

## **Assessing the Role of Religion in Preventing Discrimination and Stigma, Like In Covid-19, To Promote Peace Stop Discrimination and Stigma with your Faith**

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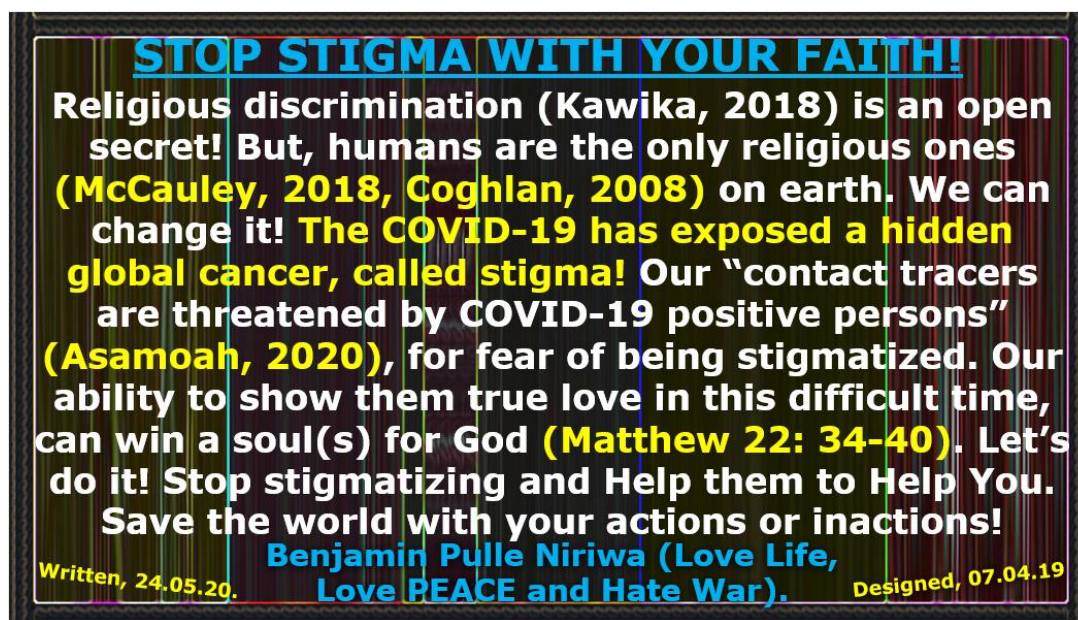
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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

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If it were not because of COVID-19 Pandemic, 24<sup>th</sup> May 2020, would have been one of the busiest days of the world. For Eid ul Fitr falling on Sunday, whilst our Muslim brothers and sisters would be busily praising Allah for a successful fast: Christians too would have been busy glorifying God in our various churches. Unfortunately, a tiny but powerful invisible enemy, “SARS-CoV-2” (Meyerowitz, 2020) is outside there waiting to infect anyone group of people who would not observe the COVID-19 Prevention Protocols: like maintaining physical distance, wearing the right face mask, washing of hands using clean running water or sanitizing them with 70% alcohol-based hand sanitizers (CDC, 2020; Niriwa, 2020).



**Figure 1: Religious Prevention of Discrimination and Stigma (Source: Authors’ designs and writing, 2019)**

This should tell us that instead of discriminating against and fighting ourselves, we should rather put our differences away, and fight the invisible enemy sitting on our PEACE. Infectious diseases like tuberculosis (Tellier *et al.*, 2019) and natural disasters like hurricanes (Tipson, 2013; Chan *et al.*, 2017) are increasing threats to human health and peace. Instead of focusing on our problems, human beings are rather fighting themselves, and our world is rather increasingly violent than before; especially domestic (Huecker & Smock, 2020), religious (Wibisono *et al.*, 2019; Glock & Stark, 1965), and political violence (Majumdar, 2020)! Amongst all these, “religious violence” is said to have been increasing (Muggah & Velshi, 2019) more; that is a very bad news for us as believers. This is because, increased violence mostly goes with increased discrimination and stigma (Mehta *et al.*, 2019; Torrey, 2011).

**WHO Definition of Violence:** The WHO, (2002) defines violence as: “The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either resulted in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Dahlberg & Krug, 2006). Violence is multidimensional like “Religious extremism” (Wibisono *et al.*, 2019). From, this definition, it means that, when you discriminate against and stigmatize COVID-19 positive persons, you are not only inflicting emotional pains in them; you are giving them psychological problem/violence.

**WHO Definition of Peace:** It is evolutionally defined by the WHO as a situation in which there is no war and “Structural violence” in our societies (WHO, 2020). But peace and health are interrelated, as can be seen in the WHO definition of health in 1948, as: “A state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2020; PHAST, 2020). The relationship between health and peace is even made clearer in Steinhauer, (2016) definition of peace as an environment full of positive wellbeing without conflict. Violence leads to diseases and infirmities that can let one lose their health and have no peaceful minds!

