

Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's Religious Sanitisation in Anambra State: A Blessing or Burden

Abalogu, Divine Maduka, Ph.D

Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
dm.abalogu@unizik.edu.ng

&

Mbatojuo, Ifeyinwa Francisca

Department of Religion and Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
mbaify002@gmail.com



Abstract

This study examines Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's religious sanitisation in Anambra State, with particular attention to whether the policy constitutes a blessing or a burden to religious life and society in the state. The study specifically explores the reasons for the policy, examines its perceived benefits in promoting public order, curbing religious exploitation and protecting the environment, and assesses the concerns it raises regarding religious freedom and cultural practices. The study adopts Conflict Theory as its theoretical framework to analyse the tensions between government regulation, religious freedom and societal interests. The study finds that religious sanitisation has the potential to promote accountability, reduce harmful religious practices and contribute to public order. However, concerns remain regarding possible infringement on religious rights, interference with indigenous practices and the risk of selective enforcement. The study concludes that the policy can be beneficial where it addresses genuine social problems, but its implementation should be transparent, impartial and consistent with constitutional guarantees of religious freedom.

Keywords: Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo, religious sanitisation, Anambra State, government regulation, religious freedom.

Introduction

Religion remains an important institution in Nigerian society, shaping the beliefs, values, moral behaviour and social relationships of individuals and communities. Its influence extends beyond private worship into public life, politics, culture and social organisation. In Nigeria, religious institutions and leaders often participate in activities that affect the wider society, including peacebuilding, moral formation, political mobilisation and community development. According to Abalogu and Nwokedi (2025), religion influences social behaviour and can play significant roles in political processes, including mobilisation, sensitisation, peacebuilding and the promotion of democratic participation. This indicates that religion is not isolated from the affairs of the state; rather, religious activities can have implications for governance and social order.

The relationship between religion and government, however, is not always without tension. While religion can contribute positively to morality, social cohesion and public welfare, certain religious activities may generate concerns where they affect public peace, individual rights, environmental

protection or the security of citizens. The responsibility of government, therefore, includes the protection of religious freedom as well as the maintenance of public order. The Nigerian Constitution recognises freedom of thought, conscience and religion, while the broader human-rights framework also protects the manifestation of religious belief. The challenge arises when government regulation of religious activities is perceived either as a legitimate response to harmful practices or as an unnecessary interference with religious liberty. This tension has become particularly visible in Anambra State under the administration of Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo. Since assuming office in March 2022, Soludo's administration has pursued a number of reforms aimed at making Anambra a more orderly, secure and economically productive state. Within this wider reform agenda, the government has increasingly addressed religious and traditional practices considered harmful to public order, environmental wellbeing and the security of citizens. Recent government statements have also clarified that the administration does not intend to prohibit evangelism or public preaching as such, but seeks to regulate practices that create public disturbance or violate existing regulations.

The controversy surrounding the policy has nevertheless continued to generate public debate. Reports concerning restrictions on public preaching, noise control and actions against alleged fraudulent religious or traditional practitioners have raised questions about the appropriate limits of governmental intervention in religious affairs. For instance, a 2025 report on the government's regulation of public preaching highlighted criticism of the reported ₦500,000 penalty for violations, with legal concerns raised over its possible implications for religious freedom. At the same time, the state government has continued to justify its interventions as necessary for public order, security and the protection of citizens from harmful practices. Recent reports indicate that the administration has also intensified its campaign against alleged fake native doctors and related practices. The issue is therefore not simply whether government should regulate religion, but where the legitimate boundary between regulation and religious freedom should be drawn. Excessive religious activities that disturb public peace or exploit vulnerable persons may reasonably attract governmental attention. However, regulation becomes problematic when legitimate religious expression, indigenous beliefs or lawful worship are treated as inherently harmful. This makes the subject particularly important in a state such as Anambra, where Christianity, indigenous religious traditions and other forms of religious expression continue to occupy significant places in the social and cultural life of the people.

The present study examines Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's religious sanitisation in Anambra State and asks a central question: is the policy a blessing or a burden? The study specifically examines the factors that necessitated the policy, considers its perceived benefits in promoting public order, curbing religious exploitation and protecting the environment, and assesses the concerns surrounding religious freedom, cultural practices and possible selective enforcement. The study is anchored on Conflict Theory because the policy involves competing interests between government authority, religious actors, traditional practitioners and members of the wider society. Through this approach, the study seeks to provide a balanced assessment of the policy rather than presenting religious sanitisation as either entirely beneficial or entirely harmful.

The study is also situated within the broader scholarly concern about the interaction between religion, politics, rights and social transformation in Nigeria. Nwokedi's work with Abalogu (2025) demonstrates that religion and political governance are closely connected in Nigerian

public life, while his wider scholarship on religion and contemporary social issues reflects the need to examine religious practices within their changing social environment. Against this background, the present study contributes to the ongoing discussion by examining the specific case of religious sanitisation under the Soludo administration and evaluating its implications for religious freedom, social order and cultural life in Anambra State.

Conceptual Clarification: Religion, Sanitisation and Religious Sanitisation

Religion

Religion is a complex social and cultural phenomenon that has been defined from theological, sociological, anthropological and philosophical perspectives. Tylor (1871) views religion essentially as belief in spiritual beings. Although this definition draws attention to the supernatural dimension of religion, it is too narrow to capture the wider social, cultural and institutional expressions of religious life. Religion is not limited to what people believe about spiritual realities; it is also expressed through rituals, symbols, moral values, institutions and relationships within society. Durkheim (1912) defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things which brings adherents together into a moral community. This definition shifts attention from religion as merely an individual's belief to religion as a social institution capable of creating collective identity and regulating social behaviour. The researchers find this understanding particularly relevant to the present study because religious activities in Anambra State do not occur in isolation. Worship, preaching, rituals and the activities of religious leaders often take place within communities and may therefore affect the peace, security and wellbeing of other members of society.

