

## **Moralizing the Relationship between Religious Experience and the Nigerian Society**

Chidiebere Obi

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jrhr.v14i1.12>

### ***Abstract***

*Religious experience is a claim that direct experience of the supernatural or God is possible; it is the belief that a certain communication can take place between man and God. This particular belief has served as one of the proofs for the reality and existence of God. Outcomes of religious experience may be in the form of prophesy, miracles, money rituals, protection rituals, speaking in tongues, falling under the anointing and other charismatic displays. This (religious experience) has raised a number of epistemic issues in philosophy as a result of the nature of the 'beings' (man and God) involved. Man by nature is finite and material while God is infinite and immaterial, therefore whatever experience that occurs between them must raise some questions. Most of these questions border on the veridicality of religious experience, that is, how true is religious experience? In spite of these questions on religious experience, the world today is agog with so many claims of religious experience. Nigeria, for example, is replete with myriad of claims of religious experiences which are prevalent in both our traditional and foreign religions. This paper tries to interrogate the impact of these religious experiences in Nigeria by subjecting such impact to moral justifiability. After exploring the arguments on religious experience and its impact on the Nigerian society, the paper submits that a line should be drawn between what may be genuine religious experience and its abusive version with sole purpose of defrauding the gullible citizens which is morally condemnable.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Religious Experience, Mysticism, Mystical Experience, Nigerian Society, Moralizing.

### **Introduction**

The impact of religion on the human society cannot be underestimated as people are more swayed by their religious beliefs than the laws of the land. This explains some of the irrational things some people do as a result of their religious convictions such as; suicide bombing in the name of religion, using fellow human person for rituals due to some religious convictions, taking harmful substances based on the directive from a religious leader, amongst others. On the other hand, religion has also impacted positively on the human society; one wonders how the human society would have been like without some *positive* religious teachings and beliefs.

Religion plays all these roles due to the springboard provided it by religious experience, that is, the claim or belief that direct contact with God is a reality. The awe religion inculcates in the adherents is made possible by the belief that the living can commune with the divine. All the religions of the world have their foundations on this belief. The Christian religion has its basis on religious experience, that is, that Jesus Christ (the founder) was sent by God and he always communes with God the father; he made appearances to his followers after his death which convinced his followers that he has risen and they began to worship Jesus as the risen Messiah, Christ and the son of God. Sequel to this, they started preaching him all over the world which marks a leap from Judaism to Christianity. Moses, the founder of Judaism was reputed to have had a direct experience where he conversed with God interpersonally on the Mount Sinai. Sidghartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism gained enlightenment after he encountered the Absolute. Muhammad, the founder of the Islamic religion also had an experience with Angel Gabriel before founding the religion.

Following this trend and knowing the importance of religious experience in religion, a good number people today have claimed to have had experienced God and consequently, founded their own religious community. This has led to the proliferation of religious affiliations. Nigeria is a typical example of a country that is fraught with numerous churches with different claims of religious experiences. Founders of these churches have always anchored their beliefs on different encounters they have had with god which they usually backed up through prophesying to members, falling under anointing, speaking in tongues, performing ‘miracles’, amongst other means. Traditional religions in Nigeria have also embarked on the publicity of their claimed experience with the divine with accompanying promises of prosperity, healing, fame, protection, amongst others. The resultant effects of these developments on the Nigerian society are quite enormous and counterproductive. For instance, a good number of Nigerian youths today are made lazy by these acclaimed spiritual leaders who always brainwashed them into believing that there is quicker route to wealth. Oftentimes, these youths are requested to perform all kinds of ritual (even with human parts) in order to make end meet. There have been cases where these acclaimed spiritual leaders duped people of their belongings in the guise of acting on the directives of their god. These bad resultant effects can also be seen in the family and political settings of the Nigerian society (we shall discuss this later in the work).

This raises the following questions: what is religious experience and what are the philosophical issues with it? What has been the Nigerian experience with religious experience? What are the moral implications of this experience? How do we delineate the boundaries of religious experience in order to avoid its abuse? These are the questions the paper will try to resolve.

