

**A Critique of J.S. Sanni's Argument on the Role of Religion in Promoting Silence and Extortion in Contemporary African (Nigerian) Society using the Name of God**

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**Abstract**

This study examines J.S. Sanni's argument on the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in contemporary African (Nigerian) society, leveraging on the name of God, with a view to determining the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. Sanni posits that religion (Christianity and Islam) have played crucial roles in promoting silence and extortion in Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria. He argues that the colonial debris of disempowerment, injustices, manipulation and extortion, using the instrumentality of religion, are still very much part of African society today. According to him, the above manipulations, extortions and injustices, perpetrated by the colonial masters on African societies using the tool of religion, is still very much part of the contemporary African society and have only assumed new outlooks and language and consequently plunged many Africans into silence in the face of what is often presented as sacred and holy. The study examines the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. The paper adopts historical hermeneutics and textual analysis methods.

**Keywords:** Religion, Extortion, Silence, God, Manipulation, Africa, Nigeria.

**Introduction**

This study examines J.S. Sanni's argument on the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in contemporary African (Nigerian) society, using the name of God, with a view to determining the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. Sanni posits that one of the cases of violence, which represents an extreme type, is silence in the face of what is often presented as 'divine' or 'holy' (SANNI 2021, 72). According to him, this type of violence is peculiar to some Christian churches or places of worship where members, often the poor, are exploited and extorted economically or financially with a promise of divine breakthrough or divine eternal reward in the afterlife.

In his article entitled "In the Name of God? Religion, Silence and Extortion", Sanni presents a philosophical critique of the assumed connection that God and human beings have, particularly, regarding the valorization of silence in matters concerning God. He argues that the colonial debris of disempowerment,

injustices, manipulation and extortion, using the instrumentality of religion, are still very much part of African society, today. According to him, these manipulations, extortions and injustices have only assumed new outlooks and language and consequently plunged many Africans into silence in the face of what is often presented as sacred and holy.

Previous studies have examined the concepts of God and religion from various perspectives (IDOWU 1962; MBITI 1969; METUH 1972; NZE 1981; NWOGA 1984; ILOGU 1985; GBADAGESIN 1991 WIREDU 1998; BEWAJI 1998; NJOKU 2002; EKEKE and EKEOPARA 2010; AJA 2015; OJIMBA 2022; AGADA 2022), but none has paid attention to how these concepts relate to matters of exploitation, manipulation and extortion, especially, as it relates the violence or terrorism of silence, often presented in matters of what is usually considered as 'the divine,' 'the sacred' or 'the unknown.' This current study looks in that direction as it x-rays J.S. Sanni's view regarding the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in the contemporary African (Nigerian) society, leveraging on the name of God, with a view to determining the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. In the context of this enquiry, the study raises the following questions: how tenable is Sanni's view that the colonial use of religion for disempowerment, injustices, manipulations, exploitations and extortions is still very much part of African (Nigerian) society today? Does the present African society really manifest the above tendencies of exploitation, manipulation and injustice, as Sanni pointed out above? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Sanni's argument in view of his accusation that the present African society, just like the colonial African society, manifests the features of exploitations, manipulations, and extortions, perpetrated by African religious leaders, using the instrumentality of religion? To properly address the above questions, this study is divided into four sections. Section one explores Sanni's idea of religious silence and its colonial links, while section two examines his view of silence in the face of the unknown or the sacred. Section three highlights Sanni's reimagination of religious opium and silence, while section four attempts a critique of Sanni's argument on the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in the contemporary African (Nigerian) society, leveraging on the name of God, while foregrounding the strengths and weaknesses of this argument.

### **Sanni's Idea of Religious Silence and its Colonial Links**

Sanni posits that Nigeria was a victim of colonial domination, extortion and subjugation. According to him, the above colonial domination of the Nigerian state had serious political, economic, and social implications on Nigeria (SANNI 2021, 74). He maintains that the instrument of religion, utilized by the colonial masters in subjugating the African society, had devastating consequences on the African mind. One can posit that it is in agreement with this Sannian line of thought that Nkrumah (1964, 22) asserts that "while the missionaries implore the colonial subjects to lay up his treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor dust doth corrupt, the traders and administrators acquired his minerals and lands." In this connection, Sanni argues that the colonial administrators utilized religion to keep

Africans under control and make them subservient to the colonizers. In Sanni's estimation, "this subservient disposition, strategic in its nature, made Africans docile and, shrewdly put, submit ignorantly to what was considered Western and religious" (SANNI 2021, 74). Ojimba (2022, 107) contends that as a result of this subservience and control of the African mind by the colonizer, African "people were made to believe that everything white is superior, including Western religion and system of education, while whatever that is black is fetish, barbaric and inferior." In Sanni's view, this created avenues for the extortion of resources, which also included the physical and psychological subjugation that ultimately culminated in the complete control of the African people and their territory. Certainly, Ekpo Denis' view becomes important in this connection as he argues that "European Christianity taught the mission-educated [Africans] to interpret history in terms of God-ordained world moral order that rigorously discriminates between good and evil, the guilty and the innocent, victims and the executioners, etc." (EKPO 1996, 7). This strategy validates Christianity, including the moral standard it presented as the yardstick for evaluating and understanding oneself within the world. Sanni interprets this standard presented by Christianity as highly instrumental in the pillaging agenda of colonialism. For him, this made it seamless for the colonialists to carry out their agenda in African society as Africans busied themselves with the uncritical acceptance and appropriation of Christian moral values with the promise of a better life and greater reward after the worldly life. Consequently, a reasonable percentage of the African populace embraced Christianity through the influence of colonialism, with the disposition of seeking the face of God.

