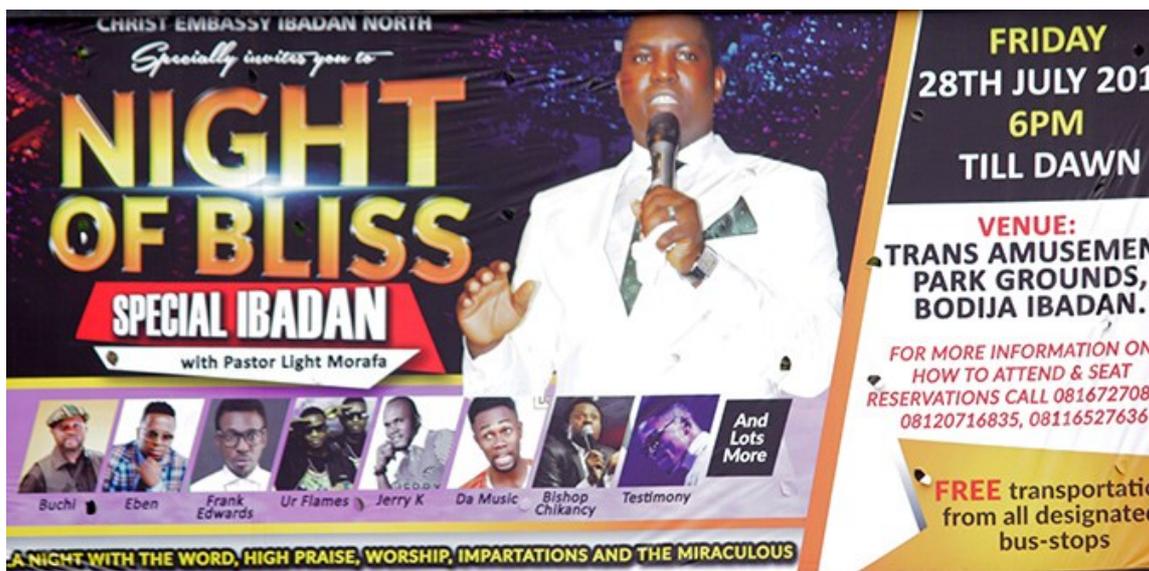


# Weber's puzzle: Why is Nigeria so religious, yet so poor?

If the German philosopher Max Weber is right about the causal link between religiosity and prosperity, the why, asks LSE's Olu Fasan, is Nigeria so poor.

A few months ago, the popular American preacher TD Jakes came to the church I attend in London. Preaching on leadership and wealth, he said prayer is not leadership and not enough to make anyone rich. "If prayers were enough", he said, "Nigeria would be one of the richest countries in the world". Most people in the congregation clapped in agreement. Several weeks later, The Times of London wrote an editorial on the relationship between religion and wealth, in which it [said](#): "A period of increasing religiosity in Nigeria heralded a period of falling wealth". So, Nigeria has become a global case study of how a nation can be deeply religious and yet not prosperous. But where does the idea that religiosity leads to prosperity come from? And why has the causal relationship held in reverse for Nigeria?

The major secular source of the idea is Max Weber, the German philosopher and political economist. In his [book](#), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber sets out two key propositions. First, that only the "spirit of capitalism" can engender prosperity and second that the "spirit" is strongly correlated with religion, particularly Protestantism.



Christ Embassy Ibadan North "Night of Bliss" poster with comedians Buchi and Bishop Chikancy among others

Photo Credit: Ebenezer Obadare.

What, then, is the explanation for Nigeria's religiosity without prosperity? Surely, religion permeates every aspect of Nigerian life, with every Nigerian from all strata of life publicly and unapologetically demonstrating their religiosity. Yet, according to the Brookings [Institution](#), Nigeria has overtaken India as the country with the largest number of the extreme poor in the world. So, if Weber is right about the causal link between religiosity and prosperity, why is Nigeria so religious and yet so poor? To explain this puzzle, we must first understand what the "spirit of capitalism" and the "Protestant ethic" mean and, then, we must examine whether Nigeria's religiosity induces the spirit of capitalism; in other words, is there a correlation between the religiousness of Nigerians and the ethos that drives a capitalistic or market economy and, therefore, prosperity?

First, what is the “spirit of capitalism”? In defining the concept, Weber drew on the work of Benjamin Franklin, one of America’s founding fathers, who set out key principles, such as “Time is money” and “Credit is money”, as well as the virtues of industry, frugality and honesty. Therefore, the spirit of capitalism combines two elements (1) the impulse to accumulate wealth and (2) a frugal life-style. The former requires a disciplined labour force and a regularised investment of capital; the latter requires thrift and “this-worldly asceticism”. The idea is that wealth should be accumulated not for conspicuous or spontaneous consumption but for the betterment of society.

But the spirit of capitalism is also ethically driven. Capitalism may be about the greed to accumulate wealth, but it is greed with a moral underpinning, as evident from reading Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* with his *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. According to Weber, “the capitalistic economy forces the individual to conform to capitalistic rules of action”, and “the manufacturer who acts counter to these norms will be eliminated from the economic scene just as the worker who cannot adapt himself to them will be thrown into the streets without a job”. In other words, the capitalistic economy is a competitive, no-nonsense one, and only those who play by the rules, that is, who demonstrate the spirit of capitalism – thrift, industry and enterprise – will, in the long run, survive.

