

Conceptions of the COVID-19 Pandemic among Religious Leaders in Nigeria: Implications for Responses and Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the concomitant relationship between the different conceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic among religious leaders in Nigeria and its implications for their various response and coping mechanisms. The study used secondary sources such as newspapers and magazines, scholarly texts, journal articles, and the internet for content analysis and conclusion. It argues that responses to COVID-19 safety rules, lockdowns and coping measures among the religious organisations, denominations and sects in Nigeria were outcomes of their conceptions or misconceptions about the disease. It was observed that while some religious leaders and followers alike dismissed COVID-19 as a farce resulting from conspiracy theories of diseases, others accepted the existence of the pandemic. The study contends that while denial of the disease led to resistance and opposition to the directives issued by the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) to curb the spread of the disease in the country, belief in the reality of the disease and its manifestation as an act of God resulted in a positive response to the directives passed to mitigate the pandemic. The study concludes that several religious leaders would not have devised credible coping mechanisms in the church services without the government's enforcement of the lockdown.

Keywords

COVID-19, implications, lockdown, Nigeria, religious leaders

Introduction

In Nigeria, widespread conventional religious practices range from regular attendance of churches and mosques to personal devotions of reading the Bible and the Koran. Additionally, there are traditional religious worshippers. In Nigeria, the two major religious groups—Christians and Muslims—usually observe their holy week of Easter and Ramadan in a large gathering of processions by worshippers in churches and mosques, respectively.

However, for the first time in the country's history, a total lockdown occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which also affected places of worship. The federal government issued a sit-at-home order from March 30, 2020, in some states of the nation, such as Lagos, Ogun State and Abuja, to contain the spread of the disease to the states and other parts of the country. Some state governors followed suit in imposing the same restrictions in their states. The restriction order of two weeks was further extended by another two weeks and furthered into months where all social gatherings and parades in churches, mosques, weddings and funerals were banned (Campbell, 2020).

However, while the Muslim and Christian authorities, as represented by the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), supported the lockdown and social restriction measures as ordered by the government, some minor groups and religious adherents who conceived the COVID-19 pandemic as a farce showed initial rejection and disdain toward the order given by the government. The government, which did not find such disobedience funny, ordered such leaders' immediate arrest and prosecution. (Campbell, 2020). In some extreme cases, the government ordered the closure of such churches and mosques, which served as a lesson for others.

However, as the number of Coronavirus cases started rising and the government bent on enforcing its restriction orders, even those who initially did not believe in the existence and severity of the pandemic were compelled to observe the safety measures. There have been hardships across all sections of the country, and the government could not cushion the effects of such difficulties. So, citizens devised coping mechanisms of survival despite their long-held conspiracy theories. To this end, this study examined the conspiracy theories of the coronavirus pandemic, the conceptions of Nigerian religious leaders about the COVID-19 and the various responses and coping mechanisms developed by both religious leaders and their followers.

Conspiracy theories on the Coronavirus pandemic

A conspiracy theory is couched on the belief that powerful forces secretly manipulate certain events or situations with harmful intents. Conspiracy theories on the Coronavirus ignore scientific evidence and falsely blames individuals and groups. According to the European Commission (2020), conspiracy theories have six features, which include an alleged secret plot; a group of conspirators; a false suggestion that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; claiming that nothing is as it appears and that everything is connected; dividing the world into good or bad; and scapegoating people and groups. According to Ellis (2020),

Conspiracy theories have dogged disasters and outbreaks of illness probably forever. While the Black Plague ravaged Europe in the 1300s, people became convinced that their Jewish neighbours were furtively poisoning good Christian wells for reasons. Conspiracy theories about the Wuhan coronavirus, which range from believing the disease is a bio-weapon to the result of eating bat soup, are playing an ancient chord. As always, it sounds anxious, racist, and distinctly out of tune with reality.

Though conspiracy theories have a long history of emergence, the actual term “conspiracy theory” emerged much more recently. It was only a few decades ago that the term took on derogatory connotations. A version of its origin claims that the CIA invented the term in 1967 to disqualify those who questioned the official version of John F. Kennedy’s assassination and doubted that his killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, had acted alone (**theconversation.com, 2020**).

The more extreme version claims that the CIA invented the term because “conspiracy” and “theory” had never been combined before. A more moderate version acknowledges that the term existed previously but claims that the CIA intentionally created its negative connotations and turned the label into a tool of political propaganda (**theconversation.com, 2020**). The more moderate version has been popular in recent years for two reasons. Firstly, it is easy to disprove the more extreme claim that the CIA invented the term. As the contention on the origin of conspiracy theory rages on, there is a generally held belief that “conspiracy theory” emerged around 1870 and became more frequently used during the 1950s. Even die-hard conspiracy theorists have a hard time trying to ignore this. Secondly, the more moderate version received a significant boost in popularity a few years ago when the American political scientist, Lance DeHaven-Smith, propagated it in [a book published](#) by a renowned university press. However, despite the differing claims by the two versions about the origin and development of the term, the proponents of both versions invariably point to an official CIA document called “[Concerning Criticism of the Warren Report](#) (<http://www.jklancen.com/CIA.html>, 2020) as their smoking gun. It was released in 1976 after The New York Times requested it under the Freedom of Information Act.

