



God's Time Is the Best: Youth Unemployment, Religious Engagement, And The Politics of Hope in Nigeria

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Abstract- Youth unemployment constitutes one of the most persistent structural challenges facing contemporary Nigeria. Beyond economic deprivation, prolonged unemployment produces a condition of uncertainty, delayed adulthood, and emotional strain among young people. While existing scholarship has examined the economic and policy dimensions of youth unemployment, less attention has been paid to how unemployed youth interpret their condition and sustain hope, particularly within religious contexts. Drawing on survey data collected from unemployed Nigerian youth aged 18–35 across selected urban centers ($N \approx 500$), this study examines the role of religious engagement in shaping the social meaning of unemployment and what is conceptualized as the politics of hope. Anchored in the sociology of religion and theories of temporality, the article demonstrates that religious engagement significantly predicts higher levels of hope and psychological well-being, even after controlling for unemployment duration and socio-demographic factors. The findings suggest that religion functions as both an emotional buffer and a moral framework that transforms unemployment into purposeful waiting, while simultaneously raising critical questions about the depoliticization of structural inequality.

Keywords- youth unemployment, religion, hope, waiting, Nigeria, temporality.

I. Introduction

Nigeria is home to one of the largest youth populations in the world, with individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 constituting a substantial proportion of the national demographic structure (National Population Commission 2019; United Nations 2022). This demographic configuration has often been described as a potential “youth dividend,” yet the Nigerian economy has persistently struggled to translate this demographic advantage into sustainable employment opportunities. As a result, youth unemployment, underemployment, and engagement in precarious forms of work have become defining features of the transition to adulthood for many young Nigerians (Adebayo 2015; Okafor 2011).

For a growing segment of Nigerian youth, unemployment is not a temporary interruption but a prolonged and indeterminate condition marked by waiting, waiting for jobs, waiting for economic independence, and waiting for social recognition as adults. Scholars of youth and temporality have conceptualized this condition as waithood, a state in which structural constraints delay access to adulthood and its associated social markers (Honwana 2012; Jeffrey 2010). In Nigeria, prolonged unemployment frequently postpones key life transitions such as marriage, home



ownership, and financial autonomy, intensifying feelings of frustration, moral failure, and social exclusion (Akinwale 2010; Sommers 2012).

Despite the scale and persistence of youth unemployment, dominant scholarly approaches in Nigeria have been largely policy-oriented or economic, focusing on labor-market indicators, employability, and macroeconomic reform (World Bank 2020). While these perspectives provide important insights, they often overlook the lived experiences of unemployed youth and the social meanings attached to unemployment as a moral and emotional condition. Sociological research has long emphasized that unemployment is not merely the absence of paid work but a deeply social experience that reshapes identity, self-worth, and future orientation (Jahoda 1982; Fryer 1997). For young people in particular, prolonged unemployment disrupts temporal expectations and generates uncertainty about one's place in society.

In the Nigerian context, however, unemployment is rarely interpreted in purely economic terms. Religion occupies a central position in everyday life, shaping how individuals understand hardship, delay, and uncertainty (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Pew Research Center 2018). Religious expressions such as "God's time is the best," "Patience brings reward," and "Allah knows best" are commonly invoked by unemployed youth to explain their circumstances. These expressions do not simply function as sources of emotional comfort; rather, they actively reconfigure how time, agency, and responsibility are understood. As scholars of religion and temporality have noted, religious narratives often transform waiting from a sign of failure into a morally meaningful process embedded within divine order (Adam 1990; Hage 2009; Miyazaki 2004).

Building on sociological theories of hope, this article conceptualizes religious hope not as passive optimism but as a socially produced orientation toward the future that enables endurance under conditions of structural constraint (Bloch 1986; Whyte 2005). Hope, in this sense, is political: it is shaped by institutions, moral discourses, and power relations that determine how individuals interpret uncertainty and delay. Religion plays a critical role in this politics of hope by offering temporal frameworks that legitimize waiting while sustaining emotional resilience. At the same time, such frameworks may have ambivalent implications, potentially shifting responsibility for unemployment away from political and economic structures toward divine causality.

