

## CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON NIGERIAN RELIGIOSITY

**Amanambu, Uchenna Ebony, PhD**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Awka Anambra State

[ebonyuchem@gmail.com](mailto:ebonyuchem@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

*Undoubtedly, there is a huge correlation between religion and societal stability and it takes more than religious rituals to stabilize a society. Suffice it to say that viable economy, responsible politics, uncompromised security architecture, functional health system and peaceful inter relationships are some of the crucial ingredients for a stable society. The stability or otherwise of religion is dependent on the stability of a society. The nexus between religion and society in general has been an intriguing discourse both within the society and academic circle. Hence, this study investigates the history of Nigeria, religious pluralism in Nigeria, the eruption of the “novel” coronavirus known as Covid-19 and its attendant governments’ lockdown approach. The study also analyzes the impacts of the virus and its attendant lockdown responses on the general religiousness of Nigerians knowing the unrivalled influence of religion on the existence of Nigerians.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Coronavirus, Nigeria, Religiosity

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is no doubt a notoriously religious country. Religion is a unique phenomenon in the Nigerian society. Apart from some major political parties with wider interests and contacts, religion is a major factor that has succeeded in bringing sizeable numbers of Nigerians under one umbrella, irrespective of their ethnic and social considerations or status. The large crowds of people that participate in religious celebrations and other gatherings such as crusades, revival programmes, Quranic recitations and public lectures are some of the indications of how seriously Nigerians take religions. People are ready to interact through religion especially with other Nigerians who share their belief system. The same way, many Nigerians can stake their lives for their religious beliefs and organizations. The global Covid-19 pandemic has kept many people inside their houses through various governments’ lockdown policy for a long period of time

and many sectors of the world and Nigeria have been adversely affected. The auditoriums of Nigeria's mega churches and mosques are scanty and sometimes empty and their gates are shut as they are forced to observe a government ban on large gatherings to halt the spread of coronavirus. But it took not only declarations and threats from governments but also forceful arrests and prosecution for the message of the lockdown to get across. In some cases, those in charge of administering these worship centers bolt their doors. Therefore, efforts shall be made in this study to have unbiased reflections on the impact of Covid-19 on the religiousness and religiosity of Nigerians.

### Clarification of Some Terms

1. **Critical** means making a careful and unbiased judgment about the good and bad qualities of something or somebody.
2. **Reflections:** This is the plural of the word "reflection" which means the act of casting one's mind back so as to give a careful thought and consideration on something.
3. **Impacts:** It is the plural of the term "impact" which means having a direct effect on, impinging on or striking forcefully on something or somebody. It also means a forceful response that occurs when one thing hits another or when two objects collide. It is simply employed to mean the result of something that has happened or is happening.
4. **COVID-19 Pandemic:** This is the combination of two terms- "Covid-19 and pandemic". Covid-19 is an acronym of the newest form of coronavirus that erupted in Wuhan China in 2019. The World Health Organization described "Pandemic" as a form of outbreak that has gone beyond a particular environment which requires enormous collaborations to contend.
5. **Religiosity:** Derived from the word "religion" though it is yet to have a generally accepted definition, means the quality and act of being religious, strong piety and devoutness.

In the context of this study, Critical Reflections on the Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Nigerian Religiosity means an unbiased analysis of the positive and negative results of the "novel" coronavirus on the religiousness of Nigerians. It means also how the eruption of the virus and the governments' lockdown have affected and effected the commitment and the religious attitudes of Nigerians.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Functionalist and Conflict theories are adopted in this study. Iruonagbe (2013) avers that Durkheim one of the proponents of Functionalist theory believes that social life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs that form the collective conscience. The absence of the aforementioned threatens social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation and the unity of the people (p.5). Coser (1956), one of the disciples of the foremost originator of the conflict theory, Karl Marx, said that conflict is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals (p.3). Ani (2012) argues that conflict manifests as products of interactions amongst human beings and groups who plot to outwit others (p.158). This theory is used because it implies that conflict is generated by the quests to protect one's identity and maximize one's interest. Functionalist theory is employed because religion is one of the factors that a society needs to properly function. Therefore, the society will be in danger if religion performs negatively. The theories are employed to highlight and analyze the challenges and impacts of Covid-19 and the lockdown on the religiousness of Nigerians knowing that religion is regarded as the source of human existence.

### **Brief History of Nigeria**

Nigeria like many other countries of the world did not come down from the moon. It has a trajectory plan of development. In that case, Abiola (1984) states that between the eleventh century and the European colonial conquest in the nineteenth century, the area known as Nigeria today was homes of sophisticated kingdoms and societies. British colonialists arrived and declared Lagos a colony in 1861. Similarly, in 1906, the colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria which included the former Niger Coast Protectorates that were hitherto administered separately were merged to form the Southern Protectorates (p.153). Adigwe (1979) remarks that the Sokoto Caliphate was conquered in 1903 and after the conquests the British were able to create the Northern Nigerian protectorate. Both the Southern and Northern protectorates from January 1914 were amalgamated hence Nigeria (p.170).

