

Fasting Among New Religious Movements: A New Dimension of Spirituality Beyond Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing of People

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ABSTRACT

This study examined fasting among select Christian New Religious Movements (CNRMs) in Southeastern Nigeria. Specifically, it evaluates the historical roots of their fasting practices, appraises key factors responsible for their distinctive pattern of fasting, explores the social and economic impacts of their fasting practices on national development, and explains the level of vulnerability experienced by their members in these practices. The theory of religious economy guided it. This study employs a case study research design, utilising a questionnaire as a primary data source and journals, books, and the internet as secondary data sources. The sample size is 400, determined using Cochran's formula for an indefinite or unknown population. The findings show that their fasting practices are similar to those of the mainline Churches, but are taken to the extreme, often motivated by ignorance, materialism, and a quest to make a difference, championing a philosophy of faith without works, which promotes underdevelopment. The study therefore recommends, among other things, realignment of their fasting practice with biblical and Christian traditional teachings on fasting.

Keywords: Church, Development, Fasting, New-Religious-Movements, Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

New religious movement (NRM) is the generally accepted term for what is sometimes pejoratively called a "cult." The term "new religious movement" has been applied to all new faiths that have emerged worldwide over the past several centuries. Several shared traits characterise NRMs. These religions are, by definition, "new"; they offer innovative religious responses to the conditions of the modern world, even though most NRMs present themselves as rooted in ancient traditions. NRMs are also usually regarded as "countercultural"; i.e., they are perceived (by others and by themselves) to be alternatives to the mainstream religions of the world, especially Christianity in its normative forms. These movements are often highly eclectic, pluralistic, and syncretistic. They freely combine doctrines and practices from diverse sources within their belief systems.

The new movement is usually founded by a charismatic and sometimes highly authoritarian leader who is thought to have extraordinary powers or insights (Rubinstein, n.d.). NRMs, in all their diversity, represent various responses to the challenges of modernity: religious and cultural pluralism, the influence of science and technology, and the secularisation of modern life. They are also attempts to find new spiritual alternatives to the mainstream religious traditions. While some NRMs have led their

adherents to tragic ends and others faded away as quickly as they had arisen, many have provided religious solace to those who feel they cannot obtain it elsewhere. Some show signs of enduring and becoming institutionalised. Some of them will undoubtedly become, over time, part of tomorrow's 'mainstream religions.'

Christian New Religious Movements could also be referred to as Neo-Pentecostalism. This group adheres to the doctrine and practices of long-term fasting. This mode of fasting could fuel what Olukoya (2013, as cited in Marshall, 2016) described as militant machine gun prayer, which according to him is a violent prayer, adamant prayer, stubborn prayer, enough-is-enough prayer, unapologetic prayer (prayers you pray without regret), bold prayer (fearless with the courage to demand a response), unwavering prayer, and steadfast prayer. It has just one goal: the elimination of the enemy.

This research is therefore motivated by the excesses of what it terms the 'fasting project' of Christian NRMs in Nigeria, especially in the Southeast. It becomes necessary to investigate the activities of the NRMs in the Southeast of Nigeria, especially at this time in our national life, for a clear understanding of the aftermath, the gains and otherwise of religion in national building and development. The results and outcomes of such investigations and evaluations would help establish a truly stable and authentic Christian religion.

Thus, the scope of this study encompasses fasting among Christian New Religious Movements in Nigeria, particularly in the Southeast, comprising the states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. Southeast has a population of 16,395,555, according to the 2006 National Population Census, and a projected population of 23,488,518 for 2022 (National Population Commission, 2020). It has boundaries with Benue and Kogi States to the North, Rivers and Bayelsa States to the South, Cross River and Akwa Ibom States to the East, and Delta and Edo States to the West.

The study sites comprise two selected Christian New Religious movements located in the three municipal cities of each chosen state in the Southeast. The two Christian New Religious movements selected are the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM). The choice of the two was due to their lengthy fasting observances: RCCG observes 70 days, while MFM observes 100 days (Akpos, 2024; RCCG, 2025). The three states are Imo, Enugu, and Ebonyi. Likewise, the three cities are Owerri, Okigwe, and Orlu (Imo State), Enugu, Nsukka, and Udi (Enugu State), and Abakiliki, Izaa, and Afikpo (Ebonyi State). The selection of the two Christian New Religious Movements in the above cities aims to elicit an informed response to the issue at stake. Additionally, the subjects are members of the two selected Christian New Religious Movements in Southeastern Nigeria, within the age of reason and capable of fasting, and between the ages of 15 and 59.

