‘Its’ like being a Christian is tantamount to victimisation: A Qualitative study of Christian experiences and perceptions of insecurity and terrorism in Nigeria

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Abstract: Insecurity and terrorism poses global concern. Central to this concern is how the Christian self and identity are experienced in relation to Nigeria’s ongoing terrorist threat. Informed by data from 63 Christian participants recruited in Nigeria, this study makes an original contribution by demystifying how personal experiences fuel perceived victimisation. These include religious insecurity and fear, insecurity as a targeted ploy to undermine the Christian identity and shared identity as a safe space—all of which appears to reinforce the sense of being victimised and an object of domination by the perceived Muslim “superior other”. The study recommends an improved policy that addresses the identified challenges to positively enhance existing Christian-Muslim relations, including confidence in the government.

Subjects: Criminology and Criminal Justice; Victims and Victimology; Crime and Crime Prevention

Keywords: Boko Haram; Christian; experiences; Nigeria; perspective; terrorism

1. Introduction
Religious intolerance and insecurity are issues of concern in the African continent. Ranging from Al Shabaab, a Salafist jihadi Islamic movement with an underlying political motive to wage war against perceived enemies of Islam (Anderson & McKnight, 2015), to the Lord Resistant Army mutilation of children and women responsible for the death of over 100,000 people in Uganda...
(Day, 2017). Originally founded by Joseph Kony, the Lord Resistant Army was ideologically driven by the quest to instil Christian rule in Uganda and foster a multiparty democratic system and Acholi nationalism.

Central to such intolerance is Nigeria, whose own fair share of religious intolerance seems apparent. Over the last decade, the rising level of religious intolerance and insecurity in Nigeria has been a significant concern. Insecurity has generally stifled the peace and stability in the country ranging from terrorism to armed banditry and kidnapping. For instance, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace Global Terrorism Index report, in 2014 alone, out of the 32,658 people killed due to terrorism globally, Boko Haram is responsible for 7512, amounting to 23 per cent of the global terrorism-related death (Institute for Economic and Peace, 2015). The total number of people killed by Boko Haram exceeds the number of civilian deaths in any sole civil war in Africa in 2014 (Anderson, 2015). For instance, in Somalia, approximately 4,425 people were killed compared to South Sudan in 1817 and 2116 civilians in the Central African Republic (Anderson, 2015). Even in recent times, the Institute for Economics and Peace Global Terrorism Index report (Institute for Economics and Peace), 2022 still ranked Nigeria as one of the countries facing insecurity challenges due to Boko Haram, tagged as one of the deadly terrorist groups in the world. Between 2020 and 2021, the Institute for Economics and Peace Global Terrorism Index report suggests that Boko Haram accounts for 178 deaths (Institute for Economics and Peace), 2022. Even before Boko Haram, religious extremism and intolerance appear to be on the rise. Between 2003 and 1999, religiously motivated violence accounts for the death of over 10,000 people in the country (Onuoha, 2010). Central to these concerns is the issue of victimisation and the religious divide between the Christian and Muslim adherents.

Religion is often considered a force for mobilisation and cohesion. Within Nigeria, existing studies suggest that Nigeria is one of the world’s most religious countries (Meleki, 2021). Historically, Nigeria has often been entangled in ethno-religious conflicts where religion has often been a force for creating a “us vs them” and an “ingroup vs outgroup” identity. Notable movements, including the Maitatsine movement, highlight how religion has been mobilised to promote hate and incite violence. Studies suggest that the clashes between the Maitatsine movement and the security forces led to the death of over 4000 persons and the destruction of properties (Ischei, 1989). Such violence and the use of religion to incite hate have gradually resurfaced with the emergence of Boko Haram, which spurred a renewed fear of the perceived Muslim subjugation.

Existing studies on the link between religion and insecurity have often tended to focus on Islamophobia. The perceived fear of Islam as the demonised “other” fuelling violence has been a subject of debate. Kairep (2020) argues that Islamophobia represents a negative perception of Islam and that the term also provokes fear. Thus, the Muslims are perceived as the victimised “other”. While much emphasis is accorded Islamophobia, there seems to be a paucity of research that has explored Christian experiences of victimisation and insecurity in Nigeria from an interpretative phenomenological analytical (IPA) lens. Thus, the paper made an original contribution by using the IPA’s theoretical lens to underpin how Christian experience insecurity and terrorism. The paper is also significant given its robust and rigorous engagement with the IPA to demystify how personal experiences inform perceived victimisation. The rigorous adoption of the IPA could serve as a basis for transferability to other contexts sharing similar characteristics. The significance of the findings is vital for understanding how the Christian self is used to mediate interactions with others, stereotyping, and informing how they experience insecurity. It is also significant as it could help address the perceived root causes of such insecurity as highlighted in the Muslim community’s problematisation by promoting positive narratives that allow for peaceful co-existence.

Against the preceding backdrop, the paper commenced with an engagement with the theoretical debates concerning religion, religious intolerance and its link to victimisation. Religious tolerance for this study “means sharing with others amid differences by linking them to the
entrance to peaceful coexistence between religions and societies” (Jabouri et al., 2022, p. 1). For this study, religious intolerance refers to the intolerance against other’s religious beliefs, doctrines and practices, whether expressly or impliedly, in ways that put the other adherents in an uncomfortable position or the feeling of being victimised. The paper also proceeds to engage with Nigeria’s historical context and how religion shapes the polity, including the connotational debate on secularism, the introduction of Sharia law and the perceived fear of Christian domination and victimisation by the Muslims. The next section discusses the methodology involving the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Finally, the paper reports and discusses the findings from the dataset whilst drawing on the conclusion and its implication for the literature and policy improvement.