In Sanni's estimation, the above "yearning for God, for a religious mindset, was based on an initial awareness of human limitations as a necessary condition for arriving at the understanding of God, or at least, for suspending reason and turning to faith, which makes a ceaseless search for the will of God necessary in a contingent world" (SANNI 2021, 75). According to Sanni, this contingency of the world is interpreted as a deficient condition of unawareness that can only be rescued or remedied by the divine. This interpretation or understanding is premised on the belief that the veil of ignorance can be lifted only with the divine help. This belief or understanding implies that human limitations necessarily point to the existence of a divine being or a beyond, where those limitations can be overcome. From the perspective of religion, a necessary being exists who is described as the cause of the contingent beings.

For Sanni, the reason for the search for God derives from the desire to know His will and command. It is in this connection that Clarke (2014, 7) argues that the "religious are able to appeal, among other things, to God's wishes, God's commands, the benefits of going to heaven, the benefits of avoiding hell, the benefits of being reincarnated as a superior being, and the benefits of escaping from the cycle of reincarnation, as well as all of the justificatory sources that are appealed to by the secular." The implication of Clarke's view is that religion constitutes the means through which humans can make heaven by total submission and obedience to the will of God. Clarke's view also implies an alternative to

heaven which is hell. In Clarke's interpretation, Hell designates a place of condemnation and agony, where the cycle of reincarnation is constantly repeated. Thus, one can assert that Clarke postulates two spheres or worlds (heaven and hell) that are removed from the human or natural world. Sanni interprets these worlds as metaphysical worlds (beyond the natural world), which solicits adherence to certain beliefs that inform human actions and spiritualities (SANNI 2021, 75). This interpretation is premised on his belief that since the metaphysical cannot be comprehended by humans, it then becomes highly imperative to seek other-worldly assistance to acquire knowledge of the divine will that has a metaphysical nature.

Consequent upon the nature of the divine knowledge, Sanni maintains that any attempt to apply reason to religious beliefs is faced with serious criticism and the invocation of the Augustinian assertion that "it is of God that we speak, so what is astonishing in that you did not understand? Because if you had understood, it would not be God" (see MARION 2001, 404). The above Augustinian assertion presupposes the inability of human reason to understand matters of the divine. This, however, does not preclude the metaphysical assumption of the traceability of the human essence to God, who incorporates the attributes of supernaturalism, ahistoricity, and timelessness (see SANNI 2021, 76). It is also assumed that contingent beings, like humans, harbor a natural and irresistible tendency and disposition towards God and this belief is not only peculiar to Christianity, but also to Islam.

Within the Islamic religious tradition, there also exists the belief that man was created by God and in the image of God and that the existence of man in the world is premised on the fulfillment of the divine will on earth. Al-Faruqi argues that the human being has a natural disposition to serve God and obey his will. This is encapsulated in his concept of *din al-fitrah* or 'natural religion' (AL-FARUQI 1978, 138), which portrays humans essentially as religious beings, configured in the image of God to serve and adore God. The above concept also presupposes, in the Islamic religious tradition, that all humans are naturally configured to be Muslim, which is a universal principle in nature that incorporates the tendency for the promotion of harmonious existence amongst all religious traditions and which also has the capacity to engineer social, economic and political stability (see AL-FARUQI 1978; see SANNI 2021). Sanni interprets the concept of *din al-fitrah* as denoting "the instinctive, essential and a-historical ability of human beings to recognize the religious metaphysical nature of God and, at the same time, choose to revere and adhere to his precepts" (SANNI 2021, 76). This belief is captured in the Quranic verse that "all men are born Muslim" (cited in SANNI 2021, 76; see AL-FARUQI 1978, 139). This belief provides the basis for the assertion that humans have the nature of God flowing in them, which can be seen from the nature of their soul.

Sanni (2021, 76) argues that the account of Christianity and Islam, as captured above, "justifies the valorization of religious values and the deliberate imposition of silence in the face of the purported divine will." For him, this assumed natural disposition of humans towards God forms the foundation of