Statement of the Problem/Justification

Many foreign New Religious Movements (NRMs) emerged in Nigeria in the 1970s, particularly in the southern part of the country. Many of them have engaged in vigorous missionary activities, attempting to compete with established religions for membership among Nigerians. Some of the foreign NRMs that marked their presence in Nigeria are as follow: Aetherious Society, Hare Krishna Movement (ISKCON), Raelian Religion, Inner Light, Grail Message, Baha'ism, Christian Science, Sa'i Baba Mission, Brahma Kumaris, Eckankar, Scientology, Guru Maharaji, Lucis Trust, Higher Consciousness Society, The Way of Truth, etc. (Ibrahim, 2013). However, some of these movements are Christian NRMs, while others are non-Christian NRMs. The focus of this research, therefore, is on the former, also known as 'New/Neo-Pentecostal Movements in Nigeria.' Like the heroes of our faith, Christian New Religious Movements in Nigeria emphasise fasting. Nevertheless, their practice of fasting is

questionable as it goes beyond the healing system, which encompasses psycho-spiritual dimensions. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the effects, both positive and negative, as well as the general process of executing their fasting practices.

Research Objectives

This project aims to:

- i. Evaluate the historical roots of fasting practices of the New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Southeast Nigeria.
- ii. Appraise key factors responsible for the model pattern of fasting by the New Religious Movements in Southeast Nigeria.
- iii. Explore the social and economic impacts of Christian New Religious Movements in national development, especially in the Southeast and
- iv. Explain the level of vulnerabilities experienced by their members in the fasting practices.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The term 'New Religious Movements' (NRM) encompasses a variety of unrelated groups, many of which may not appear overtly religious and are often labelled as cults (Healy, 2011). For Isomkwo & Njor (2019), New Religious Movements (NRMs) are mostly those religious movements that have severed from their mainstream religious groups. In other words, they are variants of the old or original forms of those religions. For Pope Francis (2013), some of the NRMs tend to fundamentalism, while others seem to propose a spirituality without God. Jegede (2017) identified some of their attributes to include fanaticism, emphasis on wealth-making, earthly bliss, and empowerment. The paper noted that their focus on prosperity links them to capitalist philosophies. Some scholars have also explored the reasons behind the spread of NRMs. For instance, Pope Francis (2013) observed that on the one hand, the rise of NRMs is a human reaction to a materialistic, consumerist and individualistic society. Alternatively, he

noted that it is a means of exploiting the weaknesses of people living in poverty and on the fringes of society, who are looking for immediate solutions to their needs. Furthermore, he attributed the spread of NRMs to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some parishes and communities, as well as a bureaucratic approach to dealing with problems. Ibrahim (2013) pointed to globalisation, secularism, the spread of education, urbanisation, the religious experiences of individuals, and existential crisis as the rationales for the spread. Owolabi (2015) and Isomkwo & Njor (2019) identified leadership and economic factors as fundamental to the spread. That is why Kamal (2019) described NRMs as operating in the domain of entrepreneurship. However, Ibrahim (2013) noted that members of NRMs face numerous challenges resulting from misinformation and misunderstanding.

The Hebrew word for fast is *tsom*, and the Greek word is *nestis*, which means 'not eat food.' The other Greek word for it is *asitos*. *Sitos* means grain, and the 'a' means against; in other words, against grain, against food. Fasting also means putting God first and focusing on Him. There are times when we can continue with our normal, responsible daily lives, but there are also times when God calls us to set everything aside to seek His face in prayer and fasting, and to intercede for specific needs. Fasting is required due to a direct command from the Lord and under His guidance (Mostert & Grobbelaar, n.d.). One could also conceive of fasting as a deliberate abstinence from physical gratification—usually going without food for a period—to achieve a greater spiritual goal. Fasting is intentionally denying the flesh to gain a response from the spirit. It means renouncing the natural to invoke the supernatural (Evans, n.d.). Prophet Isaiah offered valuable insights into the importance of fasting, along with several guidelines and prescriptions for those who wish to fast (Isaiah 58:1-14). Other scriptural passages offer rationales for fasting (1 Kings 17:8-16; Esther 4:8-16; Nehemiah 1:1-11; Matthew

