



Under God's protective wings: Does exposure to violent conflict make Nigerians value God more?

Daniel Tuki¹

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of exposure to violent conflict on the importance that Nigerians attach to God in their lives. The regression results show that conflict exposure positively correlates with the importance attached to God. The analysis also shows that the more recent a conflict is, the larger is its effect on the importance attached to God. The positive correlation persisted when I broke down the data based on religious affiliation (Christians and Muslims) and gender (males and females) and estimated models using these subsamples of respondents. However, the size of the effect was larger among Christians than Muslims. The effect size was also larger among females than males. A plausible mechanism behind these results is that reliance upon God serves as a coping strategy to deal with the threats posed by violent conflict. These results are robust to different operationalizations of violent conflict.

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¹ Research Fellow, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Germany/Department of Social Sciences, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany (Correspondence: daniel.tuki@wzb.eu).

1.0. Introduction

With a population almost evenly split between Muslims and Christians, Nigeria is home to some of the most religious people in the world. “Neither religion is dominant over the other, but religion is dominant over secularism.” (Campbell & Page, 2018, p. 75). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018 found that 96 percent Nigerians considered religion to be “Very important” in their lives (Poushter et al. 2019). This finding was corroborated by the Wave 7 World Values Survey (WVS) conducted in the same year: 93 percent of Nigerians considered religion to be “Very important” in their lives, while 5 percent considered it to be “Rather important.” The WVS survey also showed that 99 percent of Nigerians believe in God, 90 percent of them attend religious services at least once a month, 94 percent of them pray at least once a day, and 70 percent of them either “Strongly agree” or “Agree” that their religion is the only acceptable religion (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Why are Nigerians so religious? Could their religiosity, to some extent, emanate from the threat of violent conflict that they contend with in their daily lives? Some studies have shown that misfortune and traumatic experiences can induce religiosity among people. This is because reliance upon God breeds resilience and enables them to make sense of their suffering (e.g. Pertek 2022; Atari-Khan et al. 2021; Lusk et al. 2021; Kaiser et al. 2020; Choi & Hastings 2019; Manning & Miles 2018; Tippens 2017). Other studies have found that traumatic experiences erode religiosity, and in some cases, could prompt people to abandon their faith (Leo et al. 2021; Janoff-Bulman 1992). This study focuses specifically on exposure to violent conflict and how it influences the importance that Nigerians attach to God in their lives. Although many studies have examined how religion could lead to violent conflicts in Nigeria (e.g. Tuki 2023; Agbiboa 2013, 2013a; Krause 2011; Ukiwo 2003; Bienen 1986), none, to the best of my knowledge, has examined the effect of violent conflicts on religiosity. Using representative survey data for Nigeria, as well as econometric techniques, this study fills that gap.

To measure the importance attached to God, I used an item in the Wave 7 WVS questionnaire that asked respondents how important God is in their lives. The responses were measured on a ten-point scale ranging from “Very important” to “Not at all important.” Although the topics of religiosity and God are interwoven, I focus particularly on the latter in this study. This is because it is possible for people to engage in religious rituals like church or mosque attendance out of pressure from family members or coreligionists without necessarily believing in God or in the efficacy of these rituals. Moreover, it is possible to believe in the existence of God or a higher power without belonging to any particular religion. To measure exposure to violent conflict, I drew buffers with a radius of 30km around the dwellings of the respondents using QGIS software, and counted the total number of violent conflict incidents within the buffers. I was able to do this because I relied on the WVS (Haerpfer et al., 2022) and Armed Conflict Locations and Events Database (ACLED) dataset (Raleigh et al., 2010), both of which are georeferenced.

This study finds that exposure to violent conflict positively correlates with the importance attached to God. The analysis also showed that the more recent the conflict is, the larger is its effect on the importance attached to God. The positive correlation persisted when I broke down the data based on religious affiliation (Muslims and Christians) and gender (males and females) and estimated some models using these subsamples of respondents. However, the effect size was larger among Christians than Muslims. This could be because Christians have a higher level of conflict exposure than Muslims. The effect size was also larger among females than males. This might be due to the risk aversive nature of women, which might emanate from the patriarchal nature of the society in which they are seen as homemakers whose role it is to take care of the children and the home, while the men go out, work, and take risks in order provide for the needs of the household members. Religiosity could thus be associated with risk aversive behavior (i.e. to mitigate the existential threat posed by violent conflict) and being non-religious

with risk taking (Miller and Hoffman 1995). Suffice to add that men and women have similar levels of conflict exposure.

Taken together, my results suggest that Nigerians rely upon God as a coping strategy in dealing with the existential threat posed by violent conflict. In other words, reliance upon God attenuates the adverse effects of traumatic stress and misfortune emanating from violent conflict. This is especially relevant in the case of Nigeria, where the government has failed in its fundamental responsibility to provide security for the citizenry. This study contributes to the broader literature on religious coping in times of distress and misfortune – especially those induced by conflict (e.g. Van Tubergen et al. 2023; Shai 2022; Lusk et al. 2021; Henrich et al. 2019; Zussman 2014).

This study proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on the nexus between religiosity and resilience in the face of trauma and misfortune. Section 3 specifies the general form of the regression model to be estimated and operationalizes the variables that will be used to estimate it. Section 4 presents the regression results and discusses them, while section 5 summarizes the study and concludes.