Theconversation.com (2020) reported that the document named above expresses concern about the considerable number of people who doubted the official investigation into Kennedy’s assassination by the Warren Commission, which found that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. It also aims to equip CIA contacts with arguments against those who challenge the findings and the official version of the event. For example, it emphasises that nobody in their right mind would have chosen someone as unstable as Oswald as a pawn in a larger plot. And it further points out the “logical fallacies of these alternative accounts” (warp.povusers.org, 2020).

Conspiracy theories flourish because they often appear as a logical explanation of events or situations which are difficult to understand. Such views usually start by raising a suspicion and a puzzle that require an answer to such questions as *who is benefiting from the event or situation, or more so, who is behind the making of such claims*. Any ‘evidence’ is then forced to fit into the theory (European Commission, 2020).

People spread conspiracy theories to achieve a particular motive. They move most people to believe they are authentic, while others deliberately want to provoke, manipulate or target people for political or financial reasons through such mechanisms and sources. Thus, they may explore social and mass media as veritable instruments to manipulate the psychology of their followers. Conspiracy theories often target or discriminate against an entire group perceived as the enemy behind a real or imagined threat. They polarise society and fuel violent extremism. While most people who spread conspiracy theories genuinely believe in them, others deploy them cynically to achieve these effects.

Perceived “out-groups” of society are especially prone to be targets of conspiracy theories, hate speech and disinformation campaigns. These include people of different origin, religions or sexual orientations. In the context of COVID-19, specific groups were frequently falsely blamed for spreading the virus in Europe. These include people of assumed Asian origin, Jews, Muslims, etc. Once they have taken root, conspiracy theories can proliferate. They are hard to refute because anyone who tries doing that is part of the conspiracy (European commission, 2020).

Conspiracy theories could have damaging effects in the following ways:

- **They identify an enemy and a secret plot that threatens peoples’ lives or beliefs and spark a defence mechanism** that can fuel discrimination, justify hate crimes, and exploit violent extremist groups.
- **They spread mistrust in public institutions**, which can lead to political apathy or radicalisation.
- **They spread mistrust in scientific and medical information**, which can have serious consequences.

Conspiracy theories and the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 is a new disease caused by the most recently discovered Coronavirus. Uncertainty, fear and complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic have fuelled related conspiracy theories. They attempt to ‘explain’ why the pandemic happened and who is benefiting from it. A global study of 28 countries revealed that more than 3 in 10 people surveyed believe that a foreign power or another force is deliberately causing the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Gallup International, 2020).

Misconceptions spread by proponents of conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic include claims that:

- The virus was artificially created (e.g. in a laboratory) by people with a specific interest (e.g. reducing world population).
- The virus was spread intentionally through 5G signals.
- Vaccines and cures are intentionally withheld to cause further spread and harm to people.
- Specific sanitary measures to counter the spread of the virus are used to intentionally harm or control society (e.g. vaccines, masks).

Misinformation about a new, deadly coronavirus has gone viral. Conspiracy theories and wild claims have been spreading across the global internet since Chinese officials first announced, on December 31 2019, that mysterious pneumonia was sweeping through the city of Wuhan. Ellis (2020), corroborating the views of the European Commission, stated that falsehoods about Coronavirus fall into two major categories - conspiracy theories about the origins of the illness and misinformation about miracle cures. Some scientists believe the animal vector may have been bats. One theory claims it came from bat soup, thus sparking racially tinged online outrage about supposed Chinese eating habits causing the pandemic. One of the most prominent pieces of video evidence was a segment from a travel show shot in 2016 in Palau. It is important to note that bat soup is not typical food in Palau, yet it was presented as such. Ellis further informed that another theory about the virus was people's expressed view that it was a bio-weapon that somehow escaped its secure place in the lab at Wuhan Institute of Virology. Contrarily, however, Ellis cited a former Israeli intelligence officer who himself admits that there is no evidence to back such a theory. Then again, another theory has it that a scientist husband and wife "spy team" stole the Coronavirus from Canada's National Microbiology Laboratory. A virologist was suspended following a "policy breach," but the report theorists reference makes no mention of her being a Chinese spy or ever illicitly sending a virus to China. Many felt that the virus was somehow a cover-up or a plot. Such persons claim that the disease was not new on the planet based on various alleged proofs. Despite a vaccine patent for a coronavirus, labels on cleaning products like Clorox and Lysol claiming to be able to kill it are still disbelieved. The one spreading across the globe now is called 2019-nCoV, and unfortunately, it cannot be treated with any known vaccine or Lysol.