Meanwhile, Nigeria received her political independence on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1960 under a constitution that was initially provided for a parliamentary system of government. Six years later, the Military came on the scene on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1966, when Major Nzeogwu and five other majors staged a coup-d'état that claimed several lives. Uwechue (2003) said that the coup of 1966, though, later twisted

and turned sour together with other factors such as counter coup, massacring of the Igbo people in the north and Gowon's inability to abide by the Aburi Accord, led late General Ojukwu to declare the independence of Biafra and the Nigerian civil war ensued (p.401). The dimension of physical shooting reportedly ended bitterly and bloody in the defeat of Biafra in 1970.

However, Gowon's administration was knocked out of office after series of allegations such as corruption and his inability to announce a realistic time for Civilian hand-over. Awosefo (2005) stresses that Murtala Mohammed and his group took over the government (p.136). Ademolekum (1985) said that Murtala Mohammed's regime was short lived and through a bloody coup of 13th February, 1976 that claimed his life, his Second in-Command General Olusegun Obasanjo, completed the programme of Civilian rule that later produced Shehu Shagari as the president in 1979. But the administration was booted out through a coup by Major Gen. Muhammadu Buhari on 31st December 1983 (p.22). Awosefo (2005) posits that the Buhari's military government was on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1985 overthrown through a bloodless coup that produced General Ibrahim Babangida. He continued until in 1993, when he bowed to public pressure after the annulment of the June 12th 1993 election believed to have been won by late M.K.O Abiola. He inaugurated the Interim National Government headed by Shonekan and in his word "stepped aside". But on 17th November 1993, late General Sani Abacha forced Shonekan to resign and he took over government (pp.143-144). But Abacha died in office on 8th June, 1998.

Ademolekum (1999) confirms that at the death of Abacha, Abdulsalami Abubakar took over government and handed over to a Civilian rule under Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, on 29th May, 1999 who ruled for eight years (p.24). Nevertheless, Nigerian re-attainment of democracy saw Chief Olusegun Obasanjo hand over to Alhaji Umaru Yar'adua on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2007. After prolonged illness, Yar'adua died on 5th May 2010. Then with the "doctrine of necessity" as propounded by the National Assembly, the Acting President, Goodluck Jonathan who acted as Vice President before then was on 6th May 2010, sworn in as the replacement for the late Yar'adua. Jonathan picked Namadi Sambo, the former Governor of Kaduna State to be his deputy until in 2015 when they vacated offices for major General Mohammad Buhari (rtd) and Prof. Yemi Osinbajo respectively. It can be summed that between 1861 and 1913, the country was governed by southern and northern protectorates structures. Between 1914 and 1946, it operated on the regional basis especially with the arrival of Richard's Constitution in 1946 up to 1967. The country grew from regional pattern into the

present six (6) geopolitical zones, thirty-six (36) states and seven hundred and seventy-four (774) local government areas

### **Religious Pluralism in Nigeria**

Pluralism suggests divergent views, ideas and opinions. Religious pluralism is understood not only as diversity and multiplication of religions but also as the interaction of religious communities within a given society. Apart from Christianity, Islam and traditional religions, Nigeria is a home to many religions of the world. For example, when the Federal High Court in Abuja granted bail to the leader of the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB), one of the conditions for the bail was to produce a Jewish leader as one his sureties. To the chagrin of many observers, a respected Jewish leader stood and signed for his release. A religious pluralistic society refers to an environment where there are many religious beliefs, concepts and ideologies. In that case, many religions exist in Nigeria but three of them shall be briefly discussed.

### **Islam**

Within one hundred years of Muhammad's death, the original Islamic community through trade, expansion and conquest became an Empire that spread to all over the world. According to Emelike (2011), the Islamic world extended from the Arabian West to the North Africa and the eastern Spain to Indonesia (pp.225-248). Nwanaju (2011) said that Islam came into northern Nigeria as early as in the eleventh century and was well established in the state capitals of the region but by the sixteenth century, it spread into the countryside toward the Middle Belt and uplands (pp.405-420). The Islamic adventurism was stopped in the Middle Belt by the resistance of local peoples who refused to be incorporated into the emirate states. However, Nze (2007) notes that the Fulani-led jihad of the nineteenth century pushed Islam into Nupe and across the Niger River into the northern Yoruba-speaking areas (p.33). The Colonial conquest established a rule that caused active Christian evangelistic campaign not to occur in the northern region. Salmone (1991) states that by 1990s, the two religions have continued to compete for converts in the Middle Belt, where ethnic groups and families had adherents from each persuasions (p.54).

Kenny (1996) avers that Islam is known to be much more accommodating to local customs and practices than Christianity which is said to be very critical of traditional customs. There are two features of Islam which is essential to understanding its place in Nigerian society. They are the degree to which Islam

permeates other institutions in the society and their contributions to Nigerian religious pluralism. As an institution in the emirate society, Islam includes in its practices daily and annual ritual obligations, the pilgrimage to Mecca, Sharia law, established view on politics, family life, communal order and appropriate modes of personal conduct in most situations. Public meetings often began and ended with Muslim prayers and everyone knew at least, the minimum Arabic prayers and the five pillars of the religion required for full participation. Public arbitrations were carried out mostly by local leaders with the help of religious experts and Alkali Courts which provided widespread knowledge of the basic tenets of Sharia law (p.123).