colonial exploitation of Africa. He believes that attributes of Christianity and Islam, such as the belief in the existence of a supernatural reality and the worship of such supernatural reality, are also found in African traditional religions (see MBITI 1969). It is also Sanni's contention that the problem of exploitation is not traceable to religion itself but to its use. He posits that the "colonial use of religion was oppressive in its blatant and, sometimes, forceful dismissal of pre-colonial African traditional religion" and that the "use of religious values in Nigeria is characterized by an unsympathetic rejection of African traditional religion and a similar kind of hegemony that colonial presentation of Christianity and Islam imposed on African traditional religion (SANNI 2021, 76). For him, this is reinforced by the imposition of silence. Unarguably, religion plays an alarming role in Nigeria. The Nigerian state incorporates large population, natural resources and landmass, which makes it occupy a strategic position in the global ranking. The role religion plays in African and Nigeria, in particular, raises serious concern. Religious leaders have often utilized the instrumentality of religion in covering and perpetrating all kinds of vices. It is also interesting to note that religious practice in Nigeria is as complex as her population. This must have informed why Sanni argues that "religious practice in Nigeria is just as varied and diverse as the population, creating a complex and fascinating situation that arises from its 'triple heritage,' of indigenous religious traditions, Islam, and Christianity" (SANNI 2021, 77). The involvement of people in more than one religious tradition is considered normal and common. The British colonial rule left a legacy of ethnicity, splitting the country into North and South with different cultural, economic and political orientations, which can be blamed on their strategy of uneven regional development in the country. While it can be posited that the North subscribes largely to Islamic religious tradition and the South to Christianity, it is important to note that the religious complexity of the country is beyond North-South binary. Sanni posits that there are people in Nigeria, who neither subscribe to Islam nor Christianity, but can be described as African traditional worshipers or atheists. The situation becomes more interesting when one realizes that there are countless denominations within the Christian and Islamic religious traditions. This makes religious practice in Nigeria far more complex than North/South binary.

Another major concern regarding the Nigerian state is the issue of poverty. The current statistics indicate that Nigeria is topping the chart in countries with extreme poverty, having overtaken countries like India (see *The World Poverty Clock*). No doubt, the struggle to lift many Nigerians beyond the poverty line has often proven abortive due to incompetent leadership and high level of corruption in the country. Sanni contends that poverty is a crucial factor for the proliferation of prosperity churches in Nigeria, who deceptively promise to lift the adherents out of poverty and better their social and economic situations. For him, this tendency is "synonymous to colonial disguised promise of development through Christianity, while exploiting the resources of the continent" (SANNI 2021, 77; see NKRUMAH 1964).

The political landscape of Nigeria is also not left out of the exploitation, which has economic and social implications on the Nigerian people. Sanni posits that many Nigerians who are curious to know the reason for the country's unfortunate social and economic conditions also turn to religion for answers. Thus, one can contend that the Nigerian situation corroborates Mbiti's assertion that Africans are notoriously religious (MBITI 1969, 1). It is also in this connection that the former governor of Lagos State, Babatunde Fashola, asserts that there is too much God (understood as religion) in the average Nigerian life. This is an indication that religion permeates all facets of life in Nigeria. This over-subscription of Nigeria to religion may have informed why one of the aspirants in the 2023 election hired fake bishops (see DAILY POST NEWSPAPER, July 21, 2022) to endorse his candidature because of his realization that Nigeria is radically and unreflectively religious. This indicates that Africans and Nigeria, in particular, depend heavily on religion for explanation of all things. In this connection, Sanni contends that religion in Nigeria determines the framework for morality on which one should lead his or her life. In Sanni's estimation, the implication of this is that people fall victims of assorted types of exploitations, invariably presented to them in the guise of divine revelation. For him, the religious "reality teaches people to be silent in the face of what has been made known by the divine or the unknown, succumbing to an imposed passivity in the name of God [and] celebrating one's silence at the sound of voices of religious authorities" (SANNI 2021, 78). Having explored Sanni's idea of religious silence and its colonial links, I will now proceed to highlight his view of silence in the face of the unknown.

### **Sanni's View of Silence in the Face of the Unknown**

Sanni contends that religious reasons are often invoked whenever one encounters any unexpected or unimaginable experience, in which case people are urged to be silent. For him, in some cases, silence is considered a prerequisite if any encounter is to be taken as divine. It is in connection with this line of thought that religious scholars like Flood (1999) will argue that mainline religions are concerned with the identification of the contingency and limitation of man and the possibility of his transformation or transcendence to have total control over him and exercise restraints over the life of man. The above argument posited by Flood implies that human limitation constitutes a justification for religious transcendence. Sanni contends that Flood's argument can constitute grounds for the promotion of existential numbness, which he (Sanni) interprets as denoting forgetfulness in line with that which is real. Sanni goes further to interpret existential numbness as "the desire to resolve or transcend human realities through religious means without adequately engaging their implications and invitations" (SANNI 2021, 78). Sanni considers it highly imperative to draw extensively from the views of Karl Marx to buttress his point. Recall that Marx advocates for a critique of religion due to its deceptive tendencies and instrumental nature in the hands of the capitalists. He describes it as the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of a soulless condition. In fact, he interprets religion as the opium of the people:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo. (MARX 1844, 53)

The above Marxian critique of religion reminds one of the Nietzschean critique of the same. Nietzsche in [The Antichrist] is of the view that the religious leaders have utilized religion as a tool for the subjugation of humanity and for the deception of society. He describes religious speculative postulations as metaphysical errors (see OJIMBA, ANICHEBE and EZEBUIRO 2014) and as an attempt to instil fear in man with a view to keeping him under perpetual control and dominance (NIETZSCHE 2004). According to Nietzsche, religion has enfeebled man and made him incapable of rationally tackling his challenges in the world of nature, which for him, is the only existing world. He interprets religion as a creation of the weak-minded people, whom he describes as the slaves (see NIETZSCHE 1966), in order to control the strong or the powerful. He, therefore, calls for a complete abolition and repudiation of all religious speculations and postulations. Just like the Nietzschean condemnation and critique of religion, Marx interprets religion as the opium of the people, which constitutes a deception of humanity. For him, religion is created by the people and not the people being created by religion. But, the creators and inventors of this religion project it as constituting the first conditions of existence and, as such, uncreated by man. They portray it as originating from the divine. Marx discountenances this and tries to represent religion for what it is: a creation of man and the opium of the people.