The conspiracy theory did not escape Nigeria and its citizens. Driving the conspiracy theory home to our topic of discussion, some notable Nigerian religious leaders imbibed and propagated conspiracy theories on their pulpit, religious gatherings and through the internet. Nigeria is a highly religious country, and it is widely reported that many citizens trust Muslim and Christian clerics or other religious leaders more than they do the government (Adepoju, 2020). Adepoju (2020), using the public pronouncement made by Pastor Chris Oyakilome of Christ Embassy, for example, informed that:

There was a huge social media buzz when Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the charismatic leader of Nigeria's major Pentecostal churches, endorsed a theory connecting COVID-19 to 5G. It was evident in the aftermath that the local truth ecosystem was caught off guard and fumbled its way to respond. It emphasised the importance of spiritual leaders influence when it comes to public health information.

Thus, considering the large segment of the population that some of these religious leaders attract and the level of attachment and reverence their followers have for them, most of these adherents

believed the conspiracy theories and disseminated them to their trusted friends and relatives. Such unsuspecting friends and relatives, in turn, spread the same to others, thereby worsening the spread. This led to some of the misconceptions, scepticisms and superstitions created around the coronavirus disease in Nigeria. Besides the above, some of the COVID-19 protocol breaches and non-adherence to the safety measures proffered against the disease during the lockdown arose from these conspiracy theories. For instance, Sheikh Sani Yahaya, through several sermons and press conferences, dismissed Coronavirus as a “farce - a ghost of the West maliciously created by some secret Western agents to prevent Muslims from performing their religious obligations such as pilgrimage, congregational prayers, preaching and handshakes” (Yahaya, cited in Ibrahim, 2020). Yahaya’s positing found positive punctuation in the religious undertone advanced by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome in theorising that COVID-19 and the 5G technology are products of a satanic secret agent, the Illuminati, to transform humankind into a hybrid of mechanical devices and pawns in the willing hands of Satan. This misconception of the realities of COVID-19 warranted Pastor Chris to vehemently kick against the lockdown directives by the federal government of Nigeria, whom he alleged were exploring the period to install the 5G antennas and their accessories secretly. The effect of such a stance by these religious leaders was a de-marketing of the health and safety tips for preventing the spread of the virus in Nigeria. Thus, it was difficult for many citizens to accept the virus’ existence or the government’s genuine intention regarding the lockdown. Worst still was, and still is, the acceptance of the authenticity of the figures of infected persons as are reeled out from Disease Control Centres and their claim of those who died from it. That Nigerians have long learnt to distrust their leaders, undoubtedly contributing to their resolve to anchor their trust in their religious leaders. This has not helped in any way in curbing the spread of the disease.

Conceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic among religious leaders in Nigeria

While most religious leaders and organisations did not downplay the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic, a handful of them promoted the conspiracy theories. Below are some of the negative conceptions of the pessimists and positivists on the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdowns:

Conspiracy conception

Notable among the pessimists who share the conspiracy theories of the COVID-19 pandemic were Sheikh Sani Yahaya (leader of the Islamic Reform Movement, Izala, and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (founder and leader of Christ Embassy. Interestingly, both Izala and Christ Embassy have millions of followers across Nigeria and Africa.

In several sermons and press conferences, Sheikh Sani Yahaya dismissed Coronavirus as a “farce, maliciously created by some secret Western agents to prevent Muslims from performing their religious obligations such as pilgrimage, congregational prayers preaching and handshakes” (Yahaya cited in Ibrahim, 2020). Yahaya was quoted to have described COVID-19 as “a ghost of the West” - an illusion of Western origin. He stated that the virus was foretold in a 1981 novel titled

“The Eyes of Darkness” written by Dean R. Koontz. Yahaya and some of his followers further pointed to several dystopian movies featuring global pandemics, such as “Outbreaks” (1995), “I am Legend” (2007), and “Contagion” (2011), to corroborate their claim that COVID-19 was a premeditated conspiracy (Ibrahim, 2020).

That Pastor Chris Oyakhilome linked COVID-19 emergence to the 5G technology is legendary. He fed his congregation with the idea that the disease was a mastermind of mainstream media corporations and some devilish scientists who were, and still are, bent on instigating a new world order” through the 5G technology. In fact, he pointed at Bill Gates and the Asian Tiger for being behind that “devilish” resolve. Amidst this growing attempt associating the 5G technology with the world government, Pastor Chris added religious colouration to this theory. Thus, in one of his online sermons on April 8, 2020, Pastor Chris made reference to Bible prophecies to psychologise his followers into believing that both Coronavirus and 5G technologies were consciously devised anti-Christ mechanisms employed by satanic secret agents to lure men into hell and deny them the hope of everlasting life. According to him, these satanic agents will soon introduce a COVID-19 vaccine, a serum filled with nano-microchips introduced into the human body. These microchips, controlled via 5G technology, are mere designs to read and influence human thought while undermining human free will. He thus alleged that it was primarily intended to coerce people to worship Satan instead of God. For him, therefore, the lockdown of cities across the nation by the Federal Government of Nigeria was a secret plot to facilitate the installation of a 5G technology that would ensure that motive. He contended that the microchips meant to be injected into the human bodies are the much prophesied “mark of the beast” as foretold in the Bible Book of Revelation. To drive home his point, Pastor Oyakhilome corroborated the earlier view of Yahaya, which subscribed to drawing inference from the dystopian Hollywood film “Divergent” (2014) that deals with the theme of mind control through a serum infused into the human body (Oyakhilome, cited in Ibrahim, 2020).