## **What is religious experience and what are the philosophical issues with it?**

**What is religious experience?** Religious experience is the claim that the direct contact with the Divine, the Absolute, the One, God is a reality. Norman Habel *et al* (1993) defines it as the structured way in which a believer enters into a relation with the sacred or gain awareness with it within a particular religious sect. Religious experience presupposes that:

- i. there is a reality beyond this physical realm,
- ii. this reality is knowable through a special and structured process and experience,
- iii. experience of this reality is not imaginary but perceptual and real, and
- iv. the existence of this reality is established by this experience.

The knowledge and information from religious experience is regarded by those who have had such experience as not conceptual or imaginary but perceptual and real.

Citing William James', *The Varieties of Religious Experience* published in 1902, Lacey outlined what termed, 'common core' to all (genuine) religious experiences:

1. Religious experiences are experiential, like perception. They are quite different from thinking about God or trying to imagine God's nature.
2. However, they aren't connected to any particular mode of sense perception (sight, hearing, etc.). Sometimes they can be, e.g., the person may feel God is speaking to them; but the 'inner words' are not normally everything about the experience. They are part of an awareness that transcends sense perceptions, that doesn't have sensory content.
3. The person feels they are immediately aware of and connected to God.

4. This awareness tends to block out everything else temporarily, perhaps even to the degree that the distinction between the person and what they are aware of disappears ('mystical union').

Describing two senses of religious experience, Smith (2015) writes: In the first sense, religious experience means an encounter with the divine in a way analogous to encounters with other persons and things in the world. In the second case, reference is made not to an encounter with a divine being but rather to the apprehension of a quality of holiness or rightness in reality or to the fact that all experience can be viewed in relation to the ground from which it springs. In short, religious experience means both special experience of the divine or ultimate and the viewing of any experience as pointing to the divine or ultimate. We can understand the distinction Smith tried to establish here, that is, that not all experiences of religious experience claim to have encountered God face to face; some will claim to have been taken over by some forces while some will say that they were in a state of total bliss, then, heard a voice speaks to them. Regardless of this distinction, the two senses point to the same thing which is the reality of a transcendental existent as the 'other party' in such encounters. Underhill (1912), underscores the characteristic stages of mystical experience namely:

- a. Awakening stage: this stage is considered the first step towards a mystical goal. Here, one awakens to the reality of the divine order. "This experience, usually abrupt and well-marked, is accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation." (p 169)
- b. Purgation: the awakening stage pushes one into the purgation of all forms of impurities in preparation to the holy encounter. Here, one realizes his imperfections and tries to purge himself of them through discipline and mortification of the flesh. "The first thing that the self observes when it turns back upon itself in that awful moment of lucidity [of awakening] is the horrible contrast between its clouded contours and the pure sharp radiance of the Real;

between its muddled faulty life, its perverse self-centered drifting, and [the clarity of the transcendent]." (p.200)

- c. **Illumination:** this stage is the culmination of the awakening and purgative stages; it is "a state which includes in itself many of the stages of contemplation, visions and adventures of the soul ...." Regardless of the joyous nature of this stage, many mystic writers argued that it not a stage of final union with the absolute which was the reason Underhill warns of its danger: "In persons of feeble or diffuse intelligence and above all in victims of self-regarding spirituality, this deep absorption in the sense of Divine Reality may easily degenerate into a monoideism. Then the shady side of Illumination, a selfish preoccupation with transcendental joys, the spiritual gluttony condemned by St. John of the Cross, comes out. (p. 246)" The awakening, purgative and illuminative stages are the first of a mystic's life and many mystics do not go beyond the illuminative stage (even a non-mystic can experience the illumination)
- d. **The dark night of the soul:** this stage is experienced by strongest of mystics and it is marked by total purgation of the euphoria and joy of the illumination. The task now is to learn to "dissociate the personal satisfaction of mystical vision from the reality of mystical life." (p. 170) In other words, the mystic must overcome all attachment to self and ego (to selfish ego) in order to merge with the great One in, under, behind and through all things.
- e. **Union:** passing through the dark night of the soul will usher the mystic into the union with the absolute which is the last stage. Unlike the mere perception and enjoyment of the transcendent as in illumination, here, the mystic becomes one with it. Union is ineffable

Many have claimed to have had one religious experience or another through prayers, worship, meditation, extended religious exercises such as crusade, set-apart, camping and fellowshiping,

fasting, amongst others. During some of these religious events, some people experience: falling under anointing, prophesying, speaking in tongues, et cetera. Some affiliations have days for miracle sessions and consultations, people who attend such programmes do so with the conviction that the organizers have had religious experiences and they are coming to tap from such.

