

Striking a Balance between Two Extremes: COVID-19 Pentecostal Annotations and Government's Response-Actions in Nigeria

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Abstract: *The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and subsequent government's response-actions generated fascinating reactions and interpretations from different quarters in Nigeria. The country's vibrant socio-political and religious spaces were inundated by a series of interpretations, thoughts and opinions, especially by prominent clergies from the Pentecostal Christian faith. Five perspectives emerged: the divinely-permitted pandemic/punishment perspective, the eschatological perspective; the Satanic-orchestration perspective; the conspiracy perspective; and the pragmatist's perspective. This article examines the thrusts, strengths and limitations of these perspectives in the light of scientific explanations of the global outbreak of COVID-19 and government's response-actions in Nigeria. The standpoint was used as the theoretical underpinning for the study, while the argument was based on secondary sources, including audio/visual sermons/addresses of various clergies on the*

subject matter. These were content-analysed and subjected to historical and descriptive methods. Findings show that while some of the claims and interpretations by proponents of the perspectives were labelled 'unscientific', unverifiable, outrageous and premised on sentiments, such claims went a long way to shape beliefs, public perception and disposition to the pandemic and subsequent measures by the government. It was concluded that such overriding influence ought to have been leveraged by the government to achieve compliance with its measures and manage the pandemic regarding its spread and the administration of vaccines.

Keywords: COVID-19, government's response, religious annotation, pentecostalism, standpoint theory.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19 and subsequent government's actions generated fascinating reactions and interpretations from different quarters. In Nigeria, the country's vibrant socio-political and religious spaces were inundated by series of interpretations, thoughts and opinions expressed across different sectors and among people of diverse ideological leanings, socio-cultural and religious affiliations. In particular, and as expected, prominent religious figures in the country, especially those of the Pentecostal Christian faith, were vocal and prompt in providing 'spiritual' underpinnings and annotations on the pandemic.

In all, five distinct but overlapping perspectives emerged. The first is the divinely-permitted pandemic/punishment perspective, which argues that COVID-19 broke out as a result of the invasion of God's *Great Army*, causing plagues, pestilences and diseases (Adepetun, 2020; Omoniyi, 2020). Proponents of this perspective believed that the act of God's wrath was triggered by the lawlessness of humanity, which propelled God to show off His sovereignty (Amen Media, 2020; Adepetun, 2020; Omoniyi, 2020). The general overseer of the largest Pentecostal movement in Nigeria and Africa, Pastor E.A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), is a proponent of this perspective. In a similar vein, the second perspective, the eschatological perspective, opined that the outbreak of COVID-19 is an amplification and direct fulfilment of end-time prophecies and predictions of the release of plagues and horror on humanity as captured in the Book of Revelation and other eschatological books of the Bible.

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On the other hand, the Satanic-orchestration perspective attributed the coronavirus pandemic to the activities of malevolent spirits from the “pit of hell” (Daily Independent, 2020, p. 2). Proponents of this perspective, particularly Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church, one of the most prominent Pentecostal-charismatic leaders in Africa, argued that COVID-19 is a deliberate assault against humanity by the forces of evil in collaboration with human agents. The fourth perspective, which is perhaps the most contentious but fascinating, the conspiracy perspective, argued that COVID-19 is nothing but a deception orchestrated by notable world leaders under the umbrella of the United Nations, and powerful economic figures to establish a New World Order through vaccination, genetic modification and installation of the 5G telecommunications gadgets, leading to the “internet of things” (Adefisoye, 2020, p. 1). Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of the Believers’ Love World, popularly called Christ Embassy, and his cohort, Reverend Chris Okotie of the Household of God Church, occupy the frontline in the conspiracy perspective (Gabriel, 2020).

The fifth and final perspective, the pragmatist’s perspective, totally rejected the claim from the conspiracy standpoint. For the advocates of this perspective, the virus is real. Proponents of the perspective include Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, a United Kingdom-based Nigerian preacher, and Reverend Sam Adeyemi of the Daystar Church, Lagos. They take their inspiration and analysis from the outbreak of the Spanish Influenza of 1819 (Gabriel, 2020). It is important to note that each perspective has strong points, premised on Biblical injunctions and theoretical explanations.

