




Curtailed Worship, Conspiracy Theories, and Hollywood Dystopias: Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic among the Reformist Muslims and Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria

DAUDA ABUBAKAR 
University of Jos, Nigeria

ABDULLAHI MUHAMMAD MAIGARI
Al-Qalam University, Katsina

MURTALA IBRAHIM
Utrecht University, Netherlands

ARAFAT IBRAHIM
Gombe State University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT COVID-19 has affected all spheres of human activities, including religion, in Nigeria. Due to its devastating effect, the state was compelled to introduce precautionary and preventive measures to reduce its spread in the country, including lockdown, ban on gatherings, and social distancing. This extraordinary situation caused different reactions among Muslim and Christian religious leaders, with some accepting COVID-19 and the restrictions and others rejecting them. This work focuses on the response to the pandemic by prominent reformist Muslim groups (the Izala and NASFAT) and two major Pentecostal Churches (Christ Embassy and Living Faith). As we show, despite many differences and even hostility between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Muslim and Christian leaders formulated similar responses to COVID-19. Namely, they either interpreted the pandemic in spiritual rather medical terms (as God's punishment or the work of the devil) or rejected the very existence of the coronavirus and presented the pandemic as a Western conspiracy designed to stop Muslim and Christian religious activities in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS Religion, Islam, Christianity, COVID-19, lockdown, conspiracy, worship, Nigeria

Introduction

When the COVID-19 infection rate began to rise in Nigeria in April 2020, several state governments enacted social distancing regulations that included the lockdown of major cities, the closure of places of worship, and restrictions on religious congregations.¹ However, the compliance with these regulations was not strictly enforced by government officials due to the sensitivity of religion in Nigeria. Religious organizations are important social actors in the country, with the power to support or challenge the authority of the state. This is happening, first, because most Nigerians are religiously inclined and religion plays a vital role in people's lives. Second, Nigeria is a country characterized by insecurity and lack of social amenities; a situation that Daniel Lambach (2004) refers to as a fragile state. Fragile states are not only prone to conflicts but also lack the willingness or capacity to perform state functions in terms of the welfare of citizens and security, as well as the ability to maintain peace and stability (Lambach 2004, 3). For Nigeria as a fragile state, the major challenge is the existence of many religious and ethnic leaders that either compete for state power by supporting politicians of their choice (Abubakar 2014, 213) or question the authority of the state. Some religious leaders function as "second state" authorities backed by strong public support and control over their followers (Boege et al. 2008). The exercise of this power was clearly visible during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic when some influential Muslim and Christian religious figures opposed the secular discourse on the pandemic promoted by the state and proposed their own—highly popular—explanations and solutions.

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This article examines the responses to the pandemic from two sets of religious groups—Reformist Muslims and Pentecostal Christians.² We discuss these responses in the context of secular state regulations to counter the spread of the virus in Nigeria, on the one hand, and the official reaction to the pandemic by dominant Muslim and Christian groups in Nigeria, on the other hand.³ First, we examine the position adopted by the NASFAT Islamic organization and the Living Faith Pentecostal Church, both of whom presented the pandemic as the result of spiritual deficiency. Consequently, they promoted unconditional faith in God and sincere prayers as the best antidote to the coronavirus. At the same time, they generally accepted government regulations aimed at reducing the spread of the disease. Second, we analyze denialist discourses on COVID-19 produced and promoted by two reformist religious leaders, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir (leader of the Izala movement) and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (the founder and leader of the Pentecostal church known as Christ Embassy). Sani Yahya and Chris Oyakhilome criticized the government for suspending mass religious activities and gatherings, which in their assumption was nothing but a Western conspiracy against religious communities and humanity at large.

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The Religious Landscape in Nigeria

Nigeria, with its population of more than 200 million, is an ethnically, linguistically, and reli-

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1 This article is based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation in Nigeria from October 2020 to February 2021.

2 The term "reformists" refers to projects of change, i.e., aiming to re-order Nigerian Muslims' and Christians' worldviews and institutional structures against those produced by Western modernity (Osella and Osella 2007).

3 As of February 2021, 152,000 Nigerians have been confirmed to be infected with the virus. However, experts postulate that this number might grossly understate the real infection rate due to inadequate testing and other vital medical equipment in the country (Finnan 2021).

giously diverse state. Religion is an essential part of its socio-cultural landscape. Mosques and churches can be found at every corner of cities and villages and they are always full of believers (Abubakar 2014). The dominant position of Sunni Muslims and Christians (of different denominations) make Nigeria an “Islam-Christian nation”, as Opeyoye Modupe (2000, 12) calls it.⁴ Islam dominates in the northern part of the country among the Hausa/Fulani, Kanuri, and Nupe people,⁵ while Christians make up the majority in the southern part of the country among the Igbo and the people of Rivers, Cross-Rivers, Benin, and Calabar. The Western part of the country, dominated by the Yoruba (one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria), has an almost equal share of Muslim and Christian population.