Sanni contends that Marx highlights important points in his analysis of religion that require our attention. He agrees with Marx that religion does not have any necessary divine origin but is a creation of man. For him, the existence of religion is premised on the desire to pacify the poor, morally gain dominance over the rich and have total control of the world. Sanni also agrees with Marx that religion is “the sigh of the oppressed” and “the opium of the masses.” For him, the nature of religion, as conceptualized by Marx, constitutes an exact reflection of the social reality of the use of religion in most African societies today (SANNI 2021). He is of the view that the Marxian interpretation of religion, as the opium of the people, not only presupposes worldly pacification but also an anticipation of eternal reward. This anticipation of eternal reward influences understanding human reality and why humans must toe the path of their divinely formulated project. This presupposes that humans must conduct their lives in accordance with the will of God according to most religions like Christianity in Africa.

Sanni contends that the nature of the opium is such that it invariably remains exciting. According to him:

While people find religious rhetoric compelling because of its ethical dimension, often generated from an interpretation of the Bible or Qur'an, the opium (religion), although a sigh of the oppressed and a consolation to all, ultimately commands power. This power is generated by the belief that there are people who are "chosen", "called", and "missioned", sometimes summoned in a dream, to become God's vessels. These supposed ordained/chosen people of God become the link between the unknown/sacred and the worldly. (SANNI 2021, 79)

In Sanni's estimation, the above has always justified the imposed silence that is usually associated with the sacred. He contends that there is a power play or relations with regard to the use of religion, which has often been utilized as an instrument of control and dominance. For him, "this power relation is generated from the understanding of religion itself. This is clear in the hierarchy that exists in religious structures. These hierarchical structures legitimize religious power relations, which in turn justify the silence that religion imposes" (SANNI 2021, 79). He goes further to posit that silence is always interpreted as a sign of submission, openness to the divine will and the recognition of one's ignorance in view of the sacred or the divine. This religious imposed ignorance and silence, with reference to divine issues, is often utilized by the religious leaders, who describe themselves as the chosen people, in the exploitation of the believers or followers of such religion, for their selfish interest and in furtherance of their financial wellbeing, leaving such followers or adherents more impoverished. Sanni contends that:

This recognized ignorance in deciphering matters of the divine imposes silence in the presence of the religious leaders who have the powers to mediate for the ignorant. In the process of this mediation, religious leaders abuse and justify the need for members to "sow" material treasures here on earth, in exchange for heavenly rewards, by donating those material "seeds" to religious leaders who, preferring their rewards to be quite earthly, use those "seeds" to live extravagant lives, all in the name of God. (SANNI 2021, 80)

Sanni argues that through the above-supposed mediation or intercession by the religious leaders, their adherents or followers are promised eternal rewards and permanent divine solutions to their predicaments or problems. The above situation is an exact reflection of the contemporary Nigerian social reality, where religious leaders are parasitically sucking and milking their adherents with a fake assurance of divine solutions to their problems. Members are persuaded to sow material seeds to the religious leaders who live large on earth while urging such members on whose treasures they are living on to wait for heavenly reward at the end of time or the afterlife. Having highlighted the Sannian view of silence in the face of the unknown, I will now examine his thoughts on the reimagination of religious opium and silence.

### **Sanni's Re-imagination of Religious Opium and Silence**

In this section, Sanni presents what he describes as a re-imagination of the religious opium, which in his view, compels silence and which he interprets to be the basis or foundation of exploitation and extortion in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. He contends that while religion is considered a popular path to take, one wonders if it is the right path. He posits that the pacifying nature of religion regarding reality, requires a new attitude in view of religious beliefs and claims. For Sanni (2021), the foundation of religion is rooted in the world of nature (see O'LEARY 2001). However, religious leaders project religion as having a divine or supernatural origin and as constituting the foundation for moral precepts. Human problems are traced to their actions and inactions in the world and immediately linked to the divine purpose or solutions. Any problem humans experience in the world is traceable to a supernatural cause. Sanni argues that religion grounds itself in metaphysical teachings which is removed from the natural world. As such, the restlessness that people face in the world of nature is interpreted by religious popular view to mean that human existence presupposes more than the world can truly account for. This is the foundation of human anxiety and curiosity to gain knowledge of divine wisdom.