2. Religious intolerance and victimisation

Religion and its link to victimisation have been a subject of debate. Several theories explain religion in society. Durkheim (1912) argues that religion is a unified system of practices and beliefs relative to sacred things that unite all those who adhere to its doctrine into a single moral community. For Durkheim (1912), he argued in his work entitled “Elementary Forms of Religious Life” that all societies divide the world into the profane and the sacred. Durkheim (1912) further argues that the profane refers to ordinary life involving engagement with one’s daily routine, while the sacred relates to any act that transcends the routine practices of everyday life and typically manifests in collective representations in sacred spaces set apart from contemporary society. In essence, religion represents the collective practice of maintaining a safe space between the profane and the sacred through rituals, as evidenced in the weekly or daily visit to the mosque or church and an engagement in routine prayers. Durkheim’s view no doubt highlight the collectivity in religion.

Religion often constitutes a solace for the oppressed. Karl Marx (1843) argues that “religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heat of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” Marx’s argument no doubt highlights criticism of religion in that it tends to provide solace for enduring difficulties with the promise of a better future or afterlife. On the other hand, Weber (1905) contends that religion is a precipitator of social change. Drawing on the effects of religious beliefs on economic activities in protestant societies, including England and the Netherlands, Weber (1905) concludes that they were the developed capitalist with their most successful business, mostly from Protestants.

Drawing on Karl Marx and Marxist views, religion could serve as a source of social conflict and could be used to explain the growing divide between Muslims and Christian in Nigeria. Such explanation stems from the use of religion as a source of mobilisation and the creation of the “us vs them” identity, which, if not appropriately managed, could lead to conflict and divide between both adherents. For example, Boko Haram has often pulled on religious rhetoric such as Salafist jihadism to portray Christians as an infidel and justify its killings of such adherents. In addition, given the number imbalance between Christian and Muslims in Nigeria, with the latter being the majority, religion could be perceived as a source of victimisation where Christian adherent feels marginalised and oppressed politically and economically (Varin, 2016).

Contemporary debates about religion have focused on issues such as civil religion, secularisation, and religious cohesiveness in the context of multiculturalism and globalisation. From the context of the link between religion and victimisation, the emphasis tends to be on Muslims, who are often perceived to be subject to religiously motivated discrimination (Allen 2005; Modood, 2012; Runnymede Trust). Notable studies, including the Runnymede Trust (1997) titled “Islamophobia a challenge for us all”, highlight discrimination suffered by the Muslim population. Anwar (2008) also contends that that discrimination against Muslims and violence are significant problems facing the group. While much emphasis is accorded to the Muslims related to the link between religion and victimisation, this paper shifts from this perspective to address the gap by
explore Christian experiences of insecurity and terrorism in Nigeria. The paper draws on existing historical context and the IPA to demystify Christian victimisation experiences in the country.

3. Religion and Boko Haram in Nigeria

Nigeria is a pluralistic society encompassing diverse ethnic groups and religions. Historically Muslim-Christian relationship has been marred by issues of distrust. Nigeria being a multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation, have experience crises along these lines, which dates to the colonial policy of the British. Varin (2016) argues that the political divide between Christian and Muslims dates to the unification of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914. The unification subsequently saw the re-division into three regions by further dividing the South into a Christian-dominant Eastern region and a religiously mixed Western region. The dominant ethnic group in each of these regions is one of Nigeria’s three largest ethnic groups: North (Hausa, Muslim), West (Yoruba, both Christian and Muslim) and Eastern (Igbo, Christian).

The amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in Nigeria by Sir Frederick Lugard saw the fusing of both regions to create a single nation-State. However, Tamuno (1980) argues that under Sir Lugard’s leadership, the British government did not seek the populace’s opinion before the amalgamation. Instead, an indirect rule was introduced, which did little to instil confidence among the populace. Such relation will later degenerate into a lack of trust by both Christian adherents, making up 40 per cent of the population and the Muslims, forming approximately 50 per cent (Sulaiman, 2019). Hence, making the Muslim the dominant religion in the country.

The debate concerning religion has often led to the contentious relationship between Muslims and Christians. Such a contentious relationship intertwined with religious rivalry issues and the competition between the Muslim and Christian adherents that tends to divide the country along ethnopolitical lines. The product which in recent years has led to a rise in religious extremism in the country. The emergence of the Maitatsine movement of the 1980s highlights one such moment where religious extremism and fanaticism played out. Maitatsine advocates a rejection of western influence and modernisation (Isichei, 1989). Falola (1998) argues that the Maitatsine movement and subsequent riots were because of political decadence on the one hand and Islamic fundamentalism coupled with the 1970s economic troubles on the other hand. The Maitatsine movement saw others, including the Christians who did not accept his ideology, as infidels. The contentious relationship between Muslims and Christians has also led to thousands of deaths. For instance, IRIN (2004) report suggests that more than 53,000 people were killed, including the displacement of 280,000 people during Plateau State’s three years of sectarian violence. As Varin (2016) argues, the resort to violence stems from religion’s strong influence in Nigeria. Varin (2016, p. 53) further contends that:

Since independence in 1960, Christians and Muslims have been at odds to define the role of religion in governance, with both sides defending their right to religious freedom and the implementation of religious laws. In addition, unscrupulous politicians have exploited this vulnerability to gain power over their adversaries using inflammatory languages and inciting violence against the different communities.