Amanambu (2013) confirms that Sunni (derived from sunna) or Orthodox Islam became the dominant sect in Nigeria, the most widespread and practised religion in the nineteen Northern States of Nigeria. However, the region is evenly mixed with Christians in some States such as Adamawa, Bauchi, Plateau, Taraba, Kaduna, Benue, Kogi, Kwara and the Federal Capital Territory. There is slightly a balance of Christian, Muslim and Traditional religious practitioners' population that spread in some southern States such as Kwara, Ondo, Osun, Ogun, Oyo and Lagos. There exist also a sizeable number of Islamic practitioners in the western part of the country. Just as Catholics in the country owe their religious allegiances to the Pope who lives as far as Vatican, the head of Islamic religion in Nigeria is the Sultan of Sokoto Caliphate who along with a number of Emirs presides over the affairs of the religion in the North. While Islam is propagated through jihad and trade, a number of Islamic movements also propagate the Islamic religion across Nigeria and they include NAFSAT, HIZBULAHJI movements, ANSAR-UDEEN society among others (pp.12-14). Islam came into Nigeria long before Christianity could set its foot on the land. The spread of Islam in Nigeria were largely by jihadism and trade.

### **Christianity**

Christianity came into Nigeria through the missionaries from Europe particularly Ireland, England, Portugal, Italy and America. Christianity is predominantly found in the seventeen states in the Southern part of Nigeria which consist of the Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio and other nationalities from the Niger Delta region as well as parts of the Middle Belt region. Up till the late 1980s, most of the strong Christian religious movements in Nigeria were the orthodox churches such as the Catholic, Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodists and others which date back to the pre-20th century era. Christianity

came to Nigeria according to Nze (2007) in two phases: which is in 1515 and 1842 (p.24). Apart from these mainline churches, Christianity has grown into many other movements which Amanambu (2013) groups as follows: *Mainline Pentecostals*; these are the groups like Assemblies of God, Grace of God and their likes who are also foreign churches founded in the country. They are like the mainline churches but have since been taken over by Nigerians. *Indigenous Pentecostals*; they are those churches founded and owned by Nigerians and they include: Living Faith Church, Christ Embassy, the Lord's Chosen, Deeper Life and host of others. Finally, there are the African instituted churches founded by the Africans out of their worldviews, experiences and revelations and they are patterned after African culture. These include: Aladura, Cherubim and Seraphim, Abosso Apostolic Faith among others (p.14).

Lately, the Pentecostal wing of the church mostly the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Christ Embassy, Living Faith, the Lord's Chosen Charismatic Revival Ministry, Omega Fire Ministry and others are growing in popularity and gradually depopulating the mainline and orthodox churches. Amanambu (2013) argues that they do this by engaging in the theology of prosperity, earthly success and employment of maximum use of flamboyant, colourful and aesthetics methods of evangelization to convince their listeners. Some Pentecostal churches such as Deeper Life Bible Church and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries claim to be more concerned with spiritual matters more than others. They usually mount an ill-fated campaign against the mainline churches by describing them as too rigid or misguided, old fashioned preachers of salvation and other de-marketing terms (pp.14-15).

### **Indigenous or Traditional Religions in Nigeria**

This is a home grown religion that emanates from the people's world-view. Before the arrival of both Islam and Christianity, Metuh (1981) argues that each major group of what later became known as Nigeria had its distinct political units and religion under what is generally referred to as African Traditional Religion (ATR). Many gods and goddesses such as Ogun (god of iron), Sango or Amadioha (god of thunder) and many others were feared and revered in different parts of Nigeria (p.66). It is referred to as "indigenous" because it springs from the environments and feelings of the people. There may not be the total number of indigenous faiths or practitioners in Nigeria, however, they are not as numerous as the other two major religions in Nigeria. But many Africans,

not minding their various educational and religious attainments still consult the practitioners of this religion for solutions concerning their various challenges.

The exact population of each religious divide in Nigeria has been controversial. But Amanambu (2013) posits that the traditional religions suffered seriously because whenever the British colonialists encountered any institution which they considered to be in opposition to their mission, they did everything to liquidate it, even if it meant having to use the force of arms.

There are other religions in Nigeria whose degrees of influence are yet to be ascertained and they include: Judaism, Hinduism, Baha'i faith, Chrislam, Grail movement, the Reformed Ogboni fraternity and others. But Nigeria is known to be predominantly religious with these three main religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional Religions. There are however some dynamisms that have permeated virtually all aspects of the country's religiosity. For instance, religious meetings are now conducted virtually everywhere in the markets, offices, streets, shops, schools-in libraries, lecture halls and even in laboratories. A good number of lecturers and teachers have either abandoned or combined both teaching and research with evangelistic vocations. There appear to be no longer a clear demarcation between religious duties and academic work.

