

JESUS CONDEMNS HYPOCRITICAL RELIGIOSITY (MATTHEW 23:1-12): LESSONS FOR NIGERIAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Cletus OBIJIAKU

Nigeria is so deeply religious that she could probably win an award, or appear in the Guinness World Book of Record, as a country, where every month at least one religious group or sect springs up at any corner of the country. This shows that many religious leaders, either self-acclaimed or ecclesiastically appointed/ordained, are emerging in every nook and cranny of the country. These leaders claim divine mandate and inspiration, and consequently regard their directives and instructions as divine oriented. These leaders expect the believers to follow their teachings *in toto*, without allowance for deviation.

Paradoxically, although the teachings of many of these religious leaders are orthodox and morally sound, their real lives contradict their teachings (cf. Matt 23:3), and so there is no witnessing among them. This has led to a crisis of faith in many believers. Accordingly, though the country wears a façade of great religiosity, the hidden reality is religious depravity. This is the reason, amidst the profusely external religiosity in the country, all kinds of criminalities thrive: armed robbery, kidnapping, bribery, corruptions, political killing, etc. In the Catholic circle, M. Kukah mentions some of the worrying trends as tribalism, syncretism and shallowness of faith, among others.¹

The hypocritical attitude of many Nigerian religious leaders (Christians, the case in point) is a replica of that of the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-12. Studying and

exposing this text exegetically, this paper argues that Jesus' total condemnation of hypocrisy is a confirmation that hypocrisy is a complete aberration of genuine religiosity. Such yields nothing else but chaos or anarchy. The faithful are therefore advised not to follow the bad examples of hypocritical leaders.

The Context of Matthew 23:1-12

This text falls within the section on Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem (21-25). Structurally, the Gospel of Matthew consists of six narratives and five discourses (sermons) woven together concentrically or symmetrically.² The fifth discourse (23-25) is on Jesus' condemnation of the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders and his discussion on the end-time. Some scholars regard Matthew's gospel as pro-Jewish (cf. 5:18; 10:6; 15:24; 23:3); but some others consider it anti-Jewish. In many instances, Jesus calls Jewish religious leaders 'hypocrites' (Matt 6:2, 5, 16; 15:7; 22:18; 23:13ff; 24:51). This is due to their religious insincerity and the obstacle they pose to the teachings of Jesus.

D. Harrington terms the whole of Matthew 19-23 "Opposition to Jesus".³ It could be said that the context of Matthew 23:1-12 is that of opposition. The parable of the labourers hired at different hours but paid the same amount is a response to the Jews, who thought that salvation was for them alone (20:1-16). Jesus expels traders from the temple angrily, to the consternation and indignation of the chief priests and scribes (21:1-17); and this led to their questioning his authority (21:23-27). Jesus chides them indirectly in the parables of the two sons (21:28-32) and the wicked tenants (21:33-46). But for the crowd, the chief priests and the scribes could have arrested him (21:45-46). The reproach continues in the parable of the non-interested invitees to a wedding banquet, who killed the servants of the inviter (22:1-14). The opponents tried to trap Jesus with the questions on the tribute to Caesar (22:15-22), the resurrection of the dead (22:23-33) and

2. Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel according to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (NJB)*, eds Raymond E. Brown et al. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 630-674, at 633.

3. Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 5.

the greatest commandment (22:33-40).

Given the indocility and obduracy of the scribes and the other religious leaders, Jesus comes out directly to scold them and to warn them of their hypocrisy (23:1-36). Harrington, commenting on the Gospel of Matthew, says:

The scribes and Pharisees – the religious and intellectual leaders whom many modern Jews view as the founders of post-biblical Judaism – are caricatured and criticized. Their synagogues are called 'synagogues of the hypocrites'. They represent an unbending and heartless legalism, in opposition to the free and compassionate Jesus. This negative attitude toward the opponents reaches a climax in chapter 23 with the 'woes' against the scribes and Pharisees on account of their religious pride, their shutting the kingdom of heaven, their casuistry, and their hypocrisy.⁴

Reading the Gospel of Matthew, one discovers that even though the author was most probably a Jew, who used the Jewish Torah to prove that Jesus was the Messiah being awaited, he had many issues with the Jews, especially their religious leaders. S. Sandmel opines that the anger of the author (traditionally Matthew) "boils over into a unique, unparalleled specimen of invective" in chapter 23.⁵

The Exposition of the Text

This section studies Matthew 23:1-12 exegetically, bringing out some theological implications. The verses are grouped according to themes.