Religious or mystical experience presents the possibility of man who by nature is finite having a perceptual experience with god who by nature is infinite; thus, raises some metaphysical and epistemological concerns. We shall now discuss some of these concerns.

### **Philosophical Concerns with Religious Experience.**

There have been so many philosophical arguments on the veridicality of religious experience. We all are at liberty to have all kinds of experiences but the problem is usually the interpretations we give to these our experiences and the authenticity of these interpretations; that is to say that to have an experience is one thing and to interpret this experience is another, it is within the bedrock of the nature of the interpretations given to different religious experiences that the problem of religious experience is embedded, thus, the philosophical concerns with religious experience. For the purpose of this work, we shall discuss the following: *argument on the unverifiability of religious experience, argument on experience, interpretation, perception and inference, and argument on the conflicting religious experience*

#### **a. Arguments on the Unverifiability of Religious Experience**

The foundation of most of the arguments against religious experience is the fact that such can not be empirically verified. This view was popularized by the logical positivists who claimed that it is only sense experience can guarantee indubitable knowledge and sequel to this, any claim of knowledge that cannot be empirically verifiable, should be

regarded as nonsensical. Religious experience, if subjected to this kind of proof, becomes doomed. This is because, the claim of experiencing God cannot be empirically verified. This view by the logical positivists was influenced by Wittgenstein (1922) who argued that language must picture reality, that is, whatever thing that can be said or claimed, must have its basis on sense perception and this underscores the reality of knowledge claim. On discovering that there is more to reality than what the senses can prove, Wittgenstein (1953) argued for a language game; which is that, just like games we play that come with their respective rules, language should follow suit. This simply means that every language should be understood in accordance to its contextual rules. Therefore, sense experience should not be the sole yardstick for measuring the veridicality or otherwise of any claim of knowledge, rather, the senses are one of many of such yardsticks. On this view, for one to understand what a religious experient is saying, one has to first, understand the workings of mysticism or even experience such in order to comprehend it and any attempt to use sense experience as the basis for assessing religious experience will amount to empirical imperialism. Schleiermacher (1893) argues: ... the empiricists' restriction of experience to sense-observation. There are, he held, other sorts of perceptions ('intuitions', *Anschauungen*), which give knowledge of objective reality. Religious faith is based upon a distinctive sort of non-sensory apprehension, what he called an 'intuition of the infinite', or of a reality upon which we are absolutely dependent.

Deducing from the above views, one can argue that Wittgenstein's later take on the contextual meaningfulness gives rise to the problem of private language which brings about distortion in the use of language, that is, anyone can make claim of anything and insists on its veridicality. Applying such to religious experience will breed abuse and fakery where many would claim to have experienced God but may be false.

### **b. Argument on Experience, Interpretation, Perception and Inference**

Every experience must be an experience of something as something, that is, there is no how one can say that he/she had an experience of nothing, one should be able to explain or interpret what he/she experienced. It means that to have an experience is one thing and another is to interpret or explain the experience. Capturing this fact, Copleston (2002) argued: “to experience ..., is to experience something as something, as x or y. ... we cannot distinguish between the interpretation and the uninterpreted experience.” One can have an auditory experience or visual experience of things. For instance, while walking on my street, I suddenly heard a sharp sound, one thing is clear: I had an auditory experience of a sound but when I interpret this my experience to be a sound from a gun, I may be mistaken because, I only had an auditory experience and not a visual one. It may turn out to be a sound from the bursting of a tyre. It may be true that a religious experient had an encounter, acted upon, and/or even heard a sound but he/she may be mistaken when this his/her experience is interpreted to be caused by God. What if the religious experient claims that what he had was a visual experience, that is, that he saw or perceived God?

Reacting to the above question, Zangwill (2017) holds that the perceptual knowledge of infinity is impossible, that is, in line with God’s omni properties, it becomes illogical for one to argue for God’s perceptual experience but such can be inferred. He argued:

The epistemological problem with God is mathematical. The argument is that it is impossible for us to grasp a conception of infinity, in the sense of completed totality, on the basis of sense experience - the evidence our senses. This is because all perceptual experiences have finite content. Perceptual experiences of a thing, or of a fact, represents something non-infinite. (Can we perceptually represent the infinite divisibility of a line?) It seems

that we can *conceive* of infinity but not *perceive* it. The question is how we can conceive it if we cannot perceive it[?]