1.1 Objective and Methodological Standpoint

In this article, the authors are concerned with analysing the various interpretations given to COVID-19 by Nigeria’s Pentecostal church leaders and the implication of such annotations on government’s response-actions. The standpoint was used as the theoretical underpinning for the study, while the argument was based on secondary sources, including audio/visual sermons/addresses of various clergies on the subject matter. These were content-analysed and subjected to historical and descriptive methods. The article is divided into six sections. The section following the introduction is the theoretical framework. Here, the standpoint theory was found suitable for analysing the different views expressed on COVID-19 by Nigeria’s Pentecostal church leaders. The third section presents the outbreak of the pandemic in Nigeria and government’s actions in Nigeria. The fourth section presents and analyses the various interpretations and explanations on COVID-19 and the government’s response. The fifth section reviewed the subject matter from a scientific and global perspective. Also, attempts were made to balance the government’s position and what religion could offer in managing the coronavirus pandemic. The sixth and final section concludes the article.

2. Coronavirus and the Standpoint Theory

The standpoint theory is suitable for analysing religious interpretations of the coronavirus pandemic and the government’s response in Nigeria. The theory is commonly linked to the work of the 19th-century German philosopher George Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, who was interested in power dynamics in the master-slave relationship in the early 1800 (Wood, 2008). Subsequently, Karl Marx expanded the frontier of the theory by demonstrating how the workplace shapes the views and perceptions of individuals (Bajracharya, 2018). The theory was further developed by Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding and Julian Wood to present and project feminists’ standpoints.

Generally, the standpoint theory is premised on the assumption that a person’s perspective is created by their personal experience in social groups. Specifically, proponents of the theory opine that “social construct of the world and social realities are set by standpoints” (Bajracharya, 2018, p. 2). In other words, a person’s disposition, perception and decisions are informed by their standpoint. Standpoint theory arguably gives voice to the marginalized groups by allowing them to challenge the status quo as the outsider within.

In Nigeria, an informed analysis of the standpoint of the country’s Pentecostal church leaders on any issue of national (or global) concern must first appreciate the point that Pentecostalism occupies a frontline in the ‘making of the Nigerian State, especially since the 1970s and 80s. Olufemi Vaughan, a religion historian and sociologist, argued convincingly that “Pentecostalism has always

been at the forefront of providing an important medium for the articulation of religious, social, political and economic conditions that shape local people's aspirations in contemporary Nigerian societies" (Vaughnan, 2016, p. 40). He added that "as the crisis of the Nigerian state intensified in the 1980s, Pentecostal Christianity did not only fill the gap left behind by the state, but also provided a powerful critique of the state's custodians" (p. 140). The standpoint and even the belligerency of the Pentecostals in Nigeria's social-political spheres have not abated even as the government attempted to curtail the rampaging murderous coronavirus. However, what is worrisome is the spate of discord claims made on the coronavirus pandemic by these Pentecostal leaders.

3. Outbreak of COVID-19 and Government's Response in Nigeria

The outbreak of plagues, diseases and epidemics is not alien to humanity (Clary, 1985; Adefisoye, 2019). Evidences from human history support this claim. What is, however, novel or rather impervious about the coronavirus, unlike the Spanish Influenza of 1819 and other plagues of global scale and impact, is its (initial) etiological ambivalence, causative incongruity and therapeutic chaos. It is evident that the disease is highly contagious and rapid in its spread, and at the time of writing this article, it has spawned many even deadlier variants. Reports by the World Health Organization (WHO) and findings that have emerged from literature on the virus trace it to Wuhan, the capital of the Hubei province of China, in late December 2019 (Adefisoye & Adefisoye, 2020; Cascella et al., 2020; Jimola & Ofodu, 2021; Kumar, Malviya & Sharma, 2020; Omodan, 2020; Omodan, & Ige, 2021; WHO, 2020). Interestingly, the effects of the pandemic can only be measured in its adversative consequences, in terms of the number of people killed, its economic cost and social impact.

The consequences of the pandemic, and reactions to it, defeated expectations, as countries classified as 'developed' had to formulate hasty policies and make 'chaotic' decisions, which flawed their development status and organised health and emergency-response systems. The preceding has once again validated the assertion of Clary (1985, p. 1) that "crises have always played a role in policy formation but the entire structure of disaster response was crisis-driven (and fear-laden)". According to him, "when a disaster struck, people acted; society's attitude toward natural disasters was fatalistic" (p.1).