Nigerians are very religious and superstitious people. The conspiracy theories arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, no doubt, further entrenched their religiosity and superstitiousness. Thus, even those who seem to believe a little of the reality of COVID-19 anchor their belief of solution to the disease on divine interventions. That Nigerians violated the lockdown and restriction orders by attending churches and mosques and other social gatherings resulted from the above. Thus, rather than adopt the scientific and social measures proffered by the government for the prevention and control of the disease, Nigerians prefer the use of religious “armours” such as anointing oils, holy waters, chaplets, talismans, herbs or rituals (Abati, 2020) as preventive measures. Beyond face to face conviction, some grossly resorted to using social media platforms (e.g. WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) to entrench their gospel, thus spreading among the people.

The economic effect of the pandemic was indeed colossal. Most religious leaders cashed in on the cold war between China and America to project fake news concerning the source of the virus. Such leaders promoted prejudice against China by inciting panic-buying, accusing China of proffering fake vaccines, and they, therefore, encouraged their followers to deliberately or ignorantly undermine medical advice (Hassan, 2020). They, thus, opined that lockdown, self-isolation and

social distancing were un-African solutions to the pandemic (Abati, 2020).

The “Act of God” theory

This conception arose in a swift criticism of the conspiracy theories. Pastor Mathew Ashimolowo and Dr Mansur Sokoto represented the theorists in this regard. Debunking the views of Oyakhilome and Yahaya, they attributed the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic to divine act. For Pastors Mathew and Mansur, COVID-19 emerged as a result of God’s anger against humankind. Though the duo did not reject modern biomedicine as a remedy in tackling the virus, they ultimately proffer prayers as the primary panacea for its eradication (Ibrahim, 2020).

The result of acceptance of the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic as a disease that requires safety measures has so far made Nigerians exhibit a high degree of compliance with the government directives, engaging in vigilant hand washing, practising social distancing and self-isolation, and avoiding going to work, school or crowded areas. Even most religious leaders agreed to stop large gatherings, forbade the shaking of hands and directed church members to pray at home and use hand sanitisers (Makinde, Nwogu, Ajaja & Alagbe, 2020; Olatunji, 2020).

Response from religious leaders

No doubt, as the adverse effects of COVID-19 in Europe, America and Asia continue to filter the country, it dawned on religious leaders the need to have their followers come to the realities of the facts of the disease. As soon as the Federal Government, via the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 and the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), issued guidelines for safety and prevention of the spread of the disease, the umbrella body of Christians in Nigeria, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), responded positively by directing churches in the country to conduct services online or use house cell-based service. The CAN President pointed out to members of the body the imperative of adhering to the guideline by the government of not more than 50 congregants in a single service. He equally admonished member churches to start conducting online services to help curtail gatherings and keep them abreast of their spirituality. Again, the CAN President criticised affiliating church leaders who did not have online facilities to split their services into shifts to accommodate the spiritual wellness of members. Secondly, CAN called on all churches in the country to pray on the 22nd and 29th of March for an end to the pandemic in Nigeria and all over the world; for the protection of Nigerians from the disease, and for healing of those already infected by the disease (Premium Times, 2020).

Subsequently, the Catholic Bishops Conference volunteered all 425 hospitals and clinics nationwide for conversion and use as isolation centres. Hence state governors were encouraged to approach Catholic Bishops in their states to access these facilities (La Croix International, 2020).

Further directives included each branch or church providing alcohol-based hand sanitisers, regular handwashing with soap and water; maintaining at least one-metre distance from each other and anyone coughing or sneezing; avoiding the touching of eyes, nose and mouth; drinking of

hot water regularly; practicing respiratory hygiene such as covering mouth and nose with elbows or tissues when coughing or sneezing; disposing of tissues immediately after use; and seeking early medical care if one had a fever, cough and difficulty in breathing (Premium Times, 2020).

As posited earlier in this work, apart from some recalcitrant religious leaders who saw the COVID-19 pandemic as a farce, most churches and mosques believed in the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. It could thus be opined that religious leaders' negative attitude to the facts of the pandemic is a result of the distrust citizens have for the government and an ingrained psychological make-up of the Nigerian citizenry who see religious bodies as their last hope for both physical and metaphysical restorations. The churches responded by first subscribing to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic is an act of God aimed at chastising a sinful man to bring him back to his creator and hinge on these long-ingrained psychotics.