Geertz (1973) approaches religion from a cultural perspective and explains it as a system of symbols through which people develop conceptions of existence and enduring motivations for particular patterns of behaviour. This definition is important because it shows that religion gives meaning to human experiences and influences how people interpret and respond to the world around them. Consequently, attempts to regulate religious practices may affect not only outward activities but also deeply held cultural meanings and identities. Berger (1967) further explains the significance of religion in the construction and legitimation of social reality. His sociological approach presents religion as an important institution through which societies establish meaningful explanations of human existence and social order. This perspective is useful to the present study because it demonstrates why government intervention in religious affairs can become socially sensitive. When the state regulates religious practices, it is not simply regulating an ordinary social activity; it may also be intervening in systems of meaning that individuals and communities consider sacred.

Mbiti (1969) presents African religion as deeply integrated into African life, worldview, community and social relationships. This author's work demonstrates that religion in many African societies cannot easily be separated from everyday social existence. Idowu (1973), in a study on African Traditional Religion, similarly treats African religious thought as a coherent worldview involving beliefs about God, divinities, human beings, morality and religious practices. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Anambra State, where indigenous religious traditions continue to form part of the cultural heritage of communities. Metuh (1987) also demonstrates the diversity and complexity of African religious systems by examining African religious concepts, rituals, religious functionaries, moral values, sacrifices, divinities and relationships between

human beings and the spiritual world. The implication is that religious practices cannot always be evaluated adequately without understanding the cultural and historical meanings attached to them. Abalogu and Nwokedi (2025) argue that religion has an important relationship with political and social life, particularly through political mobilisation, sensitisation, peacebuilding and other forms of public participation. This further demonstrates that religion has a public dimension and can interact directly with governance and social organisation. Therefore, the researchers understand religion in this study as a system of beliefs, values, symbols, rituals and practices through which individuals and communities relate to the sacred and organise aspects of their social life. This definition is appropriate because Governor Soludo's policy does not seek to regulate private belief itself but focuses largely on certain public religious and related practices.

Sanitisation

Sanitisation generally conveys the idea of making something clean, safe or free from undesirable elements. However, when applied to social institutions, the concept can be understood more broadly as an intentional process of reform, regulation or removal of practices regarded as harmful to the wellbeing of society. In this study, sanitisation is therefore understood as a regulatory process through which government seeks to address activities considered disruptive, exploitative, dangerous or inconsistent with accepted standards of public order. The researchers consider this understanding more appropriate than restricting sanitisation to physical cleanliness. Governor Soludo's intervention is not primarily concerned with physical sanitation. Rather, it involves attempts to regulate certain religious and traditional practices that the government considers harmful to public peace, environmental protection, personal safety or social morality. Sanitisation in this context is therefore a form of social regulation.

The concept of regulation is important to this understanding. Sarkissian (2012) observes that government regulation of religion can affect the way religious groups express and organise their religious activities. Her study demonstrates that state regulation may have implications for religious expression, particularly where governmental intervention becomes extensive. More recent research on government religion policy in sub-Saharan Africa similarly identifies government regulation of religion as an important dimension of contemporary state-religion relations. The researchers therefore understand sanitisation as a deliberate governmental effort to identify and address practices considered harmful to society while attempting to preserve legitimate activities. This distinction is important because not every religious activity that appears unusual or unfamiliar should automatically be regarded as harmful. Regulation must be based on identifiable social concerns and applied according to established legal and ethical standards.

Religious Sanitisation

Religious sanitisation is used in this study to describe the process through which government seeks to regulate, reform or eliminate religious practices considered harmful to public order, security, environmental wellbeing or the rights of other citizens. It is therefore a combination of religion and social regulation. The concept should not be interpreted as an attempt to eliminate religion or prevent citizens from exercising their faith. The idea of regulating religion presents an important tension between two legitimate interests. On one side is the responsibility of government to maintain public order and protect citizens from exploitation, criminality, environmental degradation and activities that interfere with the rights of others. On the other side is the right of individuals and religious communities to hold, practise and express their religious beliefs.

Contemporary scholarship on religious regulation shows that excessive governmental control can restrict religious expression, even where regulation is introduced in the name of public order.

This tension is particularly important in Nigeria because religious expression is constitutionally protected, while government also has responsibilities relating to security, public health, environmental protection and social order. Consequently, religious sanitisation cannot be assessed solely by examining the intentions of government. Attention must also be given to the methods of implementation, the groups affected and whether the measures are applied fairly. Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973) and Metuh (1987) demonstrate that African religious practices are frequently intertwined with culture, community life, morality and traditional institutions. Consequently, governmental restrictions on certain traditional or religious practices may be interpreted by practitioners not merely as administrative regulation but as interference with cultural identity and inherited religious traditions. For this study, therefore, religious sanitisation refers specifically to Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's efforts to regulate religious and related spiritual practices in Anambra State where such practices are considered capable of threatening public order, security, environmental wellbeing or the rights of other citizens. The researchers do not equate religious sanitisation with suppression of religion. Rather, the central concern is the extent to which government can regulate harmful practices without unnecessarily restricting legitimate religious expression.

The concept is consequently central to the question of whether Soludo's policy constitutes a blessing or a burden. It may be considered a blessing where it protects citizens from religious exploitation, curbs activities that disturb public peace, protects the environment and promotes accountability. Conversely, it may become a burden where enforcement is arbitrary, selectively applied, culturally insensitive or unnecessarily restrictive of constitutionally protected religious practices. The assessment of religious sanitisation must therefore consider both its intended objectives and its practical consequences for religious freedom, culture and social order in Anambra State.