Communal violence and a civil war occurred since Nigeria’s independence in 1960. In 1967, the Eastern region, dominated by mostly Igbo and Christian, strove for secession as the independent nation of Biafra. As a result, the Nigerian government and its military under northern Muslim leadership vigorously stopped the secessionist quest, leading to the death of over two million Biafrans (Scacco & Warren, 2021). Kendhammer (2014) argues that after the war, interreligious tensions persist and remain one of the significant concerns informing contemporary political tensions and grievances in the country. Ibrahim (1991) also contends that during the 1980s, most Christians in Nigeria believed the predominantly Muslim north received a greater share of economic resources and political power, thus igniting resentment on religious lines. The 1980s and
Ike, Cogent Social Sciences (2022), 8: 2071032
https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2071032

early 1990s also saw the rise of religious and ethnic identity feuds due to the gradual introduction of a multiparty system (Falola, 1998; Ibrahim, 1991). The Nigeria Middle Belt, which is composed of a conflation of Christians and Muslims, recorded a series of interreligious violence, including a religious riot in areas such as Kafanchan in Kaduna state. The Kafanchan riot of 1987 led to the deaths of 25 persons. Between 1990 and 2008, at least 4,703 fatalities occurred due to interreligious conflict in Nigeria (Basedau et al., 2013).

Even the commencement of the new millennium did little to quell the contentious divide between the Muslims and the Christian. For example, in 2000, large-scale riots broke out between the Muslims and Christians in Kaduna state and led to the death of approximately 1,295 people, including the displacement of others (Tertsakian 2003; Scacco, 2020). The crisis was triggered by a public debate over whether to introduce Sharia law into Kaduna state’s criminal code. The crisis, which is often dubbed a serious interreligious violence in Nigeria, witnessed the destruction and burning of churches and mosques. A study comprising 300 respondents living in the conflict-prone area in Kaduna and representing both religious adherents found, among others, that there exist continued high levels of prejudice and mistrust against those perceived as members of the opposite religion and outgroup (Scacco & Warren, 2021).

Even in Jos, Plateau state, interreligious violence is an issue of concern, and the capital (Jos) is known to have experienced deadly riots between the Christians and the Muslims between 2001 and 2004. The riot has often resulted in the death of thousands. The Jos Plateau conflict originated from the competition between the Muslims and Christians, indigenes and settlers who strived to acquire political power and their representation in top government positions in the State (Majekodunmi et al., 2014). The Beroms, who are predominantly Christian, claim indigene status and political representation in the State’s government based on Jos Plateau’s original inhabitant status. The Jasawa, who are Muslim Hausas, is often construed as settlers of Jos (Varin, 2016). This places them at a disadvantage, particularly related to economic, social and political benefits, including employment in the State’s civil service and scholarships. Consequently, Jos’ conflict stems from the conflation of Hausa-Fulanis’ claim of indigeneity in Plateau State based on their longstanding settlement and their political desires for adequate political representation. These are undoubtedly vehemently resisted by indigenes of the Jos Plateau, who strive to keep the State’s resources for themselves and argue that settlers have already acquired sufficient advantages over them in terms of affluence and numbers (Majekodunmi et al., 2014).

The tension between the Hausa Fulanis (predominantly Muslims) and Jos Plateau’s indigenes (predominantly Christians) has led to a series of violence in the State. For example, a Hausa Muslim appointed as a coordinator for poverty alleviation in August 2001 fuelled resentment and the escalation of tension engulfed into a riot in September 2001. In just a short span of one week, over 1000 people were killed, including thousands who fled because of the riot (Bawa & Nwogwu, 2002). The media reported these riots as religious riots, and it was quick for those on both sides who fomented the violence to incite their followers on the grounds of religion (Human Right Watch, 2001). However, the consequences were devastating. According to an IRIN report published in (IRIN, 2004), over 53,000 people lost their lives, further displacing 280,000 people during three years of intensive sectarian violence in Plateau State.

A study conducted by Orji (2011) involving semi-structured interviews with clerics and lay members of faith-based organisations on the role they played during the Jos crises found that Plateau State indigenous communities perceive their members as unable to access opportunities at the federal level due to the Hausa-Fulani Muslims domination of the federal government. While indigenes of Jos-Plateau highlight such concerns, other religious and ethnic groups across Nigeria have expressed concerns suggesting the Hausa-Fulani/Muslim hegemony in Nigeria’s political sphere (Ekwe-Ekwe, 1985; Harnischfeger, 2004; Ibelema, 2000). The Jos-Plateau crises highlight the frustration with the perceived deprivation of political access at the federal level, reflecting
a sense of deep-seated perceptions of deprivation among the indigenes and a sense that the Muslims are ebbing towards claiming the little resources available to the former (Ike et al., 2021).

Interreligious conflict in Nigeria is also partly influenced by the sensitive religious nature of the country. In 2009, a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey comprising 1,516 Nigerians examined Christians and Muslims’ attitudes towards religion and each other (Pew Forum, 2010). It was found that over half (58%) of the Nigerian respondents perceive religious conflict as a very big problem in the country (Pew Forum, 2010). It was also found that 70% of Muslims believed sharia should be the official law, while 71% believed the Bible should be the official law (Pew Forum, 2010).