But again, change of attitude by citizens could be seen when the churches and mosques and their leaders began to tow the line of government. The turn of event was that the shift in mindset by religious leaders to observing government directives resulted in the majority of citizens not only adhering to and supporting the government's directives for closure of churches and mosques but going further to use these churches and mosques as veritable avenues to engage in mass awareness campaigns for information dissemination on measures, guidelines and protocols for prevention of the spread of the disease. No doubt, the lockdown imposed hardship on the citizens. But again, government and donor agencies used the churches and religious bodies as distribution centres for palliatives. Besides, some of these religious bodies, like the Deeper Life Church, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and the Catholic Church, assisted the government by donating palliatives in kind and cash (Wadibia, 2020).

Wadibia (2020), in his analysis of the response of the church to COVID-19, showed how Nigeria's Pentecostal pastors leveraged the pulpit to voice concerns relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to him,

Nigeria's Pentecostal leadership responses range from archconservative strands of socio-theological thought that highlight the perceived decay of global human ethics as the chief trigger underpinning the spread of COVID-19 to politico-theological arguments that posit that the best way to overcome the COVID-19 crisis involves adhering to the recently imposed social and public health policies of the Nigerian federal government. These arguments call for social distancing, a ban on crowds of more than fifty people, a cessation of movement in some of Nigeria's major urban centres (i.e. Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun State) and an emphasis on personal agency through renewed individual commitments to high personal hygiene standards (i.e. hand washing, the use of sanitisers, etc.).

An example of the positive response of church leaders, particularly of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, is that of Pastor E.A. Adeboye, who serves as the head pastor of the Redeemed Christian

Church of God (RCCG). In a recent online church broadcast, Adeboye argued that the spread of the pandemic is God's way of demonstrating his sovereignty over all human affairs; the pandemic's growing number of casualties from all walks of life, implies that no one, irrespective of one's socio-economic standing in society, is safe from the virus's potentially fatal grasp. Adeboye's "rhetoric about COVID-19 provides an important illustration of how Pentecostal theology and Christian eschatology inform how Nigerian Pentecostals understand the pandemic's global imposition" (Wadibia, 2020). Adeboye draws attention to the notion that no one is safe from contracting the virus regardless of social position. In Nigeria, a country rife with psychologically ingrained ecosystems of socio-cultural hierarchies, Adeboye's argument underscores the helplessness that all Nigerians face when dealing with an enemy like COVID-19. Citing the biblical story of Job, Adeboye articulates a view that God allows some editions of evil to persist, as opposed to the view that all evil originates from Satan, to usher individuals and societies into a novel understanding of his providential sovereignty. Ultimately, Adeboye concludes by asserting that true Christians are safe from the clutches of COVID-19. In quoting Psalm 91, which directly correlates identifying as a Christian benefitting from God's protection, Adeboye situates his understanding of the pandemic's spread on a playing field that straddles between the material and ethereal realms (Wadibia, 2020).

Similarly, Pastor Tunde Bakare, head of the Latter Rain Assembly Church, rebuked religious leaders calling for a reopening of prayer houses, especially in the case of organisations with extensive facilities. In his own words, Bakare stated that "instead of criticising the government, they should collaborate with them; they must be prepared to offer some of their halls for the government to use as isolation centres" (Olukoya and Mohammed, 2020)

Most Muslims also accepted the lockdown as part of the safety and control measures of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. A typical example of such Muslims includes journalist Baballe Mukhtari, who agrees with the confinement rules, even if they have deeply affected their lives. Mukhtari expressed his happiness for being with his family due to the lockdown, to which he alluded to his health and family safety. He said that even though he did not go to the mosque, he enjoyed prayers at home, at least for the moment of the pandemic (Olukoya and Mohammed, 2020).

On the flip side of the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria are some clerics who dismissed the existence of the disease with a wave of a hand. Onapajo and Adebisi (2020) have given a critical insight into some of the vituperations of some church leaders against lockdown. The authors reported Nigerians as renowned for their religiosity. They thus corroborated a "2018 Global Attitudes Survey by the Pew Research Center", which estimated that 65% of the Nigerian population specified that religion plays a focal role in their country, with 96% pinpointing religion as the essential factor in their lives. Onapajo and Adebisi (2020) reiterated that this religious disposition of Nigerians explains why, when COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, many Nigerians responded in religious parlance of exclamations such as, 'it is not my portion!' or that they are immune to COVID-19 because they are 'Children of God'—views, no doubt, inspired by the repudiation of Coronavirus by some Nigerian religious leaders.

The above authors cited three typical examples of the pessimists or rebuttal perspective that portrays COVID-19 as a hoax. The authors reported a widely circulated video of a church service

in Abia State, where Pastor Innocent Kingsley, the General Overseer of Bible-Believing Mission, dismissed the existence of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Assuredly, he proclaimed:

‘That thing cannot survive in Nigeria. What do you mean by Coronavirus when there is corrosive anointing? It can’t survive here. I don’t know about other places. There is no Coronavirus here. Coronavirus does not exist in Nigeria.’ To many ovations from his church members, he added, ‘how can it survive here, Coronavirus against corrosive anointing? It can’t survive here. It is not possible. It doesn’t exist in Nigeria. I am being very sincere with you; it is not in Nigeria. Coronavirus hasn’t entered Nigeria yet’ (Onapajo and Adebisi, 2020).