2.0. Theoretical considerations

Some studies have examined the relationship between exposure to violent conflict and religiosity. In a study conducted in Israel, Zussman (2014) found that political violence emanating from the Arab-Israeli conflict had a positive effect on religiosity: people who had been exposed to political violence were more likely to consider themselves religious. This effect was present among both Jewish and Muslim Israelis. In a similar study also conducted in Israel, Shai (2022) found that people who were exposed to the war between Israel and Hezbollah or who were residing in war-affected areas had a higher level of religiosity than those who were not exposed to the conflict. Moreover, he compared the level of religiosity among the population before and after the war and found that religiosity surged in the post-war period. This change was most pronounced among people with low levels of education and those who were not very religious

prior to the war. He concluded that religiosity served as a crutch that people relied on to cope with the detrimental effects of the war. Relying on survey data spanning Uganda, Sierra Leone, and Tajikistan, Henrich et al. (2019) found that exposure to war has a positive effect on religiosity. Their results also showed that people who had been exposed to war were likely to continue participating in religious activities several years after the war had ended. The study by Du & Chi (2016), which is based on global data, corroborate the findings showing a direct relationship between war exposure and religiosity.

The immediate threat of conflict might not be the sole driver of religiosity. Even when people are out of harm's way, they might still be affected by conflict through indirect mechanisms – for instance via family members or kin still residing in the conflict zone. Relying on the German Socio-economic Panel (SOEP) dataset, Van Tubergen et al. (2023) examined how conflicts in the origin country influenced religiosity among Syrian, Afghan, and Iraqi refugees residing in Germany. They found that the higher the number of conflict-induced fatalities in the refugees' region of birth, the more frequently they prayed. This effect was especially salient among refugees who had family members and relatives residing in the conflict zone.

Some studies have particularly focused on the role of religiosity in attenuating the psychological trauma caused by war among military personnel. Cesur et al. (2020) conducted a study in the United States examining the effect of combat service on religiosity among military personnel who had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. They found that servicemen who had engaged in combat roles were more likely to attend religious services and engage in personal prayer than their counterparts who had also been deployed but had not engaged in a combat role. Using a sample of 54 Israeli soldiers who had returned from combat, Israel-Cohen et al. (2016) found that soldiers who were religious coped better with war-associated trauma than those who were not. Aflakesir and Coleman (2008) studied 78 disabled Iranian war veterans who had participated in the Iraq–Iran War in the period from 1980 to 1988. They found that the veterans'

religious beliefs provided them with solace, which in turn enabled them to cope with their physical challenges and the trauma from the war.

Another strand of literature has focused specifically on religious coping among refugees. In a qualitative study that spanned three European countries (Italy, Poland, and Spain), Oviedo et al. (2022) interviewed 94 Ukrainians who had been displaced by the Russia-Ukraine War. They found that prayer served as a form of “psychological capital” that enabled them to cope with the war-induced trauma. In a qualitative study conducted among Sub-Saharan African refugee women in Tunisia who had been victims of gender-based violence and trafficking, Pertek (2022) found that “Prayers and direct relationships with God, derived from their spiritual capital, were most cited in helping respondents survive unspeakable hardships.” (p. 6). She also found that, when faced with food insecurity while in detention, some of the women resorted to fasting as a means of getting closer to God and having their prayers answered. The positive effect of religiosity on resilience have been replicated among refugees of Pakistani and Somali origin in Nepal (Thomas et al. 2011), refugees from Central America and Mexico heading to the United States (Lusk et al. 2021), adolescent refugees of African, Asian, and Middle Eastern origin in Malaysia (Chow et al. 2021), unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Ireland (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan 2010), refugees of Middle Eastern, African, Asian, and Eastern European origin in the Netherlands (Fadhli et al. 2022; Sleijpen et al. 2017), Karen (Burmese) refugees in the United States (Muruthi et al. 2020), Syrian refugees in the United States (Yalim & Chapple 2023; Atari-Khan et al. 2021; Hasan et al. 2018; Hassan et al. 2016) and the United Kingdom (Alachkar 2022), Eritrean refugees in Norway (Abraham et al. 2018), and Sudanese refugees in Australia (Schweitzer et al 2007).

Some studies have focused on the relationship between religiosity and resilience among sick people. In a study conducted among 152 breast cancer patients in Greece, Fradelos et al. (2018) found that those whose disease was at an advanced stage were more religious than those whose disease was at an earlier stage. Moreover, they found a positive correlation between

religiosity and resilience. Choi and Hastings (2019) found that religion enabled African American diabetic patients to cope better with the challenges posed by the disease. One of the patients whom they interviewed said, “I think God keeps me strong enough to come and fight and come to my doctor’s appointment.” (p. 14). Another patient saw his suffering as a test from God: “So whatever He [God] got for me, maybe He wants me to be able to hold up something and be strong for His glory, I guess, so He got to put some stress on me.” (p. 12). Others studies have focused on how religiosity enables people to cope with the devastating effects of natural disasters like hurricanes (Cherry et al. 2015; Alawiyah et al. 2011), earthquakes (Sibley & Bulbulia 2012; Bentzen 2019; Mesidor & Sly 2019; Smith et al. 2014), tsunamis (Holmgaard 2019), floods (Cherry et al. 2023; Sipon et al. 2014), and tornadoes (Lim et al. 2019), as well as disease outbreaks (Upenieks & Ellison 2022; Bentzen 2021).