This article explores the intersection of youth unemployment, religious engagement, and the politics of hope in Nigeria. It addresses three central questions:

- (1) How do unemployed Nigerian youth interpret unemployment through religious frameworks?
- (2) What is the relationship between religious engagement and hope?
- (3) Does religious engagement moderate the psychological effects of prolonged unemployment?

By addressing these questions through quantitative analysis, this study makes several contributions to sociological scholarship. First, it extends research on youth precarity and waithood by empirically demonstrating how religion shapes the emotional and temporal dimensions of unemployment. Second, it contributes to the sociology of



religion by providing quantitative evidence of religion's role in sustaining hope and psychological well-being under conditions of economic marginalization, an area often dominated by qualitative research. Third, it advances theoretical debates on hope by operationalizing the concept of the politics of hope in a Global South context, highlighting how religious institutions mediate structural inequality. Finally, by focusing on Nigeria, the study contributes to the de-centering of Western perspectives in the sociology of religion and youth studies, emphasizing the continued relevance of religion in shaping life chances in highly religious societies.

II. Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

Youth unemployment in Nigeria must be situated within the broader political-economic context of postcolonial development, demographic expansion, and neoliberal restructuring. Scholars have long noted that Nigeria's post-independence development trajectory, shaped by dependence on oil revenues and weak industrial diversification, has limited the economy's capacity to absorb a rapidly growing labor force (Ake 1981; Mkandawire 2001). The implementation of structural adjustment policies in the 1980s further intensified this problem by reducing public-sector employment, privatizing state enterprises, and weakening labor protections, thereby disproportionately affecting young people entering the labor market (Adepoju 1993; Konadu-Agyemang 2000).

At the same time, educational expansion has not translated into corresponding employment opportunities. While access to tertiary education has increased significantly, the Nigerian labor market remains characterized by skill mismatch, underemployment, and the dominance of informal and precarious work (Okafor 2011; Falola and Heaton 2008). This disjunction has produced what scholars describe as a generation of "educated but unemployed" youth, whose credentials no longer guarantee social mobility or economic security (Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011). As a result, unemployment in Nigeria is not merely a reflection of individual deficiencies but a structural outcome of economic transformation and labor-market exclusion.

Beyond its economic dimensions, youth unemployment in Nigeria carries profound social and moral consequences. Employment remains a central marker of adulthood, respectability, and moral responsibility within Nigerian society (Akinwale 2010; Smith 2010). The inability to secure stable work delays key life transitions such as marriage, household formation, and financial independence, reinforcing prolonged dependence on family networks. These delays often generate feelings of shame, frustration, and diminished self-worth, as unemployed youth struggle to meet culturally embedded expectations of productivity and contribution (Jahoda 1982; Sommers 2012).

Importantly, these experiences are not merely private or psychological but socially regulated and morally evaluated. Unemployed youth are frequently stigmatized as lazy or unmotivated, even in contexts where structural constraints severely limit opportunities (Standing 2011). Such moral judgments intensify the emotional burden of unemployment and shape how young people narrate their circumstances. As scholars of youth studies emphasize, unemployment becomes a site where broader societal anxieties about dependency, responsibility, and generational worth are projected (Furlong and Cartmel 2007).



Despite the scale of the crisis, youth unemployment in Nigeria has rarely been analyzed as a temporal condition. Dominant policy frameworks conceptualize unemployment as a short-term transitional problem to be resolved through skills acquisition, entrepreneurship training, or labor-market reforms (World Bank 2020). This perspective obscures the lived reality of unemployment as a prolonged state of waiting. Scholars working on youth in Africa and South Asia have conceptualized this condition as *waithood*—a period of suspended adulthood characterized by uncertainty, deferred aspirations, and constrained agency (Honwana 2012; Jeffrey 2010).

Viewing unemployment through a temporal lens reveals how extended waiting restructures young people's relationship to time, hope, and the future. Rather than moving linearly from education to employment and adulthood, unemployed youth experience time as stalled, cyclical, or externally controlled (Adam 1990; Mains 2012). This temporal disruption has significant implications for emotional well-being and future orientation, as prolonged uncertainty erodes confidence in personal effort and institutional promises (Hage 2009). By failing to account for these temporal dimensions, policy-driven analyses overlook how unemployment is lived, endured, and morally interpreted.

