

ALC COVID-19 RESEARCH

OP-ED SERIES – VOL.4 ISSUE: 5

JULY 30, 2020

UNDERSTANDING AND FIGHTING PANDEMIC IN THE “SPIRIT”: RELIGION AND COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

Abiodun Alao*

IN SUMMARY

- The pandemic’s association with China was derided in some circles, with many Nigerians claiming that it would be like all Chinese goods: “fake quality” and ephemeral.
- Some Pentecostal Pastors demanded that their congregants should not interpret the absence of physical church to mean the suspension of their payments of tithe and offering.
- The reaction to COVID-19 was not limited to Christianity alone. When the pandemic was first reported in Nigeria, the largely Muslim North dismissed it as Western propaganda.
- To many Nigerians, the religion to which they had devoted all their emotional and financial resources could not provide answers or clarity at the most desperate time of need.

A survey once carried out by the [BBC World Service](#) depicted Nigeria as the world's "most religious country", with more than 90% of those sampled claiming that "they "believed" in God, "prayed" regularly, and were ready to "die" for their religious beliefs. It is thus not surprising that Nigerians turn "spiritual" when confronted with any major problem that baffles their imagination, or retire to fatalism for issues that may merely require deep critical thinking. The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest that has this thrown up a litany of religious responses across the country, and the ways these have manifested may in the future change the attitude of Nigerians to religion. This piece focuses on how religion has come into the ways Nigerians have understood and responded to the Coronavirus outbreak in the country. The need for a write-up of this nature becomes all the more necessary, especially now that religion is playing important roles in the ways many African countries, including [Tanzania](#), [Malawi](#) and [Burundi](#), are approaching the COVID-19 pandemic.

For a country that had experienced the Ebola epidemic, COVID-19, when it first started, was not considered as anything serious. The pandemic's association with China was even derided in some circles, with many Nigerians claiming that it would be like all Chinese goods: "fake quality" and ephemeral. When eventually the reality of its devastating consequences and the possibility of its long duration dawned on the population, religion and faith came into the equation.

The first interesting thing about COVID-19 and religion in Nigeria is that no religious leader "predicted" its occurrence. In a country awash with "predictions", and where the beginning of every year is associated with religious leaders "predicting" major occurrences in the year, including prominent Nigerians who would die, how a pandemic of the magnitude of COVID-19 escaped the mention of any "predictor" baffled the imagination of many critical Nigerians. The later-day claim by the leader of the largest Pentecostal church in Nigeria, [Pastor Adeboye](#), that the Lord had told him that the whole world would be put on a "compulsory holiday" was considered by many as a calculated afterthought, especially as he did not make it public at the time of revelation. In short, many Nigerians concluded that previous predictions by their clergies were nothing more than mere intelligent guesses.

After the devastating consequences of the pandemic became known, various Pentecostal pastors came in with explanations of its cause. Of all those who offered explanations about this, very few were as spectacular as [Pastor Chris Oyakhilome](#)'s marriage of religion and the pseudo-science analysis that the Coronavirus was caused by the introduction of 5G technology. With the fury of an Old-Testament prophet, Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy was even emphatic when he described the pandemic as "the largest global cover-up in history", and that it is not coronavirus that was causing the problem, but cell poisoning that was meant to force the world to take a vaccine. He linked the whole pandemic to the "Anti-Christ" that the Bible predicted would emerge shortly before the second return of Jesus Christ. Almost immediately, other Pentecostal Pastors, including [Matthew Ashimolowo of the KICC](#) and [Sam Adeyemi of Daystar Church](#), dismissed Oyakhilome's linkage of Coronavirus to 5G or the Anti-Christ as farrago nonsense.

Once the existence of the disease had been confirmed in Nigeria, the Pentecostal intervention moved on to how long it would last in the country. The Pentecostal pastor whose view was most emphatic here was [T.B. Joshua of Synagogue Church of All Nations](#). Talking to his Congregation who greeted his prediction with a loud shout of "Amen", Joshua was categorical that COVID-19 would end on March 27. But when that date passed and the pandemic persisted, he readjusted his prediction by saying that what he meant was that by that day, the virus would have halted in the place where it began: Wuhan, China. Not many Nigerians bought into this prediction readjustment. Even other Pentecostal pastors viewed this prediction with derision, with [Pastor Adeboye](#) using the local derision parlance "na lie" (it is a lie) to dismiss off any prediction of an imminent end of COVID-19.