Theoretical Framework: Conflict Theory

Conflict Theory is associated with Karl Marx and was developed in 1848. From Marx analysis of social inequality, power and competition between social groups. Marx (1848) argues that society is characterised by competing interests, particularly between groups that possess power and those who are subject to that power. The theory holds that social institutions and structures can become arenas where groups struggle to protect their interests. Conflict Theory is relevant to this study because Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's religious sanitisation policy involves a relationship between government authority and religious freedom. The government, as the regulatory authority, seeks to control certain religious and spiritual activities in the interest of public order, security, environmental protection and the wellbeing of citizens. Religious practitioners and traditional worshippers, on the other hand, seek to preserve their freedom to practise and express their beliefs. These different interests can produce tension and disagreement.

The theory is also relevant because it allows the study to examine both sides of the policy. While the government may regard religious sanitisation as necessary for curbing fraudulent religious practices, excessive noise and activities considered harmful to society, some religious and traditional groups may perceive the same measures as interference with their religious rights and

cultural practices. Conflict Theory therefore provides a balanced framework for examining whether the policy is a blessing or a burden.

Application of the Theory to the Study

The researchers apply Conflict Theory to examine the struggle between the state's responsibility to maintain public order and the people's right to religious and cultural expression. Governor Soludo represents the authority of the state, while religious organisations, preachers, traditional practitioners and other affected groups represent interests that may be restricted or affected by the government's regulations.

The application of the theory helps the researchers to examine the reasons behind the government's intervention, the responses of religious and traditional groups, and the consequences of the policy for religious freedom and social order. Where the policy protects citizens from exploitation, reduces harmful practices and promotes peaceful coexistence, it may be viewed as a positive exercise of governmental authority. However, where enforcement becomes excessive, selective or insensitive to legitimate religious and cultural practices, it may generate resistance and be perceived as a burden. Thus, Conflict Theory provides the theoretical lens for assessing the central question of this study: whether Governor Soludo's religious sanitisation represents a necessary intervention for social order or an excessive exercise of governmental authority over religious and cultural life in Anambra State.

Governor Soludo's Religious Sanitisation Policy in Anambra State

Religion is an important part of the life of the people of Anambra State. It affects how people worship, relate with one another and understand their society. Christianity is widely practised in the state, while traditional religious beliefs and practices also remain part of Igbo culture. Egwuonwu (2024) explains that Christian and Igbo traditional values can help to promote peace, good behaviour and security in Anambra State. This shows that religion and traditional values can contribute positively to society when they are properly practised. The relationship between religion and society is also discussed by Abalogu and Nwokedi (2025). They explain that religion plays an important role in Nigerian public life through political participation, mobilisation, sensitisation and peacebuilding. This means that religion is not only a matter of private worship. Religious activities can also affect the wider society. For this reason, the government may become concerned when certain religious activities affect public peace, security or the rights of other people.

Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's religious sanitisation policy must be understood within this situation. Since the beginning of Soludo's administration, the governor has introduced different measures aimed at improving security, public order and the general wellbeing of the people of Anambra State. Religious and traditional practices have become part of this wider government concern, especially where some activities are linked to fraud, criminality, excessive noise, environmental problems or the exploitation of vulnerable people. The issue is, however, sensitive because religion and culture are closely connected among the Igbo. Ifesinachukwu and Emejulu (2025), in their study of Christianity and traditional religious practices in Awka, show that Christianity has affected traditional religious practices, but traditional beliefs and practices have continued to exist within Igbo society. This means that any government policy concerning religion and traditional practices must consider the cultural meaning attached to them.

Okpalike (2024) also draws attention to the importance of sacred spaces in Igbo traditional religion. This scholar's discussion shows that some places in Igbo society are not regarded simply as ordinary physical spaces. They may have religious and cultural meanings. This is important to the present study because government actions involving shrines, rivers, forests and other places connected with traditional practices may be understood differently by government officials and traditional practitioners. Similarly, Metuh (1987) explains that African traditional religion involves beliefs, rituals, sacrifices, religious officials and relationships between human beings and the spiritual world. In the Igbo setting, therefore, traditional religious practices cannot always be separated from culture. This makes government regulation of such practices a sensitive issue.

Governor Soludo's administration has stated that its policy is not directed against all traditional religious practitioners. The state government has explained that it is mainly concerned with people who use traditional practices to commit crimes, deceive people or engage in harmful activities. The government has also maintained that genuine traditional medicine and legitimate traditional practices should not be treated as criminal activities. This distinction is important because it shows that the stated aim of the policy is to control harmful practices rather than to abolish traditional religion. The policy also affects Christian religious activities. Public preaching, the use of loudspeakers and religious activities in public places have attracted government attention because of concerns about noise pollution and disturbance. The government has argued that freedom of religion should not prevent other citizens from enjoying peace and public order. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether people should be allowed to preach or worship, but how such activities should be carried out without disturbing others.

The government has also taken action against persons described as fake pastors, fake native doctors and other religious or spiritual practitioners accused of deceiving or exploiting members of the public. From the government's point of view, such actions are necessary to protect people from fraud and criminal activities. However, the policy has also raised concerns about religious freedom and the possibility that legitimate religious or traditional practices may be wrongly affected. Kanu and Nosike (2025) emphasise the importance of dialogue between religious groups in dealing with religious differences and contemporary social problems. This idea is useful to the present study because government regulation alone may not solve every problem connected with religious practices. Dialogue between government, Christian leaders, traditional religious practitioners and community leaders may help to establish clear boundaries between legitimate religious activities and harmful practices.