The Kathedra (Seat) and the Hypocrisy of the Pharisee and Scribes (Vs 1-3)

Apart from the NT, the primary sources of information on *hoi Pharisaioi* (the Pharisees) include Josephus (ca. AD 90) and Rabbinic Literature (ca. AD 200). Some scholars opine that the NT's negative presentation of the Pharisees is a reflection of the early Christians' polemic against Jewish and rabbinic religious authority and leadership, with which they were in conflict.⁶

4. Ibid., 20.

5. S. Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 68.

6. Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1994), 782-783.

Josephus calls the Pharisees *hairēsis* (a sect, school of thought), the members of which were very influential and lived a simple life. They were opposed to the aristocrats (among whom were priests and Sadducees), who lived a very comfortable and ostentatious life. The Pharisees “affirmed the influence of divine activity on human life, the joint effect of human freedom and fate, and reward and punishment in the afterlife”; and these were at variance with the traditional teachings and attitudes of the Jews.⁷ Though some of them were among the ruling class, majority were “subordinate officials, bureaucrats, judges and educators”, who sought a social change, based on the covenant with Yahweh.⁸ Allegedly, they have the accurate interpretation of the Law. This information gathered from other sources notwithstanding, some of the negative NT views on the Pharisees still have some historical backing. The account given of them during Queen Alexandra's reign shows that they wielded great authority, opposed other leaders, and attacked their enemies.⁹ Their interest in interpreting the Law resulted in the extended and cumbersome commentary on the Law, which is best seen in the later Rabbinic Movement. “The Pharisees accepted also oral traditions of the elders (Mt 15:2; Mk 7:5), which was [*sic*] attributed to a chain of elders which went all the way back to Moses. These traditions erected a 'fence' about the Law...”¹⁰ Their overzealousness about the law could have led them to falter. Their quest for power and revenge could have prompted them to use every arsenal to destroy any perceived enemy. Jesus' teaching was significantly different from theirs, and so he incurred their wrath.

The scribes (*hoi grammateis*) were important personalities in Mesopotamian and Egyptian ancient civilisation, for they were the ones who documented data concerning government, trade, finance, religion, society, etc. Not all kings and authority figures were literate. Even the literate ones relied heavily on the activities of the scribes, whose advice could not be dispensed with. They were in the courts of David (2 Sam 8:17; 20:25), Solomon (1 Kgs

7. Anthony J. Saldarini, “Pharisees,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*, Vol. 5, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 289-303, at 302.

8. Saldarini, “Pharisees,” in *ABD*, 302.

9. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 13:410-415 in *The Works of Josephus*, Complete and Unabridged (Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 363-364.

10. John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972), 668.

4:3) and many other Israelite kings (2 Kgs 12:11; 18:18, 37; 25:19). In Judaism, scribes like Ezra were the transmitters and interpreters of the law (Ezra 7:1-7; Neh 8:1-3). They had the ability of judging individual cases. Jeremiah 8:8 gives the first hint of the negative aspect of the scribes: “How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us’? But, behold, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie.”

In the NT, the scribes are very prominent in their opposition to Jesus. Being the custodians and the interpreters of the Law, they felt threatened when Jesus claimed authority above the Law, and people cherished his authority more than theirs (Matt 7:29; 12:38). For the scribes, Jesus' claim to forgive sin was blasphemous (Matt 9:3, Mk 2:6). They objected to the popular acclamations given to Jesus (Matt 21:15). In Jesus' three predictions of his passion, they were named among his would-be torturers (Matt 16:21; 20:18; Mark 8:31). In some other passages, they are presented in a good light: They were happy with Jesus for silencing the Sadducees (Luke 20:39); a scribe trained for the kingdom brings out from it both old and new treasures (Matt 13:52).