Most of the studies I have reviewed so far have focused on the capacity of religiosity to temper the adverse effects of misfortune and traumatic experiences. However, traumatic experiences could also have a negative effect on religiosity, and in some instances, they may lead to a loss of faith (Janoff-Bulman 1992). “People with exposure to trauma...may either relinquish their religious beliefs or elaborate upon these in a continued attempt to preserve their beliefs, thus increasing their beliefs.” (Leo et al. 2021, p. 164). Hussain et al. (2011) conducted a study among 1,180 Norwegian tourists who had been exposed to the 2004 Tsunami to determine the effect that this experience had on their level of religiosity. Their findings were mixed: Although, for the majority of respondents, the traumatic experience had no effect on religiosity, it led to a strengthening of religious beliefs among 8.3 percent of the respondents, and a weakening of religious beliefs among 5.2 percent of them. The weakening of religious beliefs was especially salient among younger respondents, those with post-traumatic stress, and those who had been highly exposed to the disaster. Kennedy and Drebing (2002) found that, among religiously committed evangelical adults in the United States, the experience of physical or sexual abuse positively correlated with feelings of religious doubt and a sense of being distant from God.

Similarly, Ben-Ezra et al. (2010) conducted a study among 111 Jewish women, 51 of whom were sexual trauma victims. They found that about half of the women who had been victimized “changed their religious perception toward secularism, thus becoming less religious.” (p. 10).

Returning to the Nigerian case, it is imperative to point out that the incidence of violent conflict rose steadily in the country between 2016 to 2022. Data from ACLED shows that there were 698 violent conflicts in 2016.² By 2022 the estimate had risen to 3,324, making 2022 Nigeria’s most violent year – in terms of the incidence of conflict – since 1997. A comparison of the estimates for 2016 and 2022 indicates a growth of 376 percent (Raleigh et al. 2010). The rising trend in violent conflict is symptomatic of the Nigerian government’s inability to provide security for its citizens. There have even been debates on the topic of whether Nigeria is a failed state (Nevin et al. 2023; Aina & Cheeseman 2021; Rotberg & Campbell 2021). Taking into consideration the rising trend of violent conflicts in Nigeria, coupled with weak state capacity, I expect that these will evoke a feeling of helplessness among the population, which will prompt them to seek succour and security in God.

3.0. Data and methodology

This study relies on the Wave 7 World Values Survey (WVS) data collected in 2018.³ The dataset comprises 1,237 observations and is representative for Nigeria. As shown in figure 1, respondents were drawn from each of Nigeria’s 36 states, plus the federal capital territory – Abuja. Out of Nigeria’s 774 local government areas (i.e. municipalities), the WVS collected data from 120 of them. Respondents were at least 16 years old, with males and females represented in the sample in the ratio 51:49.

² Table A2 in the appendix reports the trend of violent conflict in Nigeria from 1997 to 2022.

³ To access the World Values Survey data and questionnaire, visit: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

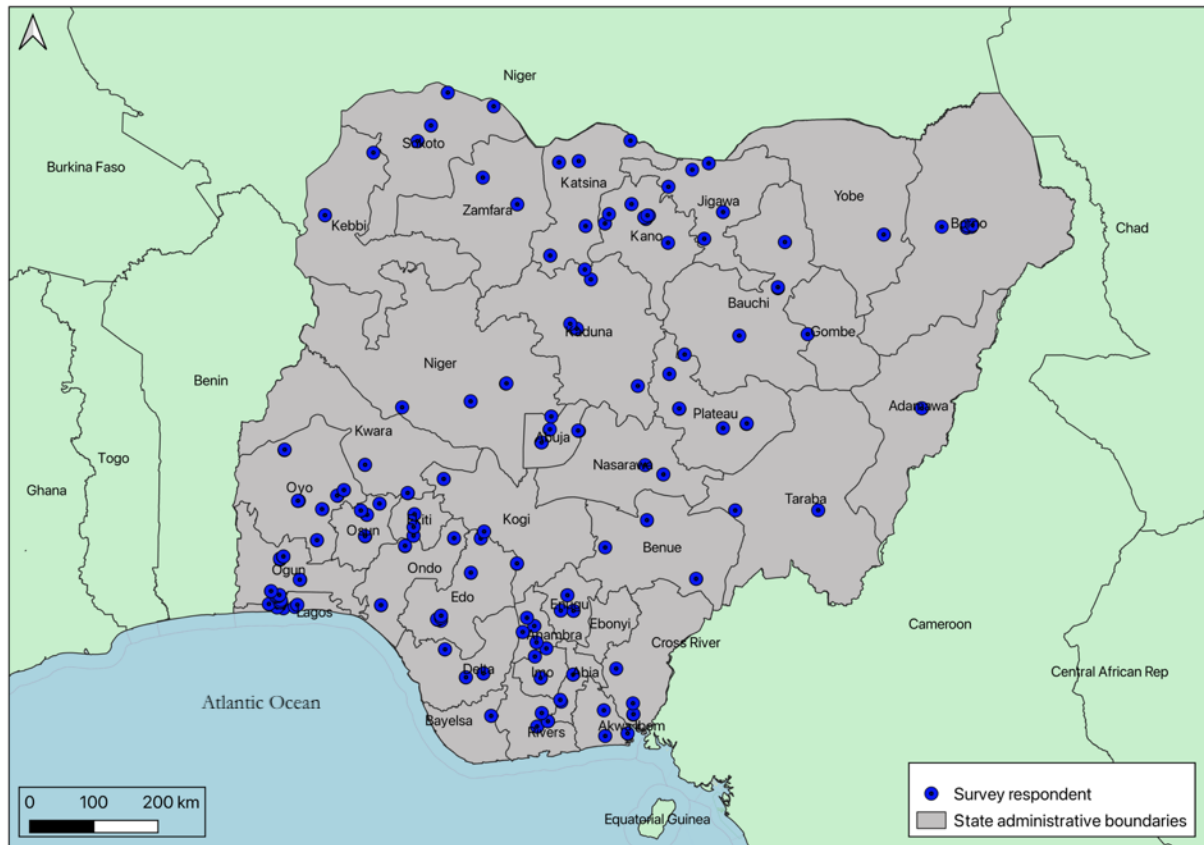


Figure 1: Geolocations of survey respondents across Nigeria’s states

Note: The figure shows the geolocations of the respondents and the administrative boundaries of Nigeria’s 36 states, plus the federal capital territory – Abuja. The shapefiles for Nigeria’s administrative boundaries were developed by UNOCHA and could be accessed here: <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/nga-administrative-boundaries>