### **Increased Violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Democracy, amidst Infectious Diseases, Like COVID-19, Is a Proof of Discrimination or Stigma**

The WHO world report on violence and health for 2002, declared violence as a global public health problem (WHO, 2002; Dahlberg & Krug, 2006; Krug *et al.*, 2002). It is revealed by the WHO, (2002) and many writers that, violence is not only when people are attacking each other with weapons like guns or cutlasses, but anything that does not allow you to have peace (COE, 2017; Cohen, 2019). Politics and religion are identified as the first top two causes of violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century World as has always been the case since creation. Though the United Nations (UN) aims at reducing poverty, inequality and so on to promote inclusive societies and global peace in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN has admitted COVID-19 is make this a mirage (UN, 2020).

The violence and discriminations or stigmas associated with COVID-19 are identified as some of the reasons why these SDGs targets are limping. These open secrets of the world have become rampant in this particular pandemic; triggered by world’s politics due to violence against already “Marginalized groups” (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020; UN, 2020), rather promoting inequality, exclusiveness, poverty, and hunger. There are reports of some governments abusing or violating human rights and dignity in their strategies to prevent the pandemic (Jubilut & Cerna, 2020; HRW., 2020; UN a., 2021; Guterres, 2020) but are quick to attack any journalist or health worker that exposes them (HRW., 2020).

Reports from the UN indicate that violence is one of three main reasons why some nations are facing crisis (HRW., 2020; UN b., 2020), instead of focusing on how to prevent SARS-CoV-2 from further spreading, they are fighting. The UN in their report revealed the other two reasons as “Natural disasters, or climate change”, which are, themselves global problems favoring another global problem: “COVID-19 Pandemic” (Bagcchi, 2020).

We need to think of how to deal with these problems facing the world, instead discriminating against ourselves and fighting! If the world is dominated by Christians and Muslims (Hacket & Mclendon, 2017) who are the “Salts” and “Light” of the world, these happenings do not only expose discrimination and stigma as global problems but hypocrisy too, especially religious hypocrisy (and especially when people are silent about them, instead condemning the practices).

The WHO, (2002) gave some examples of violence, such as: emotional or psychological harassment, depriving/neglecting others (very common amongst stigmatized people), hindering others’ developing (sabotage), sexual harassment or starvation and so on. Some nations like Venezuela (Briceño-León, 2012) and Ghana (Bekoe, 2017; Awuni, 2020) which were peaceful are now less peaceful than before.

Venezuela, though was counted amongst the less violent nations of Latin America, is now amongst nations with alarming “Homicide rate” (Briceño-León, 2012; Knight & Tribin, 2020) and estimated deaths from violence as “16,506” for 2020 alone (OSAC, 2020; García & Aburto, 2019). Venezuela is a religious country

dominated by Christians for which most of them are even Catholics (Hernández, 2019), yet the country for the past years does not know peace as revealed by (Hernández & Zuñiga, 2019; Caraballo-Arias *et al.*, 2018).

In the midst of COVID-19, the 2020 general elections of Ghana, for example, right from the voters registration exercise is characterized by violence than previous (Apinga, 2020; Egyabeng a., 2020; News, 2021). Ghana, though a religious country dominated by Christians and Muslims has witnessed a serious political discrimination where some citizens were called foreigners in their own country (Dzila, 2020; Myjoyonline., 2020; Rasgambo1., 2020).

Religion and culture is also identified as one of the fundamental triggers of major global unrests on earth, especially in nations that are yet to develop (Stewart, 2002; Cohen, 2019; WHO, 2002). Religion and culture are like blood and water in our bodies, this is why religion/culture is always amongst the major causes of violence on earth (Stewart, 2002).

The Holy Quran starting the peace process by avoiding religious discrimination in the sentence: “There is no compulsion where the religion is concerned” (Quran., 2:256. 1924; GNN, 2015; Ashley, 2015), make it easy for believers to identify strange behaviors. Such behaviors are exposed as religious extremism used by some religious fundamentalists (Azarian, 2018; Weston, 2019) who see their religious opponents as their enemies – the root cause of religious violence! If we really understand this quote, there should be no religious violence (Wibisono *et al.*, 2019; Sule, 2015) or discrimination and stigma on this earth, like seen in the case HIV/AIDs (Reyes-Estrada *et al.*, 2018).

Some religious violence around the globe (Wibisono *et al.*, 2019; Basedau *et al.*, 2014), testified that religion is really amongst major causes of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century World’s unrest. Some political and tribal conflicts even appear in the form of religious identity (Majumdar, 2020; Wibisono *et al.*, 2019; Sule, 2015; Canetti *et al.*, 2010); where there are mostly some forms of political influences in every religious violence (Wibisono *et al.*, 2019). Sule, (2015) has named twenty-seven ethno-religious violence in Northern Nigeria alone which he even said are some of them. As the “light of the world”, we Christians and Muslims who are the majority on earth, must be very ashamed of this shameless revelation! We cannot be preaching peace and justice, and we are the same people causing problems on earth!