From the above exposition, one can see that the Pharisees and the scribes in Jewish religious ambience had great authority with regard to the interpretation of the Law of Moses. People looked up to them for direction. When they taught without prejudice and self-interest, their orthodoxy could not be faulted. In Matthew 23:1-3, Jesus recognises this exalted position which they occupy, hence *epi tēs Mōyseōs kathedras ekathisan* (they ‘sit’ on the seat of Moses, v. 2). The past, *ekathisan*, probably shows a Semitic influence, where a past tense could be converted into a present.¹¹ *Kathedra* is an “exalted seat occupied by men of eminent rank or influence, as teachers and judges”.¹² It is the LXX translation of the Hebrew *mōšāb* and *šēbet* (1 Sam 20:18, 25; 1 Kgs 10:5, 19). Owing to their being the authentic successors of Moses, Jesus gives the crowds (*ochlois*) and the disciples (*mathētais*) two imperatives: *poēsate kai tēreite* (do and keep, v.3) whatever the

11. Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1994), 84-85.

12. Thayer's Greek Lexicon in BibleWorks 7.0, available from CD-rom, Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, s.v. “*kathedra*”.

scribes and Pharisees say; but he forbids them to imitate their actions, using a strong prohibition, *mē poieite* (do not do, v.3), for they speak but do not act accordingly.

The Phortia Barea (Heavy Burden) of Hypocritical Religiosity (V. 4)

The scribes complicated the simple commandments of Yahweh and turned them into 'riddles' for the lay people. They invented innumerable ceremonial laws, which became burdens. William Barclay points out some of the burdens they laid on people. The scribal interpretation of the Sabbath obligation entails the following: a) one should not walk beyond 1000 yards from one's residence on a Sabbath. However, when a rope is tied across the end of a street, that point becomes one's residence; or wherever one has food for at least two meals could also become one's residence. b) Tying of knots, carrying loads, cooking, harvesting, and other things are forbidden. However, the scribes knew the provisions for evading these regulations.¹³

The religious leaders accused Jesus and his disciples of breaking the Sabbath because they plucked corn from the field and ate (Matt 12:8; Luke 6:5). They accused Jesus of defiling the Sabbath because he healed a man whose hand was withered (Matt 12:12-13; Mark 3:1), the woman with a spirit of infirmity (Luke 13:10-17), a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), a man sick for 38 years (John 5:1-16), etc. Some of the burdens were *kosher* regulations that had to do with food and purification laws (Mark 7:1-5).

The oral traditions of the rabbis eventually gave rise in AD 200 to a documented rabbinic teaching called the *Mishna*, which, among other things, contains laws concerning holy things (*qodāšîm*) and purity (*toharôt*): "The *Mishnah* as a whole thus puts forward larger questions: What must a Jew do to reflect the special relationship between self and God? How does one cooperate with God's overall scheme? The answers lead us to the details of rabbinic law, expressed in the individual rulings and disputes that make up

13. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, revd ed., The Daily Study Bible (Bangalore: Theological Publication, 1997), 158.

14. Roger Brooks, "Mishna," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*, Vol. 4, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 871-873, at 873.

the *Mishnah*'s bulk."¹⁴ There were different views on the same issue among the rabbis. Some were strict (led by Shammai), and others liberal (led by Hillel). Many of their views were human imaginations and constructions (sometimes hypocritically motivated), not divinely inspired. These were the burdens they laid on people, but they themselves devised means of evading them.

A Religion of Ostentation (Vss 5-7)

This unit points at the ostentatious nature of the religious practices of some scribes and Pharisees. The aim of their religious actions is *pros to theathēnai tois anthrōpois* (to be seen by men). *Pros* here in verse 5 expresses a purpose (cf. Mark 13:22; Acts 3:10; Rom 3:26; 2 Cor 1:20). Their making broad and large *ta phulaktēria autōn* (their phylacteries) and *kraspeda* (tassels) proves this point. Phylacteries and tassels are part of the traditional Jewish religious wears. Exodus 13:9 and 16 (cf. Deut 6:8; 11:18), referring most probably to the Law, command that it should be a sign on the hand and a memorial between the eyes. Based on this command, the tradition of wearing *tephillin* (phylacteries) arose: "They are like little leather boxes, strapped, one on the wrist and one on the forehead. The one on the wrist is a little leather box of one compartment, and inside it there is a parchment roll with the following four passages of scripture written on it – Exodus 13:1-10; 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21. The one worn on the forehead is the same..."¹⁵ As for the tassels, God ordered the people to make a *tītit* (fringe, Num 15:38; Deut 22:12; cf. Ezra 8:3, lock of hair on head) on the edges of their garments, which were meant to remind them of the Law. This command was kept by having four tassels on the outer garment, and later by using prayer-shawl tassels. Some Pharisees and scribes made their phylacteries and tassels extraordinarily large so that they could be seen as holier than others, even if their hearts were devoid of the love of God and neighbour.