Human anxiety, as well as curiosity, is also exploited by religion in terms of its promise of eternal reward and happy ending at the end of time (see SMITH 2001; KOSELLECK 2004). As such, religious adherents are perpetually kept under control with regards to the anticipation of such eternal rewards premised on the second coming of Christ as can be seen in the Christian religion, the coming of the Messiah, as captured in Judaism, and the coming of “*al-Mahdi*, the Rightly Guided, who appears before the end of time and restores the ties between heaven and earth, until time shuts down [Islam]” (SMITH 2001, 35). The implication of the eternal rewards and happy ending, promised by religion to its adherents, is that humans have to be active in view of their good works on earth in order to qualify for this promise of a happy ending and heavenly rewards. This further raises the human consciousness with regards to understanding, not only the beginning, but also the end. Sanni posits that religion becomes the catharsis here, which provides answers to the above human perplexity and satisfies human curiosity. In his estimation, “religion provides a platform for the consoling anticipation of a happy end, after living a life that is characterized by a disturbing uncertainty of its origin and its destination. This consolation is sometimes derived from stories which grow and condense into myths that impregnate societies with epistemologies and interpretations” (SANNI 2021, 81; see SMITH 2001, 29). The above religious view provides a message of hope, eliciting good works from its adherents and presupposing that the world or universe is purposeful or goal-oriented.

Religious scholars like Harris would argue that religion only wallows in deception, extortion and exploitation of human anxiety and problems and would recommend a total abolition of the concept of religion (see HARRIS 2005). Ultimately, Harris identifies ignorance as the true coinage of religion, where people are encouraged to believe without seeing, questioning or arguing. Sanni is

of the view that the above could account for some of the reasons for the kind of silence that one finds in religion in today's society. While Sanni welcomes some of the views presented by Harris, he objected to most of them, especially with regard to the total abolition of religion because this would prevent people from freely worshipping. Furthermore, he objected to Harris' position, arguing that the problem is not religion itself, but the use of religion as an instrument or tool of exploitation and extortion by religious practitioners and leaders. Furthermore, Sanni counters O'Leary's view that religious teaching emanates from lived experience and within the world and not outside the world, arguing that this position is an incomplete representation of religion and contradicts the religious position that all things emanate from God, including lived realities. He argues that while he does not subscribe to the use and misuse of religion in Africa (Nigeria), he does not undermine religious experience and expressions as vehicles for the invocation of the ineffable and the sacred (SANNI 2021, 82). However, Sanni contends that the closed nature of religious claims in view of the 'sacred' and the 'unknown' makes it susceptible to deception that is usually perpetrated through the use of religion for oppressive silence and economic extortion.

Sanni posits that the only channel to actively rebrand or reimage the role of religion in society requires that religion must be brought into dialogue between belief and human realities. In his words:

The question "Who am I?" has been understood solely based on belief, and the faith in these beliefs has given rise to truth claims which are not accessible and irreconcilable with human realities. Through belief and faith, religious people attribute a metaphysical status to an unseen reality (God), and conjecture claims believed to be the fruit of self-manifestation of God (revelation), which are then considered as truth claims. The elimination of perverse imposition of silence in the name of God demands for religious claims to be transposed into a form compatible with the non-religious public sphere in order to bring about genuine co-existence between faith and human reality (SANNI 2021, 82; see TRIGG 2007)

The above Sannian view presupposes that contemporary African society must awaken its consciousness with regard to the social, economic and political undertones in the use of religion today. For him, God is repackaged and abused by some religious leaders in the economic, social and political exploitations, manipulations and extortions of people who are ignorant and silent in the face of this purportedly contorted or configured sacred and unknown. Sanni posits that despite religious desire to monopolize truth, religious places should provide a forum where people's voices could be heard. As much as religion desires to be the voice of the voiceless, Sanni contends that religious leaders should make it a space where people can express their views.

Sanni argues that the crux of religious exploitation and extortion is that the intelligence of the individuals in the religious places of worship is wallowing in their imposed ignorance and silence. He describes religion as transactional regarding the religious leaders' rhetoric and injunction to the people, especially the needy, to sow material seed to the Church in anticipation or exchange of eternal rewards and divine blessings. He goes ahead to postulate that apart from poverty and ignorance, people's intelligence are manipulated in such a way that religious leaders control how people think and what they know. They are usually controlled to think within the box in such a way that will be to the advantage of the religious leaders and the Church. For Sanni, the above personal interest is often supported by religious books like the Bible and the Quran, which these religious exploiters and manipulators reference as the justification and foundation of their religious authority. Consequently, Sanni contends that "the silence that is being imposed at the expense of facing the lived reality of people needs to be addressed [and that] people need to be awakened to the deceptive use of religion for economic extortion, social disintegration and individual manipulation" (SANNI 2021, 83). Ultimately, Sanni posits that religion constitutes the basis of disorientation in Africa and that based on this, "God needs to be recreated in such a way that voices are heard, and human realities are not shut down the same way colonialism used religion to obscure the injustice still being perpetrated against Africans" (SANNI 2021, 83). Having highlighted Sanni's view with regard to the re-imagination of religious opium and silence, it is now appropriate to examine his argument regarding the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in contemporary African society using the name of God.