According to a 2018 report from the CIA World Factbook, around 53 percent of Nigerians were Muslims and 46 percent Christians (11 percent are Roman Catholic and 35 percent belong to other denominations). The major religious groups among the Muslims in Nigeria are *Izalat al-bid'a wa iqamat al-Sunna*, known as Izala, the *ṭuruq*⁶ (Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya), Salafiyya, NASFAT, and the Shi'ite. Among Christians, these are the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), Anglican Church, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), and many Pentecostal churches like Christ Embassy, Living Faith Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, etc. However, it is difficult to give numbers for these various groups and denominations because of the lack of an official religious census in the country. [4]

The “Islam-Christian” character of Nigeria has resulted in hostility and competition, often leading to bloody conflicts, between the adherents of Islam and Christianity, especially in northern Nigeria, including the Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba, and Adamawa states that are considered as meeting points for Muslims and Christians in the country (Mustapha and Ehrhard 2018, 226). In addition to inter-religious conflicts between the two major religions, there are also intra-religious tensions between different groups and denominations within the Muslim and Christian communities (Best and Sabastine 2007; Higazi 2007; Last 2007). [5]

In this context, it is important to note that the response to COVID-19 was neither uniform within the larger Christian and Muslim communities, nor could it be said that Christians and Muslims held opposite views on the pandemic. Rather, as we will show in this article, the more radical Christian and Muslim organizations adopted almost identical discourses based on anti-Western conspiracy theories, whereas more moderate Christian and Muslim groups, in a similar way, called for obeying state-introduced restrictions and refrained from gatherings, including religious congregations. [6]

The ‘New Normal’ Form of Worship and Its Discontents during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

After the COVID-19 pandemic started in Nigeria in February 2020, the federal government imposed lockdown in March in three key states (Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory, [7]

4 Besides these, there are other religions in Nigeria, such as African traditional religion, the Hari Krishna, Erckanka, Grail Message, Rucrucians, Guru Maharaji, ChrisIslam, etc. African traditional religion is the original system of religious belief and practices in both the northern and southern parts of Nigeria before the coming of Islam and Christianity. They are still relevant among some ethnic groups, especially in rural areas. Also, some elements of traditional religion are practiced by adherents of Islam and Christianity.

5 However, northern Nigeria has a large Christian minority, some of whom are northerners themselves while others come from the south for work. Out of the twenty states in northern Nigeria (including Abuja), only three (Plateau, Benue, and Taraba) are dominated mainly by Christians.

6 *Ṭuruq* (sing. *ṭarīqa*) is a popular name for the Sufi Orders in Nigeria. Among them, the most popular are Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya.

Abuja). Governors of other states also imposed local lockdowns in their regions beginning from April 2020. This led to severe restrictions on religious gatherings in almost the entire country. In Plateau State, for instance, the number of participants at any religious or social gathering was limited to no more than 50, depending on the size of the worship place (Moti and Vambe 2020, 529). The situation presented an entirely new experience for Nigerian believers, regardless their religious affiliation.

Theologically, the Qur'an emphasizes the importance of the mosque as a worship place where Muslims are expected to remember and glorify Allah (Qur'an: 24: 36), while the Hadith and Sunnah of the Prophet highlight the necessity to conduct daily and weekly worship in congregations (Sabiq 1995, 181). For example, the Prophet emphasized in one of his Hadith that: "Praying in congregation is better with twenty-six rewards than praying alone by an individual" (Yusuf 2009, 113). This form of worship has become a norm for Muslims everywhere in the world. [8]

The Maliki school of thought⁷, to which Muslims in Nigeria belong, emphasizes the importance of praying together in mosques, standing in rows, shoulder to shoulder. The nineteenth-century Islamic reform of Usman Danfodio⁸ further strengthened the culture of communal worship among Muslims in northern Nigeria. With the emergence of the Izala reform movement in 1978, the tradition of congregational prayer in mosques became even firmer, and loudspeakers started to be used to invite Muslims to attend congregational worship. Worshipers are regularly checked by mosque volunteers to make sure that they form proper rows and can touch each other. At the end of the prayer, worshippers exchange the *salām* (peace) greetings followed by the shaking of hands to sustain brotherhood in faith. [9]