One could see that the essence of the Mosaic ordinances

15. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible (Bangalore: Theological Publication, 1997), 286.

given in the above texts does not consist in making of phylacteries and tassels. For Matthew Henry, "...the expressions seem to be figurative, intimating no more than that we should bear the things of God in our minds as carefully as if we had them bound between our eyes."¹⁶ The essence of the whole of the metaphorical expressions is that the people should remember the Law day and night, and have it as their guiding principle. Jewish religious leaders interpreted it rather literally, hence the tradition of phylacteries and tassels.

The same Jewish leaders took front seats in the *synagōgais* (synagogue, v. 6). Synagogues were important places for prayer, especially after 70 AD destruction of the temple. Since temple sacrifice was no longer possible, synagogue prayer and the law interpretation gained more prominence. There, the back seats were meant for unimportant people. The front seats, which normally faced the congregation, were meant for the leaders or elders. All present saw any person who was on an honourable seat. A front seat was for presiding purposes. The occupant was to forget oneself and focus on God, whom one represented, and carry out the appropriate functions for the sanctification and spiritual nourishment of the congregation. It was out of ostentation and pride that multiple front seats were introduced. Attention shifted to the occupants, who sought glory, honour and self-adulation, as if at banquets and marketplaces (v. 6). Jesus condemns this attitude because their religiosity had become idolatry and hypocrisy.

Prohibition of Usurpation of 'Divine' Titles (Vss 8-10)

Rab or *Rabbi* (also *Rabbouni* or *Rabban*) is a Greek-transliteration of a Hebrew word, which means "great, my great One", used figuratively for "teacher, master, Lord". In the OT, it is a title for one who occupies a prominent position (2 Kgs 25:8; Jer 39:3, 13; Dan 1:3). Beginning from around 110 BC, *talmîd* (pupil, disciple) addressed the teacher as a Rabbi, at whose feet he learnt for some years. A *talmîd* is bound to the teacher as long as one is

16. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry Commentary*, in BibleWorks 7.0, available from CD-rom, Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks, see Matthew 23:5.

under his tutelage. But when one graduates, one equally assumes the title, Rabbi. The disciples of John the Baptist address him as Rabbi (John 3:26). In the gospels, Rabbi refers to Jesus (Matt 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5; John 1:38; 3:2; 6:25). John uses it the most. Luke never uses it. In Matthew, the disciples (except Judas) avoid using the title for Jesus; they call him 'Kyrie' (Lord). Matthew wants to emphasise that Jesus is not a *didaskalos* in the Jewish sense but the Lord who is forever above all. "Since Jesus preaches with prophetic authority..., his disciples do not take up the study which, when successfully completed, will qualify them to end their training and become rabbis... They remain *mathētai* [disciples] and Jesus remains their *didaskalos* [teacher]. They are expressly forbidden to call themselves rabbi ...Mt. 23:8. If, then, Jesus is called *didaskalos* and rabbi in the Gospels, this denotes a different relation of the disciples to Him than that between Jewish *talmîd* and his teacher."¹⁷

In verse 8, a version of Codex Sinaiticus and some other manuscripts have *kathēgētēs*, instead of *didaskalos*; but in verse 10, *kathēgētēs* is used in most manuscripts. *Kathēgētēs* (leader, guide, instructor, teacher, master), which appears several times in Dionysius and Plutarch, is a *hapax legomena* in the Bible, appearing only in Matthew 23:8-10. This alludes to the catechetical nature of the Matthean gospel. If Jesus Christ is the only *kathēgētēs*, all humans are *adelphoi* (brothers and sisters, Luke 21:16; Eph 6:23). Jesus' prohibition of the use of the title, *kathēgētēs* is only in a relative sense. It is a prohibition of pride.¹⁸