Glock & Stark, (1965), trying to explain the multiple associations of religious extremism, revealed that all religions on earth have five (5) major attributes that distinguish them from one another. These are; differences in religious ideologies (beliefs), intelligence (knowledge), ritualisms (sacrifices), “experiential (feelings or emotions)”, and implications (effects arising from religious differences). All these differences above are some of the reasons for the religious discrimination and stigma! My interest amongst these is the: “Experiential” difference. COVID-19 has re-affirmed a serious global problem called stigma, where COVID-19 infected persons are discriminated against and stigmatized (Logie & Turan, 2020; BBC., 2020; Starr, 2020). These behaviors result in unbearable emotional pains that they go through.

### What Are the Causes of Stigma and Discrimination?

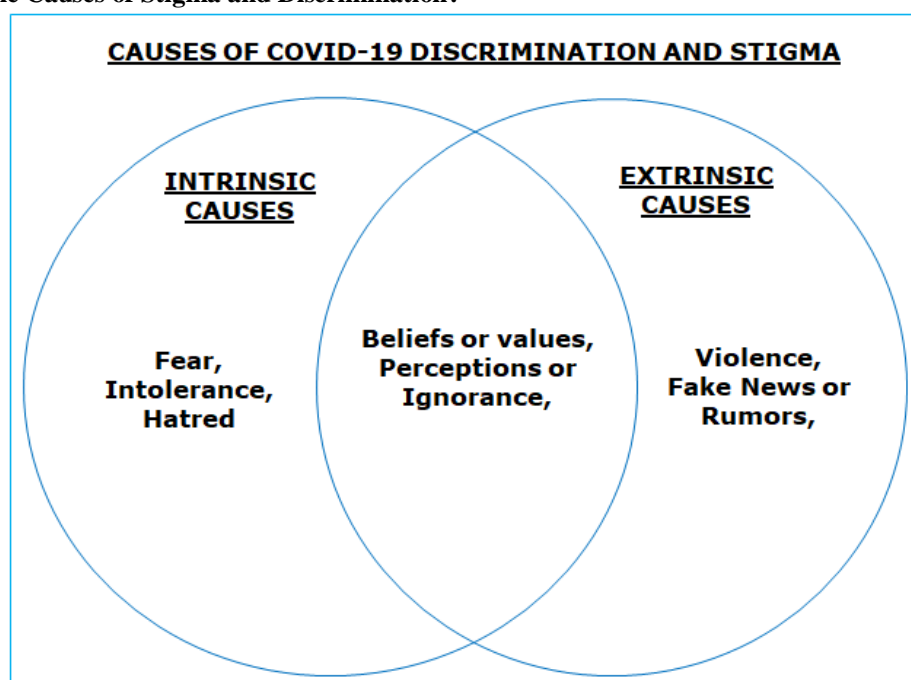


Figure 2: Causes of COVID-19 Discrimination and Stigma

Most Common Causes of Discrimination and stigma are; “Fear” (Person *et al.*, 2004), “Intolerance” (UN., 2011; Verkuyten *et al.*, 2020), “Violence” (Torrey, 2011), “Hatred” (Clement *et al.*, 2011), “Beliefs or Values” (PlanGhana, 2020) “Fake News or Rumors” (de la Espriella, 2020) and “Perception” (O’Reilly, 2019) or “Ignorance” (Thornicroft, 2007). These are grouped under two major causes – Intrinsic and Extrinsic Causes (Fig. 2.).

**The Intrinsic Causes of Discrimination and Stigma during the COVID-19 Pandemic:** They include fear, intolerance, hatred, beliefs or values, and perceptions or ignorance. These are the leading causes of discrimination and stigma in the COVID-19 Pandemic. Among these the fear of getting infected with COVID-19 (de la Espriella, 2020) is the first and leading causes of most of the COVID-19 associated discriminations and stigmas. Fear, example, is one of the major reasons why Venezuela is going through violence in the midst of COVID-19 Pandemic (Knight, 2020). It is also one of the reasons health workers and the COVID-19 infected or recovered persons are discriminated (Grover *et al.*, 2020) as revealed by (Demirtaş-Madran, 2020). The next one is the intolerances that exist between certain social groups like political parties, religious groups, race/tribe, and so on.

These intolerances that are already global cancers have been aggravated by the pandemic. Most of these intolerances arise from the perceptions (O’Reilly *et al.*, 2019; Demirtaş-Madran, 2020) and hatred (Clement *et al.*, 2011) that are attached to specific group of people like the mentally sick. Example the Chinese, especially at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic, were perceived as the people who are the cause (Demirtaş-Madran, 2020; de la Espriella, 2020). This perception has naturally generated some hatred against them amongst some people and this leads to targeted discrimination and stigma against them (Devakumar *et al.*, 2020; Demirtaş-Madran, 2020).