There is a similar focus on communal worship among Christians in Nigeria. Most of them attend it on Sunday, although they can gather in the church throughout the week as well. Christian worship in church includes songs of praise, formal prayers, readings from the Bible, singing, and sermons by a priest or a pastor. When we discussed its importance with several Protestant ministers, Pastor Lucky Pam of the COCIN Church in Jos emphasized that worship in the congregation always bring blessings. A pastor of ECWA church in Gombe, Bitrus Maji, quoted verses from the Bible (e.g., Matthew 18: 20 and Psalm 99: 5) to show the importance of worshipping together in the church. [10]

During the lockdown in Spring 2020, all forms of mass gatherings were suspended, including congregational worship in mosques and churches. The ban was gradually relaxed from May 2020, and by the end of June it was eventually lifted, but new regulations restricted the number of worshippers (maximum of 50 in some places, depending on the size of the mosque or church) and stipulated the distance of two meters between them. After five months of strict restrictions, the regulations began to ease gradually, and eventually life returned to normal toward the end of 2020. [11]

Hence, for most of 2020, COVID-19 has challenged the culture of communal worship for Muslims and Christians. While it became clear that human-to-human contact is the major source of the virus' transmission within any community, many Muslims and Christians in [12]

7 The Sunni Islamic world has four schools of thought, which are called *madhab* (pl. *madhāhib*): Māliki, Hanafi, Shāfi'i and Hanbali. The Māliki School is predominant in West and North Africa, the Hanafi School dominates in South and Central Asia, the Hanbali School in North and Central Arabia, and the Shāfi'i School in East Africa and Southeast Asia. These are mainly schools of jurisprudence.

8 Usman Danfodio was a nineteenth century Muslim cleric who started a movement for the reform of Islam in the Hausaland, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This reform led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, which is still a strong Muslim religious authority in Nigeria.

Nigeria viewed the restrictions and the fact that most religious services were transferred to the Internet as depriving them of their rights to practice their faith in congregation.

Malam Musa Shehu,⁹ a regular worshipper in a mosque at Balarabe Street in the city of Jos, [13] describes the way in which the two-meter regulation was practiced in their mosque:

We had to arrange among ourselves who attend which worship just to conform [14] with the government restrictions. This has caused a lot of confusion and discomfort to some of the worshippers. We have equally faced criticisms from the other Muslims especially the Izala for accepting the COVID-19 and complying with these regulations.

In her turn, Georgina Gomwir, a regular member of the St. Mary's Catholic Church in Jos,¹⁰ indicated that in her congregation, worship was conducted at intervals—6:00–8:00 am, 8:00–10:00 am, and 10:00–12:00 pm—to avoid congestion and keep the necessary physical distance between the participants. Worshipers could choose which part of the day was suitable for them. However, this new form of worship became a misnomer for many Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. For example, according to Lawal Muhammad, an imam in Jos: “Adopting such a form of worship means that Muslims have neglected the Sunna of the Prophet for fear of death from disease, whereas Allah has stipulated the time and place of death of every person and no one will escape it.”¹¹ In his turn, Audu Kenneth, a member and regular worshipper at the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Jos,¹² pointed out the negative effects that social distancing caused in their church during the lockdown and was confident that other worship places faced similar complications. First, according to him, it reduced the number of church attendees, especially because people without facemask were not allowed to enter the church. Second, communal worship was reduced to one hour for each group of worshippers instead of the normal two hours in order to reduce the discomfort of wearing a mask for a prolonged time. Finally, children were not allowed into the church, meaning that many parents had to stay home with them. [15]

These and other restrictions led to various forms of resistance and protest. For example, [16] Lawal Dedee, a human rights activists and regular worshipper at Majema mosque in Jos, stated that during the COVID-19 lockdown he stopped attending congregational prayer for about two months. He explained the rationale for this decision: “The new form of worship that required two-meter gap between worshippers was completely a new experience for me. Therefore, I was confused and felt like I was not doing the right worship. Because of that, I restricted myself to praying at home with my family.”¹³ Another interviewee, Malam Babangida Lawal, described an incident at the Al-Bayan Mosque in Jos:

That week in November 2020, I went for a Friday congregational worship. After [17] conducting the usual sermon, the Imam announced that he will not lead such a new form of prayer. He urged the congregation to form rows shoulder-to-shoulder and neglect governmental regulation. To my surprise, most of the audience shouted “*Allāhu Akbar!*” in praise of the imam and complied to his request.¹⁴