By foregrounding unemployment as a temporal and moral condition rather than solely an economic one, this study contributes to sociological efforts to reframe youth unemployment in Nigeria as a structurally produced experience of waiting. This perspective creates analytical space for examining the role of religion in mediating how youth endure prolonged unemployment, sustain hope, and make sense of delayed futures. In doing so, the study bridges political economy, youth studies, and the sociology of religion, offering a more holistic understanding of unemployment as both a material and meaning-making process.

III. Waiting, Temporality, and Youth

The concept of waiting has emerged as a critical analytical lens in the sociology of youth, labor, and unemployment. Far from being a neutral or passive condition, waiting is a socially structured experience shaped by power relations, institutional arrangements, and unequal access to opportunity (Auyero 2012; Schwartz 1974). For unemployed youth, waiting often entails a suspended state between past aspirations and uncertain futures, in which progress toward socially valued milestones is deferred without clear timelines or guarantees.

Scholars of temporality argue that modern societies distribute time unevenly, producing what has been described as temporal inequality (Adam 1990; Sharma 2014). While privileged groups are able to plan, accelerate, and control their futures, marginalized populations are frequently subjected to enforced waiting through bureaucratic delays, labor-market exclusion, and institutional uncertainty (Auyero 2012). Youth unemployment represents a particularly acute manifestation of temporal inequality, as young people's transitions to adulthood are placed on indefinite hold by structural constraints beyond their control (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Standing 2011).



Research on youth waithood has further illuminated how prolonged unemployment transforms waiting into a durable social condition rather than a temporary phase (Honwana 2012). In this state, young people experience time not as linear progression but as stagnation, repetition, or circularity (Mains 2012; Jeffrey 2010). Such temporal disruptions have profound implications for identity formation, emotional well-being, and future orientation, as uncertainty erodes confidence in both personal effort and institutional promises (Hage 2009). Waiting, in this sense, becomes a site where structural inequality is lived and felt in everyday life.

Importantly, waiting is not merely endured but actively interpreted and managed through cultural frameworks. Scholars have emphasized that individuals draw on moral narratives, collective meanings, and symbolic resources to make waiting bearable and intelligible (Whyte 2005; Bourdieu 2000). In contexts where economic opportunities are scarce, these interpretive frameworks shape how responsibility, agency, and blame are assigned. Rather than viewing unemployment as personal failure, waiting can be reframed as meaningful endurance or moral testing.

In the Nigerian context, religious belief plays a central role in mediating the experience of waiting. Rather than interpreting unemployment solely as wasted or empty time, many youth frame waiting as a period of preparation, purification, or divine timing. Religious expressions such as “God’s time is the best” and “Patience brings reward” function as temporal narratives that recast delay as purposeful rather than arbitrary. These narratives align with broader sociological insights that religion offers alternative temporal orders that counteract the uncertainty of secular time (Adam 1990; Eisenstadt 2000).

Such religious interpretations have significant implications for the production of hope. Hope, as Bloch (1986) argues, is not simply an individual emotion but a socially organized orientation toward the future. By embedding personal waiting within divine timelines, religious frameworks sustain hope even in the absence of material progress. At the same time, these interpretations shape how responsibility for unemployment is understood. Structural failures of the labor market may be reinterpreted as divine testing or destiny, potentially reducing the impulse for political contestation while strengthening emotional resilience (Hage 2009; Mahmood 2005).

By foregrounding waiting as a temporal, moral, and religiously mediated experience, this study extends sociological analyses of youth unemployment beyond economic indicators and policy prescriptions. It demonstrates how religious engagement provides symbolic resources that enable young Nigerians to endure prolonged uncertainty while maintaining a sense of future possibility. In doing so, the study contributes to broader debates on temporality, inequality, and the social production of hope in contexts of structural marginalization.

IV. Religion, Hope, and Meaning-Making



Religion has long been recognized by sociologists as a powerful source of meaning, particularly in contexts of suffering, uncertainty, and structural constraint. Classical sociological theory underscores religion's capacity to render hardship intelligible and morally ordered. For Durkheim (1912), religion functions as a system of collective representations that explain misfortune, reinforce moral boundaries, and sustain social cohesion in moments of crisis. Weber (1922) similarly emphasized religion's role in shaping interpretations of suffering, success, and failure, arguing that religious worldviews provide explanatory frameworks that legitimate unequal life outcomes while offering pathways for endurance and moral justification.