3.1. Operationalization of the variables

3.1.1. Dependent variable

Importance of God: This measures the degree of importance that the respondents attach to God in their lives. It was derived from the question, “How important is God in your life?”, with the responses measured on a ten-point scale ranging from “1 = Not at all important” to “10 = Very important.” I treated all the “Don’t know” and “No answer” responses as missing observations. I applied this rule to all variables derived from the WVS data.

3.1.2. Explanatory variable

Violent conflict: This measures the total number of violent conflict incidents within the 30km buffer around the respondents’ dwelling that occurred between 1997 to 2017. The higher the number of incidents within the buffer, the higher the exposure to violent conflict and vice versa.

I used the start data of 1997 because the ACLED dataset is available beginning from that year. Although the ACLED data is updated in real time, I excluded all incidents that occurred after 2017. This lags the explanatory variable since the survey from which I derive the dependent variable, was conducted in 2018. Relying on the ACLED dataset (Raleigh et al. 2010), I defined a violent conflict as any incident that falls under any of the following three categories: Battles, Violence against civilians, and Explosions/Remote violence.⁴ I considered all the conflicts within the buffer between 1997 to 2017 because I am particularly interested in the cumulative effect of violent conflict. Moreover, the effects of conflict tend to persist over time. Some studies have shown that past conflicts affect present behavior (Hunt 2010; Hoepken 1998).

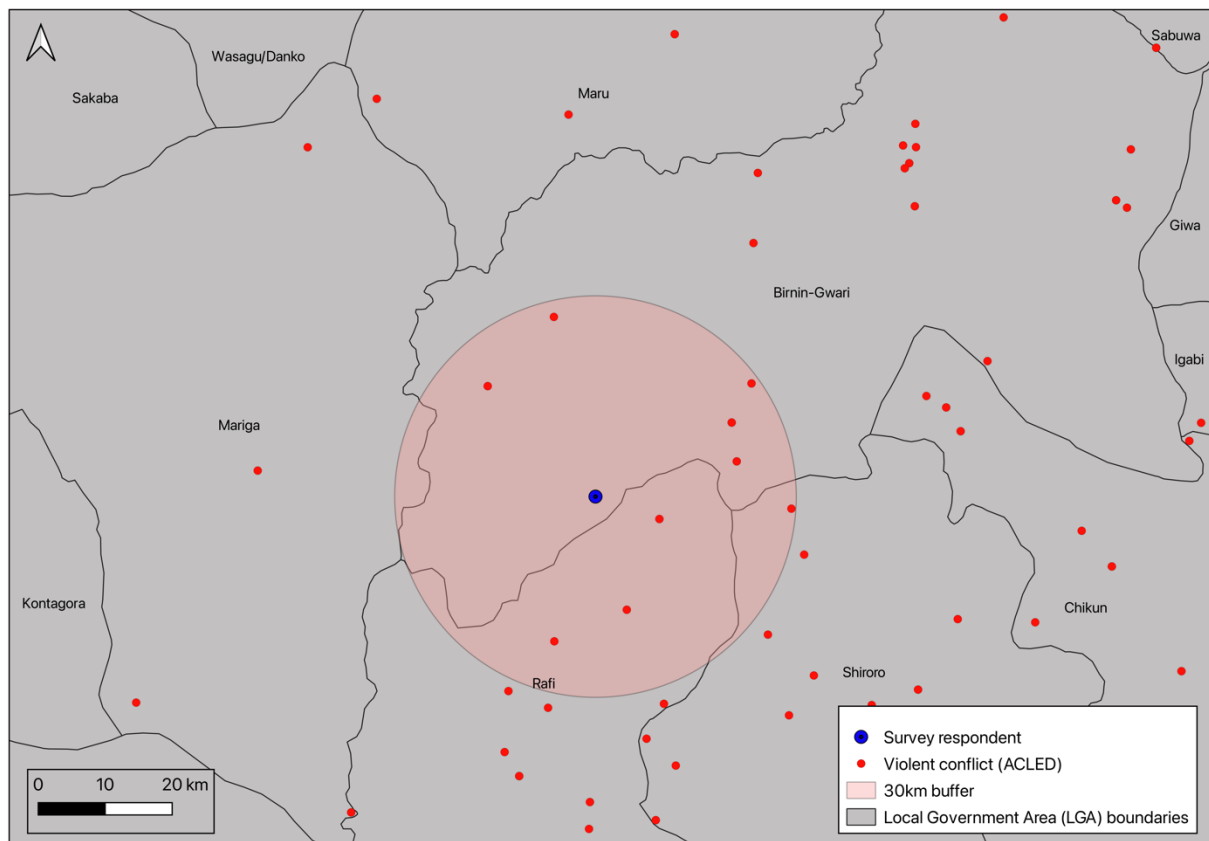


Figure 2: Measuring conflict exposure

Note: The figure visualizes how I developed the measure for conflict exposure. It shows the geolocation of a hypothetical respondent, the local government area (LGA) (i.e. municipality) administrative boundaries, as well as the geolocations of the violent conflict incidents.