The sharia debate and the quest to implement Islamic laws in Nigeria have often served as a contentious point of conflict between Muslims and Christians. Nigeria is a secular state, and the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria explicitly provides that the state and federal government “shall not adopt any religion as State religion” whilst also guaranteeing freedom of religion to all Nigerians. However, notwithstanding the Constitution’s provisions, the Muslims have often demanded the implementation of Sharia law, especially across the northern region. Consequently, Christians in Nigeria express dissent that Sharia law should not apply to them and argue that it could lead to conflict as it may erode civil rights (Varin, 2016). The fears appear informed by the previous act of General Babangida, who unilaterally, in 1986, without consultation, secretly admitted Nigeria to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC; Onapajo & Usman, 2015). The act terrified most Christian who felt that it was a direct move to Islamise the country.

Notwithstanding the Constitution’s provisions, the Muslims can still implement sharia law in at least 12 states. Zamfara State was the first State to introduce strict sharia law under the leadership of Governor Ahmed Sani, who was elected on his quest to ensure sharia implementation. Following his precedent, other states have also enforced Sharia law, including Borno, Bauchi, Gombe, Jigawa, Katsina, Kano, Kaduna, Kebbi, Niger, Yobe, Sokoto and Zamfara. Johannes Harnischfeger (2014) argues that although they might be underlying political motives behind Sharia implementation, it was also driven by genuine religious beliefs, profound distrust of the elected governors, and perceived fear of Christian domination.

While Zamfara state could endorse sharia with little protest due to its 90% Muslim population, the same could not be said of other states. In states with a large Christian minority, the sharia led to conflict. For instance, in 2000, in Kaduna, the Christian Association of Nigeria organised a protest to voice their discontent over the Sharia policy. The protest led to a clash with Muslim youths leading to the loss of 1200 lives (Human Right Watch, 2001). Some Christians in the Southeast began to massacre the Muslim minority in their State as revenge for killing fellow Christians in Kaduna (Varin, 2016). In response, the Kaduna State government slightly modified the law to exclude Christians from certain restrictions and punishment, including amputations and stoning, was not implemented. Such a move satisfied neither religion as the Christians felt the government was pandering to Islamic extremism while the Muslims felt Governor Makarfi succumbed to the Christian will and betrayed the north (Varin, 2016).

Even when policies including the NYSC scheme, sponsoring religious pilgrimages abroad and recognising associations, including the Christian Association of Nigeria, exist, these interventions seem to have done little in instilling both religious adherents’ confidence in the secularism of the country. Notable examples include the emergence of Boko Haram, which has further heightened tension between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria.

3.1. Boko Haram and Nigeria’s contentious religious divide
The emergence of Boko Haram is a subject of debate. Boko Haram, often translated to mean western education, is forbidden represent a dominant terrorist group bedevilling Nigeria (Ike, 2018; Ike et al., 2021). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees UNHCR, 2020), Boko Haram is responsible for displacing
approximately 2.4 million people in the Lake Chad Basin and over 2 million people in Nigeria. While the bulk of the literature argues on Boko Haram's rejection of western education, Thurston (2018:16) argues that Boko Haram mean “Western culture is forbidden by Islam”. Such argument appeared to highlight the group view as documented in one of its statements thus:

Boko Haram does not in any way mean “Western education is a sin” as the infidel media continue to portray us. Boko Haram actually means “Western Civilisation” is forbidden. The difference is that while the first gave the impression that we are opposed to formal education coming from the West, that is Europe, which is not true, the second affirms or believe [sic] in the supremacy of Islamic culture (not Education), for culture is broader, it includes education but not determine by western education. In this case we are talking of Western ways of life which include: constitutional provision as it relates to, the rights and privileges of women [,] multi-party democracy in an overwhelmingly Islamic country like Nigeria.

The statement from the sect highlights a significant link to the perceived quest to uphold Islamic values. However, how these values play out is a subject of debate. Some scholars argue that Boko Haram is a religious extremist group (Adesoji, 2010). Others contend that its ideologies stem from the Salafist-jihadist ideology. To this extent, Thurston (2018) argues that it is important to explore Boko Haram ideology from three main contexts: Salafism, jihadism, and Salafi-jihadism. Salafism is a philosophical outlook that refers to the return of Islam back to the practices of its pious predecessors. Salafis strive to emulate such purity and see themselves as the only saved sect to achieve such aims. Boko Haram's link to jihad and Salafi-jihadism stems from the combination of Salafis theology and jihadist ideology. The combination justifies its killing of fellow Muslims and other religions, not supporting its ideology which aims to Islamise Nigeria, abolish western influences and establish a caliphate governed by strict Sharia law.

While Boko Haram ideology is often interlinked with Islam, Tibi (2012) argues for distinguishing Islam from Islamism. Tibi (2012) contends that Islamism is different from the faith of Islam as it seeks to use Islam in achieving political goals. However, other scholar associates Boko Haram with the socioeconomic condition of the region, which they argue constitutes the reasons for its emergence. For instance, the economic situation in the north far outweighs that of any other region in Nigeria. More than 60% of Nigerians are estimated to live on less than a dollar a day. In the north, following the 1970 economic recession after the oil boom, the north was further submerged in acute poverty. Between 2006 and 1980, the level of poverty in the northeast zone rose from 35.6 per cent to 72.4 percent- making it the second poorest region after the northwest at 79.2 per cent (Thurston, 2018). In the southern region, the poverty rate has also increased, ranging between 55.9 per cent and 63.1 per cent in 2006 but remained lower than in the north (Aluko, 2013). Meanwhile, a high level of unemployment also prevails in the northern region than that in the south. While socioeconomic factors permeate, other studies situate the uprising from the perceived heavy-handedness of the Nigerian security forces argue to alienate the public from the former (Hansen, 2020; Amnesty-International 2014HRW 2012).

