SDGs. This is because, without peaceful environment, social justice and fairness, successful implementation of SDGS, driven by humans will be elusive. Arising from our deductions from the objectives of the Goals above, it is evident that, the death sentence passed on a -22 year Yahaya Sharif on Monday 10, 2020 in Kano state of Nigeria by Muslim leaders was antithetical to the cardinal objectives of SDGs in Nigeria. This is because, for Nigeria to achieve success in Goals 3 & 16, human lives must have been protected in a peaceful and safe environment at all cost by 2030.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Arising from the findings above, religious leaders in a generalized context have been paying lip service towards the eradication of poverty amongst Nigerians. Prophecies and predictions based on falsehood were the greatest obstacles to the realization of SDGs in Nigeria. Majority of the religious leaders are after their selfish interests, even though they enjoy tax free business transactions. Most of them, particularly the Pentecostal Churches, did not believe that COVID-19 Pandemic existed, hence they indulged in prophecies based on false hood for monetary gains.

It is imperative to note that, religious leaders are not operating in abstraction but in an environment within Nigerian territorial integrity without paying taxes. They cannot eat their cakes, and still have their penny at all times. To this end, Federal government of Nigeria should sponsor an executive bill titled "Development Tithes" as part of social responsibilities in which any religious institution having 100 members and above shall pay 10% of the total income into the federation account. The funds should be dedicated specifically for the development and revitalization of four key sectors of the Nigerian economy such as; Health, Power, Agriculture and Education. If these key sectors of Nigerian economy are well developed and harnessed, poverty reduction, extreme hunger and unemployment rate will reduce to a manageable proportion, and by extension, the foundational Goals: 1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 10 would have been achieved before the 2030 deadline.

Religious leaders should be closely monitored as some of them are now involved in all sort of criminalities and exploitation of their members for selfish gains. As a matter of urgency, each state of the federation should sponsor an executive bill to various State House of Assembly for the enactment of an Edict to be titled "'Ethical Conduct and Limitations of Religious

Leaders 2024 to forestall their penchant for: Child abuse; Sexual molestation; Ritualism, Monetization of prayers; Self-kidnap, and Fake prophecies. Each State government of the federation should replicate Federal government's policy implementation on the matter. These measures will act as a deterrence to other institutions in Nigeria.

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