



(PREPRINT) Curtailed Worship, Conspiracy Theories, and Hollywood Dystopias: Reacting to the COVID-19 Pandemic among the Reformists Muslims and Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria

ANONYMOUS

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 Muslims 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 (the Christ Embassy and the Living Faith). As we show, despite many differences and even the 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 a work of the devil) or rejected the very existence of coronavirus and presented the pandemic as the Western conspiracy designed to stop Muslim and Christian religious activities in Nigeria.

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

IMPORTANT

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Introduction

When the COVID-19 infection rate began to rise in Nigeria, 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. However, the compliance with these

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regulations was not strictly enforced by government officials due to the sensitivity of religion in Nigeria. Many religious leaders and organizations did not downplay the reality of the pandemic and hence complied with the restrictions. However, some of them openly denied the very reality of the coronavirus and opposed regulations put in place by the governments to halt the spread of the disease in the country.

This article examines the responses to the pandemic of two major religious groups—reformists Muslims and Pentecostal Christians. 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 the Society for the Support of Islam (a body that represents all Muslim organizations in Nigeria), on the other hand.¹ 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. Second, we analyse denialist discourses on the COVID-19 produced and promoted by Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir (leader of the Izala, a reform movement) and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (the founder and leader of the Pentecostal church known as the Christ Embassy). These two religious figures have criticized the government for suspending mass religious activities and gathering, which in their assumption is nothing but a Western conspiracy against religious communities and humanity at large. The Izala, NASFAT, Living Faith, and Christ Embassy have millions of followers across Nigeria and in different parts of Africa. As such, they are important social actors in Nigeria with the power to challenge the authority of the state in Nigeria. [4]

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 a strong public support and control over their followers (Boege et al. 2008). The exercise of this power has been 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. [5]

Religious Landscape in Nigeria

Nigeria, with its population of more than 200 million, is an ethnically, linguistically, and religiously 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 importance of religion is further strengthened by its close, mutually reinforcing, relations with ethnic identity. [6]

The dominant position of Sunni Muslims and Christians (of different denominations) make [7]

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

Nigeria an “Islam-Christian nation”, as Opeloye Modupe (2000, 12) calls it.² Islam first came to Nigeria in the eleventh century through the present Borno State (a strong Boko Haram province located in the north-eastern part of the country) and was established in the Kanem Empire (1380s–1893) that controlled Borno at that time. In the fourteenth century, Islam became dominant on the territory of the present Kano State (in northern Nigeria), which was then one of the important trading centres of the Hausa Kingdom (Clarke and Linden 1984, 32:11). From these two initial centres, Islam gradually spread to the entire northern Nigeria, an area with the largest population in the country. In its turn, Christianity first entered Nigeria in 1830s–1840s by the effort of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) (Ayandele 1991, 4; Gaiya 2004, 357) and became the main religion in the southern part of the country. As a result, Nigeria is divided along religious line. Islam dominates in the northern part of the country among the Hausa/Fulani, Kanuri, and Nupe people,³ while Christians are 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 World Factbook by CIA, around 53 percent of Nigerians were Muslims and 46 percent—Christians (11 percent Roman Catholic and percent of other denominations). The major religious groups among the Muslims in Nigeria are *Izalat al-bid’awā iqamat al-Sunna* known as Izala, the *ṭuruq*⁴ (Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya), Salafi, NASFAT, and the Shi’a. Among the 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 the Christ Embassy, the Living Faith Church, the Redeem Christian Church of God, etc. However, it is difficult to give numbers for these various groups and denominations. [8]

The “Islam-Christian” character of Nigeria have resulted in hostility and competition, often leading to bloody conflicts, between the adherents of Islam and Christianity, especially in northern Nigeria, including Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba, and Adamawa states considered as meeting points for Muslims and Christians in the country. 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. In this context, it is important to note that the response to the COVID-19 was neither uniform within the larger Christian and Muslim communities, nor it could be said that Christians and Muslims held opposite views on the pandemic. Rather, as we will show later in this article, the more radical Christian and Muslim organizations adopted almost identical rejectionist discourses based on anti-Western conspiracy theories, whereas more moderate Christian and Muslim groups called in a similar way to obey state-introduced restrictions and refrain from gatherings, including religious congregations. [9]

2 Except of them, there are other religions in Nigeria such as the African Traditional Religion, the Hari Krishna, Erckanka, Grail Message, Rucicrucians, Guru Maharaji, ChrisIslam, etc. The African Traditional Religion was the original religious belief and practice in both the northern and southern parts of Nigeria before the coming of other foreign religions such as Islam and Christianity. It is still relevant among some ethnic groups, especially in rural areas. Also, some elements of traditional religion are practiced by adherents of Islam and Christianity.