The origin of the COVID-19 discrimination and stigma against some religious groups is also based the already existing differences in beliefs or values. This believe or values difference and the religious extremist groups (Wibisono b *et al.*, 2019) which are mostly tagged/perceived as Muslims could be the reasons why Islam is the leading religious group in the COVID-19 Pandemic discrimination and stigma as seen in (Kayaoglu, 2020; Demirtaş-Madran, 2020).

Ignorance is an unintended form of stigma where the person inflicting the discriminatory or stigmatizing behavior(s) does not know that his or her actions are hurting another person (Thornicroft a. *et al.*, 2018; Thornicroft *et al.*, 2007). This same trend is seen in some of the COVID-19 discrimination and stigma cases too (de la Espriella, 2020). It is a behavior that is ignorantly targeted against a certain group because they perceive that group as potential transmitters of the virus, as seen in the case of frontline health workers (de la Espriella, 2020).

**The Extrinsic Causes of COVID-19 Discrimination and Stigma:** These are violence, beliefs or values, fake news or rumors and perceptions. Violence mostly arises based on the principle of division where people are divided and incited to hate each other (Posner *et al.*, 2009), as seen in most political violence using the politics of dividing to rule (Yahaya, 2020; Bethke, 2012; Posner *et al.*, 2009). These behaviors are referred to as extrinsic because the political environment determines how the citizens also behave. A political party that believes in the principle of “Divide-and-rule” (Yahaya, 2020; Bethke, 2012) mostly sees those who criticize them as their opponents. This is one of the reasons why some journalist and health workers are harassed by some governments in power during this COVID-19 pandemic.

Beliefs and values mostly practiced by individuals are introduced into them by their religious environments. This is what makes them extrinsic in nature too. But they cause discrimination and stigma is the same as found in the intrinsic causes above. The same applies to perceptions! The kind of environment that individuals live in and what goes on around them determines how they perceive other people too. This in turn determines how they behave towards others. Example, the COVID-19 Pandemic’s environment was strongly associated with the belief that Chinese are the ones who introduced the virus to the world (Demirtaş-Madran, 2020; de la Espriella, 2020). This environmental rumor introduced a perception that they are the cause of the world’s problem and that also explains why they were mostly targeted with discrimination and stigma.

Fake News or Rumors (de la Espriella, 2020) is another serious cause of discrimination and stigma in the COVID-19 Pandemic! Some men of God were spreading false rumors about the pandemic that have the capacity of creating false impression that those infected with the disease are sinners! Comments that COVID-19 is a punishment from God (Martin, 2020; Gordon, 2020) or a “Death angel” (Brown, 2020; Dossey, 2020) that God is using to wipe off sinners; does not only affect the compliance level of people, it also increases the level of stigma attached to it.

So, some of these causes like beliefs or values and perceptions can be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature based on whether the behaving with respect to his/her personal beliefs or values and perception; or it is based on the environment around him/her.

### Are there Evidence of Discrimination and Stigma, Especially in COVID-19?

Discrimination and stigma is a silent pandemic found even amongst family members (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2019; Korschorke *et al.*, 2017) like between children of the same parents or between parents and children. The same issue of stigma amongst family members is found in this current pandemic (Rizvi Jafree *et al.*, 2020; PlanGhana, 2020).

In some countries like Saudi Arabia (which should have been a shining example for the Islamic Nations), small children are thought to discriminate against non-Muslims (Ibrahim, 2019). In Ghana Christians and Muslims live as if we have the same belief; but in Iraq it is considered as “haram (forbidden)” if a Muslim wishes a Christian merry Christmas (Ibrahim, 2019). I am not a Muslim, but with the little that I have learnt about Islam, I know that Islam is as peaceful as Christianity. From this and the Ghanaian Christian-Muslim relationship, I have seen that our religions are not the problems. We human beings who are the only religious on earth (McCauley, 2018; Coghlan, 2008), are the ones tarnishing the images of our religions. If not, how can our Holy Books preach peace, yet some fundamentalists rejoice in killing in the name of God, as seen in the case of Nigeria (Geller, 2019)?

In (Matthew 7:12, KJV), Jesus says: “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets”. If you do not want others to maltreat your religious members, why subject others’ religious members to harsh treatments? Relating this verse to the Greatest Commandment (Matthew, 22: 34-40), such treatments are pure hatred, discrimination or stigma; and cannot be described as love. All religions believe that theirs is the best, and this has resulted in most of them referring to themselves as the selected lucky ones that God chose (Tarico, 2015). This has resulted in automatic discrimination/stigma in which members of the same religion or denomination are treated as special/superior than outsiders.