### **Situating the "Novel" Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

The name, "coronavirus" is not only the most populous term today but also the most dreaded one across the world and Lindsay (2020) posits that coronaviruses are common to human and animal. The first in the class of the viruses was first discovered in domestic poultry in the 1930s. Lately, coronavirus in the class of SARS viruses was first virus known as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) in 2002, the second is the Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in 2012 and the current novel coronavirus known as Covid-19 pandemic (SARS-CoV2). Vergnaud (2020) describes coronavirus as an acute respiratory disease caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). A cluster of its cases initially appeared in Wuhan, a city in the Hubei Province of China. From Wuhan, it spread and received worldwide attention. Lindsay (2020) states that in animals, the viruses can cause a range of respiratory, gastrointestinal, liver and neurologic diseases but in human, these three coronaviruses cause more serious lung infections. The current pandemic known as Covid-19 is a "novel" coronavirus and it is called a "novel" because it is a new coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. "Covid-19" is an acronym for the virus because it erupted in 2019. This means that it is



different from coronaviruses that caused the common cold and SARS in 2002 as well as MERS in 2012.

Meanwhile, the source of coronavirus has been subject of controversies with the US president Donald Trump and others accusing China of inventing the virus from their laboratory. May be because of the controversy over its source, Huileng (2020) disclosed that Missouri in the United State of America filed a lawsuit against the Chinese government because of the virus. Also a group of Nigerian lawyers sued China for \$200 billion in damages for the adverse effects of the coronavirus outbreak on the country and its citizens. Nevertheless, the source of the new coronavirus is believed to be an animal. Xingyi Ge, Wang and Zhengli (2015) note that several independent research groups have identified that SARS-CoV-2 belongs to  $\beta$ -coronavirus, with highly identical genome to bat coronavirus. With that, they are pointing to bat as the natural host. Covid-19 is said to be spreading through respiratory secretions when infected people cough or sneeze and when an infected object is touched. Those who come in contact with infected persons or travelled to infected environments are encouraged to isolate themselves for fourteen (14) days before their symptoms begin and as well conduct tests on them. Currently, there are few specific antiviral strategies but several potent candidates of antivirals and repurposed drugs are under urgent investigation. There are no vaccines available for now.

Common symptoms of Covid-19 are fever, tiredness, dry cough and difficulty in breathing. Less common symptoms experienced include aches and pains, a runny nose and diarrhea. Some people infected with Covid-19 however, do not show symptoms or feel sick at all. World Health Organization (WHO) described it as “pandemic” due to the rapid increase in the number of cases outside China and its deadly effect on a growing number of other countries of the world. As of 11<sup>th</sup> June, 2020, Oyero (2020) discloses that Nigeria reported a total of thirteen thousand, eight hundred and seventy three (13, 873) confirmed cases, with four thousand three hundred and fifty one (4,351) people recovered and three hundred and eighty-two (382) deaths. Nigeria has not tested up to one percent of its citizens yet the number is increasing exponentially. Globally, Johns Hopkins university reported that there are over seven million, two hundred and seventy-three thousand, nine hundred and fifty eight (7,273,958) cases with over four hundred and thirteen thousand three hundred and seventy two deaths (413,372) and three million, eight hundred and nine thousand one hundred and forty four (3,809,144) people have recovered.

Some of the approaches adopted by various governments across the world in containing the spread of the virus include partial or total lockdown of states, enlightenments on social distancing- a term for measures such as avoiding mass gatherings and reducing close contact between people. In addition to the aforementioned, the governments have adopted the practice of quarantining and isolating people with emphasis on personal and corporate protective measures by the health professionals. None of these measures has affected mankind like the lockdown. This is a single virus that has kept the mighty in check. It has quieted the war tensions brewing up between nations of the world. All the world leading economies have crumbled. With the near global lockdown, the countries of the world are at loss as what could be next.

### **Random Responses to the Covid-19 and the Lockdown**

Nigeria is not alone in its reactions to the eruption of the “novel” coronavirus. The responses of people especially leaders across the world have been more of mixed reactions. Pilkington and Pengelly (2020) aver that the United States of America President, Donald Trump came under fire for allegedly putting aside a January 30 memo by a senior government official, warning of mass casualties and economic devastation months before the pandemic found its way into America and disrupted the lives of the people, claiming some of their best and most promising individuals in the process. Daka (2020) said that the President of Turkey declared that they would not stop the Juma’at congregation because of Coronavirus because they do not believe in the virus, they only believe in Allah. The World Health Organization is not spared in this error of judgment. On 23<sup>rd</sup> January, Director-General of the organization, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said that there was no evidence of human-to-human transmission outside China. But a few days later, he backtracked and declared Covid-19 “a pandemic”.

In Nigeria, it rather began in another tone and one of the first patterns that emerged seems to emanate from mostly religious leaders who claimed that they had predicted the Coronavirus affliction or that they knew about its arrival. Fasua (2020) avers that Prophets G.F. Adetuberu and T.B. Joshua claimed to have predicted coronavirus long before it happened. Of course, many Nigerians tend to believe their religious leaders.