What Zangwill was arguing against here is that any claim of the perceptual knowledge of God is reducing God to material being which is idolatrous; “a person who believes in religious perceptual experience has an idolatrous conception of God, and the thought is that if we are going to have a conception of God it should not be an idolatrous one”. He rather, argued that God can be inferred but not perceived. For instance, when miracles happen, one can infer that God is behind such happenings and not that he saw God behind all. The summary of the case Zangwill was trying to make is that; any claim of perceptual religious experience is illogical and goes against the nature of god as an infinite being with omni properties. One can criticize Zangwill by arguing that God, with his omni properties can bring about any situation or event of choice. As all-knowing and all-powerful being (omni attributes/properties which Zangwill did not deny), he may wish to make himself perceptible to a finite being.

Another point here is that, like we stated earlier that every experience must be experience of something as something, therefore, one cannot have experience of nothing. Most mystical writers (including William James) described the last stage of mystical experience (that is, union with divine) as ineffable. One, at this stage, becomes overwhelmed by his presence that the awe experienced will make it impossible for such to be explained or described. This claim is begging questions: since our experience must be experience of something as something, is it then, possible for one to have an experience that cannot be described? Does that not amount to one having experience of nothing? Saying that such a state/stage is ineffable, has this not said something about the state/stage? A good number of religious experients do come out of this last stage of mystical process with information or message and this raises an epistemological

question: is it possible to acquire information or knowledge in an unconscious state?

**c. Argument on the Conflicting Religious Experience**

Due to the myriad number of religious affiliations, there are always conflicting religious claims. Religious experience varies from one affiliation to another with conflicting claims. Sometimes, these conflicting experiences can occur within one denomination; there have been millions of cases within Christianity for instance, where different religious leaders and pastors gave conflicting prophesies on a particular issue with a unified claim that it was revealed by God. The question becomes: which one do we adhere to? Sequel to these inherent conflicts, some critics have denied the veridicality of religious experience. We can argue that conflicting accounts does not necessarily defeat the reality of a thing. Kwan (2006) argued that:

Consider the conflict of witnesses in the courts. It would be indeed stupid to reject all their accounts just because they conflict! It seems to be a rational strategy to try to reconcile their reports as much as possible.... Take another example: suppose a phenomenon occurred very briefly which led to conflicting reports – **A** reported seeing an aeroplane, **B** a spaceship, and **C**, an air balloon. It is absurd to suggest that we should reject all their statements and think that nothing has ever happened! It is possible that one of them may actually be correct. At the very least we should accept the common content of their experiences. *Unidentified flying object*, vague though it is, is not a completely uninformative term.

One can even argue that the fact that a good number of people have had religious experience (not minding how conflictual), has underscored its authenticity. This line of thought is repudiable since not all corporate experience turns out to be authentic. For instance, a group of individuals were strolling down a well tarred road, one of them

looked and saw a pool of water some miles ahead of them; he beckoned on others to come and see what he saw, they all agreed with him (except a few) but getting to that spot, they could not find any pool of water. The fact that many had similar experience does not by any way prove the veridicality of such an experience.

There are uncountable number of arguments on religious experience which we may not exhaust in this work but judging by the ones we have considered so far; we can deduce the enormous controversies embedded in it. These controversies may have arisen in the face of the effects of religious experience on the society. Ordinarily, a topic like religious experience ought not to raise much ado because of its special nature but due to what we experience in our society (Nigeria as a case study) today, it calls for a philosophical review which will help to properly delineate its boundaries.

### **Religious Experience in Nigeria**

Nigeria is one of the most religious countries of the world with plethora of churches and religious affiliations. There is a saying that ‘one cannot see a street in Nigeria without a church’, and this goes a long way to explain how deeply religious Nigerians are. Most of these churches usually engage in rivalry competitions with each other in their bid to attract more members. For instance, there are well publicised selected happenings and events of their churches on newspapers, television stations, social media, etcetera. Some of these selected events may be: video clips of miracles that took place in their churches, testimonies from their adherents, clips of their adherents falling under anointing, amongst other enticing ones. The reason for this publicity is to sway people into joining them. Oftentimes, the leaders of these churches do engage in media fight against each other on social media, each claiming to possess higher power than the others. Epywen (2020) shares this view: “The proliferation of churches and mosques; the littering of roundabouts and every conspicuous place with posters, and signposts,