I measured exposure to violent conflict by employing buffers rather than the local government area (LGA) administrative boundaries because using the latter could pose some

⁴ To access the ACLED dataset and the codebook visit: <https://acleddata.com/>

problems. If I had measured conflict exposure using the LGA administrative boundaries, I would have associated all the respondents residing in an LGA with the total number of incidents there. This assumes that all the respondents residing in a particular LGA are equally exposed to conflict, which might not be the case. This also limits the amount of variation in conflict exposure variable. As shown in figure 2, the respondent resides in Birnin-Gwari, yet some conflict incidents in Shiroro and Rafi LGAs are closer to his/her dwelling than some incidents in Brinin Gwari. Moreover, administrative boundaries in Nigeria, especially at the sub-state level, are not very clearly defined. The use of buffers mitigates these problems because they are unique for every respondent and are independent of administrative boundaries. Buffers also allow for comparability between the respondents, since they are of equal sizes. 98 percent of the respondents had at least one incident within the 30km buffer. 50 percent of them had at least 30 incidents.

3.1.3. Control variables

Socioeconomic condition: This is an additive indicator that measures the socioeconomic condition of the household within which the respondents reside. It was derived from the question, “In the last 12 months, how often have you or your family: (a) Gone without enough food to eat, (b) Gone without needed medicine or treatment that you needed, (c) Gone without a cash income, (d) Gone without a safe shelter over your head,” with the responses measured on a four-point ordinal scale ranging from “1 = Often” to “4 = Never.” Summing the responses to these four items, I created an additive indicator that ranges from 4 to 16. Higher values denote a better socioeconomic condition and vice versa. The four items had a Cronbach Alpha statistic of 0.74, which shows internal reliability. The rationale for adding socioeconomic condition as a control variable in the model is due to its capacity to influence both the dependent and explanatory variables. Poor socioeconomic condition could increase the risk of conflict by reducing the opportunity cost of engaging in violence (Von Uexkull 2014; Do & Iyer 2010). Some studies have shown that improvements in socioeconomic condition negatively correlates with religiosity

(Storm 2017; Barber 2015; 2013), while others contend that the correlation between the two variables is positive (Buser 2015).

Prevalence of stunting: This measures the proportion of children under the age of 5 within the 30km buffer around the respondents' dwellings who were classified as stunted in 2013 (Bosco et al. 2017). Since the original dataset is gendered, I computed the prevalence of stunting for males and females separately, and then took the average. I was able to compute this variable at the buffer level using QGIS software because the raw dataset is gridded. This variable proxies socioeconomic condition at the communal level.

Demographic covariates: I also consider the demographic covariates of the respondents like their gender, age, religious affiliation, and marital status. Gender is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is male and 0 if female. Age is measured on a 6-point ordinal scale ranging from "1 = 16–24 years" to "6 = 65 and more years." Religious affiliation is a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the respondent is Muslim and 0 if Christian. Since I am particularly interested in the relationship between Christians and Muslims, I treated all the respondents who belonged to neither of the two major religions as missing. This led to a marginal decrease in the number of observations because majority of Nigerians self-identify as either Christians or Muslims. Marital status takes the value of 1 if the respondent is married or has ever been married, and 0 otherwise. I categorized respondents who were divorced, separated, or widowed as married because divorce or the demise of a spouse does not necessarily get rid of parental responsibility, especially if the union produced offspring.

3.2. Summary statistics and analytical technique

Table 1 presents the summary statistics of the variables that will be used to estimate the regression model.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Importance of God ^ϕ	1237	9.46	1.674	1	10
Violent conflict (20km)	1237	57.574	106.592	0	550
Violent conflict (30km)	1237	81.261	123.109	0	558
Violent conflict (40km)	1237	100.822	135.618	0	636
Violent conflict (short) (30km)	1237	18.719	32.035	0	182
Violent conflict (1 fatality) (30km)	1237	60.538	97.062	0	464
GTD (30km)	1237	38.96	93.511	0	575
UCDP (30km)	1237	31.208	78.167	0	494
Religious affiliation	1229	0.461	0.499	0	1
Gender	1237	0.512	0.5	0	1
Age	1237	2.315	1.237	1	6
Marital status	1237	0.596	0.491	0	1
Socioeconomic condition	1227	11.415	2.732	4	16
Prevalence of stunting (20km)	1237	0.326	0.14	0.149	0.609
Prevalence of stunting (30km)	1237	0.333	0.138	0.158	0.611
Prevalence of stunting (40km)	1237	0.338	0.136	0.155	0.608

Note: ϕ is the dependent variable

The general form of the model could be expressed thus:

$$Y_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Violent conflict}_t + \beta_2 X'_t + \epsilon_t$$

Where Y_t is the dependent variable which measures the degree of importance that respondents attach to God in their lives. X'_t is a vector of control variables that have already been discussed in the preceding section, β_0 is the intercept, β_1 and β_2 are the coefficients for the explanatory and control variables respectively, ϵ_t is the error term, and t denotes the year in which the variables are measured. Although this study examines the effect of violent conflict on the importance attached to God, the reverse is also plausible as people who attach much (or less) importance to God might be those who are exposed to violent conflict. This leads to the problem of reverse causality. To mitigate this problem, I considered only conflict incidents within the 30km buffer that occurred before 2018. This lags the explanatory variable since the dependent variable is measured in 2018. While it is plausible that previous conflicts can influence the importance attached to God in the present; it is implausible that the importance attached to God in the present would influence past conflicts. Although the dependent variable is measured on an ordinal scale, it has ten categories which makes an ordered regression model unsuitable as an

estimation method. I thus treat the dependent variable as continuous and estimate the model using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression.