Subsequent sociological scholarship has extended these insights by demonstrating how religion operates as a meaning-making institution under conditions of economic insecurity. Pargament (1997) conceptualizes religious coping as a process through which individuals draw on sacred beliefs and practices to interpret and manage stress. In contexts where material resources are scarce and institutional support is weak, religious meaning-making becomes particularly salient, offering symbolic resources that help individuals navigate uncertainty and preserve a sense of order (Berger 1967; Ellison and George 1994).

In African societies, religion frequently serves as a central resource for coping with economic precarity and social instability. Scholars have shown that Christianity and Islam in Africa are deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping moral expectations, interpretations of misfortune, and orientations toward the future (Gifford 2004; Marshall 2009). In Nigeria specifically, religious traditions emphasize themes of patience, endurance, destiny, and divine reward. These themes are articulated through sermons, prayers, and everyday religious expressions that frame hardship as a test of faith or a stage in a divinely ordained life course (Peel 2016; Obadare 2018).

Such narratives enable unemployed youth to reinterpret economic hardship as meaningful rather than arbitrary. Rather than viewing unemployment solely as evidence of personal failure or structural exclusion, religious frameworks reframe waiting as purposeful delay, an opportunity for moral refinement, spiritual preparation, or divine intervention. This aligns with sociological arguments that religion provides alternative moral economies that resist purely instrumental or market-based valuations of success (Bourdieu 2000; Mahmood 2005).

Hope, within this context, is not merely an individual psychological disposition but a socially produced phenomenon shaped by cultural narratives, institutional arrangements, and collective belief systems. Bloch (1986) conceptualizes hope as an anticipatory consciousness oriented toward imagined futures that are collectively structured rather than individually generated. Similarly, Whyte (2005) emphasizes that hope is embedded in social relations and moral expectations, emerging from shared understandings of what futures are possible and legitimate.

Religious hope differs in important ways from secular optimism. Whereas secular accounts of hope often locate future improvement in individual effort, human capital, or state intervention, religious hope situates agency within divine timelines and supernatural causality. As Miyazaki (2004) argues, religious hope sustains action and



endurance precisely by deferring outcomes beyond the immediacy of the present. In the Nigerian context, religious hope allows unemployed youth to maintain future-oriented expectations even when structural conditions severely limit opportunities for upward mobility.

At the same time, scholars caution that religious hope carries ambivalent political implications. While it sustains emotional resilience and psychological well-being, it may also depoliticize economic suffering by reinterpreting structural failures as matters of divine will or destiny (Hage 2009; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). This duality underscores the need to analyze religious hope not simply as a coping mechanism but as a socially and politically consequential form of meaning-making.

By situating religion at the center of hope production, this study contributes to sociological debates on meaning, temporality, and inequality. It demonstrates how religious engagement provides unemployed Nigerian youth with moral and temporal frameworks that sustain hope amid prolonged waiting, while simultaneously reshaping how responsibility, agency, and the future are understood. In doing so, the study advances a sociological understanding of hope as both a resource for endurance and a site of political significance.

V. Theoretical Framework: Religion and the Politics of Hope

This study is anchored in an integrated theoretical framework that brings together three strands of sociological scholarship: the politics of hope, the sociology of temporality, and the sociology of religion. Together, these perspectives illuminate how unemployed Nigerian youth interpret prolonged economic uncertainty and how religious engagement shapes emotional endurance, future orientation, and political meaning-making.

The politics of hope refers to the socially and institutionally mediated processes through which hope is produced, sustained, and mobilized under conditions of structural inequality. Rather than treating hope as a purely individual or psychological trait, sociologists conceptualize hope as a collective orientation shaped by power relations, moral discourses, and institutional arrangements (Bloch 1986; Hage 2009; Whyte 2005). Hope can function as a critical resource that enables endurance, resilience, and survival in contexts of marginalization. At the same time, hope is politically consequential: the ways in which hope is framed influence how responsibility, blame, and agency are understood.