9 Interview with Malam Musa Shehu, a teacher and worshipper at Balarabe Street Mosque Jos, November 2020.

10 Interview with Georgina Gomwir, a member of the St. Mary's Church Jos, February 2021.

11 Interview with Lawal Muhammad, an imam at Anguwan Rogo Jos, February 2021.

12 Interview with Audu Kenneth, a regular member of the Emmanuel Baptist Church Jos, February 2021.

13 Interview with Lawal Dedee, a humanitarian, Jos, February 2021.

14 Interview with Malam Babangida Lawal, a regular worshipper at Al-Bayan Mosque in Jos, November 2020.

This incident illustrates well the kind of discomfort with which most Muslims in Nigeria view the need for social distancing during worship. Similar acts of disobedience in many mosques and churches in different parts of the country have been reported in the media. For example, in November 2020, the National Television Network (NTA) broadcasted sessions of a mobile court in Abuja that issued an order to arrest some imams and pastors either for violating the lockdown by conducting worship in their churches or mosques or for not observing the social distance rule when meetings were allowed. [18]

After discussing an importance of communal worship for Nigerian Christians and Muslims in this section, in the following part of this article we will move to the responses to COVID-19 on part of influential religious leaders who shaped their Muslim and Christian followers' attitude to the pandemic. [19]

Religious Leaders' Responses to the Pandemic

The responses of Muslim and Christian religious leaders to the pandemic in Nigeria and the measures taken by secular state authorities to regulate the spread of COVID-19 varied between full compliance and strict rejection. The first attitude, which was presented by people such as Mansur Sokoto, an influential Muslim scholar and a professor at the Usman Danfodio University in Sokoto, accepted the reality of COVID-19 and advised the Muslim public to adhere to the health regulations stipulated by the state, especially the suspension of religious gatherings and worship in mosques. Mansur Sokoto drew on the historical *ṭā'ūn* (epidemic) during the period of the second Muslim Caliph Umar bin Khattab, known as the plague of Amwas (638–639). The plague had stricken the Muslim army at Amwas, a Syrian city, causing the death of more than 25,000 men (Dols 1974). In a video clip circulating on WhatsApp since November 2020, Sokoto narrated that during that epidemic Muslims were instructed to disperse into valleys and avoid contact to stop the spread of the disease. He then concluded that this example justified the suspension of congregational worship in mosques in Nigeria today due to the COVID-19 pandemic. [20]

Furthermore, Sokoto called for a collective Muslim *fatwa* on such a critical issue as COVID-19 and discouraged Muslims from accepting *fatwas* from individual Muslim scholars who might have limited knowledge about the pandemic. Sokoto's views were supported by the *Jamā'at Nasril Islam* (JNI or Society for the Support of Islam), an umbrella organization that represents all Muslim associations/groups in Nigeria. During several of their press conferences and media publications, representatives of JNI instructed Muslims to suspend congregational worship in mosques during the lockdown, accept the two-meter spacing between worshippers, and abide by health regulations such as avoiding handshakes after worship; these were regulations stipulated by the government. The President General of the JNI, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar,¹⁵ who is also the spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims and Sultan of Sokoto, often appeared in the media wearing a facemask and encouraged fellow Muslims to follow his example. In March 2020, the Sultan stated that "it is sheer ignorance for someone to disobey the measures put in place by health personnel and authorities" (Sahara Reporters 2020). [21]

In a similar vein, the Christian umbrella organization—Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)—emphasized that all churches in the country should strictly follow COVID-19 preven- [22]

15 Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar is the leader of the Qādiriyya Sufi Order in Nigeria and president-general of *Jamā'at Nasril Islam* (JNI) and Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). He is the descendant of Usman Danfodio and now the Sultan of the Muslims in Nigeria.

tive restrictions. According to its president, Rev. Dr. Samson Ayokunle, “no sacrifice is too great to end the pandemic once and for all.” With these words, it was reported in the Punch Newspaper of 13 November 2020 that the CAN President challenged Muslim and Christian religious leaders who downplayed the health aspect of the pandemic. The statement also criticized those rejecting the pandemic as a conspiracy against the faithful.¹⁶

Two major Muslim and Pentecostal organizations—NASFAT and Living Faith Church—did not challenge the reality of the pandemic but interpreted it in spiritual rather than medical terms. NASFAT is the acronym of the Arabic phrase *Nasrul-Lāhi-Fathi*, which translates as “help of Allah is triumphant”. The organization began as a worship group in Lagos in 1995. It was launched by young Muslim middle-class professionals who wanted to project a new image of Islam as a modern and sophisticated religion (Soares 2009). Living Faith Church Worldwide (also known as Winners Chapel) is one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, with its headquarters located in Ota, Ogun State. This mega-church, according to its website, has a global outreach with congregations in 65 countries. The church was established in 1981 by David Oyedepo after he claimed to receive a message from God saying, “Now the hour has come to liberate the world from all oppressions of the devil, through the preaching of the Word of faith; and I am sending you to undertake this task” (Lindhardt 2014, 24). Living Faith and NASFAT are major players on the religious scene of the Nigerian urban environment and their view on the pandemic influences large numbers of people in the country.