COVID-19 associated discrimination or stigma is a multifaceted problem exposed in the form of targeted discrimination or stigma against specific social groups (Abdelhafiz & Alorabi, 2020; Grover *et al.*, 2020; Dionne & Turkmen, 2020), like tribal/racial discrimination (Gennaro, 2020; Kayaoglu, 2020; Dodds *et al.*, 2020), discrimination and stigma against COVID-19 frontline healthcare workers and the recovered COVID-19 persons (Singh & Subedi, 2020; Mostafa *et al.*, 2020), political discrimination or stigma (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020; Dodds *et al.*, 2020; Flinders, 2020), religious discrimination or stigma (Kayaoglu, 2020), discrimination or stigma amongst students in academia (Li *et al.*, 2020), and so on.

So, the commonness discriminations and stigmas during COVID-19 are grouped into six (6) categories as COVID-19 Infected or Recovered Persons, Occupational or Professional Groups, Racial/tribal, Religious, Political, and Economic discriminations (Fig. 3.).

**Discrimination and Stigma against COVID-19 Infected or Recovered Persons:** The first groups to complaint about discrimination and stigma against are the COVID-19 Infected or Recovered Persons and their relatives.

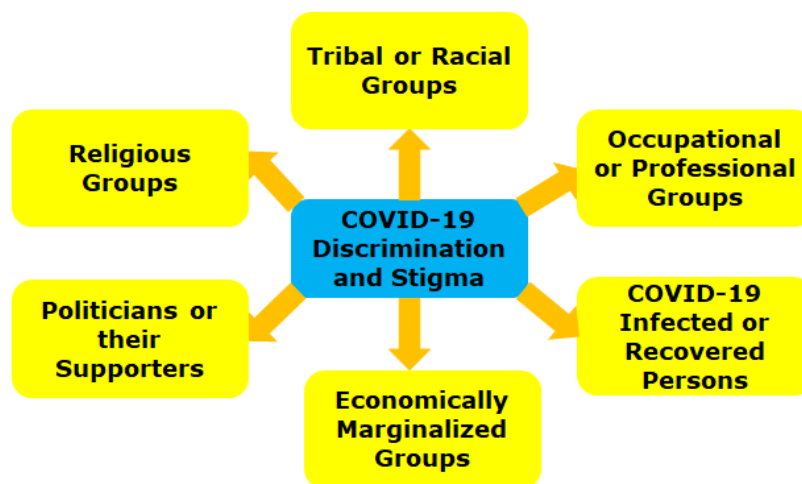


Figure 3: The Most Common Forms of COVID-19 Discrimination and Stigma

For fear of being exposed and stigmatized, some COVID-19 positive persons, especially the asymptomatic ones, are seeing those helping them (contact tracers) as their enemies and are threatening them (Asamoah, 2020; Ghanaweb, 2020). A Ghanaian pregnant mother who survived COVI-19 has bitterly complained of how her daughter was discriminated against, stigmatized and stoned by her community (BBC., 2020). A man likewise revealed how his brother discriminated against and stigmatized him because of COVID-19 (Starr, 2020).

**Occupational discrimination and Stigma:** Even before the emergence of COVID-19 Pandemic, Psychiatric Nurses were facing serious discrimination and stigma for their decision to help mentally sick patients to live dignified lives. In a similar way, the health professionals who are risking their lives to help curb this inevitable global cancer and persons who have recovered from COVID-19, have complained of being stigmatized and socially discriminated against (Singh, 2020). Amongst the various occupations, workers, or professionals, the COVID-19 Front line Health Workers are leading in the discrimination and stigma ladder (Grover, 2020; Singh, 2020).

**Tribal/racial discrimination and stigma:** It is leading in the COVID-19 Pandemic's social problems, with Chinese being mostly targeted (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020; Croucher *et al.*, 2020), especially, at the initial stages. Asian Americans, especially Chinese, were complaining of targeted "Increased incidents of racism, discrimination, and violence", especially in the United States (US) where targeted "Hate crimes" is reported to have risen to an alarming rate of 100 cases daily (Croucher, 2020). The Chinese themselves though Africans did not discriminate against them, were rather discriminating against and stigmatizing Africans' residents in China (GNA., 2020; Al-Jazeera., 2020; HRW a., 2020). Ghana is one of those African countries whose nationals the Chinese government discriminated against and unjustifiably deported them (Ansah, 2020; Citinewsroom., 2020).

This is pure discrimination as condemned by the Human Right Watch (HRW a., 2020); if these people are residents of China how can they be accused of importing COVID-19 to China?. They were deporting Africans, yet, were sending their medical doctors to the very continent that they tagged as the SARS-CoV-2 inhabited continent (Amazgist., 2020). These discriminative behaviors mostly lead to mistrust! Some Nigerians lose their trust in the Chinese doctors and were not happy because of the Chinese government unjustifiable forced eviction of Africans (Opera.com., 2020) that has already created some mistrust. This racial discrimination or stigma during this pandemic has been a problem world like the other as revealed this article (Bhanot, 2020).