The prohibition not to be called *patera* (father) is in verse 9. *Patēr* (father, Hebrew - *āb*), just as *mētēr* (mother, Hebrew - *ēm*) is of primitive Indo-European and Greco-Roman origin. They are coined from the first sounds that a child stammers (*pa, ma*) as it learns to speak while at the bosom of the parents. These concepts have been in existence and in vogue since at least 2000 BC.¹⁹ *Patēr*

17. Eduard Lohse, "rabbi, rabbouni, " in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, vol. VI, eds Gerhard Kittel and G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 961-965, at 965.

18. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry Commentary*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1961), 1320.

19. Gottlob Schrenk, "Patēr," in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, vol. V, eds Gerhard Kittel and G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 945-959, at 948.

is the head of the house, the teacher. This human concept was eventually employed in the religious circle, expressing God as the father, a practice which was seen in ancient Mediterranean Semitic world and eventually passed onto the Greeks. Both the socio-cultural and the religious use of the concept of *āb* is found in the OT (Exod 3:13; 10:6; Num 1:45; Esth 2:7). In the NT, Jesus makes the honour given to parents obligatory (Mark 7:10–13; Matt 15:4–7), for the call to discipleship does not obliterate one's socio-cultural moral duty. In later Judaism *āb* became a general title of honour and esteem, especially for the rabbis. “If occasionally Shammai, Hillel, R. Jishmael and Akiba are called 'fathers of the world', this is an exaggerated glorification.”²⁰ *Āb* became synonymous with 'teacher'. Eleazar is seen as the teacher of “glorious endurance in martyrdom for correct observance of the Law” (4 Macc 7:1, 5, 9).

From this exposition, it is quite unlikely that Jesus is banning the use of the ancient concepts, *rabbi* and *kathēgētēs*. If not, why not also their synonym, *didaskalos*? If he abolishes *patēr*, why not *mētēr* also? He is not abolishing the necessarily age-long socio-cultural rapport and respect between a *talmîd* and the *rabbi* or a child and the father. A real *rabbi* or *kathēgētēs* knows that he has modest knowledge. So, there is always a greater one. *Patēr* is actually only an anthropomorphized name for God, human beings trying to understand God in a human concept. God is the Father par excellence, the mystical Father, whom humans cannot fully comprehend. So by Jesus' prohibition, “Do not call [anyone] of you on the earth 'father'”, he is only worried about the rabbis, who, out of pride, abuse the concept by placing themselves at par with 'the Heavenly Father'. A maxim of some proud rabbis says, “He who salutes his teacher, and does not call him Rabbi, provokes the divine Majesty to depart from Israel.”²¹ This is the type of arrogance that Jesus condemns and prohibits.

20. Gottlob Schrenk, “Patēr,” in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), vol. V, 977.

21. *Matthew Henry Commentary*, Matthew 23, in BibleWorks 7.0, available from CD-rom, Norfolk, VA: BibleWorks.

The Meizōn (Greatest) is the Diakonos (Servant), Vs 11-12

In verse 11, *meizōn* is the comparative of *meγas*. With a definite article here it stands for the superlative, the greatest. *Diakonos* is nominal form of the verb *diakoneō*, found first in Herodotus, the basic meanings of which are: 'to wait at table', 'to provide or care for' and 'to serve'. These basic meanings feature most often in their figurative usages.²² The Greeks do not regard serving as dignified, for ruling is proper to humans. But among the Semitics, it is noble to serve. So, the LXX uses a more subjugating term, *douleuō* (to serve as a slave) to translate the Hebrew equivalents of *diakoneō*. *Diakonos* here is “the one who serves”. The service could also be a ministry in the Church (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8, 12). Jesus says that the greatest is the servant. All the evangelists stress this important eternal truth at least once or twice in Jesus' instructions to his disciples (Matt 20:24-28; Mark 9:35; Mark 10:41-45; Matt 20:24-28; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:4-15). In these texts, he condemns the pagan type of leadership, where the leaders lord it over the led. It must not be so among the disciples, for the proud is normally humbled while the humble is exalted. This is a simply logical and natural truth, which the hagiographers stress very often, the sages and evangelists especially (Sir 7:17; 35:17; Job 5:11; 12:19; Job 22:29; Isa 3:17; 10:13; Ezek 21:31; Psa 75:7; Matt 18:4; Luke 1:52; 14:11; 18:14; Jam 4:6, 10//1 Pet 5:5-6). In Proverbs, one reads: “When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but with the humble is wisdom (11:2; cf. 16:18; 21:24; 29:13).