Abalogu and Adingupu (2025) also show that religion and cultural practices often interact in complex ways in Nigerian society. Their study of Christian responses to polygamy demonstrates how religious beliefs may sometimes come into contact with established cultural practices. This supports the view that religious policies should be handled carefully because religion and culture are often closely connected. The researchers therefore understand Governor Soludo's religious sanitisation as an attempt by the state government to control religious and spiritual practices that are considered harmful to public peace, security, the environment and the wellbeing of citizens. The policy should not automatically be seen as an attack on religion. At the same time, government must ensure that its actions do not unnecessarily prevent people from practising their lawful religious beliefs.

The policy can therefore be seen from two sides. It may be a blessing if it helps to reduce religious fraud, protect citizens, control excessive noise, improve public order and prevent harmful practices. It may become a burden if it leads to unnecessary restrictions on religious freedom, unfair treatment of religious groups or interference with legitimate Igbo cultural and traditional practices. The question for this study is therefore whether Governor Soludo's religious sanitisation has achieved a proper balance between public order and religious freedom in Anambra State.

Factors Necessitating Religious Sanitisation in Anambra State

The religious sanitisation policy of Governor Chukwuma Charles Soludo did not arise without reasons. It came at a time when the state was facing problems connected with insecurity, religious deception, fraudulent spiritual practices, noise pollution and the misuse of traditional beliefs. The government therefore presented the policy as an attempt to separate genuine religious and traditional practices from activities that threaten public safety and social order. In June 2026, the Anambra State Government extended its campaign against fake native doctors to fake pastors and other persons allegedly using religion to commit fraud, extortion and deception.

1. Insecurity and Criminal Activities

One major reason for the policy is the problem of insecurity in Anambra State. The state has experienced kidnapping, killings, armed robbery, cult-related violence and other forms of criminality. Egwuonwu (2024) explains that insecurity in Anambra has affected the social and economic life of the people and has created a need for approaches that involve both government and community values. The Soludo administration has therefore connected some religious and traditional practices with criminal activities. The state government has particularly expressed concern about native doctors and other spiritual practitioners who allegedly prepare charms for criminals or promote practices connected with violence and quick wealth. However, the government has also made a distinction between genuine traditional medicine and criminal activities carried out under the name of traditional religion. The researcher therefore see insecurity as one of the major factors behind the policy. Where religion or traditional practice is used to support crime, government intervention becomes necessary. The challenge, however, is to ensure that genuine religious and cultural practices are not wrongly treated as criminal activities.

2. Fraudulent Religious Practices and Fake Spiritual Leaders

Another important factor is the increasing concern about people who use religion to deceive and exploit members of the public. The Anambra State Government reported in June 2026 that some pastors were being investigated and prosecuted for allegedly staging fake miracles and collecting money from people through deception. Eight pastors were arraigned over alleged fake miracles involving hired actors who were presented as people who had received healing or deliverance. This development helps to explain why the government considers religious sanitisation necessary. Religion has strong influence among the Igbo people, and many people trust pastors, prophets, traditional healers and other spiritual leaders. When such trust is abused for financial gain, vulnerable people may suffer serious economic and emotional harm. The government therefore argues that its intervention is directed at criminal deception rather than genuine worship.

3. Misuse of Igbo Traditional Religion and Culture

The policy is also connected with concerns about the misuse of Igbo traditional religion. Traditional religion remains an important part of Igbo history and culture. However, some

practices carried out in its name may conflict with public safety or may be used to justify criminal activities. Ifesinachukwu and Emejulu (2025) note that traditional religion remains important among the people of Awka even after the spread of Christianity. They also show that the relationship between Christianity and traditional religion has sometimes produced tension and misunderstanding. The researchers therefore argue that religious sanitisation should not be understood as an attempt to destroy Igbo traditional religion. Rather, the important question is how genuine cultural practices can be protected while harmful practices are controlled. This distinction is especially important in Anambra because religion and culture are closely connected.

4. Get-Rich-Quick Mentality

The desire to become wealthy without hard work has also been identified as a reason for the policy. The Anambra State Government has repeatedly criticised spiritual practitioners who promise people sudden wealth through charms, rituals and other questionable practices. The government has particularly linked the so-called “Oke-Ite” practices with a culture of quick wealth and fraudulent spiritual promises. This concern is relevant to the Igbo social value of hard work. The government argues that young people should not be encouraged to believe that wealth can be obtained through spiritual shortcuts. The researchers agree that religious leaders and traditional practitioners should promote responsible living, hard work and respect for human life rather than encourage people to depend on fraudulent spiritual promises.

5. Noise Pollution and Uncontrolled Public Preaching

Noise pollution is another factor behind the policy. Religious activities sometimes involve loudspeakers, open-air preaching and public worship in markets, streets and other places where excessive noise may disturb other people. The Anambra State Government has explained that its position is not a ban on evangelism but an enforcement of the state’s public health provisions against noise pollution and inappropriate public preaching. The researchers consider this a reasonable concern because religious freedom should exist alongside the rights of other members of society to peace and quietness. A person should be able to practise his or her religion without unnecessarily disturbing others. Therefore, the issue is not simply whether people should preach publicly, but how such activities can be carried out responsibly.

6. Protection of Vulnerable People

Religious sanitisation is also necessary because some people are easily deceived when they are desperate for healing, wealth, children, protection or solutions to personal problems. Such people may become victims of religious fraud when spiritual leaders make false promises. The recent action against alleged fake pastors in Anambra shows the government’s concern about this problem. The government has specifically asked members of the public to report religious leaders involved in fraud, extortion, deception or activities that endanger lives. The researchers therefore maintain that protecting vulnerable people should be one of the central objectives of religious sanitisation. Religious authority should be used to guide and help people rather than exploit their fears and difficulties.