**Religious Discrimination and Stigma:** Mostly this is used against minority religious groups, as seen in Nea Zealand where minority Muslims (Foroutan, 2017) are faced with targeted discrimination or stigma and general crimes (Greaves *et al.*, 2020; Foroutan, 2017). Apart from Nea Zealand, Muslims (though the second dominant religion) seem to face more COVID-19 discrimination and stigma than the other religions, as can be seen in articles like (Kayaoglu, 2020).

Economic discriminations and stigmas are directed towards already marginalized groups, making their situation(s) worse (UN, 2020; Dionne & Turkmen, 2020; Bhanot *et al.*, 2020).

You will not discriminate against or stigmatize your neighbor if you really love him/her and want peace! There are global evidences of people being targeted and discriminated against by being inflicted with violence; because of their identity or the social group that they belong to, as seen in (Dionne & Turkmen, 2020; Bhanot *et al.*, 2020). When there is no love in your heart and you value peace, you might be hurting others with your actions or inactions like stigma. But, stigma kills (Ruffell, 2017); and religious discrimination (Kawika, 2018) has been an open secret for years.

**Political discrimination and stigma:** This is mostly targeted at political opponents, as seen in Ghana's 2020 Voters' Registration (Egyabeng a., 2020; Apinga, 2020; Wemakor, 2020) and General Elections (Amoyaw, 2020; News, 2021). Unfortunately, those who lost their lives; especially at Techiman were all still falsely accused as criminals (Asaah, 2021; Nartey, 2021), but almost all of them were not crying any weapon except trying to protect their votes. It could be justifiable in a situation, like at one particular constituency, where a man is fired down for trying to seize a ballot box when counting of votes was going on (Amoyaw, 2020), describing the others as criminals is pure political discrimination.

The politicization of national issues like crimes in the country are all evidences of targeted political discrimination and stigma (Zoure, 2020; Essawa, 2020). Some governments in power (HRW., 2020) or their supporters (TIG, 2020) attacking or targeting some journalists or health workers who try to offer suggestions on identified weaknesses in their strategies to prevent spread of the pandemic, indirectly promotes targeted discrimination and stigma.

For example, Ghana's government did very well during the "Partial lockdown" (Tarlue, 2020) and beyond by providing free water to all citizens (Lamyoh, 2020). Unfortunately female journalist who exposed a possible setback of this good move made by the government; by telling them that her tap has not been following for over fourteen (14) days, was attacked and insulted (TIG, 2020).

### **Are There Instances Where the Practice of COVID-19 Prevention Protocols Could Be Mistaken as Discrimination or Stigma?**

Yes! Though discrimination and stigmatization during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Demirtaş-Madran, 2020) is something that cannot be denied; there are reports of closed persons, health workers in previous epidemic mistaking the maintenance of social distance as discrimination or stigma (Chekuri *et al.*, 2018). COVID-19 pandemic is a novel disease with multiple prevention strategies for which the ability to maintain a physical distance (Qian & Jiang, 2020) is encouraged by health experts or the (WHO., 2020).

This social environmental change is new to most people that require new behavioral change adaptation amongst all people (Kim *et al.*, 2020). People who are closely related to others or work in the same office think it is for them to still be interacting with each other without observing the COVID-19 Prevention Protocols like the wearing of face masks or maintaining a physical distance (Niriwa b., 2020). There are instances where people are seen and heard asking questions like: “Ah! Don’t you know me?”, because the person maintain a distance whilst to him or her. Questions like this means that once the person is a family member, friend, religious member, political member, school mate, co-worker and so on, he/she is not expected to maintain a distance. So, the one asking such a question would perceive that behavior of the person as discriminatory or stigmatizing; which is not true.

### **How Can Religion Stop Discrimination and Stigma, Especially in COVID-19?**

The Holy Books are not only there to help believers grow spiritually; they are very good for every aspects of our lives, like public health. For example, we wear face mask; because our mouths or noses are the main exit and entry points for most infectious agents, like SARS-CoV-2 (Li a. *et al.*, 2020; Tong, 2005). These pathogens can spread through infected air, aerosols/droplets (Morgenstern, 2020; Anderson, 2019; Leung *et al.*, 2020). Our two main Holy Books – The Bible and Quran warn us on how to use our tongues/mouths (Adams, 1996; Smith S. , 2020; Islam, 2017; Mashkat al-Anwar, 1995). COVID-19 pandemic is reminding us of most of them!