3 However, northern Nigeria has a large Christian minority, some of whom are northerners themselves while others come from the south for work. Actually, out of the twenty states in northern Nigeria (excluding Abuja) three—Plateau, Benue, and Taraba—are inhabited mainly by Christians Plateau.

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

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, 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. [10]

Theologically, the Qur’an emphasizes the importance of a 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 the 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). Yusuf Sa’ad Mahmud (2009, 113) stressed that during the early period of the Islamic history, congregational worship was a requirement for every male Muslim. This form of worship has become a norm for Muslims everywhere in the world. [11]

The Maliki school of thought⁵, to which Muslims in Nigeria belong, emphasizes the importance of praying together in mosques, standing in rows, arm in arm. The nineteenth-century Islamic reform of Usman Danfodio⁶ in northern Nigeria further strengthened the culture of communal worship among the Muslims. With the emergence of the Izala reform movement in 1978, the tradition of congregational prayer in mosques has become even firmer, and the loudspeakers started to be used to invite Muslims to attend congregational worship since then. Worshippers are regularly checked by mosque volunteers to make sure that the worshippers 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. [12]

There is a similar focus on communal worship among Christians in Nigeria. Most of them attend communal worship on Sunday, although they can gather also throughout the week. Christian worship in the 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 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. [13]

During the lockdown in Spring 2020, all forms of mass gatherings were suspended including congregational worship in mosques and churches. When the ban was eventually lifted, new regulations restricted number of worshippers (maximum 50 in some places, depending on the size of the mosque or church) and stipulated the distance of two meters between them. Hence, [14]

5 Sunni Islamic world has four schools of thought, which are called *madhhab* (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.

6 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.

COVID-19 has challenged a centuries-old religious 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 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 together.

Malam Musa Shehu,⁷ a regular worshipper in a mosque at Balarabe Street in the city of Jos, [15] 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 with the government restrictions. This has caused a lot of confusion and discomfort to some of the worshippers. We have equally faced criticisms from them and other Muslims especially the Izala for accepting the COVID-19 and complying with these regulations. [16]

In her turn, Georgina Gomwir, a regular member of the St. Mary's Catholic Church in Jos,⁸ [17] indicates 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 worshippers.

However, this new form of worship has become 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."⁹ In his turn, Audu Kenneth, a member and regular worshipper at the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Jos,¹⁰ pointed out the negative effects that the 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 attendants, especially that people without face mask were not allowed to enter the church. Second, the 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. [18]

These and other restrictions led to different forms of resistance and protest. For example, [19] 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. As he explained 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."¹¹ 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 conducting the usual sermon, the Imam announced that he will not lead such a new [20]

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

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

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

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

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

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.¹²

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. [21]

After discussing in this section an importance of communal worship for Nigerian Christians and Muslims, in the following part of this article, we will analyze the different responses of religious leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. [22]

Religious Leaders’ Responses to the Pandemic

The responses of Muslim and Christian religious leaders to the spread of COVID-19 in Nigeria and the measures taken by secular state authorities to regulate the spread of COVID-19 vary between full compliance and strict rejection. The first attitude, which is presented by people such as Mansur Sokoto, an influential Muslim scholar and a Professor at the Usman Danfodio University in Sokoto, accepts the reality of COVID-19 and advises 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 draws 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 struck 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 justifies the suspension of congregational worship in mosques today in Nigeria due to COVID-19 pandemic. [23]