Notwithstanding the argument suggesting socioeconomic factors and security forces' excessive use of violence as the drivers of the conflict, the religious underpinnings appear essential in contextualising Christian feeling of victimisation. Existing attacks highlight elements of religious connotation, as seen in the bombing of churches in Jos on Christmas day and the arbitral attacks of Christian locations. Such acts, coupled with Boko Haram's extreme resentment of western influences, including democracy and its religion, highlight instances where erstwhile political grievances took a religious tone in their manifestation. Onapajo and Usman (2015) argue that such extreme ideology highlights Christian perceived fear of Muslim domination and the use of Boko Haram as a ploy against the Christian population. Thus, highlighting a need to explore Christian experiences of insecurity and terrorism in the country.
4. Christian experiences of insecurity, terrorism and victimisation in Nigeria

4.1. Method

4.1.1. Data collection
The study adopts purposive and snowballs sampling techniques to recruit participants from Lagos and Plateau states in Nigeria. The location for data collection was specifically selected due to its relevance to the study context and a future randomised controlled trial study. For instance, Jos, Plateau State, represent an area that has experienced ethno-religious conflict between the Berom and the Hausa Fulani. The conflict in Jos is characterised as inter-religious and mainly between the marginal Christian 'indigene' (Berom, Afrisare and Anagula) and the perceived dominant Hausa Fulani Muslim groups (Adebanwi, 2005). Insecurity has also been a significant issue in Plateau State as Boko Haram has also perpetrated terrorist activities, including bombing churches. In terms of Lagos, the rationale for the choice of data collection location is because Lagos is cosmopolitan, composed of both Christians and Muslims, and it is also the most populous city in Nigeria with people from different States, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds (Ekure et al., 2019). The sample size of 63 highlights the use of IPA to vividly illustrate most of the participants' experiences, which a large sample size might not be feasible to achieve.

The criteria for including participants are that there must be Christians from Nigeria, have experience and knowledge of the contentious Christian-Muslim relationship in Nigeria, be able to speak English and provide informed consent before taking part in the study. The exclusion criteria include those not aged 18 and above, unable to provide informed consent, and unable to speak English. The participants who took part in the study were between the age of 18 and 69. Demographically, of the 63 participants, 47 were male while 16 were female. In terms of the state of origin, the participants interviewed cut across five of Nigeria's six geopolitical zones as the participants completed a demographic questionnaire indicating states including Kaduna (Northwest), Lagos (Southwest), Jos (Northcentral), Delta (South-South), and Ebonyi (Southeast). The participants were from diverse occupations, including teachers, clergy, students, self-employed entrepreneur, bank manager, security consultants, non-governmental organisation directors, computer operators, and retired soldiers. The participants' education background is also diverse, with some identifying as secondary school certificate holders to undergraduate, national diploma, master's degree and PhD holders.

The interviews made efforts to explore participants' deeper meaning related to their experiences of insecurity and the role of religion in influencing such experiences. This was made possible given that most of the participants interviewed from Lagos were those with direct experience and fled ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria's middle belt and northern regions, including states like Maiduuguri, Adamawa and Kaduna. Participants were keen to also discuss the role of terrorism as part of what influences their overall experiences of insecurity, particularly as it relates to the terrorist ideologies often construed as religiously motivated and a quest to dominate and instil Islam on all Nigerians. It is worth noting that ethical approval was sought from and granted by a University in the UK before data collection was carried out The study is part of a broader dataset and only data related to the themes of the current paper are reported. In essence, there are other areas and subjects not contained in the present article. Participation was also voluntary, and all participants who took part in the study were briefed and consented before the interview took place. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and all interviews were recorded with an audio recording device before transcribed verbatim and uploaded into Nvivo-11 to aid analysis.

4.1.2. Data analysis
An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to explore the lived experiences of Christian in Lagos and Plateau States as it relates to insecurity and victimisation in Nigeria. Phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiographic theoretical features of IPA were used to underpin the analysis and interpretation of data (Smith, 1996). The theoretical underpinning informs how
the researcher made sense of how the participants made sense of their experiences. Hence, highlighting the double hermeneutical approach underpinned by a detailed idiographic account of each participant's experiences (phenomenology; Smith & Eatough, 2021).

The study adopts the IPA method of coding, analysis, and data interpretation to capture participants’ experiential and essential quality accounts of insecurity in the country. For nuance and identification of the participants’ interpretative narratives, the researcher engages in both inductive and interactive dataset processes by listening and relistening to the recorded interviews. The researcher also engages with familiarisation with the interview transcript whilst making notes of preliminary exploratory comments. These comprise conceptual, descriptive and linguistic comments (Spiers & Smith, 2020). Codes were processed to identify the main themes in all transcripts analysed. The themes that reoccurred were collapsed and subsequently refined into the master themes. The master themes were reviewed to reflect the main accounts across the dataset. The main themes that captured the participants’ experiences were identified and reported as the final themes. IPA has been used in previous studies, highlighting its importance in providing valuable insight into how participants perceive their subjective lived experiences (Shinebourne, 2011; Spiers & Smith, 2020).