7. Need to Restore Social Order and Moral Values

Finally, the policy is driven by the need to restore social order and moral values in Anambra State. Egwuonwu (2024) argues that Christian and Igbo traditional values such as love, unity, respect for elders and communal responsibility can contribute to peace and security in the state. Similarly, the

Anambra State Government presents its religious sanitisation campaign as part of a wider effort to restore law, order, honesty and responsible behaviour. The government maintains that religion and tradition should not be used as hiding places for criminal activities. In the view of the researchers, the success of the policy will depend on the ability of the government to distinguish between genuine religious or traditional practices and criminal activities. Sanitisation should correct harmful practices without destroying religious freedom or Igbo cultural identity. This balance is important because religion and culture remain significant parts of life in Anambra State.

Religious Sanitisation as a Blessing

Religious sanitisation in Anambra State can be regarded as a blessing when it helps to protect the people from fraud, criminality, exploitation, excessive noise and the misuse of religion and traditional beliefs. This is important because religion occupies an important place in the life of the people of Anambra State. It influences family life, morality, community relations and the way people understand success, suffering and social responsibility. Egwuonwu (2024) argues that Christian and Igbo traditional values can contribute to peace, unity and the fight against insecurity in Anambra State. He points to values such as love, forgiveness, community support, *Igwebuike* and respect for elders as values that can strengthen social stability. The activities of the Soludo administration show that the idea of religious sanitisation is not merely theoretical. It has been connected with specific actions against persons whom the government considers to be using religion or traditional practices to commit offences. The researchers therefore consider the following areas as possible blessings of the policy.

1. Reduction of Fraudulent Religious and Spiritual Practices

One clear example of the government's sanitisation policy occurred on 12 February 2025 at Umuofofor village, Okija, in Ihiala Local Government Area. The Anambra State Government sealed a shrine allegedly operated by Ekene Igboegbueze, a self-proclaimed native doctor who was accused of promising unsuspecting people supernatural wealth. The operation followed complaints from members of the Okija community. Prince Ken Emeakayi, the Special Adviser to the Governor on Community Security, stated that the government considered the activities illegal under the Anambra State Homeland Security Laws. The Agunechemba security outfit was also involved in the operation. The incident is important because it gives a real example of what the government means by sanitising religious and traditional practices. The action was not simply a statement against traditional religion. It followed complaints from people in a particular community and resulted in the sealing of a particular shrine. The government also stated that items found at the shrine would undergo forensic examination before further action would be taken.

The researchers see this as a possible blessing because people who are desperate for wealth can easily become victims of spiritual fraud. The promise of sudden wealth through charms or special spiritual powers can encourage young people to look for shortcuts instead of legitimate work. The Director of Operations of the Agunechemba Security Outfit also linked the activities of alleged fake spiritual leaders with the spread of a get-rich-quick mentality among youths. However, the researchers maintain that government must distinguish between fraudulent practices and genuine traditional religion. The fact that a person is a traditional religious practitioner should not, by itself, make the person a criminal. What should attract government action is evidence of fraud, exploitation, violence or another offence.

2. Protection of Young People from the Get-Rich-Quick Mentality

The Okija incident also raises the issue of the desire for quick wealth. The government has repeatedly connected its campaign against some native doctors and spiritualists with practices that allegedly promise people wealth without legitimate work. In the February 2025 Okija operation, the government specifically warned youths against patronising fake native doctors and pastors and encouraged them to engage in legitimate activities. This concern is important in Anambra because the desire for quick wealth can expose young people to different forms of exploitation and criminality. Religious leaders have considerable influence over young people, and this influence can either encourage responsible living or promote unhealthy expectations about wealth.

In 2026, Governor Soludo again criticised religious messages that promise people success without the discipline and hard work associated with it. At a church-related event, he questioned messages that present Christianity as a way of receiving a “crown without a cross” and called for a return to values such as diligence, honesty and responsibility. The researchers therefore see this aspect of the policy as a blessing when it encourages young people to understand that religion should not be used to justify laziness, fraud or the search for instant wealth. Religious institutions can contribute to development when they teach hard work, honesty and responsibility.

3. Protection of People from Religious Fraud

The campaign was extended more directly to Christian religious practitioners in 2026. On 10 May 2026, Governor Soludo, while speaking at St. Patrick's Cathedral during the All-Knights Day of the Catholic Diocese of Awka, announced that his administration had intensified its crackdown on alleged fake pastors who exploited vulnerable people. The Governor stated that some suspects were already in custody. This announcement was followed by a more concrete legal action. On 5 June 2026, eight pastors were arraigned before a High Court sitting in Awka for alleged violations of the Anambra State Homeland Security Law 2025. The pastors were brought before the court by operatives of the Agunchemba security outfit led by Ken Emeakayi, while the Attorney-General and Commissioner for Justice, Tobechukwu Nweke, SAN, led the prosecution.

The following day, 6 June 2026, reports stated that the eight pastors were remanded in a correctional centre following allegations that they had used paid actors to stage fake miracles. The prosecution stated that the evidence included video-recorded confessions and other materials. Importantly, these were allegations before the court, and the accused remained entitled to due process. This case gives the researchers a strong basis for arguing that the policy was not directed only at African Traditional Religion. It also reached Christian religious practitioners. The researchers consider this important because it shows an attempt, at least in the government's stated policy, to apply the campaign to different forms of religious practice where criminal conduct is alleged.