### **Examining Sanni's Argument on the Role of Religion in Promoting Silence and Extortion in Contemporary African (Nigerian) Society Using the Name of God.**

This section focuses on the examination of Sanni's argument with regard to the role of religion in fostering silence and extortion in the contemporary African (Nigerian) society, using the name of God. Here, I will show the strengths and weaknesses of Sanni's argument.

Sanni's view that religion played a crucial role in advancing colonial agenda in traditional African societies is highly defensible. In traditional African society, religion permeates every aspect of life, culture, and morality, especially in Northern Nigeria. In the North, for instance, the colonial administrators used the Emirs, who were both the religious, cultural and political heads. They were able to record much success because the Northern Nigerian society was deeply religious. It is worthy to note that the colonialists could not make much headways, at the initial stage, when they utilized only their arms and diplomacy. However, after carefully examining the African traditional society and the realization that these societies were deeply religious, they decided to adopt this more powerful tool of religion, which fostered, deeply, the colonial agenda in Africa. In the South-Eastern part of Nigeria, for instance, the colonialists could not record much success, until they keyed into the politics of *Chukwu* (a religious

concept), which is just a deity in Arochukukwu and deceptively altered the Igbo traditional religious thought, which is originally and authentically polytheistic in nature by preaching to the traditional Igbo African that the concept of *Chukwu* corresponds the idea of the supreme being in the Western thought. The agenda in fostering this religious monotheism on the Igbo African society, using the concept of *Chukwu*, as corresponding to the monotheistic Western conception of the Supreme God by the missionary, is to control and manipulate the Igbo African society to foster their colonial agenda. Thus, the instrument of religion played a very significant role in the hands of the colonial administrators in carrying their wicked agenda on African soil. In view of this, Sanni's argument regarding the role religion played in traditional African society in promoting extortion and manipulation of Africans is highly tenable.

I agree with Sanni that today's African society still manifests the colonial debris of manipulation, extortion and exploitation using the instrumentality of religion. In contemporary Nigerian society, the instrument of religion is still being utilized in brainwashing and deceiving its adherents. This idea of religion as a tool of deception informed why religious critics like Marx and Nietzsche do not spare religion. Marx, for instance, described religion as the opium of the people. Opium can be likened to narcotics, which, when taken by the addicts, deceptively creates the impression that all is well with the addict. But, upon the disappearance of the narcotics, the addict comes to the realization that his condition has been worsened and that he has been deceived by such narcotics, which, at the same time, he cannot live without, as he has become completely addicted to it. Such narcotics reflect the exact role religion has been utilized to play in deceiving and extorting its adherents in today's Nigerian society.

Similarly, Nietzsche describes religion as fictitious and highly deceptive and consequently calls for the abolition of religion, which, for him, makes humans lazy and incapable of thinking and rationally tackling their challenges in the world of nature. He, therefore, advocates the abolition of religion, which he further describes as highly parasitic (NIETZSCHE, 2004). The above views, as expressed by the above scholars, reinforce Sanni's view that religion is still being utilized as an instrument of oppression, extortion and deception in contemporary Nigerian society.

To further buttress the above points, the following example might be helpful. In the area where I was living (Ikenga Junction, Ogurugu Road, Nsukka LGA of Enugu State), I experienced a crowd of people one afternoon, trooping out from a particular church, after their worship, with long canes in their hands. When I enquired from one of the worshippers why they were all carrying long canes, I was told that they went to flog the devil. I started wondering, in my mind, how the devil, believed to be a spirit, could be flogged with a physical cane. A similar incident happened somewhere, where a pastor would pray and somebody would receive an alert described as "miracle alert," after which the entire congregation of the church will be tasked to sow a seed or contribute money for a project, if they wish to receive their own miracle alerts. However, on a closer inspection, it was discovered that these pastors conspired with some agents to deceive and brainwash the entire church congregation with the miracle alert.

To further buttress the above, some religious leaders connive with agents, who are paid to pretend to be blind or lame, and to deceive people that they were healed during a deliverance or prayer session of the church. These corroborate Sanni's view on the role of religion in fostering deception, manipulation and extortion in today's Nigerian society, just like what was obtainable in colonial African society, the only difference being that such manipulation, deception and extortion have assumed new looks.

The role of religion as an instrument of deception, manipulation and extortion in contemporary Nigerian politics cannot also be overlooked. The just concluded 2023 Nigerian election is highly illustrative of the above point, a situation where fake religious leaders and bishops were hired by one of the contestants just to deceive Nigerians that his candidature has religious backing. It is interesting to note here that such a candidate recognized how powerful religion can be and the role it can play in manipulating people's thinking and beliefs, especially in the African (Nigerian) society. This is only possible because religion has permeated every aspect of African life. The religious leaders' silence in the face of these abuses, deceptions and manipulations by the Nigerian politicians is even more worrisome. The above reinforces Sanni's argument with regard to the role of religion in fostering extortion, deception and manipulation in today's Nigerian society.