### **A Detour to the Nigerian Lockdown Policy**

After series of dilly-dallies from the government and pressure from some analysts concerning the eruption of the virus in Lagos with first index case announced on 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020 and its attendance rising in number of cases, Bærendtsen (2020) remarks that on 20<sup>th</sup> March, the National Economic Council (NEC) that includes the vice president and governors of the thirty-six states, “strongly recommended” a ban on all public gatherings including at the worship centers. Segun (2020) states that the Lagos state Governor Sanwo Olu became the first to sign the Emergency Coronavirus Pandemic Bill 2020 into law. With the law, he declared a near lock down in Lagos that would last for seven days in the first instance and banks, offices, markets, courts, parks and others were closed while the number of gatherings at worship centers and their likes were reduced from 50 to 25 persons. The law was in force until 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 when the federal government imposed a total lockdown on states of Ogun, Lagos and federal capital territory Abuja to curb the flow of COVID-19. Similarly, most of the state governors had either muted near or total lockdown in their various states. Expectedly, the responses of many religious leaders to Covid-19 that have hitherto been intriguing sparked off in newer dimensions.

Nigeria has never run shortage of leaders who are champions at denial of many things despite the glaring effects and dangers of anything. Regardless of the glaring dangers their denials pose against humanity. It began as Adeniyi (2020) notes with a video that surfaced online where hundreds of Nigerians were chanting, “Mallam ya ce babu Corona” translated into English, “Our cleric has said that there is no Coronavirus, it is a hoax”. In Kano Ayomathew (2020) adds that a football competition was subsequently organized between a group that called themselves “Corona” and “Virus”. Alarmingly, hundreds of thousands of individuals attended the match. In another video, Hoechner (2020) said that the leader of Izala Muslim sect in Kaduna, Sheikh Sani Yahaya Jingir, could be seen describing Covid-19 as an international deceit and Western conspiracy against Muslims. Shortly after the video went viral, scores of young people especially from Northern Nigeria began to wash their hands in bowls and drink the water in a bid to validate the message by the cleric that Coronavirus does not exist.

Other clerics were not left out even though they came with different tones. For example, Yusuf (2020) said that Apostle Johnson Suleiman claimed that the pandemic is part of an international conspiracy against Christianity and President Trump which “pope is part of”. Hardly had the dusts generated by

Suleiman's assertion has doused than Augoye (2020) affirms that the founder and President of Love World Incorporated widely known as Christ Embassy, Rev Chris Oyakhilome, claimed that the creation of 5G technology and its deployment to parts of the world was responsible for the outbreak of Coronavirus. He said that the new technology was part of the new world order by the anti-Christ, who was bent on establishing a single religion, economy and government for the entire universe. Nseyen (2020) confirms that Pastor David Ibiyeomie another popular Nigerian preacher based in Portharcourt south-south Nigeria in a sermon said that Nigeria does not have the virus and even if it does the figures released by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control was fake. For him, "Covid-19 is rubbish and the government is using the deadly disease to embezzle funds".

Meanwhile, in what looks like the representations of the views of the traditional religions, Adebowale (2020) argues that since Covid-19 manifests all the symptoms of high fever known in Yoruba language as (Ako Iba), it can be effectively tackled with herbs. Similarly, the Ooni of Ife, Oba Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, unveiled another herbal combination that can kill Coronavirus. He believed that the herbs are potent enough to heal anyone who contract Covid-19. He maintains that some of the components of his herbal tea and that of the Ooni are in the anti- Covid-19 herbal medicine developed in Madagascar. The religious response has been expectedly worrisome. Many religious leaders are threatening bombshells and some of the members are not left out either.

### **Synthesizing the Discordant Reactions and Approaches**

As the virus continues to ravage communities causing economies to halt across the world, its spreads did not spare Nigeria as a country. Nigerian airports, roads and other essential sectors of the country were locked down and the churches and mosques were not spared. Even with all these measures that have crippled the country, there are many people who have described the existence of the virus as a conspiracy. Initially, many senior religious leaders resisted the lockdown and social distancing. For example, Ayeni (2020) states that on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, the heads of Winners Chapel, COZA and Dunamis International Church held regular services at their hundreds of thousands worshippers-capacity auditoriums. Many of the Islamic clerics were not left out of the congregational worship. Jideonwo (2020) stresses that the head of Islamic religion in Nigeria and Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar III, similarly asked Nigerian Muslims not to congregate for prayers during Ramadan.

In the same vein, Olatunji (2020) observes that Methodist Church Nigeria sent a letter to their archbishops and bishops on 18th March 2020 directing all its branches to continue holding services despite the Nigerian governments' advice against large gatherings. By 20<sup>th</sup> March, the church reversed herself and directed the compliance of the 50-person limit and limiting services, including those conducted online, to one hour or less. Omojuyigbe (2020) avers that over three hundred Islamic worshippers in Agege Central (Hausa) Mosque attacked officers of the Lagos State Covid-19 Task Force, who were enforcing the lockdown. Gradually, others who were less willing to abide by the guidelines started obeying by forces of arrests and convictions by the mobile courts. Shockingly, Abati (2020) notes that towards the Easter celebration, the governor of Rivers State relaxed the lockdown to allow churches observe Easter communion. Many religious leaders and enthusiasts applauded the governor but the Port Harcourt Catholic diocese swiftly opted out of the gesture.