4.0. Results and Discussion

Table 2 reports the results of regression models examining the relationship between exposure to violent conflict and the importance attached to God. I added the control variables in a stepwise manner to mitigate the problem of multicollinearity. This also prevents a scenario whereby the results are dependent on the inclusion of certain control variables in the model. In model 1 – the baseline model where no control variables were added – violent conflict carried the expected positive sign and was significant at the one percent level. This is congruent with the a priori expectation that exposure to violent conflict positively correlates with the degree of importance that Nigerians attach to God in their lives. In model 2 where I added only the demographic control variables, the Akaike Information Criteria (AIC) static declined from 4,773 to 4,720, indicating that model 2 has a better fit than its predecessor. The size, sign, and significance level of violent conflict remained unchanged. In model 3 where I added the control variables proxying socioeconomic condition at the household and communal levels, the AIC statistic declined further to 4,601, indicating that model 3 has a better fit than model 2. Violent conflict retained its positive sign and remained significant at the one percent level. The size of its coefficient still remained unchanged.

Table 2: Correlates of importance attached to God I

Importance of God [‡]	Full sample				Religious & gender subsamples			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5) Muslim	(6) Xtian	(7) Male	(8) Female
Violent conflict [†]	0.001*** (0.00)	0.001*** (0.00)	0.001*** (0.00)		0.001*** (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)	0.001*** (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)
Violent conflict (short) [†]				0.004*** (0.001)				
Religious affiliation		-0.12 (0.093)	0.031 (0.112)	0.052 (0.113)			-0.041 (0.151)	0.095 (0.168)
Gender		-0.018 (0.101)	-0.017 (0.098)	-0.019 (0.098)	-0.219 (0.158)	0.134 (0.121)		
Age		0.086** (0.037)	0.088** (0.037)	0.09** (0.037)	0.155*** (0.057)	0.017 (0.045)	0.102* (0.053)	0.088* (0.052)
Marital status		-0.214* (0.119)	-0.092 (0.119)	-0.104 (0.12)	-0.333 (0.207)	0.078 (0.137)	-0.337** (0.167)	0.149 (0.167)
Socioeconomic condition			0.163*** (0.021)	0.163*** (0.022)	0.164*** (0.031)	0.154*** (0.029)	0.124*** (0.026)	0.202*** (0.033)
Prevalence of stunting [†]			-1.491*** (0.458)	-1.651*** (0.458)	-1.307** (0.577)	-2.086** (0.82)	-1.488** (0.658)	-1.561** (0.637)
Constant	9.341*** (0.062)	9.35*** (0.12)	7.829*** (0.323)	7.917*** (0.322)	7.906*** (0.531)	8.034*** (0.413)	8.41*** (0.392)	7.188*** (0.483)
Observations	1237	1229	1219	1219	561	658	620	599
R-squared	0.012	0.017	0.089	0.084	0.091	0.094	0.074	0.119
AIC statistic	4773.525	4720.555	4601.795	4608.273	2196.385	2399.307	2314.702	2286.004

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, ϕ is the dependent variable, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, † denotes variables measured using buffers (i.e. with a radius of 30km). All models are estimated using OLS regression.

To check whether conflicts that have happened recently have a larger effect on the importance attached to God than the cumulative effect of conflict, I estimated a model where I substituted “Violent conflict” with “Violent conflict (short).” Unlike the former variable which measures the cumulative number of conflicts within the 30km buffer from 1997 to 2017, Violent conflict (short) measures the conflict incidents within the 30km buffer from 2015 to 2017. As shown in model 4, Violent conflict (short) carried the expected positive sign and was significant at the one percent level. However, the size of the coefficient increased to 0.004, which is four times the size of the explanatory variable in the earlier models. This suggests that the more recent a conflict incident is, the larger is its effect on the degree of importance attached to God.

To check for heterogeneity between the two major religious groups, I broke down the data based on religious affiliation and estimated models using the Muslim and Christian subsamples of respondents. As shown in models 5 and 6, conflict exposure positively correlates with the importance attached to God among both Muslims and Christians. However, the size of the effect for Christians was twice that for the Muslim subsample of respondents. A plausible reason for the larger effect among Christians could be that they have a higher level of conflict

exposure than their Muslim counterparts. An examination of the conflict exposure variable shows that 50 percent of the Christian respondents had at least 42 conflict incidents within the 30km buffer around their dwellings. The estimate for the Muslim respondents is 18.