17:14-21; 1 Corinthians 7:1-5). Thus, Sanchetee & Sanchetee (2020) noted that fasting is good when properly observed. The word "spirituality" originated from the Latin word "spirare," meaning "to breathe." Downey (2004) observed that there are different types of spiritualities, whether one views it from a religious or mundane perspective. However, his emphasis was on Christian spirituality, which could be viewed as either a lived experience or an academic discipline. In the first instance, spirituality "describes the whole of the Christian's life as this is oriented to self-transcending knowledge, freedom, and love in the light of the ultimate values and highest ideals perceived and pursued in the mystery of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church..." (p.796). In the second instance, he held that spirituality is an attempt to study Christian religious experiences as such, and to promote their development and maturation. For Van Niekerk (2018), spirituality embodies a common unity among the sacred, human beings, and nature, thereby breaking down barriers between religions. Wagani & Colucci (2018) held that it has an impact on people's wellbeing. "Psycho-spiritual wellbeing" comprises three terms: psychological, spiritual, and wellbeing. Psychological wellbeing studies the psyche, while spiritual wellbeing focuses on the core of a person through in-depth relationships (Fisher, 2011). Therefore, healthcare systems should adopt a holistic approach. It implies that it should view health "as a state of wellbeing in body, mind/psyche, and spirit, in which spirit is considered differently from psyche and can influence the individual's physical and mental health (Chirico, 2016).

It is crucial to examine the impact of New Religious Movements on African Traditional Religion and other major religions. Notably, the influence of African Independent Churches (AICs) is particularly significant. Adogame (2013) remarked that the impact of their "beliefs and practices on mainline and Pentecostal churches in Africa and the African diaspora is substantial" (pp. 60-78). Areas of such influence include emphasis on prayer, healing, the power of the spoken word, music, and dance (Kalu, 2010; Adogame, 2013). Interestingly, none of the existing literature above addresses the theme of this research. Therefore, this study is not only researchable but also relevant. It is not an exercise in futility, for it will fill the epistemological gap in fasting among the select Christian New Religious Movements in Southeast Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

This research adopted the theory of religious economy, which originated in the United States. The proponents of this theory are Rodney Stark, William Bainbridge, and Roger Finke. The central argument of the theory is that religion is a market commodity carefully packaged and delivered to religious consumers. This theory is based on four key elements: the interplay between religion and the market, exchange, religion as an explanatory framework, and pluralism and religious participation (Stark & Finke, 2000). These elements will help us to understand the excesses in the Christian NRMs' model of fasting.

Data presentation and analysis

For easy understanding, it suffices to start with the research objective one. Table 4.1 below is a summary of the data presentation.

Table 4.1. Historical roots of the fasting practices among the selected CNRMs in Southeast

S/N	Indices	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD1	Σf	Σfx	WMS X	Remarks
1	I view CNRMs' fasting as originating and having some features and practices similar to the mainline Churches.	213	106	23	20	23	385	1621	4.2	Accepted
	Percentage	55.3	27.5	6	5.2	6	100			

2	I view it as an extreme form of fasting.	173	85	30	58	39	385	1450	3.8	Accepted
	Percentage	44.9	22.1	7.8	15.1	10.1	100			
3	It makes me believe that faith is all I need to obtain God's favour, and not work.	140	92	9	85	59	385	1324	3.4	Accepted
	Percentage	36.4	23.9	2.3	22.1	15.3	100			
4	It does not brainwash me	130	82	30	66	77	385	1277	3.3	Accepted
	Percentage	33.8	21.3	7.8	17.1	20	100			

Source: Fieldwork, 2021

Table 4.1, index 1, shows that 319 (82.8%) respondents admitted that fasting among CNRMs originated and possessed some features and practices similar to those of the mainline Churches, while 43 (11.2%) opposed this view. Index 2 shows that 285 (67%) believed CNRMs observed an extreme fasting practice, while 97 (25%) held the contrary view. Index 3 indicates that 232 (60.3%) noted that CNRMs' mode of fasting emphasised faith without works, while 144 (37.4%) opposed this view. Index

4 revealed that 212 (55.1%) did not believe it brainwashes them, while 143 (37.1%) objected to it.

The weighted mean scores in each proposition above exceed the minimum score. Hence, the findings show that fasting among the select CNRMs originated and possessed some features and practices similar to those of the mainline Churches, and that it is an extreme fasting practice that emphasises faith without works, but does not brainwash its adherents.