Omorogbe (2020) states that one of the Nigerian notable preachers, Pastor E. A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), posted a message on Instagram assuring his followers that no virus can come near their dwelling. Similarly, Owolabi (2020) states that the founder and General Overseer of Gospel Saints Church at Igando in Lagos, Pastor Jacob Shodeinde urged Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu to consider reopening churches because the Covid-19 pandemic would only be defeated spiritually. He described churches as spiritual worship centers where angels visit to convey people's problems to God. He believes that prayer is the only weapon to win the battle against Covid-19.

Contrastingly, Augoye (2020) states that Rev Oyakhlome believed that the Nigerian Government ordered the lockdown of Lagos and Abuja so that the 5G can be deployed while people were trapped in their houses. Adebowale (2020) frowns at the Nigerian love to depend or wait for the Western world to do virtually everything for them including coming up with drugs and vaccines against coronavirus. He lamented that Nigeria has imposed a lockdown because the Western countries adopted the same measures. They are working on drugs and vaccines and Nigeria has to wait for them. He seems to have a supporter as Reporter (2020) said that Alfred Martins, Catholic archbishop of Lagos diocese, who recommended the potency of home herbs to the Federal Government in the quest of a cure for COVID-19. AbdulGafar, Omokhunu and Tajudeen (2020) observe that there was a sharp disagreement between the Sultan of Sokoto and governors of some states over how the 2020 Eid-el-Fitr prayers should be held. Some state governors from Kano, Bauchi, Yobe, Nasarawa, Taraba, Jigawa,

Gombe, Borno Zamfara among others have announced easing of the lockdown to allow Muslims to observe their congregational prayers. But the Sultan, Sa'ad Abubakar, who is the President-General of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) has given a directive that Muslims should observe the prayers at home as part of their observance of the Covid-19 protocols and to prevent the spread of the virus. Similarly, the Executive Secretary of the Muslim Ummah of South West Nigeria (MUSWEN), Prof Muslih Yahya has also urged Muslims to pray at homes during the Eld-il-Fitr.

Furthermore, the lockdown of Abuja, Lagos, Ogun and other states forced most of these worship centers to shut their doors. Mainstream Muslim authorities, represented by the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) have said they will follow the Federal government's restrictions on meetings and movements and instructed members to do the same. The Nigerian mainstream churches that include the likes of Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist and others who are faced with declining membership have supported the government's lockdown. But some of the big founders of Pentecostal churches and the radical wings of Islam who flourish with huge followers have been *confrontal* to the government over the lockdown.

Therefore, it can be summed up that the reactions of the religious men and women about the novel covid-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdown have been discordant. While very few are adhering to the scientific explanations and advice, others are taking to the religious and political exigencies of the Nigerian rulers. The obvious result is that the Covid-19 can capitalize in these discordant tunes to cause havoc.

### **The Impacts of Covid-19 on Nigerian Religiosity**

The interconnectivities between politics, economy and religion in a society cannot be over emphasized. What affects any of these social facts will spiral to others. Abati (2020) argues that at the commencement of the Covid-19 pestilence, religion seems to be the first victim. This is because in China where the virus erupted from promptly shut down many parts of the country to the point that the Lunar New Year 2020 could not be celebrated as no temple was allowed to open. No dance or festival could take place. Persons who had travelled from one part of the country to the other to observe the two-week Lunar New Year festivity were stranded either in transit or behind closed doors. This can be further considered the first indication of the meeting point between Covid-19 and religion. Covid-19 no doubt has impacted heavily on the religiosity of

Nigerians. The impacts have been both negative and positive and they will be interchangeably analyzed.

**COVID-19 Has Exposed Some Irrational Beliefs:** Covid-19 and the attendant lockdowns have exposed the exploiters and manipulators of religions for some rapacious ends. This is because all of a sudden the sales of the miracle waters, the holy oils, anointed handkerchiefs and their likes have been forgotten or suspended. It has weakened the influence of the mega religious leaders who exploit vulnerable people. Jideonwo (2020) states that when the prediction of T.B Joshua which claimed that the coronavirus outbreak would be over by 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020 could not happen, he quickly changed and claimed that he said he meant the virus “would be halted, where it began:” Wuhan – China. Really, some people seem to be asking some searching questions.

**Awakes Religions’ Social Consciousness:** Covid-19 awakens and brings to the public the social roles of religion in solving social problems. It began in Lagos with the likes of Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran and other churches competing for donations to the Lagos government. But the most resounding donation came from the Catholic Church. Adebowale (2020) reports that Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria offered four hundred and twenty-five (425) health facilities to the Presidential Taskforce against Covid-19. Just as many of the religious bodies are making donations to the government, they are also assisting some of their financially stricken worshippers in a move that is likely to see them retain popularity.