After defining the spirit of capitalism, Weber then goes on to argue that the “spirit” is embedded in the religious values that derive from Calvinism. These values, found in the Bible, include diligence, hard work, self-control, thrift and honesty. The overarching ideas of “duty” and “calling” are common to both capitalism and Christianity. For instance, Ecclesiastes 9:10 says “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might”, and 2 Thessalonians 3:10 puts it even more bluntly: “If any would not work, neither should he eat”. Indeed, the Bible abhors laziness and idleness, as well as profligacy and waste. It sets out injunctions to save and invest and to act with honesty, prudence and discretion in business. Of course, the spirit of capitalism can exist independently of religion, and can be found in other religions apart from Christianity. However, Weber believes that the spirit is particularly associated with the “this-worldly asceticism” found in Calvinism.

But the spirit of capitalism and the religious ethic work well in conjunction with the right institutional framework. Weber lists efficient market system, rule of law and developed bureaucracy among the “preconditions for the development of rational capitalism in Europe.” In his book, *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*, the economic historian Niall Ferguson lists what he calls “the [Six Killer Apps of prosperity](#)” that gave the West a competitive edge over others. The “killer apps” are competition; science (the Scientific Revolution preceded the Industrial Revolution); property rights, including the rule of law; medicine (after all, “health is wealth”); consumerism (industrialisation depends on a consumer society) and work ethic. The idea is that the spirit of capitalism and the moral energy of religion, in conjunction with these social, political and economic institutions, drive the capitalistic economy or “commercial society”, as Adam Smith put it, that delivers wealth and prosperity.

All of which brings us back to Nigeria. First, it is a well-known fact that Nigeria does not have the social, political and economic institutions to support a viable market economy. Nigeria does not have the tradition of rule of law, the property rights, the disciplined and efficient bureaucracy, the social institutions (health, schools, social security etc), the right politico-governance structure, the scientific or technological base, the physical infrastructure base, the market system, the competitive environment etc that can bring about a viable capitalistic economy or a commercial society.

But these institutions do not emerge by accident. They are products of a cognitive or ideational process and of deliberate policy choices that a country makes. Since Nigeria has not made these choices, we can say that it lacks the spirit of capitalism necessary to do so. Finally, we can also say that, since, according to Weber, there is a strong link between religious values and the spirit of capitalism, Nigeria’s religiosity lacks the moral fervour and drive to engender a viable capitalistic economy and therefore prosperity.

Now, let’s briefly illustrate all this with a few examples. Take the two elements of the spirit of capitalism: the accumulation of wealth and thrift. Nigeria is an oil-dependent mono-economy that has failed woefully to diversify. Once it discovered oil in the 1970s, it abandoned all other economic sectors, including agriculture. A capitalistic economy does not behave like that; it fires on all economic cylinders, not just one, to accumulate wealth.

What about thrift? Well, Nigeria is a profligate country; it hardly saves or invests but rather borrows and spends excessively and unproductively, with recurrent expenditure accounting for over 70 per cent of its annual budget. All the successful Asian countries financed investment out of savings. Nigeria could easily have built the infrastructure for a strong economy with all the money it made from oil. But it squandered its huge oil money. That is not the behaviour of a capitalistic economy. At the individual level, Nigerians indulge in conspicuous consumption. A few years ago, there was an event in Kenya. All the prominent Nigerians who attended the event went in their private jets to the amazement and amusement of Kenyan journalists. Weber would argue that such behaviour is inconsistent with the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant values.

Then, what about work ethic? No country has ever developed without an efficient bureaucracy. The economic success of Singapore and China is partly associated with the quality of their civil service. But Nigeria has a broken and dysfunctional bureaucracy. For instance, the following are words used by Nigeria's Office of the Head of Service of the Federation, in various press releases, to describe the country's civil servants: "habitual late coming", "truancy", "lukewarm and shoddy attitude to the discharge of duties" and "corrupt practices". Yet Nigeria is a deeply religious country, where everyone wears their religion on their face. But the work ethic of the people is not consistent with the "duty in calling" associated with religion and the spirit of capitalism.

The truth is that the practice of religion is systemically flawed in Nigeria; it has failed to impact positively on governance. The Bible says, "Righteousness exalts a nation", and that "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice". But why have these biblical blessings eluded Nigeria? Why is the country not "exalted", that is, prosperous, and why are the people not "rejoicing" in terms escaping poverty? Even if one considers the biblical promises of prosperity, which are conditional and linked to commandments such as obedience, righteousness, generosity towards the poor, etc, the fact is that it is hard to describe Nigeria as a righteous country or its leaders as righteous. Instead, there is so much injustice, oppression, corruption and abuse of power in the country. A deeply religious country that produces the 100th richest person on earth and yet has the largest number of the extreme poor in the world certainly has a problem that should scar its conscience.

To be sure, Nigeria is a deeply religious country, but its religiosity is shallow; it does not conform with biblical principles. What is more, it does not inspire the spirit of capitalism needed to generate wealth and prosperity and tackle poverty. Indeed, Nigeria's religiosity erodes, rather than helps, prosperity!

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