I also broke down the data based on gender and estimated models using the male and female subsamples of respondents. As shown in models 7 and 8, the positive correlation between conflict exposure and the importance attached to God persisted in both models. However, the size of the effect for females was twice that for the male subsample of respondents. The larger effect among females might be because they are more risk averse than males. In their seminal study, in which they used risk preference theory to explain the difference in religiosity between men and women, Miller and Hoffman (1995) associated religious behavior with risk aversion and non-religious behavior with risk taking. They found that females had a higher level of religiosity than males. Their analysis also showed that risk taking behavior was a mediating factor between gender and religiosity. Tying this to the Nigerian case, reliance upon God could be viewed as a risk averse behavior that mitigates the existential threat posed by violent conflict. The mechanism behind the higher religiosity among females could be structural – i.e. in terms of the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society and the salience of gender roles. Women tend to be seen as *homemakers* whose responsibility it is to look after the children and the home, while the men are viewed as *providers* whose role it is to go out, work, take risks, and provide for the needs of the household members. It is possible that the women's concern not just for their own wellbeing, but also that of the entire household members, translates into risk averse behavior. Suffice to add that males and females have similar levels of conflict exposure: 50 percent of the male respondents had at least 31 conflict incidents within the 30km buffer around their dwellings. The estimate for females was 30. When I conducted a t-test comparing the difference in the mean level of conflict exposure between the two genders, the analysis showed that the difference between the means did not differ statistically from zero. Moreover, the Wave 7 WVS dataset, upon which this study relies, shows that 41 percent of Nigerians either “Strongly agree” or

“Agree” that “when a mother works for pay, the children suffer.” Breaking down the data based on gender showed that 42 and 40 percent of males and females respectively, hold this view (Haerpfer et al., 2022).

Robustness check

Table 3: Correlates of importance attached to God II

Importance of God [‡]	(1) 20km	(2) 40km	(3) 30km	(4) 30km	(5) 30km
Violent conflict [†]	0.001*** (0.00)	0.001*** (0.00)			
Violent conflict (1 fatality) [†]			0.002*** (0.00)		
UCDP [†]				0.002*** (0.00)	
GTD [†]					0.001*** (0.00)
Religious affiliation	0.032 (0.115)	0.028 (0.111)	0.032 (0.113)	0.044 (0.114)	0.048 (0.113)
Gender	-0.019 (0.098)	-0.02 (0.098)	-0.019 (0.098)	-0.02 (0.098)	-0.019 (0.098)
Age	0.091** (0.037)	0.092** (0.037)	0.09** (0.037)	0.092** (0.037)	0.091** (0.037)
Marital status	-0.1 (0.12)	-0.102 (0.119)	-0.098 (0.119)	-0.106 (0.12)	-0.102 (0.12)
Socioeconomic condition	0.163*** (0.021)	0.163*** (0.021)	0.163*** (0.021)	0.164*** (0.022)	0.163*** (0.022)
Prevalence of stunting [†]	-1.653*** (0.45)	-1.458*** (0.458)	-1.559*** (0.454)	-1.791*** (0.445)	-1.818*** (0.441)
Constant	7.907*** (0.315)	7.817*** (0.325)	7.861*** (0.319)	7.982*** (0.308)	7.992*** (0.306)
Observations	1219	1219	1219	1219	1219
R-squared	0.087	0.087	0.088	0.085	0.084
AIC statistic	4604.682	4603.905	4602.786	4607.615	4608.146

*Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, ϕ is the dependent variable, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, † denotes variables measured using buffers. The buffer size at which the relevant variables are measured is specified in the top header. All models are estimated using OLS regression.*

It is possible that the results reported in table 2 are influenced by the size of the buffer that I have used in measuring conflict exposure, as well as the source of the conflict dataset. To check whether this is indeed the case, I estimated some models where I measured conflict exposure using different buffer sizes and considering only incidents that had resulted in at least one fatality. I also obtained alternative conflict data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) database and the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which I used to develop additional measures for conflict exposure. Table 3 reports the regression results.

In models 1 and 2 respectively, I measured exposure to violent conflict using buffers with

radii of 20km and 40km. Violent conflict carried the expected positive sign and was significant at the one percent level. Moreover, the size of the coefficient for violent conflict was the same as that in models 1 to 3 reported in table 2 where violent conflict was measured using buffers with a 30km radius.⁵ In model 3, I used a measure for conflict exposure where I considered only the incidents within the 30km buffer that had resulted in at least one fatality. Violent conflict carried the expected positive sign and was significant at the one percent level. Suffice to add that the size of the coefficient increased to 0.02, which is twice the size of the coefficient of an identical model (i.e. model 3 in table 2) when I had not subjected the conflict exposure variable to a fatality threshold. This suggests that the more violent a conflict is – in terms of fatalities – the larger is its effect on the importance attached to God.

As a final robustness check, I developed alternative measures for conflict exposure using the UCDP's Georeferenced Events Dataset (GED) (Sundberg & Melander 2013)⁶ and the Global Terrorism Database dataset (GTD) (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism 2022).⁷ The UCDP dataset differs from the ACLED dataset. While the former records only incidents that have caused at least one fatality, the latter records all incidents without a fatality threshold. Since the UCDP dataset is available starting from 1989, I considered all the incidents starting from that year until 2017 while developing the measure for conflict exposure. The GTD dataset focuses specifically on terrorist attacks and does not use a fatality threshold as an inclusion criterion. According to the GTD, a terrorist attack is any incident involving “the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a nonstate actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” (GTD Codebook 2021, p. 11). Since the GTD dataset is available beginning from 1970, I considered all the terrorist incidents from 1970 until 2017 while developing the measure for conflict exposure.

The steps taken to develop the conflict exposure variables using the UCDP and GTD datasets

⁵ I also conducted a robustness check where I replicated models 5, 6, 7 and 8 in table 2 while measuring the explanatory variable with buffers that had radii of 20km and 40km. The results remained consistent. Table A1 in the appendix reports the results of these regressions.

⁶ To access the UCDP dataset visit: <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/>

⁷ To access the GTD dataset visit: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

are identical to that discussed in section 3.1.2. Both datasets are georeferenced.