Matthew 23:1-12 has a lot of lessons for Nigerian religious leaders. The next section examines the activities of religious leaders in Nigeria and calls for a reformation.

Matthew 23:1-12 in Nigerian Context

Having studied the text in the previous section, here the text speaks to Nigerian religious leaders, who, like the scribes and the Pharisees, “occupy the seat of Moses”. As we discovered, being a scribe or a Pharisee was a wonderful divine calling, to

22. Hermann W. Beyer, “*diakoneō, diakonia, diakonos*,” in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), vol. II, eds Gerhard Kittel and G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 81-93, at 82.

which some were faithful and for which they died. In the text, Jesus was not concerned with this good set of Pharisees and scribes. The set he encountered during his short-lived ministry was a thorn in his flesh and constituted opposition to all his good deeds. These are the ones he addressed in the text. So, this section is concerned with the religious leaders who have become a contradiction to the truth. Though there are different religions in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam dominantly, the focus is on the Christians leaders.

The Enormous Office of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders are entrusted with an enormous responsibility, namely, accompanying the entire human person to its goal, *salus animae* (salvation of soul).²³ This means that their role surpasses that of socio-cultural and academic leaders, who have not much to do with the human soul, the spiritual part of a person that subsists after demise. For believers in afterlife, everything that one does while in existence is geared towards the metaphysical, which subsists eternally, hence the primacy of the role of religious leaders. It is unfortunate that some of them have not taken cognizance of this position they occupy. They are mediators, from whom the people seek divine precepts. It is unfortunate that some leaders toy with their office. They do not make much effort to have a real divine encounter so as to be empowered to lead the people. Rather, they inundate their flock with their whims and caprices, which have no divine seal.

Hypocritical Attitudes of Religious Leaders

Many a Nigerian religious leader, who have not taken to heart the enormity and delicacy of their authority, make little effort to be exemplary. They may give rousing sermons or homilies but do not do as they preach. Divine decrees may be expiated upon, but garbed in deceptive attire for selfish purposes. Sometimes human decrees, traditions, imaginations and inventions are projected as divine visions, prophecies and precepts. There were instances where religious leaders dubiously siphoned

23. Benedict E. Etafo, "Office Holders, 'Salus Animarum' and Canon Law in the Church in Nigeria," *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 1 (2011): 131-145, at 131.

Church funds into their personal accounts. Some are involved in occult practices for power. Some take hard drugs (cocaine, marijuana, etc) before coming to the stage for crusade, doctoring false healings and giving false testimonies for popularity and monetary gain.²⁴ Some have consciously destroyed families for their lustful gain. Jesus is therefore saying to the flock of such leaders, "Do not imitate them, for they preach, but do not practice". Unfortunately, people nowadays cite the actions of some of their religious leaders as a justification for their evil deeds. Religiosity of shame!

Each of the two major religions, Christianity and Islam, claims a divine mission to embrace the whole world. Though their leaders claim to be agents of peace, some perpetrate violence. H. Ukavwe stresses the challenge of reconciling various religious claims so as to live in peace.²⁵ John Onaiyekan names theological anomaly and political manipulations as the reasons for the betrayal of the mission of religion in Africa.²⁶

A Religion of Show

Jesus lived a simple and humble life, a model for his vicars. On the contrary, like those scribes and Pharisees who attracted every attention to themselves, many Nigerian religious leaders direct the flock to themselves, no longer to God. Their ostentatious and expensive attires are outrageous. Their general lifestyle is extraordinarily opulent and outlandish (first class residences, luxurious vehicles, private jets, etc.). B. Ukwuegbu remarks that many religious leaders now devote more time to fund-raising and trivial administrative issues than to preaching the gospel.²⁷ The zeal for the so-called 'ministry' is at its peak, when the rich are involved! Various strategies are used to attract people. C. Mbonu brings in the dimension of ecospirituality: "Sounds from mega

24. Victor Onwukeme, "Healing Ministry and the Nigerian Socio-economic Development," *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 1 (2011): 59-72, at 59.