Nigeria recorded its first COVID-19 case on 27 February 2020, barely two months after the disease broke out in Wuhan, China. An Italian expatriate was reported to have returned from his country to his base in Ogun State, Nigeria, via Lagos (NCDC, 2020). After that, the pandemic spread gradually but at an alarming rate, reaching a forty thousand-mark of confirmed cases in July 2020 (NCDC, 2020). This figure, however, generated controversies in terms of its veracity. First, as a result of limited testing capacities, and secondly, amidst obvious cynicism on the part of many Nigerians who perceive such figures as fictitious and a ploy by the government to attract global sympathy, draw resources and debt forgiveness. Barring such skepticism that characterised elite-masses relations in Nigeria, governments at all levels (including the near-dysfunctional local government) attempted to curtail and contain the rampaging virus. Notable measures include establishing isolation centers and molecular testing gadgets, the establishment of a system of contact-tracing, and prominently, lockdown measures, which generated an inundation of reactions.

Also, the controversial Infectious Disease Control Bill that the National Assembly hastily considered in May 2020 is another high point in governments' response to the coronavirus pandemic in Nigeria. As part of its provisions, the proposed bill would make vaccination and prophylaxis compulsory, while the certificate issued after such exercise will become a requirement for accessing public utilities (Kwem, 2020). This development was, however, greeted with a flurry of criticisms from Nigerians. It was even alleged by the Coalition of United Political Parties (CUPP) that lawmakers in the House of Representatives were offered USD 10 million for the bill's speedy passage by the founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates (Kwem, 2020). Of concern to this paper are the standpoint and annotations on COVID-19 and the response of government by prominent leaders of the Pentecostal Christian faith.

4. COVID-19 Pandemic and Pentecostal Standpoints

We identify five prominent interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic from the church's standpoint, catalogued into five perspectives. The arguments, propositions and interpretations of these perspectives are presented. They are the divinely-permitted pandemic/punishment perspective, eschatological perspective, the Satanic-orchestration perspective, the conspiracy perceptive and pragmatists' perspective.

4.1. Divinely-Permitted Pandemic/Punishment Perspective

This perspective proposes that the outbreak of COVID-19 was divinely-orchestrated as a way to bring the world to its knees in recognition of the sovereignty of God. Although, there were strong indications that the virus emanated from Wuhan, China, proponents of this perspective maintain that it was not without divine inputs. In one of his sermons in March 2020, which was widely reported in the media, the General Overseer of the RCCG, Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, posited that "God is using coronavirus to show the world that He is still in control of the affairs of men" (Amen Media, 2020; Adepetun, 2020; Omoniyi, 2020). According to the pastor, the Book of Ezekiel chapter two and verses four and five capture the foregoing:

They are obstinate and stubborn children. I am sending you to them, and you are to say to them, 'This is what the Lord GOD says.' 5. And whether they listen or refuse to listen – for they are a rebellion house – they will know that a prophet has been among them (Bible Hub, 2004, p. 1027).

Meanwhile, the mathematician-turned clergy had predicted in his yearly prophecies that the world would behave like a convulsing child and go on compulsory holidays (Amen Media, 2020; Adepetun, 2020; Omoniyi, 2020). He, however, predicted that "only those whose time was up would die from the pandemic" (Amen Media, 2020, pp. 1-2). On governments' lockdown measures, the clergy stated emphatically that the government cannot lockdown the world entirely forever (Amen Media, 2020; Adepetun, 2020; Omoniyi, 2020).

4.2 The Eschatological Perspective

The eschatological perspective, unlike the divinely-permitted perspective, opined that the outbreak of COVID-19 is in direct fulfillment of end-time prophecies of the release of plagues and pestilences on humanity as captured in the apocalyptic Book of Revelation and other eschatological books of the Bible. In the fifth and sixteenth chapters of the Book of Revelation, the Apostle John painted gloomy pictures of plagues and pestilences released by angels on humanity. Each 'bowl' of wrath had a sequence of deadly and destructive plagues, including devastating earthquakes, heat waves, and land tremors. Taking inspiration from the end-time predictions of Jesus as contained in the Book of Matthew, the twenty-fourth chapter that pestilences will characterise the world at the terminal end of the world, proponents argued that COVID-19 was a direct fulfilment of that prophecy.