as well as various religious advertisements on electronic and print media indicate the extent of commercialization of religion in Nigeria.” The springboard for the above stated competition is the claim of religious experience, each of these religious leaders boldly claims to have experienced God and delivers messages from such experience to the adherents. They usually use the phrase: ‘God told me to tell you’. A story was told of a man who bought a new car and went to his pastor for blessing, the pastor told him that God said he will have an accident with the car; he went further to request that the man leaves the car for the church for God’s work. Many families in Nigeria are in disarray as a result of prophesies from men/women of ‘god’ who used ‘god said I should tell you’ to destroy family ties. Some have also commercialised their claim of religious experience to the extend that they claim to have received the secrete to wealth through religious experience, that is, that their god reveals such to them. Sequel to this, some gullible ones have fallen victims in the hands of these self-acclaimed religious experients. A good number of Nigerian youths now, believe that there is a short cut to wealth because, once they visit these acclaimed religious experients, they will be told what to do to attract wealth and such prophesies do not come cheap; some are charged a huge sum of money while some are requested to do human sacrifice in the name of creating wealth. Through this process, many have been duped of their monies and other material valuables.

Young ladies who are desperately in need of husbands, the teeming unemployed youths, political leaders who are contesting for political offices, traders, over ambitious youths, amongst others in Nigeria, all do visit such religious experients for answers and solutions, thus, raises questions: are Nigerians too religious as a result of their being underdeveloped? Or, is Nigeria underdeveloped as a result of their being too religious? The answer to the first question is arguably, yes because, Marx (1843) argued that “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” which entails that the reason why people are religious is as a result of the bad state of things around them such as: unemployment, economic hardship, bad governance, capitalistic exploitations, etcetera. Due to this, people invent the idea of God as a consoler and hope for a better life. Sequel to this, one can say that the reason why Nigerians are too religious is a way of dealing with bad governance and misappropriation of the public commonwealth. In the face of different challenges facing the Nigerian populace, religion becomes an escape route, many would choose spending most of their time in different religious houses in search of a breakthrough. Also, knowing full well that an average Nigerian is in need of economic liberation and is vulnerable, fraudsters now come in the guise of religious experients to deceive and dupe people.

On the other hand, the over religiosity of Nigerians has become counterproductive to the societal development. Due to the ‘manna falling from heaven mentality’ amongst Nigerians, many now believe that all they need to do is to consult a man of god and everything will be sorted out. No one wants to engage in a meaningful job to make end meet. Many Nigerian youths now, engage in internet fraud as a quick way to wealth. They even consult the self-acclaimed religious experients for prophesies on how do be successful in their fraud ventures. Therefore, such mindset breeds laziness and defeatist attitude amongst the citizens and by extension, orchestrates underdevelopment of the larger society. The height of the over-religiosity of Nigerians is exemplified in what may be termed ‘holy clearance’; this is a common phenomenon amongst many Nigerians today where one who wants to travel, marry, sleep, close a business deal or contract, eat, etc would first of all, call a man/woman of god for clearance or approval. Though we are not saying that one cannot pray or ask for prayers before embarking on any of his/her endeavours but the nature and rate with which Nigerians do such is condemnable. Oftentimes, some of these

people they call for 'holy clearance' are fraudsters who are extorting money from the vulnerable ones.

Before concluding this section, one may ask, what kind of god can be consulted in the manner some with which these Nigerian self-acclaimed religious experients do claim? What kind of god would reveal the secret of success to a fraudster? A religious faithful may come up with the defence that God has reason for anything he does and that he shows mercy to whoever he deems fit. Not minding how appealing this may sound, any religious affair that does not have a moral tinge cannot be convincing. Looking at the relationship that exists between the phenomenon of religious experience and the Nigerian society, a question may be asked: is it a good or bad relationship? To do justice to this question, we shall consider the moral justification of religious experience in Nigeria using some selected ethical theories.