4. Protection of Vulnerable People

The case of the eight pastors also shows why the protection of vulnerable people became part of the government's argument. According to the prosecution, the alleged staged miracles were intended to deceive people. The Attorney-General stated that the government was trying to stop the exploitation of vulnerable members of the public through deceptive staged miracles. This issue is important because people often approach religious leaders when they are passing through difficult situations. A sick person may seek healing; an unemployed person may seek employment;

a childless couple may seek prayer; and a poor person may seek financial help. Such people can easily become victims when a religious practitioner deliberately takes advantage of their situation. The researchers therefore see the protection of vulnerable people as one of the strongest arguments in favour of religious sanitisation. Religious authority should be used to guide and support people, not to take advantage of their fears and difficulties.

5. Promotion of Peace and Security

Another possible blessing is the contribution of the policy to peace and security. Anambra State has experienced insecurity involving killings, kidnapping, armed robbery, cult-related activities and other forms of violence. Egwuonwu (2024), in a study specifically focused on Anambra State, argues that Christian and Igbo traditional values can be used to strengthen peace and reduce insecurity. The government's action against alleged criminal spiritual practitioners must therefore be understood within this wider security situation. In the February 2025 Okija operation, the Special Adviser on Community Security and the Agunchemba security outfit were directly involved. The government said the action was aimed at activities considered capable of aiding criminality. The researchers consider this a blessing where genuine security concerns are involved. Religion and traditional spirituality should contribute to the protection of life and the promotion of peace. They should not be used as a cover for kidnapping, fraud, ritual activities or other criminal conduct.

6. Control of Noise Pollution

The issue of noise pollution provides another concrete example of the policy. In March 2025, Governor Soludo confronted a roadside preacher using a loudspeaker in a market in Onitsha. The incident became widely discussed after a video of the encounter circulated publicly. The governor told the preacher that loud preaching in a marketplace was causing noise pollution and directed him to preach in a church or another appropriate place. The governor also mentioned a ₦500,000 penalty for violation of the state's noise regulations. The state government subsequently clarified on 11 March 2025 that the governor had not banned evangelism. Rather, the government said it was enforcing the Anambra State Public Health Law 2006, which prohibits noise pollution and preaching in inappropriate places such as markets using loudspeakers. This position has support in recent scholarship. Oyigbo (2025) argues that freedom of religion in Nigeria must be considered alongside the rights to health, privacy, public order and a safe environment. He explains that excessive religious noise can become a public nuisance and that reasonable regulation may be lawful under the Constitution. The researchers therefore see the regulation of excessive religious noise as a blessing when it protects other citizens from unnecessary disturbance. Religious freedom is important, but the exercise of that freedom should also respect the rights of other people.

7. Encouragement of Responsible Religious Leadership

The sanitisation campaign may also encourage religious leaders to become more responsible. On 14 June 2026, the Anambra State Government officially announced that its campaign against fake native doctors had been extended to fake pastors and other people allegedly masquerading as genuine men and women of God while engaging in criminal practices. The government specifically mentioned fraud, extortion, deception and activities that endanger lives. The government also called on residents to provide credible information about suspected criminal religious activities. This means that the policy was not presented as a matter for government security agencies alone; the public was also encouraged to participate. The researchers believe that

this can encourage religious institutions to examine their own activities. Genuine religious leaders should have nothing to fear from a policy that targets fraud and criminality. Instead, such a policy may encourage greater transparency and accountability.

8. Protection of the Image of Igbo Traditional Religion

Religious sanitisation can also benefit Igbo traditional religion if it helps to separate genuine traditional practices from criminal activities. This is important because traditional religion is part of the history and cultural identity of the Igbo people. Ifesinachukwu and Emejulu (2025), in their study of Awka, explain that Christianity and traditional religion have continued to exist side by side, although their relationship has sometimes been marked by tension. They argue that misunderstanding between the two religious traditions can affect communal unity and make it more difficult for people to deal with common problems. The researchers therefore argue that genuine Igbo traditional religion should not be allowed to carry the burden of criminal activities committed by individuals. Where a government action removes criminal elements while allowing genuine cultural and religious practices to continue, it may actually help to protect the image of the tradition.

Religious Sanitisation as a Burden

Religious sanitisation can also become a burden when government action moves beyond the control of criminality and begins to interfere with legitimate religious freedom, cultural practices and individual rights. This concern is particularly important because religion is constitutionally protected in Nigeria. Okeke et al. (2025) explain that Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution protects freedom of thought, conscience and religion and that religious freedom is important to personal dignity, democratic stability and religious pluralism. They nevertheless note that the enforcement of religious freedom in Nigeria faces important challenges. The researchers therefore consider the following issues as the major burdens associated with the policy.

1. Possible Restriction of Religious Freedom

The strongest criticism of the policy concerns religious freedom. This became clear during the public-preaching incident in Onitsha in March 2025. When Governor Soludo confronted the preacher using a loudspeaker in a market, some religious leaders and human rights activists interpreted the action as an attack on the constitutional right to preach in public. A human rights lawyer, Ifeanyi Ejiofor, publicly criticised the proposed ₦500,000 penalty and described it as a possible overreach affecting religious freedom. Other religious leaders also criticised the governor's position. Reports on 9 March 2025 stated that some bishops and religious leaders objected to the restriction on loud public preaching and argued that preaching was part of religious expression.

The government, however, later explained that the governor was not banning evangelism. It said the issue was noise pollution and preaching in inappropriate places such as markets. The researchers therefore identify an important problem here. Even when the government's intention is to control noise, the manner of enforcement can make religious people feel that their freedom is being restricted. This shows why religious sanitisation must be carefully explained and properly implemented.