4.3 The Satanic-Orchestration Perspective

Proponents of this perspective strongly claimed that the pandemic was a product of Satan's initiatives executed by human agents. Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church, also known as Winners Chapel, argued that COVID-19 was a calculated but failed attempt to slow down humanity (Agency Report, Daily Independent, 2020, p. 2). Similarly, the clergyman berated the government's decision to lockdown churches, stating that:

Coronavirus is nothing but an anti-church virus. Now, freedom of worship is no longer a constitutional right. It is now determined by certain individuals. This is no longer coronavirus, at least in two states – Lagos and Ogun – this is an anti-church virus. Caution must be exercised (Makinde, 2020, p. 1). More intriguing is the claim by the charismatic bishop to lay hands on COVID-19 patients (without the use of a hand glove) and respire on them, ostensibly for healing (Augoye, Premium Times, 2020).

4.4 The Conspiracy Perceptive

The conspiracy dimension of COVID-19 is undoubtedly the most elaborate, controversial, but fascinating. The proponents of this perspective provided a different explanation of the origin and 'purpose' of the coronavirus pandemic. Generally, the centrality of conspiracy theories, irrespective of their variations, is that many important political events or economic and social drifts are products of illusory subversions that are largely unknown to the public (Cassam, 2019; Dentith, 2021). In other words, proponents of the theory usually attribute massive death and unpalatable events to governments' clandestine activities and secret plots. It is important to add that "conspiracy theories increase in prevalence during periods of widespread anxiety, uncertainty, or hardship, as during wars and economic depressions and in the aftermath of natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, and pandemics" (Reid, 2020, p. 6).

Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of the Believers' Love World and Chris Okotie, the senior pastor of the Household of God Church, are prominent adherents of this perspective. For instance, Chris Oyakhilome, in an audacious sermon/video published on YouTube on 8 April 2020, did an extensive analysis of the supposed origin and intention of the coronavirus pandemic. According to him, there is a strong link between COVID-19 and the installation of the 5G telecommunication facilities. Oyakhilome specifically claimed that the virus is a creation of a certain Satanic agent in which the Illuminati is foremost, with the intention to automate humanity and produce pseudo humans, whose minds would be controlled and manipulated (Gabriel, 2020). The clergy argued that this was to be achieved by implanting micro-chip devices inside COVID-19 vaccines that would be later invented. Reacting to the government's lockdown measures, he claimed that Lagos and Abuja were purposely locked down to test-run the first phase of the 5G installations.

Similarly, Pastor Chris Okotie, known for his 'apocalyptic' teachings, started by stating clearly that COVID-19 does not signal the end of the present age and the emergence of the anti-Christ. Rather, it is a precursor to it (Gabriel, 2020). He established 'patterns' between Bill Gates (the man Okotie claims to be the brain behind the COVID-19 conspiracy) and the anti-Christ. Emphatically, Reverend Okotie claimed that a plot was to be executed under the auspices of the United Nations, with the sole aim of destabilising the world's economy and preventing Christians from congregating. Other reasons for such an ominous plot were to "systematically reduce world population through the increasing COVID-19 deaths; enforce a global lockdown in order to ruin the economies of nations and impoverish the people, and frustrate true worship of God" (*This Day*, 2020, p. 1-2). Reverend Okotie concluded his exposition by predicting that such a sinister plot would fail.

4.5 The Pragmatists' Perspective

In sharp contrast to the propositions and claims of the conspiracy perspective, Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo, Rev. Sam Adeyemi and Pastor Poju Oyemade of the pragmatists' perspective vehemently rejected the idea of conspiracy. For them, COVID-19 is real. According to Pastor Ashimolowo, there is no scientific or rational link between the installation of 5G and COVID-19. The United Kingdom-based televangelist argued that if there was a link between the 5G network and COVID-19 as claimed by the conspiracy perspective, how did the virus find its way to his village (Ode Omu, Osun State, Nigeria) where 5G does not exist? He advised his followers and members to adhere to the government's lockdown directives (Gabriel, 2020).