The authors further reported:

In another viral video, Prophet Dr David Kingleo Elijah, the General Overseer of Mount of Possibility Church, Ojo, Lagos, also proclaimed to his congregation that he would travel to China to use his spiritual healing prowess to ‘prophetically destroy Coronavirus’. Pompously, he declared, ‘where there is a prophet, people will not die. I am a prophet. I cannot be a prophet, I am in this world, and China is dying. It is not possible.’ Two ‘medical professionals’ also shared a testimony confirming the ability of Pastor David Ibiyeomie (of Salvation Ministries) to prevent the Coronavirus from infesting whoever seeks his healing powers. The testifying duo claimed to be the first medical personnel to contact a patient of COVID-19 in Nigeria. They stated that the prayers and Holy Communion ministered by Pastor Ibiyeomie during their isolation time saved them from being infected by the deadly virus (Onapajo and Adebisi, 2020).

A report was also made of a similar reaction by Bishop Oyedepo (following the Ebola outbreak in August 2014), where he proclaimed to his congregation: ‘Ebola knows it cannot come near where I stay. Can Ebola access Jesus? Science is eternally inferior to scriptures, and every man is a victim of his fear.’ He concluded that Ebola ‘is not a parasite; it is an attack of the devil. By the blood of Jesus, Africa is delivered from Ebola.’

Reacting to the government’s directive shutting down all religious and worship centres, Bishop Oyedepo averred:

Shutting down churches would be like shutting down hospitals. There are churches today where you sit down, and you are healed. Many are around the world. A family of four ravaged by tuberculosis sat down in this church. They carried them here. Family members have left them alone. And for 30 minutes, the husband looked at the wife, and the wife looked at the husband and said, “This cough fears God.” It ended there. The four were healed at the same time. That means that the sickness is pure oppression of the devil, which no hospitals have an answer to. Many, many illnesses would have no medical solution but prayers in church’ (Onapajo and Adebisi, 2020)

Muslims, on the other hand, also responded to the closure of religious centres. While the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) urged Muslims to comply with the ban on congregational prayers, some Muslim leaders continued to share misinformation that Muslims are “immune” to contagious disease. A typical example of negative response from Muslim clerics was the reaction of an Islamic scholar, Abubakr Imam Ali-agan, who on March 18, 2020, warned President Muhammadu Buhari’s government, the Sultanate Council and Muslim authorities not to shut down mosques in Nigeria, claiming that Muslims “have already been endowed with natural immunity to the virus” (Lichtenstein, Ajayi and Egbunike, 2020).

The ban on religious gatherings drew the ire of some mosque leaders who are among the vocal minority that rejected the coronavirus lockdown. As reported by Aliyu Tilde, “People have a strong attachment to religion.” Muslims felt threatened by perceived attempts by secular powers to regulate their religion, and some even assume the lockdown to be a conspiracy to prevent Muslims from praying and worshipping. Some who reacted angrily to government lockdown directives were from hard-hit regions, such as Kano – a predominantly Muslim city in the country’s north. Thus, to press down their directives and ensure compliance, pockets of resistance led to the suspension of several Imams for violating state-imposed measures to slow down the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria (Olukoya and Mohammed, 2020).

The impact of perceptions and responses of religious groups on the National COVID-19 Response Strategy

As observed earlier in the study, there are two sides to the conceptions on COVID-19 among religious leaders in Nigeria. These conceptions inadvertently impacted the national COVID-19 strategy differently. This is quite critical because Nigeria is a country where it is estimated that there are 41 million non-literate adults and a limited number of people with access to the internet (estimated at 92 million only). In such a country, religious leaders account for a crucial source of information dissemination even as there are more places of worship than schools. Coupled with the citizens’ lack of trust in the political class, people are more inclined to listen to and believe the views of their religious leaders as very essential to them. (Ayeni, 2020).

In essence, whatever is the opinion of the religious leaders concerning Coronavirus becomes the creed and attitude of most of their members. To a large extent, this extended to a chunk of the population. Thus, citizens’ compliances with NCDC directives were largely dependent on the psychological meandering of religious leaders. The truth is that those religious leaders who were positively disposed to the NCDC/PTF social distancing rules and hygiene measures queued into it supported the national COVID-19 strategy. Such leaders encouraged their members to comply with the safety rules. At the same time, those with spurious misconceptions negatively impacted the national COVID-19 strategy because they led the people into misconstruing the COVID-19 disease and safety measures and misled them into disregarding government directives issued to mitigate the disease.

Examples of religious leaders with large religious congregations who showed a positive disposition toward the national strategy against the pandemic included, but not limited to, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, who oversees a church with over five million members, began social distancing in his church even before the government started implementing its orders. Thus, during the actual lockdown, the church directed all its branches to hold online services. Similarly, Sam Adeyemi, the Senior Pastor of Daystar Church and various other churches, had online services (Ayeni, 2020).