When Nigeria Pentecostal Churches realised that the COVID-19 had become a crisis in Nigeria, the politics then moved to the responses of government's efforts to curb its spread. Although reluctantly, most Pentecostal churches agreed to government's decision to close all places of worship, controversies began on when it should be re-opened. Bishop David [Oyedepo of Winners Chapel](#) was at the fore of attention here. Known for his established disagreement with the Buhari administration, Oyedepo wowed to continue holding Sunday services despite lockdown, insisting that "Shutting down churches would be like shutting down hospitals." Although he later reluctantly

complied, he kept on calling on the government to re-open churches despite health concerns, claiming that there had been evidence of people being cured of COVID-19 in Churches. Another major Pentecostal pastor, [Tunde Bakare, of Latter Rain Assembly](#), however, saw things differently and said that his own Church would not re-open until 2021 and that Churches across the country should give up their premises to serve as isolation camps for COVID-19 patients.

Of all the reactions to COVID-19 by Pentecostal Pastors, the one that caused the greatest controversy was the demand by some Pentecostal Pastors that their congregants should not interpret the absence of physical church to mean the suspension of their payments of tithe and offering. They urged their members to pay into the church account. Some even went on social media to call for the continuous payment of tithe and offering despite the reduction of income during pandemic. Here, [Bishop Oyedepo](#) and [Pastor Ashimolowo](#) were among the most publicised.

The collection of tithe and offerings during COVID-19 raises questions in the minds of many Pentecostal Christians, as there were those amongst them who think that the period of the pandemic was the time the church should give back to the members that had always been loyal in their financial contributions but now had fallen on hard times, and not the time to extort money from them.

The reaction to COVID-19 was not limited to Christianity alone. Islam also responded. When the pandemic was first reported in Nigeria, the largely Muslim North dismissed it as Western propaganda. A popular Islamic cleric openly declared that there was no Coronavirus and that Moslems should not allow themselves to be fooled. This position became popular in the ancient city of Kano, where youths came out en-masse chanting the lyric: "[Malam Yache Babu corona, muma munchai Babu corona](#)" meaning "Teacher said no corona, we also say no corona". Not long after this, Kano became the epicentre of Coronavirus in Nigeria. Many people attributed the high cases of COVID-19 in the city to the nonchalant attitude underlined by religion. Governments across the predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria have also addressed the lockdown with the religious considerations of the population in mind, with some falling to the pressure of easing lockdowns to allow for Friday prayers and Muslim festivals at times that when it was clearly unwise to do so.

Not to be left out of what had now become an entertainment circus, traditional religion also made its intervention, even if on a somewhat lower scale than Christianity and Islam. Apart from haphazard responses from across communities where traditional religions offered local herbs for the cure, there were also calls for sacrifices to be made to appease the gods for the cleansing of the land. Traditional rulers, who are the custodians of indigenous religious, also called for prayers to appease the gods. One of them, the [Oluwo of Iwo, Oba Abdulrasheed Adewale Akanbi](#), went the furthest when he pronounced “the arrest” of the deadly virus and the issuance of a 16-day ultimatum for the menace to vacate the world. He also declared his willingness to sacrifice himself to die of the disease if that would translate to the eradication of the disease. He, however, never stopped wearing facemasks.

Whichever religion they belong to, most Nigerians have had one reason or the other to be disappointed with their leaders, either for going too far, or perhaps for not going far enough in the handling of COVID-19. To many of them, the religion to which they had devoted all their emotional and financial resources could not provide answers or clarity at the most desperate time of need. How this will reflect in their attitude to religion on the post-COVID-19 era, waits to be seen. This is also applicable to other African countries, especially as religious leaders across the continent have been [sending confusing messages](#). This is thus an important lesson for some African countries that seem to be adopting “spiritual” solutions to medical challenges that require simple hygiene and careful governmental policies. The national prayers that the Malawian President has called for in the fight against COVID-19, for example, should come hand-in-hand with the enforcement of face masks and social distancing policies, and religious leaders across the continent should put the interest of their followers ahead of other selfish considerations. It is on selfish desires like this are pandemic made, and on it does it spread.

* **Abiodun Alao** is a Professor of African Studies and the Director of the African Leadership Centre, King's College London.

Email: charles.a.alao@kcl.ac.uk