There is no gainsaying that in contemporary African society, religion has become in the hands of Africans, what it was in the hands of the colonial administrators. It is also needless to reassert that most religious leaders in Nigeria today use it as an instrument of oppression, manipulation, extortion and brainwashing, as Sanni rightly pointed out. Thus, what is happening in Africa, today, is what I will describe as "colonization of Africans by Africans." This further justifies Sanni's position that the debris of disempowerment, injustices, extortion and manipulation is still very much part of African society and that these manipulations, injustices and extortions "have only assumed new outlooks and language thus plunging many Africans into silence in the face of what is often presented as sacred and unknown" (SANNI 2021, 71). The above underscores the need for a critical investigation into the concepts of religion, God etc., as well as the abuse perpetrated by religious leaders and their adherents in the name of God and religion. In view of this, Sanni's philosophical critique of the assumed connections between God and human beings, as concretized in the ideas of religion, silence and extortion, is highly topical and imperative.

Sanni's intellectual ability to explore the concept of silence as the highest form of oppression with regard to religious oppression, injustices and manipulations is highly commendable. Many religious scholars have not looked at the concept of silence within the context of religious oppression, manipulation and extortion as the highest form of violence but paid attention to mere physical violence, as perpetrated by some religious fundamentalists and terrorists. This attitude of silence, which I will describe as the "terrorism of silence" might be more oppressive, violent and manipulative than physical violence. Sanni's efforts to bring this type of violence in the guise of silence to the intellectual arena is highly commendable, which may likely fuel more scholarships in this area.

Sanni's argument that the problem of poverty is a contributing factor towards the proliferation of prosperity churches in Nigeria, which invariably and deceptively promise to help people lift them out of their social and economic problems, is a true reflection of contemporary Nigerian society. In Nigerian society today, countless churches deceive their members with the promise of making them rich and lifting them out of poverty. Some go to the extent of talking about miracle alerts, as already discussed above, which their adherents unreflectively and uncritically accept without questioning, while these religious leaders, at the same time, suck these members from the back. This can be likened, as Sanni rightly pointed out, to the colonial religious strategy of promising Africans of a better life, after life on earth, while siphoning their resources from the backdoor. It can also be likened to the colonial administrative strategy of promising Africans development while at the same time, deceptively stealing their human, mineral and other natural resources.

Sanni's position that the existence of religion is not necessarily divine (even though he does not discountenance religious experience and its connection to the sacred or unknown) is defensible (SANNI 2021, 79). This is because, humans first existed before religion and not religion before humans. In fact, it can be argued that religion was created to serve the interest of man's existence in the world of nature. Thus, it might be contested that the impression most religious leaders create on their adherents with regard to religion having a divine origin is highly erroneous. It is this erroneous impression that some religious leaders capitalize on to extort, manipulate and exploit their adherents while creating fear in them in view of the unknown or the sacred. To accomplish their goal, such religious leaders pose as divinely sanctioned mediators or intermediaries between the divine and humans.

Sanni's analysis of the concept of silence, extortion and manipulation in the face of the sacred or the unknown should be extended to the attitude of some religious leaders, who in today's Nigerian society, intentionally remain mute in the face of evil oppression and other vices going on in the society, due to their selfish interest. Some religious leaders, who are expected to speak out and condemn evil, for example, in the political and other areas of life, intentionally choose to remain silent in the face of vices, especially when they receive monetary rewards from the perpetrators of these vices in the society. To demonstrate, some religious places of worship and their leaders became tools for campaigns in the recently concluded 2023 general elections, even when the candidates of their choice (obviously known for criminality and other vices) are corrupt and known by the electorates for corruption. Instead, they remain silent regarding the vices of their candidate of choice and engage in open confrontation and condemnation of the opposition candidate, which fails to bring monetary gifts and other rewards to their churches or ministries. This constitutes an abuse of religion. Worse still, the members of such religious organizations are brainwashed by their leaders to support a candidate, even when such a candidate is obviously known for corruption. Because of their selfish interest, these religious leaders market and project the candidates of their choice to their members as chosen and ordained candidates of the divine.

To further buttress the above point, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian society, the youths who indulge in money rituals, after shedding the blood of innocent people to make their evil wealth, engage some religious leaders, by giving them huge monetary gift, to justify or legitimize their ill-gotten wealth. Upon splashing their ill-gotten wealth on these religious leaders, they (religious leaders) immediately become tools in the hands of these ritualists and criminals who utilize them to deceive society into believing that such wealth is a blessing from the divine. They choose to remain silent on the bad side of the wealth and, instead, engage in convincing society that the acquirers of such wealth are enjoying the blessings from God. Sanni's concept of silence should be critically and constructively extended to these unexplored and often abused areas of religion.

Despite the above strength of Sanni's argument with reference to the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in present-day Nigerian society, there are some objections or weaknesses to his view. To illustrate, a major weakness in Sanni's argument on God, religion and extortion is his failure to discuss the concept of God, despite that the main point of his entire argument on religion, extortion and manipulation rests on such concept. Even though Sanni claims, in his article, that his main objective is not to prove the existence of God, it is clear that his major arguments rest on the concept. The philosopher or the critically-minded reader may not take his argument seriously, as such, because the main point of his argument rests on the concept of God, whom he failed to meaningfully discuss in his article. To buttress further, the appearance of the concept of God in the title of his article: "In the Name of God? Religion, Silence and Extortion," makes the discussion of the concept of God, highly imperative. This is a crucial point Sanni's article fails to establish. Thus, it is highly inexcusable and objectionable on the side of Sanni to merely assume the concept of God, without a reasonable discussion of this concept in his article. In highly philosophical and critical papers, major ideas are meaningfully discussed and not taken for granted. This is a major weakness on Sanni's side, as he took the concept of God for granted without reasonably discussing it, even though his major argument depends on it.