25. Henry O. Ukavwe, "The Influence of Religion on Political Behaviour in Nigeria: The Impact of the Tension between Westernisation and Arabianisation," *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 3 (2013): 55-67, at 58.

26. John Onaiyekan, "Harnessing the Power of Religion in Africa," *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 1 (2011): 33-57, at 47.

27. Bernard O. Ukwuegbu, "Luke's Description of the Christian Community in Jerusalem and Its Relevance for Christians Today," *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 27 (June 2013): 53-73, at 72.

phones, and insistent trumpeting and 'praise worship' [at odd hours] prove unhealthy not only to human neighbours but animals as well."²⁸

Some religious leaders, like the ones in the text, now compete with the ordinary people in the use of titles for self-adulation and glorification. Jesus is not against the use of title per se (e.g. rabbi, father, teacher/master, lord). These titles have their place in both socio-cultural and religious milieus. Jesus admits this when he makes statements like, "Honour your father and your mother" (Matthew 15:1-6; 19:19; cf. Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) and "A servant is not greater than his master" (John 13:16; 15:20). He is rather against those who, on assuming these titles, are puffed up and are no longer mindful of the One in heaven, to whom the quintessence of all these titles belong.

A Call to Servant-hood or Lordship?

Jesus gives the model of leadership in John 13, where he washed the feet of his apostles. The one who is greater is the one who serves (Luke 22:27). Nowadays, religious leaders may not do the actual serving at table (though it is not excluded), but embracing the 'servant model' of ministering is what many still have to grapple with. What is in vogue and appealing to many is the 'lord or master model'. The servant has to wait for, and wait on, the master endlessly before he/she is listened to. Sometimes the rights of a servant are denied without qualms, since the servant does not even know his/her rights or, even if known, he/she is defenceless.

A. Acha studies Moses' leadership traits and principles and argues that such would bring about some socio-religious transformation in Nigeria if imbibed by the leaders.²⁹ Moses' leadership model is, in a nutshell, a 'servant model'.

Conclusion

Religiosity does not necessarily translate into godliness. Nigerian case has proved this point. This paper has used Jesus' condemnation of the hypocritical religiosity of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:1-12 to challenge the similar one in Nigeria. If religious piety of the people is to become genuine piousness, the authentic witness of their leaders who catechize them would be of great help. Religious leaders should endeavour to handle meticulously and conscientiously their exalted office. They should not be like signboards or road signs that point out the directions but never move towards that direction. The directives that they give in a bid to enhance the observance of the divine precepts should be so humane that they equally ought to be enthusiastic to follow them. Divine precepts are meant to set people free, not to enslave them.

Religious leaders should be mindful of their lifestyle. Some people have been led astray due to the scandalous lifestyle of their religious leaders. For the Christians, the simplicity and humility of Christ should be the model. Ostentation and superfluity should be done away with. This also manifests itself in how one appropriates religious titles to oneself. All religious titles are ultimately proper only to God alone. Therefore, one should always be humbled by the fact that God allows mere humans to share in these titles socio-culturally and religiously.

The quest for money, power and glory has been the bane of many a religious leader, and is the cause of the many deceits in popular but false religiosity. This is why the anointed servants have turned into lords instead of servants. The sooner religious leaders restore religious sanity among them, the better their religiosity can be translated into godliness.

28. Caroline Mbonu, "Proliferation of Religious Sects: A Nigerian Challenge to Ecospirituality," *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 27 (June 2013): 114-125, at 114.

29. Agnes I. Acha, "Leadership Principles of Moses as Model for Leadership Reforms in Nigeria," *The Nigerian Journal of Theology* 25 (June 2011): 51-65, at 52.