According to NASFAT’s *ulama* (teachers), there are several layers of meanings behind pandemics and sickness such as COVID-19. The pain experience by the sick is not meaningless suffering but is rather encapsulated in the overarching divine plan by God. Suffering serves as expiation for sins a person committed in the past. In this understanding, pain has meta-empirical functions beyond bio-psychological discomfort. This theology emphasizes that pain cleanses sin. Another function of sickness is to move one closer to God. In NASFAT’s teaching, the dominant belief is that suffering generates a feeling of powerlessness and forces the sufferer to invoke divine intervention in his or her life. Sheriff Abdulganiyu, a member of NASFAT, puts it as follows: “People suffering from pain always remark ‘Oh God, help me’ or pray fervently to God for relief.”¹⁷ In other words, through continuous consciousness of the presence of God resulting from sickness or pandemic, one can experience spiritual transformation and become more committed to the path of God.

During the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Nigeria in March and April 2020, the imams of the NASFAT in Jos dedicated many of their Friday *khutba* (sermons) to the COVID-19 outbreak. Their central message was that the disease was a punishment from God because of widespread sin in contemporary times. They asserted that when humans turn their attention away from the path of righteousness, God uses all means available to make them rethink their unworthy deeds. The imams reiterated that a tragic disease such as COVID-19 forced people into spirituality. However, they continued, God’s punishment of humanity with COVID-19 is not an act of divine revenge but a corrective measure.

Imam Abdulkareem of the NASFAT’s mosque in Jos emphasized that the teaching of Islam regarding epidemic outbreaks is remarkably consistent with modern medicine. The imam quoted the hadith of Prophet Muhammad which says: “If you hear the news of an outbreak

16 Only the two religious organizations in Nigeria, JNII headed by the Sultan and CAN by Rev. Dr. Ayonkunle, are state-funded purposely to be umbrella organizations representing Muslims and Christians in the country. In most cases, they support state policies and ally with the state. Apart from these two, no religious body receives any funding or regular government support.

17 Interview with Sheriff Abdulganiyu, a regular member of NASFAT, May 2020.

of an epidemic (plague) in a certain place, do not enter that place: and if the epidemic falls in a place while you are present in it, do not leave that place to escape from the epidemic.” According to the imam, this hadith expresses the understanding of the contagious nature of diseases. The hadith also presents preventive measures to curtail the rapid spread of plagues through the restriction of movements in and out of the affected area. The imam quoted another hadith: “The plague was a punishment which Allah used to send on whom He wished, but Allah made it a blessing for the believers. None (among the believers) remains patient in a land in which plague has broken out and considers that nothing will befall him except what Allah has ordained for him, but that Allah will grant him a reward similar to that of a martyr.”¹⁸ Most of the Friday *khutba* of NASFAT’s mosques in Jos during the COVID-19 outbreak focused on urging the congregations to remain faithful and to know that Allah is in control of the pandemic situation.

The true and lasting panacea to the COVID-19 outbreak, according to NASFAT’s ulama, is repentance and refraining from sin. When people adopt noble behavior and become pious, Allah does not afflict them with deadly diseases. The imam in Jos encouraged the congregation to recite the following prayer for the victims of COVID-19 and other illnesses: “Take away the disease, O the Lord of the people! Cure him as You are the One Who cures, there is no cure but Yours, a cure that leaves no disease.” The imam reiterated that illnesses resulting from demonic and witchcraft attacks or magical spells can be cured solely by different verses from the Holy Qur’an. However, with sicknesses that has a biological origin, such as COVID-19, Qur’anic therapy and prayer should be complemented with medical treatment.¹⁹ [27]

In turn, according to Living Faith, in the Book of Exodus (23:25) God made a promise to the people of the Old Testament that if they obey his commandments and worship him, he will not afflict them with any disease. David Oyedepo (2008, 17), the church founder and leader, argues that the People of the Old Testament were given the gift of health in exchange for their faithful observance of rituals and unconditional obedience to God, but Christians receive health on the condition of faith alone. What follows according to Oyedepo is that Christians are not supposed to be sick, and if sickness befalls a given person, it means that there is a problem with his or her faith. Oyedepo teaches that diseases and pandemics do not come from God because God could not cripple and destroy his beloved children through sickness. According to the pastor, death and sickness descended into the world with man’s original sin in the Garden of Eden. [28]