5. Findings
The analysed results yielded the following main themes: religious insecurity, insecurity as a targeted ploy to undermine the Christian identity and shared identity as a safe space.

5.1. Theme 1—Religious insecurity and fear
This theme highlights a dominant interpretation where one’s religious identity mediates the perceived experiences of insecurity. The feeling of being petrified resonates across participants’ accounts. As Camelia recounts her experience:

My experience about it is that we are not safe. When I went to Jos, I was very, very scared. I am afraid because when I went there, they said this side is for the Muslim, and this side is for the Christian. So, when I went to the Muslim's side, I did not know that they have differences. So, I was afraid when they told me that this side is for the Muslim and I am a Christian. I was very scared; I was very scared I am not comfortable until I left that area, I was scared all through. So, what I really want them to do for us is that they should unite the country because they are making the country a religious country. Meanwhile, we have different kinds of groups. We have Christians; we have Muslims, and we have other kinds of religion. So, they should try and unite this country. When I went to Nasarawa, it is the same thing, I was afraid. I could not walk freely; even the hotel I lodge I was afraid because of the way they wrap themselves. I did not do that, so I was afraid that they might hurt me. Because of the way they look at you, you will be afraid. They look at you like who is this kind of person because the way they are, I am not like that.

Here, Camelia’s religious identity as a “Christian” influences her experiences of the fear of insecurity. Being outside the domain of other Christians sharing a similar identity as Camelia was construed from a position of disadvantage and a form of distress. A possible explanation that might have informed the participant's experience could be from existing historical conflict in Jos, Plateau State, between the Beroms’ construed as the indigenes and the Hausa trying to claim indigene status due to long term migration. Such issues of indigeneship have seldom resulted in conflicts between the duo. Thus, a further polarising existing divide between the Christian and Muslim communities in the region. Camila’s experience highlights a feeling of “us and them” where being in a Christian location conjures safety rather than being in a location labelled as belonging to the “Muslim” other. As Divine, another participant, commented, “my schooling experiences in the north as a Christian were challenging. I was always conscious and afraid of when religious crises will erupt, so I tend to remain in the space of my fellow Christians.”
Of notable importance in Camelia’s experience is the perceived feeling even when outside Jos. For instance, being in Nasarawa, a State with a Muslim majority, also evoke similar fears. The reference to words like “I was afraid because the way they wrap themselves I did not do that, so I was afraid that they might hurt me” highlight a sense of insecurity where the looks and presentation are seen as essential to belong to such social space. In essence, being a Christian and expressing such in her manner of dressing is construed as problematic due to the perceived outlook it conjures. In Camelia’s experience, she interprets how she is being looked at as a sense of outsider, which makes her feel so insecure that she fears she risks being harmed. An implication is that peaceful co-existence is seen as challenging due to the religious divide and the perceived intolerance of Muslims. On a slightly similar vein, Deinre another participant commented:

I recall my experience, and just because of the way I dressed and looked by not covering my hair, a Muslim male colleague openly condemned me, and I felt really sad that I was judged because I am a Christian and not one of them. In the south, I have never experienced anyone condemning me for not covering my hair!

The participant’s experience highlights a sense of victimisation. The implication of such a situation is demonstrated in the eruption of religious violence in 2002, which was triggered by an upcoming Miss World Pageant incited by This Day newspaper publication. The news article, which argued for the case for Nigeria to host the pageant, sparked backlash and later degenerated into violence between the Muslims Christians in Kaduna and led to the death of 250 people (Human Right Watch, 2001; Varin, 2016). In essence, dress appearance is a significant area where perceived victimisation is expressed.

Another participant recounts a similar experience who expressed fear and noted how such feelings of fear were more to do with the Muslims. The Muslims are perceived to be comfortable in the Christian region, while similar treatment seems lacking if Christians were to be in their State. Recounting his experience, Tamuno, a male ex-youth Corper, noted that:

My perspective is that as a Christian, there are certain places in Nigeria that you are not really safe to go or to live because for me, I was once a Corper before, and when I served in Kaduna, my stay there really was some kind of terrifying because I see myself like I am an outcast there but people there, they cannot even speak English, and there are so so much addicted to their own selves. They do not easily relate to Christians, and they seclude themselves. In the south, Muslims are treated well, but you cannot say the same for the north if you will get treated well as a Christian.

Here Tamuno constructs his experience from a spatial perspective where being in a particular location is tantamount to being unsafe. The reference to terms such as “terrifying” highlights a feeling of fear which problematises the Muslims as orchestrating such feeling. Tamuno’s reference to his experience as a Corper reflects a perceived negative impression of a Muslim State. His youth Corper experience appears to whittle down the essence of the scheme designed to promote peaceful coexistence among Nigerians. For instance, the primary purpose of the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme is “with a view to the proper encouragement and development of common ties among the youths of Nigeria and the promotion of national unity.” As the scheme observes, its purpose is to primarily inculcate in the youths the spirit of selfless service to the community and advocate the spirit of brotherhood and oneness of all Nigerians, irrespective of social or cultural background. The history of Nigeria since its independence highlights the need for unity amongst all people and demonstrates the fact that no geographical or cultural entity can exist in isolation (NYSC 2021). Thus, the scheme’s ethos highlights some of the historical issues associated with ethnicity, religious affiliation, culture, and marginalisation. Most of these played out during the Civil war, which later led to the establishment of the NYSC scheme. However, Tamuno’s experience highlights a perceived feeling where fears based on religious affiliation and feeling unsafe in a State, not from his original state of origin, seem dominant. The implication of such an experience is that it tends to conjure a sense of fragmented sense of belonging where
being a Christian in a Muslim space evokes a sense of disconnect and a feeling of not belonging or being accepted in such space.