Furthermore, Sokoto calls for a collective Muslim *fatwa* on such a critical issue as COVID-19 and discourages Muslims from accepting *fatwas* from individual Muslim scholars. Sokoto’s views are supported by the *Jamā’at Nasrīl Islam* (JNI or Society for the Support of Islam), an umbrella organization that represents all Muslim associations 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 2-meter spacing between worshippers, and abide by health regulations such as avoiding handshakes after worship.¹³ The President General of the JNI, Alhaji Sa’ad Abubakar,¹⁴ who is also the spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims and Sultan of Sokoto, often appears in the media wearing a facemask and encourages fellow Muslims to follow his example. In March 2020, the Sultan [24]

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

13 Handshake is a fundamental cultural norm and a means of social relationship in Nigeria. Whenever two or more people meet, the first thing they do is to shake the hands of one another.

14 Muhammad Sa’ad Abubakar is the leader of the Qādiriyya Sufi Order in Nigeria and president-general of *Jamā’at Nasrīl 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.

stated that “It is sheer ignorance for someone to disobey the measures put in place by health personnel and authorities” (Sahara Reporters 2020). 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 preventive 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, the Sultan and the CAN President challenged Muslim and Christian religious leaders who either downplay the medical aspect of the pandemic or reject it as a conspiracy against the faithful.¹⁵

Some major Muslim and Pentecostal organizations such as NASFAT and Living Faith Church do not challenge the reality of the pandemic but interpret 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 the 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 a headquarters located in Ota, Ogun State. This megachurch 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 at the religious scene of the Nigerian urban environment and their view on the pandemic influences large numbers of people in the country. [25]

According to the 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 is that Christians are not supposed to be sick and if sickness attacks 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. [26]

In the teaching of the Living Faith, pathogenic microorganisms such as viruses and bacteria are the work of Satan. He created negative energy in the spiritual realm 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 the 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 the 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 the faith in Christ since it was his death on the cross that vanquished the devil who introduced sin and sickness into the world. [27]

15 The two religious organizations in Nigeria; JNI 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.

Oyedepo and other leaders of the Living Faith argue that when physical and mental health reigns in a society people can worship God without distractions and achieve 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 the Living Faith in Jos explains the reason for the rise of COVID-19 as follows: [28]

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.¹⁶ [29]

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. The moment people start to fear the COVID-19 they become vulnerable to the infection and allow the spread of the virus. The preachers of the Living Faith admonished the Nigerian public to desist from being terrified by COVID-19 because by doing so, they are strengthening the disease. [30]

Despite the quick spread of COVID-19 in Lagos, members of the Living Faith believed that a truly born-again person could not be infected. John Adegba, 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. [31]

Another means of controlling COVID-19 according to the 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 the affirmative prayer speech. He stated that 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. He claimed that 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.¹⁷ During the COVID-19 outbreak, pastors of various branches of the Church applied this notion of the power of speech to cure the COVID-19 infection. They maintained that sound code uttered by believers attacks the COVID-19 virus and disperses its atoms. [32]

Like the Living Faith, NASFAT stress that, according to the teaching of Islam, in the primordial times in heaven there was no sickness, disease, or pandemic. Life in paradise was perfect and joyful. Only after the fall of Adam and Eve from heaven into the material world, sickness and death became necessary parts and parcels of human experience. One of the important functions of sickness according to Muhyideen Abdulkareem, a member of the NASFAT, is to facilitate the transition to life beyond this world.¹⁸ Contrary to Living Faith, in NASFAT teaching, it was Allah who created pathogens to terminate life in the material world. [33]

16 Interview with Pastor Mathew Osoji, a pastor with the Living Faith in Jos, 22 June, 2020.

17 Oyedepo’s preaching on YouTube, July 2020.

18 Interview with Muhyideen Aabdkareem, a member of NASFAT, May 2020.

Moreover, according to NASFAT's *ulama* (teachers), there are several layers of meanings behind pandemics and sickness. The pain experienced by the sick is not a meaningless suffering but rather it is encapsulated in the overarching divine plan. The suffering serves as expiation for sins he or she committed in the past. In this understanding, the pain has meta-empirical functions beyond the bio-psychological discomfort. 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 the feeling of powerlessness and forces the sufferer to invoke the 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."¹⁹ 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. [34]