### **Moral Justification**

Ethics is the science of human conducts that focuses on the justifiability and classifications of our actions into good and bad. Going by this definition of philosophical ethics, one can argue that religious experience does not fall within the subject matters of ethics; this is because, ethics studies human act (those acts that are willingly and voluntarily performed by man and are proper to him) and religious experience is arguably not a human act since man is possessed by power above him. Despite the appealing nature of this point, we are told by various mystic writers about processes or stages of becoming a mystic which simply means that having a mystical or religious experience is by choice, hence, qualifies it as a human act and not act of man. Some other points that support a moral appraisal of religious experience are that: religious experience has the tendency of being faked or abused; this view can be supported by what obtains in Nigeria where there are traces of fake religious experients who deceive and

dupe the people. Another point is the fact that the outcome or result from religious experience is meant for man's consumption. These points are in favour of an ethical justification or otherwise of religious experience.

To do justice to this, we will have a recourse to two major classifications of ethical theories: deontology and teleology. According to Obi (2019), "deontology derives its name from the Greek word for duty: *deon*. As an ethical theory, it considers what one's duty and obligations are in determining what is morally good or bad." This ethical theory does not consider the consequences of an action (this earns it the name: non-consequentialist ethical theory) while determining its morality but the nature of the act itself and what duty demands from the actor. Therefore, a deontologist does good simply because it is good to do good (that is what duty demands) not because of what we stand to gain by doing good. For the purposes of this work, we shall use Kantian ethics as a representative of deontology. On the other hand, teleology or consequentiality considers an action as good if the consequences of the action are favourable than unfavourable, otherwise, the action is considered bad. This work shall use utilitarianism as a representative of this ethical theory.

We are going to use the first two formulations of Kant's categorical imperative to moralize the relationship religious experience shares with the Nigerian society. Kant (1998) argues that moral duties are derived from moral laws which come to us in the form of imperatives and are categorical in nature, thus, his concept of categorical imperative as distinguished from the hypothetical imperative which is conditional in nature. Obi (2019) holds that: "categorical imperative simply implores one to do the right thing not minding any pleasurable results while hypothetical imperative states, 'if you want to achieve B, you should do A....'" The first two formulations of Kant's categorical imperative are: the universal law formulation and humanity or end in itself formulation. The universal

law formulation admonishes that you should only act according to the maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law. This formulation simply admonishes for a universalizable acts as against non-universalizable ones. Therefore, a good act is that act the moral agent can wish for himself otherwise, bad. On the other hand, humanity or end in itself formulation holds that one should act in such a way that he will always treat humanity, whether in his own self or that of others, never as a means only, but always at the same time as an end. This formulation implores all to always opt only for those acts that do no demean other human persons; hence, a good act reflects this while a bad one is the contrary.

Applying Kant's universal law formulation to the phenomenon of religious experience in Nigeria, we can clearly see that religious experience in Nigeria is not universalizable. This is because, religious experience in Nigeria is marred by fakery where many see in it a lucrative venture to extort the innocent ones. Even at the individual level, some of these religious experients in Nigeria will not wish to be in the shoes of their followers because, they know within themselves that they are fake. This does not mean that one cannot find genuine religious experients in Nigeria but placing it on a scale, the fake ones outweigh the genuine ones. Most civilized countries cannot share the experience as Nigerians do in respect of religious experience. This is because, ninety percent of the push-factors that make Nigerians vulnerable to these fake religious experients have been provided for by the governments of these civilized countries and this will make it impossible for someone to use religious experience to dupe others in those countries. Therefore, the act of religious experience (fakery) as experienced in Nigeria is not universalizable, thus, not morally good. On the other hand, Kant's end in itself formulation would question the place of the Nigerians as regards the phenomenon of religious; that is, have they been treated as ends in themselves or just as means? The truth is that these fake religious experients treat Nigerians as means to

satisfying their individual motives. There was a story of a Nigerian man who paid one of these fake religious experients a huge sum of money to help him secure an American visa but did not succeed in getting the said visa after several trials. One may ask if the said religious experient works at the embassy but the deal was that he will consult his god to make the securing of American visa a reality. There have been myriad of young ladies who have fallen victims of these fakeries as well; many of these Nigerian ladies usually pay monies to these fake religious experients to enable them perform some rituals that will help clear the purported evil forces that are behind their ordeal of not getting married. These stories (and more) go a long way to depict how the image of the Almighty has been mechanized by these fake Nigerian religious experients; they present an image of a mechanized god who can be toyed with at will. Therefore, they are guilty of Kant's second formulation because, they use their fellow humans only as means.