Table 4.2. Key factors for the model pattern of fasting by the CNRMs in the Southeast

S/N	Indices	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD1	Σf	Σfx	WMS X	Remarks
5	I use fasting as a means of achieving my material needs	141	117	19	56	52	385	1394	3.6	Accepted
	Percentage	36.6	30.4	4.9	14.6	13.5	100			
6	I view it as a practice inspired by ignorance and a quest to make a difference.	136	89	20	97	43	385	1333	3.5	Accepted
	Percentage	35.3	23.1	5.2	25.2	11.2	100			
7	Sometimes, it makes me feel holier than others.	139	126	34	45	41	385	1432	3.7	Accepted
	Percentage	36.1	32.7	8.8	11.7	10.7	100			
8	Sometimes it makes me have fake visions, prophecies, and speak in tongues	63	74	14	127	107	385	1014	2.6	Rejected
	Percentage	16.4	19.2	3.6	33.0	27.8	100			

Source: Fieldwork, 2021

Table 4.2, index 5, indicates that 258 (67%) respondents utilised CNRM's model of fasting as a means of addressing material needs, while 108 (28.1%) disagreed. Index 6 indicates that 225 (58.1%) believed that CNRM's model of fasting is motivated by ignorance and a quest to make a difference, while 140 (36.4%) opposed the view. Index 7 shows that 265 (68.8%) noted that the CNRMs' fasting model sometimes led them to adopt a holier-than-thou attitude, while 86

(22.4%) opposed this view. The weighted mean scores in indices 5 to 7 are above the minimum score of 3, so the propositions are accepted. Index 8 reveals that 137 (35.6%) admitted that CNRM's fasting pattern led them to fake visions, prophecies, and speaking in tongues, while 234 (60.8%) objected. The proposition is rejected because the weighted mean score core in index 8 is below the average score.

Thus, the findings indicate that the select CNRMs' model of fasting serves as a means of addressing material needs, driven by ignorance and a desire to make a difference, and sometimes results in a holier-than-thou

attitude among Christians. However, the results show that it does not lead to false visions, false prophecies, or fake speaking in tongues.

Table 4.3 Impact of fasting on the selected CNRMs in national development in Southeast

S/N	Indices	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD1	Σf	Σfx	WMS X	Remarks
9	It discourages me from participating in activities promoting Nigeria's political development	112	120	27	61	65	385	1308	3.4	Accepted
	Percentage	29.1	31.2	7.0	15.8	16.9	100			
10	It discourages me from cooperating freely with other religious groups in Nigeria.	116	117	20	65	67	385	1305	3.4	Accepted
	Percentage	30.1	30.4	5.2	16.9	17.4	100			
11	It encourages me to participate in social activities	68	78	16	119	104	385	1042	2.7	Rejected
	Percentage	17.7	20.3	4.1	30.9	27.0	100			
12	It encourages me to engage in activities supporting Nigeria's economic development	48	55	22	154	106	385	940	2.4	Rejected
	Percentage	12.5	14.3	5.7	40.0	27.5	100			

Source: Fieldwork, 2021

Table 4.3 index 9 shows that 232 (60.3%) respondents reported that the CNRMs model of fasting discouraged them from participating in activities promoting Nigeria's political development, while 126 (32.7%) opposed this view. Index 10 shows that 233 (60.5%) admitted that it discouraged them from cooperating freely with other religious groups in Nigeria, while 132 (18.3%) held the contrary view. Index 11 indicates that 146 (38%) admitted that it encouraged them to participate in social

activities, while 223 (57.9%) opposed the view. Index 12 shows that 103 maintained that it enabled them to engage in activities supporting Nigeria's economic development, while 260 (67.5%) objected to it. As the weighted mean scores validate the acceptance of indices 9 and 10 and rejection of indices 11 and 12, the findings suggest that the CNRMs model of fasting hurts the nation's political, religious, and socio-economic development.