As shown in model 4, which is based on the UCDP dataset, violent conflict carried the expected positive sign and was significant at the one percent level. The effect size was similar to that in the preceding model where, based on the ACLED dataset, I had considered only conflict incidents within the 30km buffer that had caused at least one fatality. This corroborates the previous finding that the more intense a conflict is – in terms of fatalities – the larger is its effect on the importance attached to God. In model 5 which is based on the GTD dataset, conflict exposure carried the expected positive sign and was significant at the one percent level. This suggests that exposure to terrorist attacks positively correlates with the importance that Nigerians attach to God in their lives.

5.0. Conclusion

Relying on the Wave 7 WVS data, this study examined the relationship between conflict exposure and the degree of importance that Nigerians attach God in their lives. The regression results showed that exposure to violent conflict positively correlates with the importance attached to God. The analysis also showed that the more recent a conflict is, the larger is its effect on the importance attached to God. The positive correlation persisted when I broke down the data based on religious affiliation (Christians and Muslims) and gender (males and females) and estimated models using these subsamples of respondents. However, the size of the effect was larger among Christians than Muslims. This could be because Christians have a higher level of conflict exposure than Muslims. The effect size was also larger among females than males. This might be due to risk aversive nature of women which emanates from the patriarchal nature of Nigerian society and the salience of gender roles: Women are viewed as *homemakers* whose responsibility it is to look after the children and the home, while men are viewed as *providers* whose responsibility it is to go out, work, take risks, and provide for the needs of the household members.

Taken together, my findings suggest that Nigerians rely upon God as a means of coping with the existential threat posed by violent conflict. The trend of violent conflict in the country rose steadily between 2016 to 2022, and shows no signs of abating. The Nigerian government has also failed in its fundamental responsibility to provide security for the citizenry. The population is in desperate need of hope. Reliance upon God provides that. If these findings are correct, then governments, development practitioners, and humanitarian agencies need to focus on meeting not only on the material needs of people who have been affected by violent conflict, but also their spiritual needs, as these are also very important.

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Appendix

Table A1: Correlates of importance attached to God III

Importance of God [‡]	Religious subsamples				Gender subsamples			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	20km Muslim	40km Muslim	20km Xtian	40km Xtian	20km Male	40km Male	20km Female	40km Female
Violent conflict [†]	0.001** (0.00)	0.001** (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)	0.001** (0.00)	0.001** (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)	0.002*** (0.00)
Religious affiliation					-0.036 (0.154)	-0.05 (0.151)	0.087 (0.172)	0.098 (0.165)
Gender	-0.225 (0.158)	-0.224 (0.158)	0.131 (0.122)	0.133 (0.122)				
Age	0.158*** (0.057)	0.159*** (0.057)	0.022 (0.045)	0.02 (0.046)	0.105** (0.053)	0.105** (0.053)	0.094* (0.052)	0.092* (0.052)
Marital status	-0.347* (0.208)	-0.0346* (0.207)	0.074 (0.138)	0.071 (0.137)	-0.347** (0.168)	-0.348** (0.168)	0.143 (0.168)	0.142 (0.167)
Socioeconomic condition	0.164*** (0.032)	0.163*** (0.031)	0.155*** (0.029)	0.154*** (0.029)	0.123*** (0.026)	0.124*** (0.026)	0.204*** (0.034)	0.202*** (0.033)
Prevalence of stunting [†]	-1.385** (0.547)	-1.348** (0.585)	-2.313*** (0.837)	-1.989** (0.81)	-1.625** (0.646)	-1.43** (0.672)	-1.727*** (0.627)	-1.549** (0.621)
Constant	7.946*** (0.512)	7.948*** (0.53)	8.118*** (0.407)	7.977*** (0.416)	8.485*** (0.378)	8.397*** (0.399)	7.242*** (0.475)	7.163*** (0.485)
Observations	561	561	658	658	620	620	599	599
R-squared	0.092	0.089	0.09	0.095	0.072	0.073	0.118	0.118
AIC statistic	2196.298	2197.755	2402.371	2398.868	2315.943	2315.591	2286.914	2286.944

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses, ϕ is the dependent variable, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$, † denotes variables measured using buffers. The radii of the buffers are specified in the header at the top of the table. All models are estimated using OLS regression.

Table A1 replicates models 5, 6, 7, and 8 in table 2 using buffers with alternative radii of 20km and 40km.

Table A2: Annual trend of violent conflict in Nigeria, 1997 to 2022

Year	Freq.	Percent	Cumulative
1997	108	0.58	0.58
1998	96	0.51	1.09
1999	142	0.76	1.84
2000	127	0.68	2.52
2001	96	0.51	3.03
2002	128	0.68	3.71
2003	175	0.93	4.64
2004	194	1.03	5.68
2005	98	0.52	6.20
2006	99	0.53	6.72
2007	178	0.95	7.67
2008	172	0.92	8.59
2009	156	0.83	9.42
2010	312	1.66	11.08
2011	266	1.42	12.50
2012	668	3.56	16.05
2013	704	3.75	19.80
2014	870	4.63	24.43
2015	834	4.44	28.87
2016	698	3.72	32.59
2017	865	4.61	37.20
2018	1293	6.88	44.08
2019	1502	8.00	52.08
2020	2608	13.89	65.97
2021	3068	16.34	82.30
2022	3324	17.70	100.00
Total	18,781	100.00	

Note: Violence against civilians, Battles, and Explosions/Remote violence accounted for 52%, 40%, and 8% of the total incidents. Source: Armed Conflict Location and Events Database (ACLED) (Raleigh et al. 2010).