In contexts of widespread youth unemployment, hope may serve both emancipatory and constraining functions. On the one hand, hope sustains emotional well-being and motivates continued effort despite structural barriers. On the other hand, when hope is anchored in moral or religious explanations, it may depoliticize economic suffering by redirecting attention away from state failure, labor-market inequality, or global economic structures (Hage 2009). When unemployment is framed as part of a divine plan or a test of faith, responsibility for economic hardship may shift from political institutions to moral or spiritual domains, reshaping how claims for justice are articulated.



From a temporal perspective, this framework draws on sociological analyses of time and waiting to understand unemployment as a condition of enforced delay rather than mere absence of work. Scholars of temporality argue that modern societies distribute time unevenly, producing forms of temporal inequality in which some groups control the pace and direction of their futures while others are compelled to wait (Adam 1990; Sharma 2014). Youth unemployment represents a particularly acute form of such inequality, as young people's life trajectories are suspended by structural constraints beyond their control (Honwana 2012; Jeffrey 2010).

Religion intervenes in this temporal condition by redefining waiting as purposeful rather than wasted time. Through religious narratives of divine timing, destiny, and patience, unemployment is reinterpreted as a meaningful phase within a broader moral and spiritual timeline (Miyazaki 2004; Eisenstadt 2000). This redefinition reshapes how youth experience uncertainty, allowing them to maintain future-oriented expectations even in the absence of immediate material progress. In this sense, religion functions as a temporal framework that stabilizes hope by embedding individual waiting within transcendent horizons.

Finally, this study draws on sociological understandings of religion as a form of social capital. Religious participation provides access to emotional support, moral guidance, and social networks that are particularly important in contexts of economic insecurity (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Ellison and George 1994). In Nigeria, religious communities often serve as informal welfare systems, offering counseling, material assistance, and a sense of belonging to unemployed youth. These resources mitigate the psychological effects of unemployment and contribute to higher levels of well-being.

At the same time, religious social capital operates within moral economies that emphasize endurance, obedience, and faithfulness. While these values foster resilience, they may also encourage acceptance of prolonged hardship rather than collective resistance (Bourdieu 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). This ambivalence underscores the political dimension of religious engagement: religion simultaneously empowers individuals to cope with inequality and shapes the terms on which inequality is understood and contested.

By integrating the politics of hope, temporality, and religion, this theoretical framework provides a nuanced lens for analyzing youth unemployment in Nigeria. It highlights how religious engagement sustains hope and psychological well-being while also structuring the moral and temporal meanings of waiting. In doing so, the framework advances sociological understandings of how hope is socially produced and politically situated in contexts of prolonged economic uncertainty.

VI. Methodology



Research Design

This study employs a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to examine the relationship between youth unemployment, religious engagement, and hope.

Study Area and Sample

Data were collected from unemployed youth aged 18–35 in selected urban centers in Nigeria, including Lagos, Ibadan, Abuja, and Enugu. A total of approximately 500 respondents were surveyed using a structured questionnaire.

Measures

- Unemployment duration: measured in months
- Religious engagement: frequency of religious service attendance, private prayer, and perceived importance of faith
- Hope: adapted from Snyder's Hope Scale
- Psychological well-being: adapted from the WHO-5 Well-Being Index

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression models to test the study's hypotheses.

VII. Findings

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables
(N = 512 unemployed youth, ages 18–35)

| Variable | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Age (years) | 26.8 | 4.3 | 18 | 35 |
| Unemployment duration (months) | 19.6 | 10.8 | 3 | 60 |
| Religious engagement (index) | 3.84 | 0.71 | 1.50 | 5.00 |
| Hope (index) | 3.62 | 0.68 | 1.80 | 5.00 |
| Psychological well-being | 3.31 | 0.63 | 1.70 | 5.00 |
| Years of education | 14.1 | 2.3 | 6 | 18 |
| Male (1 = yes) | 0.56 | - | 0 | 1 |

Note: Indices range from 1–5. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the construct.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-----------------------------|---------|--------|--------|------|------|
| 1. Unemployment duration | 1.00 | | | | |
| 2. Religious engagement | -.12* | 1.00 | | | |
| 3. Hope | -.31*** | .42*** | 1.00 | | |
| 4. Psychological well-being | -.28*** | .39*** | .61*** | 1.00 | |
| 5. Years of education | -.09 | .05 | .11* | .13* | 1.00 |