Also supportive of the national COVID-19 strategy was the Council of Imams and Ulama, Kaduna State Chapter, which suspended the congregational Friday and daily prayers. The Council directed that not more than 20 congregants be permitted in a service. This was to be sustained until further directives came from the NCDC, the Council warned. The Kogi State chapter of the Council followed suit and suspended prayers. Likewise, other supportive Muslim congregations throughout the country followed suit. (The Africa Report, 2020).

However, contrary to the above, some churches, such as Winners Church and COZA, and their leaders, such as Pastor Paul Enenche of Dunamis International Church in Abuja, held some misgivings and scepticisms about the reality of COVID-19, and went on with regular church services. Of particular note is Dunamis International Church in Abuja, which held regular service at its 100,000 capacity auditorium (Ayeni, 2020).

The point of emphasis is that the perceptions of the religious leaders directly or indirectly affected the implementation of the national COVID-19 protocols and directives. As we saw in the preceding section, those who believed in the lethal reality of the Coronavirus complied with the safety measures of the government and persuaded their members to stay safe, and by so doing, supported the national COVID-19 strategy. On the contrary, those with misconceptions, particularly holding on to one of the conspiracy theories or the other (or spurious superstition), did not initially comply with NCDC/PTF safety rules and indoctrinated their members not to abide by the COVID-19 safety measures and government directives. Such religious leaders were only forced to observe the lockdown measures, and they did not compel their followers to adhere to government restriction orders. Attitudes of this kind, no doubt, may have contributed to the spread of the disease in the community. Therefore, it is not out of place to state here that the bulk of the violation of the NCDC/PTF COVID-19 protocols sprang from these religious adherents whose leaders had indoctrinated them to believe that the disease is a hoax. This attitude of theirs cannot be said to support the national strategy, but rather an obstacle that complicates issues for the government in terms of spending more on security agencies to effect compliance by breakers. Therefore, one could firmly posit that the burden of containing the spread of the COVID-19 disease would have been lighter and more effective if all religious leaders were on the same page with the government. The dissenting misconceptions added to the problem.

If not for any other thing, although every night around 11:30 pm, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) publishes daily figures for COVID-19 confirmed cases, as well as the number of patients discharged, comments under the nightly tweet at the peak of the pandemic, showed what many described the figures generated by the NCDC as estimates.

A good many Nigerians only began to gradually believe in the existence of the virus as it continued to spread, and notable Nigerians began dying as a result. Therefore, before the positive change of attitudes by Nigerians on the adverse effects of COVID-19, the damage has already been done. Hence, we firmly believe that amidst the several attempts to address COVID-19 misinformation in Nigeria, a wide gap still exists in knowledge and understanding by citizens on the realities of the disease. The fact that the NCDC has used its social media platforms to debunk misinformation and issue press releases to correct misgivings is laudable (Adepoju, 2020). However, a lot still needs to be done through religious leaders as they are believed to constitute a greater force in the joint struggle to eradicate the disease. Because religious leaders essentially created the misgivings, it must be saddled on them to reverse such reservations.

Coping mechanisms

To avoid the community spread of the disease, the churches and mosques devised creative ways to adapt and cope with the hardships occasioned by the COVID-19 lockdowns and ban on mass gatherings in their places of worship. Thus, in response to the federal government's insistence that no public meeting seats an audience of more than 50 people, several of Nigeria's Pentecostal churches moved their services online. These are not without exceptions, as some refused to adapt to change. (Wadibia, 2020).

A comparative quantitative study carried out by Afolaranmi (2020) regarding church activities before and during the lockdown, through a questionnaire, revealed the following:

A. Major church activities before the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria

- Symposia
- Recording of audio and visual messages
- Drama or short playlets
- Sports
- Vigil sessions
- Retreat sessions
- Physical presence at members' functions
- Training sessions
- Home caring ministry to the elderly
- Letter writing
- Classroom activities
- Writing religious materials
- Seminars
- Missions trips/outreaches
- Telephone calls
- Text message (SMS)
- Visitation

- Discipleship programs
- Counselling
- Open-air services/revival
- One-on-one discussion
- Evangelism
- House fellowship/Cell-group sessions
- Prayer from the pulpit
- Printing of religious literature
- Bible study and teaching sessions
- Use of social media and other internet tools
- Use of some technological tools
- Preaching from the pulpit
- Regular church activities

From the above report, though the churches engaged its members in using some information technology tools such as telephone calls, text messages, use of social media and other internet tools, the majority of other engagements and activities revolved around personal contacts and mass gatherings.

B. Major Church Activities during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

- Use of social media platforms for communication and live streaming (WhatsApp groups, Facebook, Youtube, Telegram messenger) House fellowship/House cell church
- Telephone (for counselling and prayers)
- Zoom
- Text message (SMS)
- Sunday service online
- Email
- Teleconference
- Recorded messages and songs
- Weekly radio broadcast
- Multiple number of services per Sunday
- Conference call
- Visitation
- Online prayers sessions
- Family fellowship
- Typing of messages
- Website posting
- Personal counselling (for a few emergencies)
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Video recording
- Physical ministration
- Internet radio

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- Transferable videos, audio and text
 - Webinar
 - Imo messenger
 - Distribution of relief packages
 - Print media
 - Use of Google forms
 - Online class sessions
 - Sharing of God's word early in the morning
 - Television (televangelism)
 - Paying tithe through online banking transfer
 - Google classroom (Afolaranmi, 2020).