Table 4.4 Level of vulnerability of CNRMs' model of fasting on their gullible followers

S/N	Indices	SA 5	A 4	U 3	D 2	SD1	Σf	Σfx	WMS X	Remarks
.13	It encourages me to fast regardless of my age and health status.	103	10	64	81	37	385	1306	3.4	Accepted
	Percentage	26.8	26.0	16.6	21.0	9.6	100			
14	It makes me feel weak at work.	106	154	48	36	41	385	1403	3.6	Accepted
	Percentage	27.5	40.0	12.5	9.3	10.7	100			
15	It makes me have strong emotional and self-control.	108	126	35	56	60	385	1321	3.4	Accepted
	Percentage	28.0	32.7	9.1	14.6	15.6	100			
16	Sometimes it makes me fanatical.	141	135	64	26	19	385	1508	3.9	Accepted
	Percentage	36.6	35.1	16.6	6.8	4.9	100			

Source: Fieldwork, 2021

Table 4.4 index 13 shows that 203 (52.8%) maintained that CNRM's model of fasting encouraged them to fast regardless of their age and health status, while 118 (30.6%) objected to it. Index 14 indicates that 260 (67.5%) reported that it made them feel weak at work, while 77 (20%) held the contrary view. Index 15 shows that 234 (60.7%) believed it gave them strong self and emotional control, while 116 (30.2%) opposed this view. Index 16 indicates that 276 (71.7%) thought that it sometimes made them fanatical, while 45 held the contrary position.

The weighted mean score in each proposition above is more than the average mean score. Therefore, the findings show that the CNRM model of fasting has a high level of vulnerability among the gullible followers of the select CNRMs, given that it disregarded the age and health status of their members, led to lower work performance, and gave rise to religious fanaticism. However, on the positive side, the results show that it led to solid self-control and emotional stability.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings in Table 4.1, indices 1-4, indicate that most respondents believed fasting among Christian new religious movements originated and possessed some features and practices similar to those of the mainline Churches. However, it is an extreme fasting practice that emphasises faith without works. These findings align with those of Onyenweaku et al. (2024), who noted that some Christian leaders express extreme religious beliefs, such as imposing prolonged fasting on their followers universally.

The findings in Table 4.2, indices 5-8, indicate that most respondents acknowledged that the Christian new religious movements' model of fasting serves as a means of addressing material needs, driven by ignorance and a desire to make a difference, and ultimately sometimes results in a holier-than-thou attitude among Christians. These findings corroborate Jegede's (2017) identification of an emphasis

on wealth-making, earthly bliss, and empowerment as key features of NRMs. Likewise, the results validate Kamal's (2019) description of NRMs as operating in the context of entrepreneurship.

The findings in Table 4.3, indices 9-12, suggest that the fasting model of Christian new religious movements hurts the nation's political, spiritual, and socio-economic development. These findings confirm Onyenweaku et al. (2024), who found the effects of prolonged fasting on the mental health of people to include aggressiveness, lack of proper sleep, lack of concentration, confusion, reduced productivity, poor performance, abnormal behaviour, and sleeplessness. Hence, under low productivity and poor performance, the development of a nation is seriously hampered. Furthermore, the findings support Onyenweaku et al. (2024), who found that prolonged fasting can lead to poor social interaction, which in turn results in lower productivity.

The findings in Table 4.4, indices 13-16, show that Christian new religious movements' model of fasting has a high level of vulnerability to their gullible followers, given that it disregarded their age and health status, led to lower work performance, and gave rise to religious fanaticism. The findings corroborate Jegede's (2017) findings, which identified fanaticism as a characteristic of NRMs.

CONCLUSION

The fasting practices of Christian new religious movements are similar to those of mainline Churches. However, they are often taken to an extreme, motivated by materialism, a quest for making a difference, and an emphasis on faith without works, leading to underdevelopment. Consequently, it promotes the 'get rich quick' syndrome among the Nigerian population. Hence, it has implications for national development as it transforms religion into a personal enterprise, a political symbol, an image, and a vehicle for achieving personal political and economic leadership, thereby de-emphasising the common good.

Furthermore, as it could foster religious fanaticism, it could constitute a threat to national unity and the secularity of Nigeria, given the multi-religious nature of Nigeria. It could also lead workers to neglect their civic responsibilities, waste time and resources, and adopt a fatalistic mentality. Additionally, this mode of fasting could compromise the overall health of workers.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the many shortcomings of the above model of fasting, this study recommends the following:

- i. Realignment of the selected CNRMs' fasting practices with biblical and Christian traditional teachings on fasting.
- ii. Placing material benefit in its proper perspective in the selected CNRMs.
- iii. Stressing the obligation to national development as an aspect of authentic Christian living, and as part of God's call to conquer the earth.
- iv. Emphasising age and health requirements for fasting.

Declaration by Authors

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