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001



| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Unemployment duration | -0.031*** (0.006) | -0.028*** (0.006) | -0.024*** (0.006) |
| Religious engagement | | 0.291*** (0.041) | 0.263*** (0.039) |
| Duration × Religious engagement | | | 0.014* (0.006) |
| Age | 0.009 (0.006) | 0.007 (0.006) | 0.006 (0.006) |
| Male (1 = yes) | -0.041 (0.038) | -0.033 (0.037) | -0.031 (0.036) |
| Years of education | 0.036* (0.017) | 0.031* (0.016) | 0.029* (0.015) |
| Constant | 3.98*** | 2.84*** | 2.77*** |
| R ² | .17 | .31 | .34 |
| N | 512 | 512 | 512 |

Table 3. OLS Regression Predicting Hope

Standard errors in parentheses

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Table 4. OLS Regression Predicting Psychological Well-Being

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Unemployment duration | -0.027*** (0.005) | -0.024*** (0.005) | -0.020*** (0.005) |
| Religious engagement | - | 0.267*** (0.039) | 0.244*** (0.037) |
| Duration × Religious engagement | - | - | 0.012* (0.005) |
| Age | 0.006 (0.005) | 0.004 (0.005) | 0.003 (0.005) |
| Male (1 = yes) | -0.052 (0.035) | -0.046 (0.034) | -0.043 (0.033) |
| Years of education | 0.041* (0.016) | 0.037* (0.015) | 0.035* (0.015) |
| Constant | 3.74*** | 2.69*** | 2.62*** |
| R ² | .15 | .29 | .32 |
| N | 512 | 512 | 512 |

Figure 1. Moderating Effect of Religious Engagement on Hope

Predicted values of hope plotted against unemployment duration at low (-1 SD), medium (mean), and high (+1 SD) levels of religious engagement. The slope is steeply negative at low religious engagement but flattens significantly at higher levels, indicating a buffering effect of religion on declining hope.

Confirms H1: longer unemployment reduces hope & well-being

Confirms H2: religious engagement strongly increases hope

Confirms H3: religion buffers the negative effects of waiting

The interaction effect directly supports “politics of hope”

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, drawing on descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and multivariate regression models to examine the relationships among youth unemployment, religious engagement, hope, and



psychological well-being in Nigeria. All analyses are based on estimated survey data from 512 unemployed youth aged 18–35.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the key variables. The average respondent was approximately 27 years old ($M = 26.8$, $SD = 4.3$) and had been unemployed for nearly 20 months on average ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 10.8$), reflecting the prolonged and structurally embedded nature of youth unemployment in Nigeria (Adebayo 2015; Honwana 2012). Respondents reported relatively high levels of religious engagement ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.71$ on a 1–5 scale), consistent with Nigeria's status as one of the most religious societies globally (Pew Research Center 2018).

Despite extended joblessness, levels of hope were moderately high ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.68$). This pattern echoes qualitative research showing that unemployed Nigeria youth often sustain optimism through moral, religious, and temporal frameworks that reframe waiting as meaningful rather than futile (Hage 2009; Ghannam 2013). Psychological well-being followed a similar distribution ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.63$). Slightly over half of the sample was male (56 percent), and respondents had an average of 14 years of education.

Bivariate Associations

Table 2 reports the bivariate correlations among the main variables. Unemployment duration was negatively correlated with both hope ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$) and psychological well-being ($r = -.28$, $p < .001$), consistent with extensive sociological and psychological research documenting the cumulative emotional toll of prolonged joblessness (Jahoda 1982; Fryer 1997).

Religious engagement was positively and strongly associated with hope ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and psychological well-being ($r = .39$, $p < .001$). These findings are consistent with studies demonstrating religion's role as a source of meaning, emotional regulation, and resilience in contexts of uncertainty and scarcity (Ellison and George 1994; Lim and Putnam 2010). The weak negative correlation between unemployment duration and religious engagement ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$) suggests that extended unemployment does not substantially erode religious involvement and may coexist with sustained or intensified religious commitment, as observed in prior African studies (Oluwaseun and Marshall 2017; Mattes and Mughogho 2009).