Utilitarianism as a teleological ethical theory considers the consequences of an action in determining its rightness or otherwise. Obi (2019) holds that: "Utilitarianism admonishes that we should always opt for that act which will bring the most happiness or least unhappiness, to the greatest number of people." Therefore, a good act is that one that produces consequences that promote happiness over pain. Does religious experience make most Nigerians happy as against causing them pains? The answer to this question is Janus-faced; this is because, a good number of Nigerians see in religion an escape route from bad governance and economic hardship, places of worship provide refuge for them with the expectation that God will hear their cry and come to their aid. So, believing that there is God who can be communicated to and who can help change the worst to good brings some reprieve to these Nigerians but lack of patience usually pushes many into the hands of these fake religious experients who come with the promise of changing their lots in quicker way which usually turns out to be fake. Therefore, the happiness religious experience brings is

short-lived by this desperation to make end meet in a quickest way possible by some Nigerians. Placing it on a scale, one can say that the pains fake religious experience brings to Nigerians outweigh the happiness it could have brought.

Morally speaking, religious experience in Nigeria today breeds more evil than good. This is contrary to the good nexus between some religious experients in the bible and their societies; for instance, Prophet Amos and the host of others who communicated messages from God undilutedly without seeking for any personal aggrandizements, that of Nigeria has been marred by individual egocentric interests where many of these fake religious experients have exploited the people thereby, inflicting more pain than happiness on them. At this juncture, the questions to ask are; is religious experience wholly not good? How do we approach it so as to relate well with a country like Nigeria? These questions and the accompanying answers are necessary to address any form of misconception that may arise from this work on the reality or otherwise of religious experience. This is because, some may misconstrue the position of this work to mean that religious experience is unreal. To address this, we will now turn to the discourse on the ways we can improve on the relationship between religious experience and the Nigerian society.

### **Recommendation and Conclusion**

From our analysis of religious experience and arguments there in, one can deduce that such an experience is not as simple as our empirical experience. This view was captured by Wilkinson & Campbell (2010):

Many have claimed that their knowledge of God is a matter of direct experience. In some way they encountered him. This is a tricky claim to deal with, because whatever it means to encounter God, it cannot be like meeting another human being. None knows what God looks like – there is nothing he would be like – and we have no identification even for his human form if we believe that

Jesus is God. Of Jesus we have no photographs but only the imaginings of later artists to give us our impressions of him. The ever-present danger of delusion is always with us.

The above view buttresses our point about the phenomenon of religious experience; that is, that even if it happens, it is something that is uncommon and extraordinary as against its practice in Nigeria where it appears so common. Even though the veridicality or otherwise of religious experience lacks any form of consensus epistemic principles, rather depends on the epistemic principles one adopts which can be challenged by opposing ones as well but this work challenges whatever epistemic principles that may be adduced in defence of religious experience in Nigeria especially the influx of fakeries where many are duped in the guise of religious experience.

Swinburne's (2004) defence of religious experience through the principle of credulity accords it a *prima facie* evidential force. An experience has *prima facie* evidential force if the claims of the experience are probably true unless there are positive reasons to the contrary. The idea is that all experiences should be treated as innocent until proven guilty. Religious experiences should also be accorded this then, that is, the claims of religious experiences should be trusted unless counter-evidence can be brought forward. In view of this, we can argue that the way some self-acclaimed religious experients in Nigeria conduct their affairs has provided evidence for us to doubt their veridicality, hence, our use of the word: 'fakery'. The doubt here does not presuppose that religious experience cannot occur but to bring to bare its tendency of being abused as we have in Nigeria today.

Judging by our analysis on experience and the interpretation of experience, one has to be conscious of this in respect of religious experience. Citing Thomas Hobbes, Wilkinson & Campbell hold: ... when man says that God spoke to him in a dream it 'is no more than to say he dreamed that God spake to him.' Thus, one has to be able to discern and decipher a true interpretation from a false one. It may be

true that one had an encounter but concluding that such was with God is a different kettle of fish. Oftentimes, we seem to be convinced by these fakeries by some of the signs they put on during most of the events they organize where people speak in different tongues and some others are falling under anointing. To many, these are signs of a true religious experient. One may ask: what such signs might reveal of God? Does it portray a God of love, or simply God as a kind of master hypnotist – a magician? The gift of tongues goes with comprehensibility and once this is absent, it becomes noise-making. Why must God prove himself by making people fall under anointing when many of his people are being maimed and killed in Nigeria? These questions were necessitated by the sad reality in Nigeria where most people are carried away by these signs thinking that they are evidences of manifestation of religious experience. A critical mind may criticize these questions by arguing that God does what he pleases and that the way of God is not the way of man. In Nigeria, this view may be disputed by confirmed stories of stage-managed miraculous events amongst some of these Nigerian religious experients where people were paid to fall under anointing and pretend to be healed from ailments. Such cannot be what pleases God but man.