From the above coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 lockdown in Nigeria, it is clear that there is less physical contact but more and creative information technology-driven church activities. More churches that had not accessed the opportunities offered by the internet quickly adjusted and adapted it as a part of coping measures. In a way, the lockdown though abnormal helped raise internet awareness and adaptability by churches moving them away from solely traditional mass social gatherings. Thus, it is not out of place to point out clearly that COVID-19 pandemic lockdown of religious gatherings, apart from the conventional means of pastoral ministry, created various aspects of internet ministry that took a front row in worshipping and evangelistic activities, which were hitherto relegated.

Conclusion

The study examined the intricate link between the conception of Nigerian religious clerics and their responses to COVID-19 lockdowns, safety rules and palliative measures. It analysed conspiracy theory and how their acceptance or rejection influenced religious leaders' COVID-19 responses and coping mechanisms. During the study, it was established that the prominent religious leaders, associations and groups responded well to COVID-19 protocols and, as well, subscribed to government orders and directives regarding containing the pandemic. This situation may have warranted the COVID-19 sceptics to readjust their psychology to accept the reality of the pandemic. To the group of sceptics and pessimists, the lockdown appeared a bitter pill forced down their throats. Hence, they could manufacture any opposing theory to justify their fear and disbelief to the fact that there could be a time when a mere virus could lead to placing a ban on religious gatherings and worships. Be that as it may, despite their unrelenting rejection and resistance to the realities of the existence of the pandemic and government safety directives, the sceptics were, however, compelled to observe the lockdown procedures. The study further revealed that the coping mechanisms applied by religious bodies resulted in the creative use of and adaptation to internet-related communication gadgets, which were scarcely used in the pre-COVID-19 eras. Even when some procured such facilities, they seldom used them because they preferred mass gathering and social contact procedures, which brought social bonding among members. However, with the COVID-19 lockdown, the religious worship centres devised means of effectively deploying and utilising information technology to keep members connected in the face

of social restrictions. The study observed that the lockdown, as imposed by the government, was incapable of wiping away the social cord that bound members of religious organisations together (as they were able to cope with the absence of physical gathering and bonding through spiritual routines like communion service, physical corporate worship and prayers, hugging, shaking of hands, anointing, and sometimes kissing as a sign of love and unity). Therefore, our investigation shows no over-estimating of the importance of religious organisations and leaders and the roles they play in the effective functioning of government in a country like Nigeria.

From the suggestive potentials of this study, we recommend, among others, that the government begins to consider it a matter of necessity to work in synergy with religious leaders and religious bodies if it must realise its goal of national stability, cohesion and development. It is crucial to suggest that the government begin to open avenues to train these leaders and the management of the religious bodies on the internet and ICT knowledge acquisition to make them compliant with today's realities. The government can achieve this by opening ICT centres that train such leaders at very subsidized rates. Beyond the above, the government must ensure that such bodies and leaders, who wish to key into the mass media for evangelism, are not charged unduly for their programs.

To achieve the above, it would suffice to suggest that the government establish not just a ministry but a commission that will oversee the activities of these religious bodies and their leaders by making sure their teachings and activities fall within the ambit of extant laws of the land. In our opinion, therefore, whenever there is a pandemic of this magnitude, both the government and religious organisations should unite in one accord to ensure an enduring solution is found through the provision of the best practices of safety and hygiene protocols to contain the casualty rate and risks of contraction. It should not be out of place to state here that the initial denial, rejection, and conspiracy theories of some religious leaders with large followers may have arisen due to the distrust citizens have of their leaders. The government needs to prepare itself ahead of unforeseen events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Needless to repeat, both the federal government and its units were not prepared for a pandemic such as the COVID-19. The underfunding of the health sector by the government created a lack of trust in the ability of the government to provide a cure for victims of the pandemic. Thus, instead of submitting themselves to isolation centres, citizens who contracted the disease preferred going to their spiritual directors for the cure. The result of this unpreparedness was the rejection of authority by citizens, as witnessed during the lockdown. Thus, investment in the health sector and adequate remuneration and protection of health workers is needed here. Again, unlike what was obtained in the developed countries of the West, Asia and America, the Nigerian government was incapable of providing adequate economic protections to Nigerians. This made the people disregard the restriction orders as they fended for themselves. Government must begin to look towards the direction of provision of good welfare packages for its citizens. More so, the failure of the government to have a disciplined military and security personnel compounded the spread. Thus, security agents saw the period as an opportunity to make money. During lockdowns, such security personnel extorted citizens by taking bribes and permitting them passages to restricted places. If the government improves on these areas of lack and inadequacies, a lot would be done to turn things around for the good of all.

About the Author

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