**The Appreciation of Technology:** Ayeni (2020) asserts that Nigeria is a country with around forty-one million illiterate adults, where only ninety-two million have access to internet. Religious, political and traditional leaders usually find internet services very crucial in the transmission of information. The Covid-19 has quickened many religious groups in adopting the modern system of communication in sharing their religious programmes. Majority of the worship centers are doing the same across the country. They are streaming prayer services online, streamed live worship on social media, radio and online television channels. Some families are trying to create an atmosphere at home by dressing up in their Sunday outfits with the head of the household even collecting offerings and tithes from the rest of the family for onward transmission to their church.

**Heightened Faith in God:** Religion thrives in fears and it is a veritable fertilizer that nourishes the power and efficacy of religion. Somehow, the pandemic seems

to have deepened the faith of many worshippers. For instance, the daily reeling out of number of cases by the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and the way the news of the pandemic is circulating in Nigeria have portrayed a very hopeless situation. The constant reminder to the people that there is no vaccine and the controversies surrounding the Infectious Disease Control Bill 2020 in the national assembly have armed many Nigerians to give up on the scientific and political solutions. Religion thus plays the role of comfort and hope provider. Of course, it has made many people to depend on God for solution.

**Transient Religious Tolerance:** Nigerian inter-religious relationships and situations have been so tensed that the kind of war of words and other banter that are exchanged between the two dominant religions in Nigeria will always sound scary. Egwu (2020) affirms that the Christian and Muslim communities in Nigeria are collaborating to respond and combat the growing coronavirus pandemic in the country. Earlier, the relationship between the two religious groups and their adherents in the country has been marred with tension and violence but the leaders are putting their differences aside to unite for a common cause.

**The “Sheep in Wolves Clothing” Exposed:** One of the notable impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdown is that it has exposed the religious merchants who pose as religious leaders. Kwen (2020) adds that the Ministerial Enforcement Team, and FCT Mobile Court in Abuja convicted Islamic Clerics for organizing prayers in contravention of the sit-at-home orders by the government. The rather shocking account was given by Itua (2020), that pastor Kalu, in charge of Shekinah Glory Church, Jabi and elders of the church scaled fence to evade arrest by the same Enforcement Team. Hence, an FCT Mobile Court sitting in Jabi has ordered an indefinite closure of the church and that the pastor should be traced and arrested. But some of his church members, especially women who could not scale the fence were arrested and arraigned before the court. Similarly, Nwosu (2020) discloses of other pastors who denied their members in order to evade arrest. All these are not only shocking but also revealing. This is because a good and sincere religious leader will never deny nor abandon his/her followers no matter the condition. What would these supposed religious leaders preach when the situations normalize? Ironically, these leaders did not abandon the offerings and tithes donated by these followers.

**Loss of Revenues:** Many analysts are of the view that there is more to the religiousness of Nigerians. Some have simply described these religious



organizations as money making mills. Therefore, amidst the lockdown with reports and video footages circulating on social media of how security agencies are shutting down services, weddings and other such gatherings. These measures are making it hard for religious leaders to continue to run these worship centers as majority of their revenues will decrease.

**Unmasks the Nigerians' Real Perceptions of Leaders:** In addition to the initial denial of Covid-19 by some religious leaders in Nigeria, many Nigerians made mockery of the virus. Some derogatorily argued that since the virus emanated from China, it would not last because almost all the goods imported into the country from China hardly last. Hoechner (2020) argues that the widespread perceptions of the people have been that Nigerian politicians have devised it as a medium to steal the remaining monies from the public coffers. The news that Nasir Ahmed El-Rufa'i, the governor of Kaduna State tested positive for Covid-19 was met with suspicion by some Kano residents. They believed his positive test result was fabricated and part of yet another fraudulent scheme to access federal resources allocated to states affected by COVID-19. Many Nigerians have not forgotten the massive misappropriation of federal funds destined to tackle the Boko Haram crisis in north-eastern Nigeria and to support its victims. Hence the idea and rumours of Covid-19 being a hoax appear plausible. Covid-19 has really unmasked the feigned acceptability and popularity claimed by Nigerian rulers when they impose themselves on the people through the charade called elections in Nigeria. The virus has unmasked the perceptions and distrust existing between Nigerians and their rulers.

### **Accentuating the Paradox of Nigerian Religiosity**

In Nigeria, there is certainly no gain saying of the fact that the multi-religious practices in Nigeria have played more positive roles in its growth and development than the negative consequences of some of the religious practices. Early education in Nigeria was influenced by both Christian and Islamic religions. Many of the Mission Schools and healthcare centers in Nigeria established by the missionaries especially the Christian genre provided much of the educational and healthcare needs of Nigerians in the years after independence.

Nobody should doubt the immenseness of Nigerian religiosity. For example, Abati (2020) asserts that after few days of lock-down, many state governors in Nigeria began to ease the lockdown. The Katsina state government announced that it had lifted the ban on Friday Jumaat prayers. In Bauchi state, the state

Governor Bala Mohammed who tested positive for Covid-19 and later tested negative went straight to the mosque for Friday prayers without observing the social distance guidelines. In Abia, Ebonyi, Ondo, Ekiti and Niger states, Christians were asked to observe the Easter church service. Specifically, the excuse of the Abia state governor, Dr Okezie Ikpeazu was that the state has no reported case of the virus. In fact, he boasted that there will be no virus in the state because it is the only state in Nigeria that is mentioned in the Bible. All these leaders seemed to forget that Friday mosques in the Middle East have been empty and the Pope conducted Easter Mass in an empty Cathedral.