This work is raising a clarion call on Nigerians to get rid of the ‘manna falling from the heaven mentality’ which pushes them to becoming victims of these fake religious experients. In the face of economic hardship that has bedevilled most Nigerians, they should be more circumspect in finding a way of making ends meet. This work is not condemning religious experience or its reality, but it is an effort to awaken the minds of Nigerians on the need to be wary of the fakeries in respect of religious experience. Oftentimes, most of the people are carried away by the desperation to succeed that they failed to comprehend how illogical most of these fakeries are; a religious experient who only preaches and reveals secrets to wealth (not minding the means to making this wealth) does not really present the image of

God he/she claims to be professing in a good light (this does not automatically mean that the ones who do not do this are necessarily true ones). It totally stands against all that God represents, hence, illogical and cannot be morally justified (as we have already proven). The image and nature of God as we truly know it cannot be behind the revelation of success to a fraudster as prevalent in Nigeria today.

It is an established logic that something cannot come from nothing, by extension, creatures cannot claim to have created themselves; this presupposes a creator and God who is responsible for our existence. We can commune with him through our approaches to humanity and other ways he may deem fit (since he is God). No one can really empirically verify how God communes with his creatures but this does not mean that we cannot discern when this communication is abused or faked going by the effects such may have on humanity because, God is arguably, man-writ-large. Therefore, anything that negatively affects man will not have been originated in or by God. Though we have freedom of worship in Nigeria, but the government leaving the activities of these fakeries unbridled will pose a huge threat to the society. Government should devise a means of checkmating their activities since some of them even publicise their activities on social media where they sway our youths into joining this ‘quick money trend’. If this is not done, the Nigerian society on the long run, will only have youths who believe that engaging in productive jobs and getting education is waste of time. This is another way of breeding monster that will haunt us some day.

### **Works Cited**

1. Habel, N. et al (1993). “Religious Experiences”. In *Myth, Ritual and the Sacred: Introducing the Phenomena of Religion*. Underdale: University of South Australia.

2. Lacewing, M. "The argument from Religious Experience". [https://www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk/handouts\\_religion/Religious\\_Experience.pdf](https://www.alevelphilosophy.co.uk/handouts_religion/Religious_Experience.pdf)
3. Smith, J. E. "religious experience". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2 Jul. 2015, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-experience>. Accessed 13 May 2022.
4. Underhill, E. (1912). *Mysticism: a study in nature and development of spiritual consciousness*. New York: Dutton/  
<https://home.csulb.edu/~plowentr/underhill.htm>
5. Wittgenstein, L. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
6. Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
7. Ward, K. (2004) *The Case for Religion*. Oxford: One world Publications.
8. Copleston, F. (2002). *Religion and the one*. London: Continuum.
9. Zangwill, N. (2017). "The myth of religious experience revisited". *Open theology*.  
<https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opth-2017-0046/html>
10. Kwuan, K. (2006). "Can Religious Experience provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in the contemporary Analytic Philosophy".  
<https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/KwanReligiousExperienceJustifyBelief2006.pdf>
11. Epywen, U. A. (2020). "The Use and Abuse of Religion: Implications in Nigerian Society". *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ijrs/article/view/208287>
12. Marx, K. (1843). *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Oxford Press, 1970.
13. Obi, C. (2019). *Elementary Ethics: Ethics for the beginners*. Onitsha: Believe publishing.

14. Kant, I. (1998). *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Wilkinson, M. B. & Campbell, H. N. (2010). *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. London: Continuum.
16. Swinburne, R. (2004). *The Existence of God*. Oxford: Clarendon.

*Chidiebere Obi (PhD) is a senior lecturer in Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.*

*E-mail: [ccy.obi@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:ccy.obi@unizik.edu.ng)*