In the teaching of Living Faith, pathogenic microorganisms such as viruses and bacteria are the work of Satan. He created negative energy in the spiritual realm, they argue, which could manifest as a disease in the material world through the agency of human speech and thought. When one either voluntarily or involuntarily utters the phrase “I am sick” or constantly thinks negatively, he or she activates energy in the invisible world that causes sickness in the body. The actions of people in this world have consequences beyond the ordinary course of events because people are situated in a web of invisible forces that continually influence their lives. This attitude suggests that for Living Faith, there are evil spiritual forces that underlie the materiality of pandemics. In the same vein, Oyedepo preaches that the only solution to the pandemic is faith in Christ, since it was his death on the cross that vanquished the devil who introduced sin and sickness into the world. [29]

Oyedepo and other leaders of Living Faith argue that when physical and mental health [30]

18 All translations are by the authors unless indicated otherwise.

19 Interview with Malam Abubakar Muhammad, Izala’s representative at Dadin Kowa Jos, August 2020.

reigns in a society people can worship God without distractions and achieve the success and prosperity that God designed for them. But the devil is not happy with this situation. Therefore, he introduced diseases, such as COVID-19, to torment believers, make them miserable, and ravage their lives. Mathew Osoji, a pastor of Living Faith in Jos, explains the reason for the rise of COVID-19 as follows:

The devil enjoys creating and spreading deadly outbreaks of disease, particularly the powerful ones such as COVID-19, because they rejuvenate his life. As COVID-19 devastates some countries, the power of the devil is becoming more vigorous and powerful. This is why the devil will never stop creating powerful plagues that may defy conventional medicine.²⁰ [31]

This remark shows that the negative energy that manifests as sickness and saps the vitality of an affected person at the same time vivifies the life of the devil. According to Osoji, another means that the devil is using to weaken the shield of faith of born-again believers is by sending fear and negative thoughts into their minds. When people start to fear COVID-19, they become vulnerable to infection and allow the spreading of the virus. The preachers of Living Faith admonished the Nigerian public to desist from being terrified by COVID-19 because by doing so, they would strengthen the disease. [32]

Despite the quick spread of COVID-19 in Lagos, members of Living Faith believed that a truly born-again person could not be infected. John Adegga, a pastor of the church, emphasized that “when referring to the true believers, Jesus said: ‘They will pick up serpents with their own hands, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them [...]’” (Mark 16-18). He said this prophecy could be applied to the COVID-19 virus. A believer who encounters the virus is protected by his or her faith, as promised by Jesus. [33]

Another means of controlling COVID-19 according to Living Faith is through affirmative prayer speech that commands the virus to disappear in the name of Jesus. In a sermon titled *Sound Code*, Oyedepo went as far as providing the mechanics of affirmative prayer speech. He stated that: [34]

Whenever one speaks, one releases measurable energy with the sound wave from one’s mouth. This energy is acted upon by the power of the Holy Spirit to make an effect on the material world. All subatomic particles contain sound codes that respond to human speech. If speech is energy and energy is matter, according to Albert Einstein’s formula, then speech is also a matter. Furthermore, speech can release forces of destruction, and this is how diseases are destroyed by commanding them to disappear in the name of Jesus.²¹ [35]

During the COVID-19 outbreak, pastors of various branches of especially Pentecostal churches applied this notion of the power of speech to cure COVID-19 infections. They maintained that sound codes uttered by believers attack the COVID-19 virus and disperse its atoms. [36]

There are several noteworthy similarities and differences between Living Faith and NASFAT in their imaginaries of the pandemic and their responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. Both trace the origins of peoples’ susceptibility to various illnesses to the sin of Adam and Eve. After embedding COVID-19 in supernatural meaning, Living Faith and NASFAT offer a spiritual [37]

20 Oyedepo’s preaching on YouTube, July 2020.

21 Interview with Muhyideen Aabdulkareem, a member of NASFAT, May 2020.

solution to the pandemic. The two groups do not reject the biomedical techniques employed by health professionals in tackling the disease but regard them as secondary to the deeper spiritual means of withstanding the outbreak.

A significant difference between the two models of sickness proposed by NASFAT and the Embassy lies in their view on its causative agents—God and the devil, respectively. For NASFAT, since the ultimate source of the pandemic is divine, which is inherently good, the fundamental purpose of the pandemic is also good—it removes the sin and brings people closer to God. However, for Living Faith, all diseases, including COVID-19, originate from the devil, who is inherently evil. Therefore, the pandemic is essentially evil too. The spiritual means of tackling COVID-19 and other pandemics proposed by Living Faith and NASFAT are informed by their conceived meaning of pandemic. [38]