In a video conversation between Sam Adeyemi and Poju Oyemade, both based in Lagos, the former expressed his disgust on the conspiracy claims, stating that leaders must take informed positions on issues. Taking a cue from the Spanish Influenza of 1819, the pastors established that the government's lockdown was not surreal in the phase of a rampaging global epidemic. In a more balanced way, Reverend Tope Popoola of the Business Church, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria, in a sermon titled "Between conspiracy theory and the reality of COVID-19," established the reality of the virus but cautioned against falling for uncensored media propaganda, which according to him was to propagate and spread fear.

5. COVID-19 and Government's Response-Actions from a Global Angle

Historically, religious reactions to global trends, especially inventions, social change and plagues, have been pessimistic, cynical and laden with suspicion. Historicising the church's skepticism on global trends, Adelakun explicated that:

Religious leaders particularly fear scientific advancement because it changes how people understand the Divine Will. We cannot narrate the history of the Protestant Reformation that changed the history of Europe without talking about the significant role that the invention of print technology played in that event. When Galileo started promoting his heliocentric theories in the 17th Century, the Church opposed the range of his vision because his radical claims challenged religious leaders' interpretation of the Bible. They did not exactly put their anxieties in the apocalyptic language of the "anti-Christ (2020, p. 2).

On the conspiracy notion and the general disposition of people (including the Pentecostals) to new ideas, Adelakun wrote that:

People have always been threatened by technological changes that change their relationship to time and space because, like it or not, it propels a new way of experiencing the self and the structures of existing relations. The invention of new things from writing to printing, bound books, photography, cars, the telephone, streetlights, the radio, cinema, film, and the Internet has been met with paranoia and moral panic. In the 19th Century, when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone, people thought it would destroy privacy and social relations. According to one writer, because of telephone communication, "we will soon be nothing but transparent heaps of jelly to each other." Today, people say pretty much the same thing about mobile phones and social media. We now look back nostalgically at the time when the telephone, the same device they said would ruin social relationships, was a far less-threatening means of technologically-mediated communication (2020, p. 1-2).

For us (researchers), the best way to weigh the significance of the diverse religious interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic is to weigh them vis-à-vis global perspectives to find some sort of balance. In the views around the world on this subject, the explanation tilts more toward history, medical science and globalisation. Religious views around COVID-19 is found to be entrapped within this interconnected web and disconnecting it in Nigeria may not have a global appeal. The first evidence in the literature on globalism suggests that the danger of the coronavirus propagation came from contact between people (Jouret, 2020). The position examines the history of the plague in 18th Century Russia and that it spread because the faithful queued to kiss icons contaminated by the bacteria, possibly because they were not aware of how the epidemic was transmitted.

The big assumption within the mentioned five perspectives is that globalisation and even science could do without religion in what is often called 'resistance to globalisation'. On the contrary, Jouret (2020), in a magazine, listed examples in other continents showing that in the West, the Middle East, Asia, churches, mosques, synagogues and other places where members of a given community converge favour the dissemination of the virus.

The magazine claimed that a Christian sect, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, had many persons infected when the disease broke out in February 2020, to the extent that people called for its dissolution. Also, in Israel, where an ultra-orthodox neighbourhood refused to conform to the restrictions imposed by the government and with the density of their population, the city of Bnei Brak in the northwest suburbs of Tel Aviv had 35 to 40 per cent of its population testing positive to the virus. In Jerusalem, 74 per cent of people who tested positive came from the city's ultra-orthodox neighbourhoods. There are many more across the world. In India (Hindu News, 2020), Malaysia (Beech, 2020) and Pakistan (Rehman, Habib & Mehsud, 2020; News Pakistan, 2020).

Like Nigeria, some other parts of the world was defiant of the realist and globalised world appeal and have aligned with the Satanic-orchestrated perspective keeping their beliefs and faith in the

face of the ravaging pandemic. It is important to wonder if religion repudiates fact from medical sciences. Obviously not! Adefisoye (2020, p. 2-3) explained that:

while Christianity is established on the sanctity of faith (fideism), spirituality and 'divine revelation', science, on the other hand, bows to superior arguments founded on sound logic, empiricism and verifiable facts. However, the Christian faith does not repudiate empirical facts or reasons, but encourages it!