2. Conflict between Public Order and Religious Expression

The Onitsha incident also shows the conflict between public order and religious expression. A preacher may believe that preaching in a public place is part of his religious responsibility, while traders and other members of the public may consider the loudspeaker a disturbance. Oyigbo (2025) explains that religious freedom is not absolute and may be subject to reasonable limitations where religious activities affect public health, public order or the rights of others. He specifically identifies excessive religious noise as an area where religious freedom may come into conflict with other rights. This argument helps to explain why the government relied on the Public Health Law. However, the researchers believe that regulation should target the harmful part of the activity rather than the religious activity itself. If the problem is excessive noise, the government should regulate the volume, time and location rather than create the impression that public preaching itself is illegal.

3. Possible Interference with Igbo Traditional Religion

Another burden is the possibility that religious sanitisation may be seen as interference with Igbo traditional religion. This concern becomes important when government officials deal with shrines, native doctors and other traditional practitioners. The February 2025 sealing of the shrine in Okija is a good example. Although the government said the action was against alleged illegal activities, the incident can easily be interpreted by some traditional religion practitioners as government interference with traditional religious institutions. The shrine was not simply an ordinary business premises; it was a place connected with traditional spiritual practice.

This concern must be treated seriously because recent research shows that traditional religion continues to have cultural importance in Awka and other parts of Anambra. Ifesinachukwu and Emejulu (2025) show that the Awka people had indigenous religious practices before the arrival of Christianity and that elements of the traditional religious system have continued despite Christian influence. They also warn that tension between Christianity and traditional religion can affect communal unity. The researchers therefore argue that government should distinguish between a criminal activity and a cultural or religious practice. A practice should not be prohibited simply because it belongs to African Traditional Religion. There should be clear evidence that the particular activity violates the law or harms another person.

4. Difficulty in Distinguishing Genuine and Fake Religious Practitioners

The word “fake” itself creates another problem. How does government determine who is a fake pastor, fake native doctor or genuine religious practitioner? This question became more serious when the government extended its campaign from native doctors to pastors. On 14 June 2026, the government asked residents to provide credible information about pastors, churches and other religious practitioners allegedly involved in fraud, extortion, deception or criminality. The researchers agree that credible evidence of crime should be investigated. However, religious belief itself should not be used as the evidence of criminality. A pastor should be prosecuted for a specific offence such as fraud or obtaining money by false pretence, not simply because government officials do not accept the person's religious claims. The need for clear standards is supported by Okeke et al. (2025), who emphasise the importance of strong legal safeguards in protecting freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Nigeria. Therefore, the government should make the difference between religious belief and criminal conduct clear. This will reduce fear among genuine religious practitioners.

5. Risk of Selective Enforcement

There is also the possibility of selective enforcement. Religious sanitisation will lose public confidence if people begin to believe that the government is targeting some religious groups while ignoring similar conduct by others. The events of 2025 and 2026 show that the government has taken action against both traditional practitioners and Christian pastors. The Okija shrine was sealed in February 2025, while eight pastors were arraigned in Awka in June 2026. This may support the government's argument that the policy is not directed at only one religious group. Nevertheless, the researchers believe that equal treatment must be demonstrated consistently over time. A policy cannot be considered impartial merely because two different groups have been investigated. What matters is whether the same legal standard is applied to everyone.

6. Tension between Government and Religious Leaders

The policy has also created tension between the government and some religious leaders. The March 2025 public-preaching controversy is an example. The governor said he was enforcing the law against noise pollution, while some religious leaders saw the action as an attack on evangelism. This type of disagreement can weaken cooperation between government and religious institutions. This is unfortunate because religious organisations can help government in promoting peace, morality, education, social welfare and community development. The researchers therefore believe that dialogue should form part of the sanitisation policy. Government should meet with church leaders, traditional religious leaders, community leaders and other stakeholders before major enforcement actions are taken. This will help people to understand the purpose of the policy and will also allow government to hear legitimate concerns.

7. Possibility of Abuse of Government Power

Another burden is the possibility of abuse of government power. A policy that begins as an attempt to fight fraud and criminality can become dangerous if government officials begin to use it to control religious beliefs or silence unpopular religious groups. The recent arrest and prosecution of pastors make this concern important. On 5 June 2026, eight pastors were arraigned in Awka under the Homeland Security Law 2025. On 6 June, they were reported to have been remanded over allegations including the use of paid actors to stage fake miracles. These remain allegations to be determined through due process. The researchers therefore consider due process essential. Government must investigate properly, present evidence, allow the accused persons to defend themselves and allow the courts to determine guilt. Religious sanitisation should not become a system where government officials alone determine who is genuine and who is fake. Okeke et al. (2025) emphasise the importance of constitutional safeguards and stronger protection of religious liberty in Nigeria.

8. Possible Damage to Religious Tolerance

Religious sanitisation may also become a burden if it increases the tension between Christianity and African Traditional Religion. This is a serious issue in Anambra because both religious traditions have historical connections with the people. Ifesinachukwu and Emejulu (2025) show that the relationship between Christianity and traditional religion in Awka has not always been peaceful. They explain that some traditional practices were regarded as evil by Christians, creating misunderstanding and conflict. They warn that unresolved religious tension can affect communal unity and the ability of the people to address common problems. The researchers therefore argue that Soludo's policy should not deepen the old division between Christianity and traditional

religion. The government should make it clear that it is fighting criminality and harmful practices, not African culture itself.