Vitebsky (2001, 98) writes that the “metaphoric logic of specific modalities of healing often follows from the associated model of the pandemic.” The meaning ascribed to the COVID-19 pandemic by Living Faith and NASFAT plays a vital role in mitigating the terror and anxiety that dominated the minds of the people during the emergency period. In this vein, Daniel Moerman (1979, 60) argues that the metaphoric structure or system of meaning attached to illness and healing is as important as any “actual,” “physical,” and “pharmacological” aspects. Living Faith has provided a great sense of immunity and security to its members by reminding them that faith is the most effective shield they have and that they can even destroy the virus with the power of affirmative prayer. A pastor of Living Faith, Emmanuel Steven, stated: “I am not afraid of COVID-19. Even if all my neighbors perish from the outbreak, I will not flee because I have absolute assurance that I will not be infected.” In their turn, many members of NASFAT found consolation in the notion that COVID-19 is not a haphazard tragedy that may randomly strike any unlucky person, but a disease deliberately created and controlled by God, which could not infect anyone except by divine permission. [39]

At the more radical end of the scale of religious responses to the pandemic were those influential Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria who dismissed the very reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and flouted all health regulations against the virus as an evil plan by the West to distract believers from worship. The most prominent among them were Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir, the leader of the Izala movement, and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the founder and head of the Christ Embassy Church. *Jamā’at Izālat al-bid’a wa’iqāmat al-Sunna* (the Society for the Eradication of Innovations and Establishment of sunna), or Izala in short, was founded by Shaykh Isma’ila Idris (1934–2000) to purify Islam from innovations and non-Islamic customs perceived to be practiced or supported by the Sufi Orders in Nigeria. The movement has also been engaged in a bitter struggle against some Islamic folk practices such as using amulets, drinking washed scriptural verses written on slate, exorcisms, and sorcery (Abubakar 2020, 112). Izala was established in Jos in 1978 and today has branches all over Nigeria as well as in Niger Republic, Benin, Chad, Cameroon, and Ghana. In its turn, Christ Embassy, founded by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome in 1987, has now become a global church with about 13 million followers, according to its website, and 145 branches on five continents. Akukwe Obinna (2012, 42) reported that Christ Embassy has a regular membership of over three million in Nigeria in addition to many supporters who belong to other denominations, but regard Pastor Chris as their deputy pastor. The Church has penetrated most parts of Nigeria and spread in the Nigerian diaspora, reaching many African countries, such as Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, as well as Europe, Asia, and North and South America. [40]

Amidst the first wave of the pandemic, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir issued a fatwa instructing [41]

his followers to continue with their normal congregational worship at all Izala mosques in the country. He encouraged handshakes as a religious ideal and refused the call to wear face masks and observe physical distancing in the mosque. Muslim scholars who approve Shaykh Sani Yahya's views often question the regulations which allow markets to remain open but force mosques to close. For example, Malam Abubakar Muhammad,²² a representative of Shaykh Sani Yahya in Dadin Kowa, a district of Jos, insists that the spiritual ill of suspending congregational worship is much worse than the infection with COVID-19. In a similar vein, most Muslim theologians associated with Izala believe that nothing happens to the believer without the knowledge of God, and that God alone can protect and cure all forms of illnesses, including COVID-19 (Oginni et al. 2020, 1). Some of them went as far as to declare that suspension of congregational worship in mosques is a demonstration of weak *imān* (faith) on the part of Muslims who accept to do so.

In several sermons and press conferences between April and November 2020, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir declared COVID-19 a farce, maliciously created by secret agents from the US to prevent Muslims from performing their religious obligations such as pilgrimage, congregational prayers, preaching, and handshakes. He stated that "COVID-19 is *fatalwar Yahudu*"—literarily "a ghost of the West"—an illusion fabricated and spread by the Western countries. To prove his point, Sani Yahya highlighted that the virus was foretold in a 1981 novel titled *The Eyes of Darkness* written by Dean R. Koontz. Sani Yahya and some of his followers also pointed to several dystopian movies featuring global pandemics, such as *Outbreak* (1995), *I am Legend* (2007), and *Contagion* (2011), as proving his claim that COVID-19 is a premeditated Western conspiracy. In August 2020, when the virus temporarily retreated, Shaykh Sa'id Hassan Jingir, the deputy leader of Izala, praised the stance adopted by Sani Yahya: [42]

Our charismatic leader, may God bless him, had earlier denied the existence of Coronavirus and he instructed us to continue with normal prayers at our different mosques at a time when other Muslims were misled into suspending prayers in congregations, which is a major mistake in Islam. Now that people are back to their normal businesses, who is right, them or us? Where is Coronavirus in our midst today? People should understand that the whole issue about Coronavirus is a Western conspiracy to deny Muslims the blessings of praying in congregation. [43]