During the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Nigeira in March and April 2020, the imams of the NASFAT in Jos dedicated many of their Friday *khutba* (*sermon*) to the COVID-19 outbreak. Their central message was that the disease was a punishment from God because of the 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 force people into spiritual. However, God's punishment of humanity with COVID-19 is not an act of divine revenge but a corrective measure. [35]

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 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 also 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" (trans. mine). Most of the Friday *khutbas* of NASFAT's mosques in Jos during the Covid-19 outbreak focused on urging the congregations to remain faithful and to know that God is in control of the pandemic. [36]

The true and lasting panacea to the COVID-19 outbreak according to the NASFAT's *ulama* is repentance and refraining from sin. When people adopt noble behaviors and become pious, Allah do not afflict them with deadly diseases. An Imam from 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 have biological origin, such as COVID-19, Qur'anic therapy, and prayer should be complemented with medical treatment.²⁰ [37]

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

20 Interview with NASFAT Imam Abdulkareem in Jos, December 2020.

There are several noteworthy similarities and differences between the 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 with supernatural meaning, the Living Faith and NASFAT offer a spiritual solution to the pandemic. The two groups do not reject the biomedical techniques employed by the health professionals in tackling the disease but regard them as secondary to the deeper spiritual means of withstanding the outbreak. [38]

A significant difference between the two models of sickness proposed by NASFAT and the Embassy lays 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 is cleansing of sin and bringing people closer to God. However, for the Living Faith, all diseases, including COVID-19, originate from the devil who is inherently evil therefore, pandemic is essentially evil too. The spiritual means of tackling COVID-19 and other pandemic proposed by the Living Faith and NASFAT are informed by their conceived meaning of pandemic. [39]

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 the 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 metaphoric structure or the system of meaning attached to illness and healing is as important as any “actual,” “physical” and “pharmacological” aspects. The 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 the 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. [40]

Among the influential religious leaders in Nigeria who dismiss the very reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and flout all health regulations against the virus as an evil plan by the West to distract the believers from worship, the most prominent are Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir, the leader of the Izala movement, and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the founder and head of the Christ Embassy Church. *Jamāʿat Izālat al-bidʿa waʿiqāmat al-Sunna* (the Society for the Eradication of Innovations and Establishment of sunna), or Izala in short, was founded by Shaykh Ismaʿila 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 folk Islamic 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 it has branches all over Nigeria as well as in Niger Republic, Benin, Chad, Cameroon, and Ghana. In its turn, the Christ Embassy, founded by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome in 1987, has now become a global church with about 13 million followers and 145 branches on five continents. Akukwe Obinna (2012, 42) reported that the Christ Embassy has a regular membership of over three million in Nigeria in addition to many admirers 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 [41]

many African countries such as Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, as well as Europe, Asia, and North and South America.

Amidst the first wave of the pandemic, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir issued a *fatwa* instructing 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 temples. 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,²¹ 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. [42]

In several sermons and press conferences between April and November 2020, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir has declared COVID-19 as 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 "the COVID-19 is a ghost of the West," meaning that it is 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 the 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: [43]

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 business, 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. [44]

In a similar vein, the leader of the Christ Embassy Church, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, has subscribed to a conspiracy theory that unites misapprehensions about 5G technology and the 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 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 the 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 [45]

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

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 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 the Christ Embassy are strikingly similar in their responses to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and 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. The 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.

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.

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 the 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 did not only reveal hidden conspiracies against Islam and Christianity but also visually predicted the current crisis years before it happened.

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 the 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 the 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.

Since January 2021, most Nigerians returned to their daily routines without much anxiety for COVID-19. Many people have not been using face mask or observing social distance, and religious and social gatherings have returned to normal. Sometimes, people have been teasing those who wear facemask and joke that COVID-19 is gone. A respondent and a resident of Rimi town in Kano, Yakubu Nagana²² stressed that “we do not recognize COVID-19 here and everybody goes about his/her normal business as usual.”²³ 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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22 Interview with Malam Abubakar Nagana, a resident of Rimi Town in Kano State, November 2020.

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

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