The more you use your mouth without face mask; the more the risk of infecting others if you are infected, or getting yourself infected with SARS-CoV-2 (Meinhardt *et al.*, 2021; Li a. *et al.*, 2020). Both of these Holy Books warned us against backbiting, mocking others, unnecessary questions avoid arguing unnecessary (Smith S. , 2020; Islam, 2017). Anyone who uses his/her mouth for any of the above, is encouraging discrimination and stigma, since backbiting or mocking all create negative perception(s) about others that make people not able to tolerate them (Verkuyten, 2020). Jesus himself started the inter-religious peace process using himself as symbol of peace and a unifier!

Both Holy Books preach and stand for LOVE and PEACE (Brink, 2016; Zaimov, 2015; Akhter & Qadoos, 2017; ALgul, 2017)! When the Pharisees’ lawyer tempted Jesus by asking him that which of the commandments is the greatest?, he replied: “... love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul<sup>37</sup>, ... Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself<sup>39</sup>” (Matthew, 22: 34-40KJV). To help us know who our neighbour is, Jesus gave a parable about a Good Samaritan using a man who was travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho and how he was help by a “supposed enemy” (Luke, 10:25-37KJV).

Some of these parables like the “Greatest Commandment” (Matthew, 22: 34-40), “Good Samaritan” (Luke, 10:25-37), “Rich fool” (Luke d. , 12: 14-20. KJV. 1611), and so on; are very powerful peace messages that advise all believers to be tolerant and be each other’s keepers. Love which is the greatest of all the Commandments is very important in stopping discrimination and stigma. The Good Samaritan was able to help the helplessly wounded man because of love (Luke 10:25-37): in that sense, he was not behaving like the foolish rich man who was only thinking about himself.

Selfish people mostly have the thought of “Me” (Luke d. , 12: 14-20. KJV. 1611), see others as competitors; so they try to sabotage them by lying against them that leads to others finding it difficult to tolerate them (Verkuyten, 2020). Once they cannot tolerate them based on whatever reason(s), then discrimination and stigma set in since they will not like to associate with them.

But the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew., 5-7. KJV. 1611; Pink, 2020), do not only teach believers to be humble but to accept, love, and tolerate others irrespective of our differences “Inter-group tolerance” (Verkuyeten *et al.*, 2019). Jesus in his own words makes his Sermon on the Mount clearer when he specifically encourages his followers to be peace makers so that they can be blessed<sup>9</sup>; and refers to believers as the “Salt”<sup>13</sup> and “Light”<sup>14-16</sup> of this universe (Matthew e. , 5: 9, 13-16. KJV. 1611).

When he says that, turn the other part when one slaps you<sup>29</sup> (Luke., 6: 29-31. KJV. 1611), he is not literally saying that believers should be bullied. He is referring to putting measures in place that would not lead to someone even thinking of slapping you; so in the verse 31, he adds: “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise”. No one likes to be beaten or be treated badly! So, this makes it clear, what he means by turning the other “Cheek”. The “Golden rule” (Chapman & Azumah, 2018; Corazzini *et al.*, 2005) is not only applicable to Christians, but Muslims and all believers or human beings around the globe (Editor., 2019); are encouraged to treat others as they would like to be treated the same way.

Like it or not, every human being has enemies and this makes it difficult for some to be tolerant or loving! So, Jesus added in (Matthew 5:44-47, KJV) that our ability to love our enemies is what differentiates us from the unbelievers. One who loves does not discriminate or stigmatize others! That is what proof that a believer is the “Salt” or “Light” of the world (Matthew e. , 5: 9, 13-16. KJV. 1611)! We are even asked to feed our enemies when we see them go hungry or beg for food from us (Proverbs, 25:21, KJV). Jesus uses himself as an example by praying for those who crucified him, though he was going through unbearable pains on the Holy

Cross of Calvary (Luke 23: 33-34, KJV). Anyone who does not love his/her neighbor does not love God, because He is love (1John, 4:8KJV).

In our preparation to prevent the COVID-19 Pandemic from spreading, we need the spiritual aspect of preparation too, which is mostly by fasting and prayers. To pray for someone to be peaceful or find peace in life is a prayer that is found in both Holy Books - Bible and Quran (Steinhauer, 2016), and we can only do this out of love. To prepare well before prayers, one of the behaviors that we must avoid as believers is discrimination and stigma. This will help us to make peace with our neighbors before we ask God or Allah to forgive us, listen to our prayers and answer them.

Jesus himself was always greeting his followers by saying: "Peace be unto you" (John, 20:19-21, KJV; Luke 24:36, KJV) and he said in (Matthew 5:9, KJV) that: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God". We cannot successfully prevent or curb this pandemic in the midst of violence, except peace! Allah (God) preaching about peace in the Noble Quran says: "O you who believe! Enter absolutely into peace (Islam). Do not follow in the footsteps of Satan. He is an outright enemy to you" (Quran d. , 2:208. 1924). There are hundred (100) Bible Verses on peace alone (Smith, 2020). Up to now, Roman Catholics greet each other by saying: "The Peace of Christ be with you".