The extract also highlights the sense that regardless of gender, fear is expressed both ways. Being a Christian conjures a sense of victimisation where the participant felt threatened because of his religion and been perceived as the different “other”. However, the participant’s gender was immaterial. His religious affiliation and beliefs appear more dominant in influencing his experiences and how being safe are construed in a space other than where his fellow religious adherents are.

5.2. Theme 2—Insecurity as a perceived targeted ploy to undermine the Christian identity

A notable point in the participants’ experiences is the perceived sense that the increasing level of insecurity targets the Christians. Certain terrorist groups, including Boko Haram, seem linked to the Islamic religion without any sense of distinguishing it from liberal Muslims who might not support an extremist interpretation of the Quran as done by Boko Haram. A male participant from Jos, Plateau State, recounted his experience thus:

Boko Haram itself has identified or has been self-identified as an Islamic sect. In some of the videos I have seen and some of their operations I have witnessed, they tend to connect or connote some elements of Islam. Now, for example, each time they want to attack their victim, they shout ‘Allahu Akbar [God is most great]! Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!’ and as a person who was born and brought up in the north-central and having neighbours who are Muslims, I can say that that the pronouncement of Allahu Akbar before attacking their victims connotes Islam […]. The Boko Haram sect […] tends to use some of the Quran verses as well, which eh classify them as extremist and especially like the name Boko Haram which means that western education is a taboo infer (Ahong).

Here, a conflation of the participant’s experience and the media inform why the participant problematises the Islamic religion. The reference to terms such as Allahu Akbar! conjures a sense of Islamic linkage even though the word’s meaning appears unharmful. Allahu Akbar, which literally translates to Allah be praised, is attributed to a negative label due to its use by Boko Haram. The participant’s experience highlights a perceived sense of fear coupled with being from a state with a series of ethno-communal clashes that often played out on religious lines. Another participant recounted her experiences when she commented that:

I experience fear when in other Northern States and […] Boko Haram are a threat to the whole of this country […] because why; there are people behind them sponsoring them to destroy, to kill because of this religious issue. They want everybody to become Muslims, and they do not want western education. They want everybody to be illiterate. Of which is not done because in a country you have different religions. We have the Muslims, we have the Christians, and we have other types of religions. So you cannot say you want to convert everybody to only one religion. It is not done anywhere. They should allow Christians, and they should give Christian freedom in this country (Eleanor-Steph).

Another participant’s Tedjiri commented:

Look at the ongoing farmer-herders’ crises, and from my experience, I think it is more than that, as there are religious underpinnings as demonstrated in the difficulty of labelling them for who they are. It appears to me as a tactic used by Boko Haram to infiltrate into states and then subsequently impose its Islamic religious identity on Christians and others it views as infidels.

The extract highlights a perceived sense that Boko Haram represents an underlying ploy to undermine Christians. The participant expresses her experience of insecurity as one that appears to impact her identity as a Christian directly. Being a Christian is perceived from a position of victimisation where the Muslim religion is seen and perceived to suppress the
former. Terms such as “they should give Christian freedom” highlight perceived sense of domination construed from a negative perspective.

5.3. Theme 3—Shared religious identity as a sense of safe space
Religion can often serve as a force for mobilisation amongst adherents. The participants' experience highlights a sense of feeling safe amid fellow adherents sharing similar religious identities as them. As a male participant puts it:

‘So for me, it is best to be around where your fellow Christians are than to be among the midst of these Muslim people.’ (Tamuno)

Another female participant also commented:

I feel much safer being amongst my fellow Christians because at least I know what to expect. That was why after my youth service, I did not think twice about relocating to the southwest (Lagos), where at least religious intolerance and mass slaughtering are less likely to occur (Mary-Ann).

The extract highlights a sense of retracting to a safe space where being in a community dominated by adherents with similar identities is construed as safer than being in those with different religious identities. The participant’s experience appears to inform such a belief that recounting his previous experience in a northern State represents one that discourages living within such a State. Terms such as “these Muslim people” highlight a perceived feeling of being alienated and not being seen as belonging to their group. Tamuno extract thus highlights the vital role identity plays in shaping how one sees oneself and others amid a group process. Being a Christian gives Tamuno a sense of identity and belonging and reinforces a sense of social categorisation where the Muslims are perceived as the less accommodating others, and the Christians are construed in a much more positive light. Tamuno’s experiences highlight a sense of in-group and out-group stance where part of the in-group (Christians) is expressed in his lived experiences as feeling safer than being in the out-group (Muslim) space. The implication of this finding is that it tends to create a sense of stereotype that problematises a particular religion. Such stereotype resonates with existing literature which highlights terms such as islamophobia to explain the perceived fear of Islam and its adherents (Runnymede Trust, 1997). A similar view was expressed by a female participant who recounts experiences thus:

It’s like being a Christian is tantamount to victimisation, I recall my experiences when I was in the north; it was like as if I do not belong in that space. Interacting was quite difficult, and even when I tried to mingle, there is this odd resistance on their part, and I felt like I am victimised because of my religion, which really impacted my experience and why I feel safer among my fellow Christians (Helenonita).