Ralph Drollinger, a United States minister of religion who chairs a Bible study group in former President Trump's entourage, shares the belief that COVID-19 is an expression of God's anger on the Americans who worship what he called environmentalism and have a penchant for lesbianism and homosexuality. Also, Rick Wiles, a conservative preacher in Florida, thinks the virus is God's punishment for those who oppose Jesus. In the same vein, Yaakov Litzman, an ultra-orthodox Israeli Minister of Health, aligned the virus with the signs of end-time coming with the expected return of Jesus Christ. He, however, tested positive for the virus, forcing those in contact with him to go into quarantine. Even the Islamic State organisation (ISIS) found time to explain to its members that the virus is from God and urged them to place their faith in God and find refuge with Him.

Jouret (2020) and Quadri (2020), in their detailed information, stated that in Qom, Iran, the Shia sanctuaries were still crowded with faithful. In Saint Petersburg's Kazen cathedral, hundreds of believers were seen kissing the icons in an exposition of Saint John the Baptist's relics from Jerusalem. The Orient Magazine further reveals that in France, on 11 April 2020, an Easter vigil was held in the Paris church of Saint-Nicholes-Du-Chardonnet in defiance of the strict rules of confinement laid down by the government. This and other places in the US, West Indies, and South Korea "have recalcitrant religious congregations that are accelerating viral transmission" (Wesley et al., 2020, p. 5).

While the church in the global arena cannot deny globalisation and science, many of the actors, leaders and proponents of the perspectives discussed in this study are becoming more religious even as globalisation asserts its inevitability. The faith, as preached by different adherents, gives encouraging admonitions of divine protections to believers bringing up the positions of four perspectives of Divinely-Permitted/Punishment perspective; Satanic-Orchestrated perspectives; the fulfilment of end time prophecies beliefs and the world power cum technological advancement school. These four perspectives in Nigeria, explaining the root cause of the pandemic, confirms why most Christian bodies justify the need to open worship centres and undermine the scientific globalisation reality in the global world.

Jouret (2020, p. 2-3) paints the summary of the picture:

The more globalization asserts its rules, the more religiosity and its reassuring ritual dig in their heels to resist the pandemonium, the uprooting, the sense of being out of step with a new society or rejected by it, so it is not surprising that certain communities of believers refuse to adopt precautions which make them feel they must give up something of a higher order and collective rights which embody their beliefs; embraces purification, sanctification, ablutions, ritual baths or the use of communion wafers.

State responses, even in the global arena, do not come easy. The state is also easily falling for the hidden agenda or conspiracy theories.

5.1 What Religion can offer in the Face of a Global Coronavirus Outbreak

Perhaps, explaining the remote cause of COVID-19 from the religious perspective is another essential outlook in finding a means to its end. The harvest of the five perspectives in this paper has opened up a magnificent vista for such an explanation. However, these findings, no matter how accurate or inaccurate, have not in any way denied the existence, the ravages, and the global crises occasioned by the global pandemic. What could be a good submission in this paper is to find out what religion can offer in the local and global response to COVID-19.

In doing this and as raised in this paper, and especially in Nigeria, religious actors (particularly those of the Pentecostal Christian faith) are critical to the position of the church, with many of them having large followership and congregation. Such actors and or leaders have become an icon and popular that they easily form the opinion of members. The leaders provide not only the directions for the people but also can mobilise and aggregate support for a particular direction. This works well not only in Nigeria, but other parts of the world where religion is the opium of the masses.

It may be safer to admit that the critical religious actors can play a 'vital stabilizing role' and mobilize to 'offer a beacon of hope' (Marshall, 2020) amidst the pandemic and the rehabilitation that follows the post-pandemic era. As opened up by Marshall (2020), Barmania and Reiss (2020), Rob (2020) and Prothero (2007) as on the previous epidemic, coronavirus pandemic has raised a contradiction between reliance on faith and the facts of science.

Science in this regard does not accept that faith actors are thinking logically and rationally about the pandemic because of their fixed beliefs predetermined by some higher power. The proponents of the scientific explanation do not see the common sense in religious beliefs when the world is in turmoil with COVID-19. On the other side, religious actors feel that their views count, especially on government policies on the pandemic. They do not feel that only scientific data counts but that "religious traditions, beliefs and institutions play important roles in everyday life for most people worldwide" (Marshall, 2020, p.1). This is especially where over 80 per cent of people around the world adhere to a religion (Pew Research Center, 2012).