The religious peace and tolerance process in the Holy Quran that discourages religious discrimination and stigma is the verse that encourages us to allow others to enjoy their faiths without any form of coercion (Quran., 2:256. 1924). This verse encourages religious inclusion and promotes inter-religious respect amongst believers (Nasir, 2016). Majority of Quran's Surah preach peaceful co-existence with others in kind-heartedness (Zubair, 2016).

It is said that Quran 56: 25-26 promises anyone who believes that: "Therein they will hear no abusive speech, nor any talk of sin, only the saying, "Peace, peace" (Steinhauer, 2016). The global head of Ahmadiyya Muslim Mission was lamenting why there is enmity amongst humans globally, saying that Islam is a religion of peace can help solve this (Rashed, 2013). It is natural that, once you see someone as an enemy or a threat to you, you would discriminate against and stigmatize that person. Meanwhile, just as the Holy Bible teaches that we should love our enemies (Matthew 5:44-47, KJV), so does the Holy Quran (Google.com, 2015).

The Holy Quran calls its ways "... The ways of peace" (Quran 5:16) by promoting reconciliation as the best (Quran 4:128), because God hates disturbance of peace (Quran 2:205). Despite these beautiful teachings, most of our members still coin their own ways of creating hatred both interfaith and within the same faiths; resulting in words such as "Unbelievers" and "Infidels" (Ashley, 2015). These words are discriminatory in nature, leading to automatic discrimination and stigma!

Forced conversion is something that all religions must avoid! As Pastor Mensah Otabil revealed; "Salvation is not religious, it is a spiritual issue" (Otabil, 2020). There is nothing wrong for one to believe that his/her religion is the best, but forcing people into the church or mosque is not a guarantee that they will go to Heaven. So, people are worshipping with us only for acceptance (Otabil, 2020), but they are even wicked than "unbelievers". Today, most criminals have found their way into our places of worship as revealed by most crimes like robbery arrests (Wealth, 2020; Jones, 2021; Harsono, 2020). Our ability to genuinely convert these people using the teachings of the Holy Books, applying the greatest commandment, the golden rule and also accepting that religion must not be compulsory can go a long way to help prevent discrimination and stigma (Fig. 1).

## **II. CONCLUSION:**

The stigma that characterized the COVID-19 Pandemic is telling believers, especially, Christians and Muslims who are the majority (Hacket & Mclendon, 2017) that something is missing in the practice of our religious teachings. The question that we all need to answer is: "Do we practice what we preach?" as revealed by (Felix, 2018; Hall *et al.*, 2010). There is a Beautifully Peaceful Relationship between Christians and Muslims in Ghana (Abdul-Hamid, 2011). This is a clear demonstration of love that puts a smile on God's face: all believers should emulate this and let us protect it. Through that we can stop discrimination or stigma and any form of evil. Our COVID-19 positive persons need this Love! Love them, Love All: Stop the Discrimination and Stigma! We are the majority on earth, once we don't support a certain evil behavior, it can never survive!

COVID-19 is no respecter of person(s) like a righteous or a sinner (Niriwa b., 2020), just comply! As you discriminate against others who are infected, you never know when it will be your turn. You will definitely not like it if you are discriminated against and being stigmatized like you did! When Cain killed his brother Abel, God demanded Abel's blood from his hands (Genesis, 4:1-15, KJV). If because of discrimination and stigma others are not willing to comply, and others lose their lives, God will request for their blood from your hands. So, the quick reaction by Christian leaders that COVID-19 is not a disease of sinners was an excellent move in the right direction (Dennis, 2020).



### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The general public must be educated to know the differences between observing COVID-19 Prevention Protocols to help them to be able to identify behaviors that are really discriminatory or stigmatizing in nature from them.
- As we preach peace, we must find a way of protecting or promoting it through interfaith or religious dialogue.
- Uses of words like “Infidels” or “Unbelievers” are discriminatory and should be stopped. Once we believe it is justifiable to harm others because they are infidels or unbelievers, religious violence or stigma will never end.
- Just like no single human being is powerful, no single religion on earth is powerful. All religions should come together to fight against religious intolerance, discrimination/stigma.
- The cry of discrimination and stigma by COVID-19 positive persons, is a revelation that we are not showing love to those who need it most. All religions should compete in doing good or showing love to the less privilege and neglected in society.
- We are the lights and the salts of the world. If there is no peace on earth, we must bow our heads in shame, because we are the majority. We must all stand up for peace!
- We cannot worship our God in a violent environment as revealed by COVID-19. The examples shown by some religious leaders by donating to support the less privileged during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown or curfew, is worth emulating.
- Comments that God is using COVID-19 to destroy sinners create discrimination or stigma and must be avoided in our various religious activities.
- The best way of defending ones faith is not how well you have been able to create division amongst believers. You should be kind toward others, irrespective of their faith or class.

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