In a similar vein, the leader of Christ Embassy Church, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, subscribed to a conspiracy theory that unites misapprehensions about 5G technology and COVID-19. According to this theory, various Western governments, media corporations, and scientific experts are masterminding a 'new world order' through 5G technology. Oyakhilome added a religious dimension to the COVID-19-5G conspiracy theory. In one of his online sermons uploaded on YouTube on April 8, 2020, he stated that both COVID-19 and 5G technology are the products of "satanic secret agents" from the US. According to the pastor, they will soon introduce a COVID-19 vaccine which will contain nano-microchips. The microchips, which are to be controlled via 5G technology, will be able to read and influence human thoughts. Consequently, they will undermine human agency and free-will, and force people to worship Satan instead of God. Oyakhilome further stated that the federal state lockdown of Abuja and Lagos was intended to allow the secret installation of 5G antennas and other equipment. He also claimed that the microchips that will be injected into human bodies through COVID-19 vaccines are the 'mark of the beast,' as foretold in the Book of Revelation of the New [44]

²² Interview with Malam Abubakar Muhammad, Izala's representative at *Dadin Kowa* Jos, August 2020.

Testament. To prove his theory, Pastor Oyakhilome directed his audience to the dystopian Hollywood film *Divergent* (2014), which deals with the theme of mind control through a serum infused into the human body.

As the above discussion shows, Izala and Christ Embassy are strikingly similar in their responses to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and against the subsequent strategies introduced by the government to protect the citizens against the virus. The leaders assume a certain affinity between the COVID-19 pandemic, dystopian movies and fiction novels, and conspiracy theories. COVID-19 lends itself to conspiracy theories because while it has had a devastating impact on the global economy, health, and all social institutions, many people find it difficult to reduce the global human suffering unleashed by the virus to a blind natural happenstance. [45]

In this context, it is important to note that the films the two religious leaders referred to are not simply false or fictional audio-visual narratives, but rather complex works of art designed to hook viewers to the screen till the end of the show. When certain scenes in a film coincide with spectators' lived experiences, flashes of recognition occur, which usually elicit an emotional response and excitement. As Birgit Meyer (2015) has stated in the context of the Ghanaian film industry and its relation to Christianity, "the success or failure of a movie for spectators depends on the capacity of filmmakers to mediate everyday experiences in such a way that the movie incited recognition by and participation of the audiences" (2015, 142). The recognition in this instance happens when the watching of a film occurs after the lived experience. [46]

However, we suggest that when lived experiences follow or mimic what was earlier seen in a film, then this sense of recognition is transformed into one of prediction. In the case of COVID-19, earlier dystopian/pandemic movies are assumed to have predicted current lived experiences. For Shaykh Sani Yahya and Pastor Oyakhilome, the convergences between the COVID-19 outbreak and the dystopian/pandemic films are beyond coincidence; there must be a sinister conspiracy behind the striking similarities. To further connect movies and conspiracy theories, we borrow from Birgit Meyer's (2015) notion of film as 'revelation,' which explores the capacity of film to visually reveal the invisible spiritual and occult forces and entities that form the bedrock of African and Pentecostal cosmologies. To Shaykh Sani Yahya and Pastor Oyakhilome and their followers, dystopian/pandemic films not only revealed hidden conspiracies against Islam and Christianity but also visually predicted the current crisis years before it happened. [47]

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria generated divergent reactions and views from the religious leaders in the country. As we presented in this article, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir from Izala and Pastor Oyakhilome from Christ Embassy based their rejection of the pandemic and state-introduced measures to counteract it on conspiracy theories, drawing on fictional novels and dystopic Hollywood movies. In their turn, other hugely popular Muslim and Christian organizations—NASFAT and Living Faith—turned to the discourse that focused on spiritual and moral causes of the pandemic, namely weak faith and disobedience to God. Consequently, they saw religious observance as the main remedy for the coronavirus. [48]

Since January 2021, most Nigerians have returned to their daily routines without much anxiety about COVID-19. Many people have not been using face masks or observing social [49]

distancing, and religious and social gatherings have returned to normal. Sometimes, people have been teasing those who wear facemasks and joke that COVID-19 is gone. A respondent and a resident of Rimi town in Kano, Yakubu Nagana²³ stressed that “we do not recognize COVID-19 here and everybody goes about his/her normal business as usual.”²⁴ This attitude has been at least partially influenced by imageries and interpretations of the pandemic by popular religious leaders who either openly rejected the existence of the virus or explained it in spiritual rather than medical terms. On the one hand, these imageries enabled many believers to find meaning in the disease and overcome the fear and terror that engulfed the nation. On the other hand, with so many different opinions on the pandemic and the ways to deal with it, ordinary Christians and Muslims were often confused about what to accept or reject about COVID-19. The real impact of the discourses we discussed in this chapter still awaits a full evaluation.

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24 Interview with Yakubu Nagana, a resident of Rimi town in Kano State, November 2020.

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