The recommendation by Pastor Adeboye of the RCCG, that governments at both federal and state levels should have included religious leaders in their COVID-19 management committees corroborates the preceding. The reason for such recommendation may have been informed by the fact that many religious leaders are from diverse academic and professional backgrounds and could have deployed such knowledge and experience in providing valid advice in addition to their religious or rather 'spiritual insights'. On the prevention and control of the pandemic, the religious actors and leaders lead an organized and formal group, many of which are legally registered with the government, the advantage of which could help in this stabilizing role.

From Nigeria's experience, there have been public health-public faith partnerships in drawing out and implementing the WHO protocols, although such partnership was not without its initial discord and skepticism. The church has largely shown the capacity to enforce physical distancing, hand-washing, sanitising, face masks, and adapting or limiting religious gatherings. This common understanding is further emphasised by Marshall (2020, p. 2):

It became increasingly clear that diverse religious communities like the other segment of society were adjusting, willingly or grudgingly, to the shocking disruptions the coronavirus had wrought on virtually every facet of normal life. It also became apparent that religious leaders and faith groups had distinctive insights to share and practical roles to play.

There could only be a minority of religious leaders around the world who have flagrantly rejected the enforced protocols; many people and leaders support them. Many have returned to virtual meetings, relating with their members online, and cancelled most of their public gatherings and annual conventions in obedience to this understanding. It has been in the news that Saudi Arabia did not encourage Hajj when the spread became wild (New York Times, 2020). The Vatican City was also closed to the public, while Pope Francis spoke alone from the Vatican (Vatican News, 2020).

Another critical area where the church-society role would help stabilise is giving out palliative handouts and other impact cushion measures usually organised by the government or its agents. Religious bodies are formally organised and socially segmented that they can become handy if the government reaches society through them. In Nigeria, many corruption allegations against government agents in distributing these palliatives would have been avoided or minimised if the religious organisations were used in the execution or distribution. The needy, the vulnerable, the

sick, the disabled, and the underemployed would have been easily identified in a country where such social data are not readily available.

Above all, religious actors have a lot to offer in instilling hope in their members as the government continues to find a way out of the pandemic. Faith-based organisations often find acceptable reasons for a deluge of the impact of the pandemic where members can take solace, seek comfort and hope for a better tomorrow as they communally endure the trials just as they had done in the past when similar crises came up (Karam & Ali, 2020). As there is no end in sight for COVID-19, religious leaders and their congregation, especially in Nigeria, have a huge population that cannot be ignored in the scheme of things but should be required to use this strength in positive ways because their messages and components could play a critical role in determining how a disease is understood and handled even by the larger public.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the basic religious annotations expressed by prominent figures of the Pentecostal Christian faith on COVID-19 and the government's response in Nigeria. Despite Nigeria being the focus of this work, the authors viewed the subject matter from a global perspective, which forms its uniqueness. The outspokenness of Pentecostal pastors on the subject of COVID-19 and subsequent government measures reinforce the fact that since its emergence in Nigeria's history, Pentecostalism has occupied a frontline in the socio-political spheres of the country. Despite such a prominent position, claims by proponents of the five perspectives cannot be cleared of errors and superfluities (however unintended), particularly when placed on the litmus test of science and logic. While unverifiable claims were made at one point, very contentious ones (but laden with 'facts') were made on the other. While the proponents of the divinely-permitted, Satanic-orchestrated and eschatological perspectives premised their propositions on metaphysics and clairvoyance, the conspiracy perspective proponents made unverifiable but thought-provoking claims. Despite such inconsistencies, those claims shaped the perception and dispositions of the followers of those clergies (proponents).

The authors, therefore, conclude that government decision to disdain those claims meant overlooking a substantial part of the populace that would have contributed immensely to the management of the pandemic in the country. As raised in the body of this work, the government ought to have leveraged the influence and large followership of those clergies to implement its measures and achieve compliance, particularly as they pertain to maintaining social distancing, contact-tracing and the management of isolation facilities. Besides, governments at all levels should have taken full advantage of the existing levels of organisation, in terms of church-membership networks to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in distributing palliatives and implementing other welfare initiatives.

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