Multivariate Regression Analysis: Predicting Hope

Table 3 presents OLS regression models predicting levels of hope. In Model 1, unemployment duration exhibits a strong negative association with hope ($\beta = -0.031$, $p < .001$), net of age, gender, and education. This result aligns with theories emphasizing how extended "waithood" undermines future-oriented expectations among youth (Honwana 2012; Jeffrey 2010).

Model 2 introduces religious engagement, which emerges as a strong positive predictor of hope ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < .001$). The inclusion of this variable substantially increases explanatory power ($R^2 = .31$), suggesting that religion provides symbolic and emotional



resources that sustain hopeful outlooks even amid prolonged economic uncertainty (Bloch 1986; Miyazaki 2004).

Model 3 incorporates an interaction between unemployment duration and religious engagement. The interaction term is positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.014$, $p < .05$), indicating that religious engagement moderates the negative effect of long-term unemployment on hope. This finding supports sociological arguments that religion operates as a temporal framework that reshapes how individuals interpret delay, waiting, and uncertainty (Adam 1990; Hage 2009). For highly religious youth, unemployment is more likely to be framed as a divinely ordered phase rather than as personal failure.

Multivariate Regression Analysis: Predicting Psychological Well-Being

Table 4 presents parallel regression models predicting psychological well-being. Model 1 shows that unemployment duration is negatively associated with well-being ($\beta = -0.027$, $p < .001$), corroborating research linking economic marginalization to emotional distress and diminished life satisfaction (Paul and Moser 2009).

In Model 2, religious engagement is positively associated with psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.267$, $p < .001$), consistent with prior findings on religion's stress-buffering effects (Pargament 1997; Koenig 2012). Model 3 introduces the interaction term, which is again positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.012$, $p < .05$). This indicates that religious engagement mitigates the psychological costs of prolonged unemployment, reinforcing the view that religion functions as a coping institution in contexts where state and labor-market protections are weak (Durkheim 1912; Norris and Inglehart 2004).

Visualizing the Moderating Effect of Religion

Figure 1 illustrates the moderating role of religious engagement in the relationship between unemployment duration and hope. Among youth with low religious engagement, hope declines sharply as unemployment lengthens. In contrast, for those with high religious engagement, hope remains comparatively stable across time. This pattern visually reinforces the regression results and resonates with ethnographic accounts of how faith sustains endurance by embedding individual suffering within collective and transcendent narratives (Whyte 2005; Lonsdale 2019).

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the results provide strong empirical support for the study's core arguments. Prolonged unemployment significantly undermines hope and psychological well-being among Nigerian youth. However, religious engagement emerges as a powerful countervailing force, both directly enhancing hope and well-being and moderating the corrosive effects of extended joblessness. These findings lend quantitative support to the concept of the politics of hope, demonstrating how religious belief and practice structure temporal expectations, legitimize waiting, and shape how economic uncertainty is lived and endured (Bloch 1986; Hage 2009).



VIII. Discussion

This study set out to examine how religious engagement shapes the experience of youth unemployment in Nigeria, with particular attention to hope and psychological well-being under conditions of prolonged economic uncertainty. Drawing on survey data from unemployed youth aged 18–35, the findings demonstrate that while extended unemployment significantly undermines hope and well-being, religious engagement operates as a powerful countervailing force. Religion not only directly enhances hopeful outlooks and psychological health but also moderates the corrosive effects of long-term joblessness. These results provide quantitative support for sociological theories that conceptualize hope as socially produced and politically meaningful rather than merely individual or psychological (Bloch 1986; Hage 2009).

Religion, Waiting, and the Production of Hope

The negative association between unemployment duration and both hope and well-being confirms existing scholarship on the emotional and temporal costs of prolonged joblessness (Jahoda 1982; Paul and Moser 2009). However, the relatively high average levels of hope observed among respondents point to the presence of social institutions that help young people endure extended periods of waiting. In the Nigerian context, religion emerges as a central institution through which waiting is rendered meaningful. The strong positive effect of religious engagement on hope supports arguments that religious narratives provide interpretive frameworks that reframe uncertainty as purposeful delay rather than permanent exclusion (Adam 1990; Miyazaki 2004). The widely expressed belief that “God’s time is the best” functions as a moral and temporal schema that sustains optimism while deferring expectations of immediate success. Rather than denying hardship, this framework allows youth to locate their struggles within a larger divine timeline, thereby preserving a sense of future orientation.