But the paradox is that it looks like the more Nigerians build religious institutions, the more denominations and sects are created. The worst part of it is the escalation of immorality both in the private and public spheres. Virtually all the religious organizations preach against corruption in Nigeria but it seems the monster is growing in tandem with Nigerian religious expansion. Again, violence and all forms of criminality have been growing almost at the rate which the worship centers grow. The magnitude of poor work-ethics and consequent low productivity continue to hurt the country's economic space as if religion is just a mere abstract phenomenon or encourage docility.

Despite the fact that virtually all the political actors are predominantly nominal members of the two most dominant religions in Nigeria, the bad governance has caused so much poverty among the citizens that religion seems just to be a vehicle to reproduce poverty. Embarrassingly, in the build up to the 2020 Eld-il-Fitr celebration in Nigeria, Folorunsho (2020) said that the Northern Governors' Forum lamented that fifty-four per cent of the Covid-19 cases and seventy per cent of new infections in Nigeria happened in its region and appealed for further assistance in containing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in the North. Amusingly, the same governors have turned back to relax the lockdown to allow Muslims celebrate the Eld-il-Fitr.

Many Nigerians steal and kill in the name of their religion. For example, Olayemi (2020) said that there were three clerics coopted into the Christian Association of Nigeria Covid-19 Task Force team in Sapele chapter of Delta State. But these clerics who were on routine check to ensure that churches adhere to social distancing were brutalized by members of one of the churches they had visited. The same way, Obahopo (2020) reports of how many Islamic worshippers attacked and brutalized each other over position at the central mosque in Okene Kogi state. These developments have led many people to begin to query the

impacts of religion on the moral and economic well-being of Nigerians. The paradoxes of Nigerians religiosity manifest in the fact that many adherents usually hide under its guise to behave irresponsibly and unaccountably. The flavours of their religiousness are yet to commensurate with the needed social and moral values

### **Religion and Covid-19: An Insight**

There may not be any need for religion if there is no mysterious occurrence in the world of men. It is natural that whenever a person is confronted with a terrifying aspect of the world, the natural instinct often directs him/her to seek to understand the arising problems. This understanding will equip him/her to bend the arising problem to his/her will. It could have been that pre-historic man had opted or thought out many forms of rituals as means of mollifying and dominating his environment and solving his problems.

Therefore, with the trajectory of history, human being doubled the age of rituals with a newer age that can be called the age of science and technological advancement. This newer age seems to have conferred on mankind with enormous powers of manipulation and exploration and the illusion of omnipotence. The paradox, however, is that the more man conquers his space, the more he is confronted with the realization that there is still a lot about the world that he is yet to know. This new age has helped human being but it has also failed mankind and each time human is confronted with yet other mysterious developments, the person falls back on his/her primordial code of religious ritual. Human being has been striving to tame nature and other occurrences yet nature continues to unveil the limitedness of human being.

Hence, the eruption of the current Covid-19 pandemic that has been either traced to the tampering with all kinds of animals, eating of all kinds of animals that range from snakes to bats, selling them in the markets both clean and unclean animals or developing the virus in laboratories are against the order of nature. When people manufacture their plagues, they simply attribute the occurrences to a mysterious force and then remember the superiority of the First Cause or Prime Mover. This First Cause or Prime Mover is referred to as God and He is worshiped through the vehicle of religion. Generally, Nigerians have not deviated from religion in defining and understanding Covid-19 pandemic.

## Conclusion

Nigerians are often referred to as the world's most religious people and one of the surveys once portrayed them as the happiest people in the world. Conventional religious practices of regular attendance to congregational worship, weddings and funerals are widespread. There is yet to be available data on the exact number of churches and mosques in Nigeria but the country seems to have more places of worship than schools and hospitals. Despite their lowest standing on most of the standard indices of development, they are one of the happiest because of the hope that religion provides. However, the eruption of the "novel" coronavirus in 2019 at Wuhan China which has escalated to all parts of the world has wounded this joy, making coronavirus the most discussed issue around the world today. It has affected many rich and wealthy people across the world. It has claimed the lives of many influential and top people in the world. In Nigeria, the top claim of the virus was Mallam Abba Kyari who was the chief of staff to president Muhammadu Buhari. Nevertheless, the virus has been surrounded by intrigues among many Nigerians. Incidentally, one of the ways the governments have responded has been either partial or total lockdown of states. The lockdown include the closures of all educational institutions, airports, all travel bans, markets and banning of public assembly in religious gathering. It seems clear that the services at the worship centers could not continue especially in the major cities across Nigeria. Unarguably, that has brought a halt to the much-needed revenues to finance religious and rapacious activities. But majority of the religious organizations are appreciating the power of mass media in keeping in touch with their members. Covid-19 pandemic regardless of its source and mission has impacted both negatively and positively to the religiousness of Nigerians but it seems to have done more good on their religiosity than harm.

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