The extract highlights a collective identity and allegiance to the Christian religion. In expressing these experiences, the sense of self was also construed to play a role. Feeling comfortable in ones’ own space in tandem with others sharing a similar identity is seen as helpful. The extract highlights a need to dispel such beliefs to promote harmonious coexistence among religious adherents regardless of their religious beliefs.

6. Discussion, conclusion, and implication of the study
The purpose of the study was to explore Christian experiences of insecurity in Nigeria. Drawing on a qualitative approach, the following main findings are highlighted: religious insecurity and fear, insecurity as a targeted play to undermine the Christian identity and shared identity as a safe space. This will be discussed with reference to relevant literature.

Firstly, all participants spoke about their experiences of fear, drawing on their identity as Christians. The feeling of being looked at in a certain way in a Muslim region seems to becloud the essence of
secularism as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution. Fear and the perceived feeling of being alienated spurred a sense of victimisation. The findings resonate with existing literature concerning the fear of Islam, often couched as Islamophobia (Runnymede Trust, 1997). However, the findings represent a shift contrary to other studies that often portray Muslims as those victimised (Modood, 2012). As demonstrated in the present study, even the Christians felt victimised. In essence, country-specific context appears important in the perceived link between religion and victimisation. The findings also highlight experiences of fear even in the face of carrying out national duties as delineated in the NYSC. Despite the positive role of the NYSC scheme to foster national unity, participants could still express a perceived sense of disconnect from the Muslim ‘other’, who they felt tend not to allow Christians to blend into their “space”. In essence, the feeling of victimisation, fear and being discriminated against appears contrary to previous literature, which often portrays Muslims as those subject to discrimination (Allen 2005; Runnymede Trust).

Secondly, participants experience insecurity as a targeted ploy to undermine the Christian identity. Boko Haram was construed as representing Islam, and how it engages in its action denotes a sense of allegiance to the Islamic religion even though it projects a misplaced interpretation of Islam. The participants lived experiences shaped how the feeling of victimisation was construed. Terms such as Allahu Akbar! before carrying out an attack was construed to denote Islam. It also highlights a sense of fear even though Boko Haram is not a reflection of other liberal Muslims not supporting its ideologies. Participant also interpreted their experiences as one that inferred the Muslims’ quest to dominate other religions. Such fear is construed as one that impacts directly on the participants’ religion and identity as Christians. These findings highlight similar concerns as expressed by Onapajo and Usman (2015). It also highlights the lack of differentiation between liberal Muslims, who co-exist peacefully with others, and Boko Haram, who are extremists, as found in Mang’s study (Mang, 2014). The implication of the findings is the need for orientation to promote peaceful coexistence.

Thirdly, the perceived feeling of victimisation triggers a shared religious identity as a sense of safe space. Participants experiences being away from the presence of fellow Christians from a negative perspective. In essence, they tend to feel safer within the context of fellow Christians. The finding of the study seems to suggest that the “Muslims” were perceived as unaccommodating. Some participants experience such a feeling even though they tried to bridge the gap. As Helenonita highlights, she felt unsafe when sharing a similar space with the Muslims. The implication of such feeling is that it tends to lead to a lack of integration and goes against the spirit of national unity and oneness as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The participants’ experience highlights how importance was accorded to identity and acts of solidarity, surely because these acts help the participants feel a sense of community, belonging and acceptance. Above all, the participants felt it enable them to feel safe. Hence, highlighting similar studies concerning coping strategies based on religious belief, imagination, or altruistic acts (Freh et al., 2013; Kleinman, 1989).

Based on the findings, a practical recommendation is a need for policies to foster greater positive integration among religious adherents through media orientation. This might help dispel the negative generalisation of insurgent activities by groups such as Boko Haram, who are often inaccurately construed to represent all Muslims. Another recommendation relates to the need to foster interfaith dialogue, which promotes integration, unity and peaceful coexistence.

It is worth acknowledging the limitations of the study. The small sample size and the use of IPA might limit generalisation to a larger population. As Smith (1996) note, IPA does not claim to be exhaustive. Due to the study’s exploratory nature, IPA as a method helps get closer to the experience of a constrained sample. All analysed results represent a description of the perception and experiences of the participants by researchers. Notwithstanding the limitations, future research may usefully focus on improving religious reintegration and reducing feelings of victimisation.
In conclusion, this study makes an original contribution that helps understand how Christians perceived their experience of insecurity and terrorism in Nigeria. Having experienced fear and terrorism, the participants’ religious identity seems to influence and pose questions in the social, emotional, and personal aspects of their lives—all of which something plays out in their perceptions as being victimised. The present study’s adoption of IPA highlights its rigour and significance. It contributes to our understanding of how Christians’ experience insecurity and how shared religious identity fosters a coping mechanism and an avenue for safe space amid perceived victimisations.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Correction
This article has been republished with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Citation information
Cite this article as: ‘It’s like being a Christian is tantamount to victimisation’: A qualitative study of Christian experiences and perceptions of insecurity and terrorism in Nigeria, Tarela Juliet Ike, Cogent Social Sciences (2022), 8: 2071032.

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