Sanni's critique of religion as the instrument of oppression, injustice and extortion in the hands of the religious leaders, even though very logical and truly obtainable in the present Nigerian society, does vitiate some of the positive roles religion plays in the present-day African (Nigerian) society. In the Nigerian contemporary society and in the world at large, where bad leadership and other forms of vices constitute the order of the day and where there is man's inhumanity against man, people tend to lose hope with regard to existence and drift into a situation of hopelessness. Consequently, a serious search for the meaning of life and human existence will be immediately activated in people's minds. When this search for the meaning of life and the purpose of existence is fruitless and cannot get any answer, people drift into the meaninglessness of life and purposelessness of existence. This situation of hopelessness, meaninglessness and purposelessness of life and existence can lead to conditions of suicide, where people take their own lives consequent upon their interpretation of life and existence as meaningless

and purposeless. It is in this situation of hopelessness of existence and meaninglessness of life that religion comes in to provide hope to man's hopeless condition and meaning to man's meaningless life by giving the concerned individuals hope and meaning to their life and existence through the postulation of an ultimate reality, higher than the human reality, that constitutes the meaning of life and purpose of existence. Even though the postulation of such transcendent reality might not be logically tenable, it serves an important reason for humans to continue to find meaning in life and purpose for existence.

Furthermore, religion also plays an important role in taming the animalistic tendencies in humans. Without religious morality and teachings, human beings might be wallowing in the Hobbesian state of nature, where there is man's inhumanity against man and where there is the survival of the fittest. Religious morality and teachings play an important role by developing people's conscience and encouraging peaceful co-existence between individuals in society and the world at large.

Sanni should also explore, more deeply and constructively, the role of African agency in fostering colonial agenda in traditional African society and not blame the evils of colonialism in African soil entirely on the instrumentality of religion. Most African leaders played negative roles in helping the colonial masters carry out their wicked agenda on African soil, due to their selfish interests. The Emirs in Northern Nigeria, the *Obas* in Western Nigeria and the Warrant Chiefs in Eastern Nigeria all played dangerous roles in fostering the colonial agenda on African society. Sanni should, therefore, explore more constructively and more deeply the roles of these African agents in promoting colonialism in Africa, aside the role played by religion. This will give his argument much balance with regard to the role of colonialism and religion in Africa.

Sanni also employed the concepts of 'metaphysics' and 'ontology' in coining his ideas of 'metaphysical ontology' (SANNI 2021, 72) and religious metaphysical teachings' (SANNI 2021, 80) in his article, without giving much clarification regarding these concepts. Arguably, the concept of metaphysics, for instance, is very broad, which requires thorough clarification within the context of its use. Even though Sanni tries to do this only with metaphysics, leaving out the concept of ontology, his clarification is not enough to carry the average reader along. As such, the average reader is left to guess the meaning or the sense in which such concept(s) is employed within the context of the article. This can create confusion in the mind of the average reader and possibly lead to a misunderstanding or misreading of Sanni's idea with regard to religion and, as it concerns metaphysics and even ontology. Thus, it is this paper's opinion that Sanni should thoroughly clarify the above concepts of metaphysics, including ontology and, most importantly, a reasonable discussion of the concept of God, as I earlier pointed out, in his next article.

For instance, one may object to the idea that a discussion of certain concepts like God and others is not necessary for a work of this nature. However, it is the opinion of this paper that such concepts, especially the concept of God, as pointed out earlier above, are the fulcrum or foundation upon which Sanni's entire

argument revolves. As such, they require clarification and reasonable discussion in the work (especially the concept of God) to carry the average reader along, from the inception of the work, to forestall a misreading or misunderstanding of Sanni's argument or view.

### **Conclusion**

This study examines Sanni's argument on the role of religion in promoting silence and extortion in contemporary African (Nigerian) society, leveraging on the name of God, to determine the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. The study highlighted Sanni's idea of religious silence and its colonial links, explored his view of silence in the face of the unknown and x-rayed his attempt at re-imagining religious opium and silence. The study supported Sanni's view that the colonial debris of disempowerment, injustices, manipulation and extortion, using the instrumentality of religion, are still very much part of African society today. It posits, as Sanni also maintains, that the only difference is that these manipulations, extortions and injustices have assumed new outlooks and language and consequently plunged many Africans into silence in the face of what is often presented as 'sacred' and 'holy.' Despite agreeing with Sanni's position in most areas, the study also identified some weaknesses in his argument. For example, Sanni did not shed adequate light on the positive values of religion. This could give the reader the false impression that religion is completely evil or that it was solely responsible for the colonial exploitation of Africa. Also, his failure to discuss the concept of God, despite the fact that his entire argument in the paper rested on such concept (God). The study also recommends that Sanni take care of such weaknesses in his next article.

### **Declarations**

\*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work

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