9. The Need to Protect Genuine Cultural Practices

A final burden is the possibility that genuine cultural practices may be lost if the campaign is too broad. The researchers consider this particularly important because some Igbo cultural practices have religious meanings and may not fit neatly into modern categories of “religion” and “culture”. The study by Ifesinachukwu and Emejulu (2025) demonstrates that the religious history of Awka cannot be separated completely from its cultural history. The authors show that changes introduced through Christianity affected indigenous practices, some of which disappeared or changed over time. The researchers therefore believe that government should not allow the fight against criminality to become an unintended attack on cultural heritage. Where a traditional practice is harmless and does not violate the law, it should be respected. The evidence from Anambra State shows that Governor Soludo's religious sanitisation is neither completely a blessing nor completely a burden. It contains both possibilities.

On the positive side, the sealing of the alleged fraudulent shrine at Okija on 12 February 2025, the government's action against alleged fake pastors in 2026, and the arraignment of eight pastors at the Awka High Court on 5 June 2026 show that the policy has been connected with concrete attempts to deal with alleged fraud, exploitation and criminality carried out under religious or spiritual cover. The campaign against excessive religious noise, as seen in the Onitsha market incident of March 2025, also shows the government's attempt to balance religious activities with public order and the rights of other citizens. On the other hand, the same events show why the policy is controversial. The public-preaching incident raised questions about religious freedom, while actions involving traditional shrines raise questions about the protection of Igbo cultural and religious practices. Recent scholarship from Nnamdi Azikiwe University also shows that religious freedom must be protected while reasonable regulation is allowed where public health, safety and the rights of others are affected. The researchers therefore conclude that religious sanitisation becomes a blessing when it removes fraud, criminality, exploitation and harmful practices from religion and traditional worship. It becomes a burden when it unnecessarily restricts genuine worship, weakens constitutional religious freedom, interferes with harmless Igbo cultural practices or gives government officials excessive power over religious belief. The success of Governor Soludo's policy should therefore not be measured only by the number of arrests, sealed shrines or prosecutions. It should also be measured by whether the policy produces a safer society while preserving religious freedom, cultural identity, human dignity and equal treatment before the law.

Conclusion

This study examined Governor Charles Chukwuma Soludo's religious sanitisation in Anambra State with particular attention to its benefits and burdens. The study shows that the policy did not emerge in isolation. It developed within a wider context of insecurity, alleged religious fraud, questionable spiritual practices, excessive religious noise and concerns about the misuse of Igbo traditional religious practices. The events examined in the study provide clear examples. On 12 February 2025, the Anambra State Government sealed a shrine at Okija, Ihiala Local Government Area, following allegations of fraudulent spiritual activities and promises of supernatural wealth. In March 2025, the governor's confrontation with a preacher using a loudspeaker in an Onitsha market brought the issue of religious noise and public order into public debate. In May and June

2026, the government's campaign was extended to alleged fake pastors, culminating in the arraignment of eight pastors before a High Court in Awka on 5 June 2026 over allegations connected with staged miracles and other offences. These events show that religious sanitisation in Anambra State has moved beyond public statements to actual government enforcement.

The study finds that the policy can be a blessing where it protects people from fraud, exploitation and criminality committed under the cover of religion or traditional spirituality. It can also promote public order, control excessive noise and encourage religious leaders and traditional practitioners to act responsibly. In this sense, the policy can contribute to the wider security and moral development of Anambra State. However, the study also finds that the policy can become a burden if it is implemented in a way that restricts genuine religious freedom or interferes unnecessarily with Igbo cultural and traditional religious practices. The controversy surrounding public preaching demonstrates the difficulty of balancing religious expression with public order. Similarly, government action against traditional religious practitioners requires care because not every traditional religious practice is criminal or harmful.

The study therefore concludes that the major issue is not whether government should address criminality carried out in the name of religion. Government has a legitimate responsibility to protect life, property and public order. The major issue is how the sanitisation is carried out. The policy will be more acceptable and effective when it is based on clear laws, evidence, due process, equal treatment and respect for constitutional religious freedom. The study further concludes that religious sanitisation should not become a campaign against religion or Igbo culture. Rather, it should focus on specific harmful acts such as fraud, extortion, violence, criminality and excessive noise. Genuine Christian worship, African Traditional Religion and other lawful religious practices should receive equal protection. The balance between public safety, religious freedom and cultural identity is therefore central to the success of Governor Soludo's religious sanitisation policy.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government should clearly state what constitutes religious fraud, fake spiritual practice, criminal traditional practice, excessive religious noise and other offences. Clear definitions will reduce misunderstanding and prevent innocent religious practitioners from being wrongly targeted.
2. Christians, traditional religion practitioners and other religious groups should be treated according to the same legal standards. A person should be investigated because of a specific offence and not because of the religious group to which the person belongs.
3. The committee should include representatives of recognised Christian bodies, traditional religious practitioners, community leaders, legal practitioners, human rights experts, security agencies and relevant government ministries. The committee should advise government on religious regulation and help to resolve disputes before they become public conflicts.
4. The government should work with recognised Christian and traditional religious bodies to identify fraudulent practices and educate the public on how to recognise religious exploitation. This will make the campaign more cooperative and less confrontational.
5. Where the problem is excessive noise, enforcement should focus on the volume, time and location of the activity rather than stopping legitimate preaching. Clear guidelines should

be provided to churches, prayer groups and other religious organisations on acceptable sound levels and appropriate places for public preaching.

6. The government should distinguish between genuine Igbo cultural and religious practices and criminal activities. Traditional practices should not be prohibited merely because they are different from Christianity or other dominant religious traditions.
7. Persons accused of being fake pastors, fake native doctors or other religious offenders should be properly investigated and prosecuted according to the law. Government agencies should avoid declaring a person guilty before the courts have determined the case.

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