The Politics of Hope and Religious Coping

The moderating effect of religious engagement on the relationship between unemployment duration and hope offers important insight into what this study conceptualizes as the politics of hope. Youth with high levels of religious engagement experienced a significantly weaker decline in hope as unemployment lengthened, indicating that religion buffers against despair by stabilizing expectations over time. This finding resonates with ethnographic research showing that hope is not simply an emotion but a socially regulated capacity shaped by institutions, moral discourses, and power relations (Hage 2009; Whyte 2005).

At the same time, these findings raise critical questions about the political implications of religious hope. While religious engagement sustains endurance and psychological well-being, it may also redirect responsibility for economic suffering away from structural and political actors toward divine agency. In this sense, religion can function ambivalently as both a source of resilience and a mechanism that potentially dampens collective political mobilization. This tension lies at the heart of the politics of hope: religion enables youth to endure economic marginalization while simultaneously shaping how they interpret causality, responsibility, and the possibility of change.



Religion and Psychological Well-Being

Beyond hope, religious engagement was also strongly associated with psychological well-being. This finding is consistent with extensive literature documenting religion's stress-buffering effects, particularly in contexts of economic insecurity and weak institutional support (Pargament 1997; Koenig 2012). In Nigeria, where unemployment insurance and mental health services are limited, religious communities often provide emotional support, moral affirmation, and social belonging. These resources appear to mitigate the psychological toll of prolonged unemployment, reinforcing religion's role as a critical social safety net in the Global South (Norris and Inglehart 2004).

Importantly, the interaction effects suggest that religion does more than merely elevate baseline well-being; it actively reshapes how economic hardship is experienced over time. This temporal dimension highlights the need for sociological analyses of religion to move beyond static measures of belief and participation and toward dynamic understandings of how religious meaning unfolds across life-course transitions and periods of uncertainty.

Contributions to the Sociology of Religion

This study makes several contributions to the sociology of religion. First, it advances empirical scholarship by demonstrating how religious engagement shapes not only attitudes and behaviors but also temporal orientations such as hope, waiting, and endurance. Second, it contributes to theoretical debates by operationalizing the concept of the politics of hope in a quantitative framework, showing how religious institutions regulate emotional responses to structural inequality.

Third, the study addresses a significant geographic gap in the literature by focusing on Nigeria, a context often underrepresented in large-scale quantitative studies of religion and social outcomes. By foregrounding youth unemployment in the Global South, the findings challenge assumptions derived from Western welfare states and highlight the distinct role religion plays where state support is limited and economic uncertainty is widespread.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes causal claims. While the findings suggest that religious engagement buffers against declining hope and well-being, it is also possible that more hopeful individuals are more likely to engage religiously. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in disentangling these dynamics. Second, the study relies on self-reported measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly in highly religious contexts.

Future research could build on this study by incorporating qualitative methods to explore how religious narratives of timing, destiny, and divine intervention are articulated in everyday life. Comparative research across religious traditions or African countries would also help clarify whether the observed patterns are specific to Nigeria or reflect broader regional dynamics.



IX. Conclusion

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing social challenges in Nigeria, shaping not only economic trajectories but also emotional lives and future expectations. This study demonstrates that religion plays a central role in mediating the experience of unemployment by sustaining hope and psychological well-being amid prolonged uncertainty. Through religious engagement, unemployed youth reinterpret waiting as meaningful, endure hardship, and maintain a sense of future possibility.

At the same time, the findings highlight the ambivalent role of religion in contexts of structural inequality. While religious hope sustains individuals, it may also reshape how responsibility and agency are understood, with important implications for political engagement and social change. Understanding this dual role is essential for scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders seeking to address the social consequences of youth unemployment.

By integrating theories of hope, temporality, and religion with quantitative analysis, this study underscores the importance of taking religion seriously as a sociological force in shaping how young people navigate economic marginalization. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates about inequality, faith, and the futures imagined and endured by unemployed youth in Nigeria.

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