

RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS AND FIGHT AGAINST THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Truth be told, religion have provided motives for men to act in ways that were both immoral and contrary to their self-interest. Just as it had served as an independent causal factor that leads to conflict; as evidenced in various religious induced violence in Nigeria. At the same time, religion equally serve as an instrument of conflict resolution, national development and humanitarian interventions given the numerous roles played by religious leaders, Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and religious bodies in conflict zones. This study examines the role played by religious organizations in the fight against the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria especially during the lockdown. Despite, problematising the reactions of some religious leaders, towards the state-imposed lockdown guidelines for preventing the spread of Covid-19 virus in the country. The study argued that religious leaders and religious organizations contributed immensely through their donations in cash, materials, food items, and facilities, etc. It concludes that religious leaders and religious organization constitute veritable instrument for social control and regulation. Hence, the state needs partner with them in order to ensure that the curve is flattened. The study made practical recommendations for combating spread of the virus.

Keywords: Covid 19, Lockdown, Guidelines, Religious Leaders, Palliative, and Organization.

INTRODUCTION

It is an immutable truism that Nigerians are highly religious and spiritual. This is attested to by the fact that the country is nearly evenly divided between adherents of the world's two major religions – Christianity and Islam. While, the remaining [estimated] 2 percent belong largely to African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Animist. Given this preponderance, one may be not be wrong to assume that the country will be peaceful and stable. As recorded histories of the world indicate that religion and its tenets have been a binding force that unifies as well as create nationalistic sentiments and civilizations demonstrated by Jerusalem, Rome, and Mecca, etc. suggesting that religious traditions and practices constitute veritable instruments of social cohesion, social control, behavioural modification and conflict resolution. The religiosity of most Nigerians was demonstrated by Campbell (2020, p.1) as follows:

Nigerians like to say that they are the world's most religious people and the happiest, despite their low standing on most of the standard indices of development. In fact, they say, they are the happiest because of the hope that religion provides. Conventional religious practices are widespread, from regular attendance at churches and mosques and private reading of the Bible and the Koran. More than fifty years ago, the Nigerian government declared that the number of adherents to Christianity and Islam was equal, and that therefore neither was a minority religion. Nobody knows the relative size of the two religions, though in general each claims to be "really" the largest. Holy Week, Easter, and Ramadan are the high points of the religious years, with processions and packed churches and mosques.

Contrarily, religion in the Nigerian context has for decades triggered and sustained fault lines that create divisions, enmity, exclusion, marginalization, deprivation, alienation, intolerance, sectionalism, instability, politicization and violent conflict. This is evidenced in the various incidences of religious induced violence witnessed in the country since its political independence on October 1, 1960. Ironic as it is, popular opinion on religious intolerance and conflict in the country make it appear as if it is restricted to a particular part of the country as well as a particular religious set. In reality, the problem associated with intolerance features in all parts of the country and religious denominations. It is in recognition of the conflict potentials of the religious creed and discourse in the country that the 2009 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as amended prohibited state religion when it provided under its Section 10 that “the government of the Federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion”. Besides, in order to protect religious freedom of citizens among other things, it further provided under Section 38 (1-3) that:

1. Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom (either alone or in community with others, and in public or in private) to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.
2. No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observation if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own or a religion not approved by his parent or guardian.
3. No religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupil of that community or denomination in any place of education maintained wholly by that community or denomination.

Cashing in on these fundamental rights especially in abusive manner by leaders, practitioners and adherents of various religious denominations in the country, have contributed in no small measure in creating tensions between/among citizens on the one hand as well as between citizens and the state on the other.

Expectedly (it was no surprise that), when the novel corona virus (Covid 19) that currently ravages the world was declared a pandemic in early 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Some religious leaders in the country debunked the existence of virus while some others prophesied to their willing congregation that Covid19 cannot affect them since they are carrying corrosive anointing in addition to being covered by the special blood of Jesus. It was this proseytilised opposing narrative that compelled the Office of Communication (OFCOM), the British broadcast regulator to sanction and prevent Pastor Chris Oyakhilome's LoveWorld Television from airing in the British air space in May 2020 due to his strong Conspiracy theory that associates Covid-19 pandemic to the development and launching of 5G networks (Ibrahim, 2020). In the view of this, religious leaders and their follower severally violated with reckless abandon the preventive measures that were put in place to checkmate spread of the virus by the Presidential Taskforce (PTF) on Covid-19 especially, as it regard wearing of nose mask, face shield, constant washing of hand, use of hand sanitizer, practice of social and physical distancing, lockdown, staying at home, avoiding crowded places, restriction of social functions/activities, ban on religious gatherings/activities, etc. This made religion to appear as a hindrance to the states effort towards instituting these preventive and lockdown regulations and seem to have contributed to spread and resurgence (second wave) of the virus between late 2020 and early 2021. At least the statements of the Chairman of the Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 and Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Boss Mustapha suggests this, when he opined that:

It is, however, very instructive to stress the factors that have contributed to rise in numbers from late November 2020 included that increased local and international travels, businesses and religious activities, reopening of schools without strict compliance with Covid 19 safety measures (Ifreke, 2021 online).

Despite, these apparent oppositions, religious organizations played crucial roles in the fight to limit the spread and community transmission of the virus. It equally, assisted in ameliorating the plights of citizens during lockdown when most businesses, markets and communities were shutdown. A situation that made it difficult for people to engage in productive ventures as well as access food items. It is therefore, these contributions of religious organization (Faith Based Organisations) that this study interrogates.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this study comprised desk-based research, and expert reviews of the analysis. A literature review was conducted with open source material. This involved a comprehensive search and selection of relevant documents based on scope, relevance, credibility, and completeness. Given the novelty of the subject and lack of much published works on the subject at the moment mainly as it regards the role and contributions of Religious organizations in the fight against Covid-19 in Nigeria, the bulk of the material used for this study were sourced from secondary sources of documentary evidences from official publications, newspapers, magazines, tweets, internet, etc. Besides, in order to appreciate the reasons some religious

leaders and their followers were opposed to enforcement of lockdown measures by the state, most especially the closure of places of worship (or restriction as per time and permissible number of worshippers at a time), the researcher conducted elite interview with some religious leaders in the country.

NIGERIAN STATE AND COVID-19 LOCKDOWN MEASURES

COVID-19 pandemic is probably the biggest scourge and uncertainty that the world has faced since the Spanish Flu of 1918 - 1920 and the World Wars of 1914 and 1944 (Abati, 2020). The pandemic presented an unprecedented global challenge that touches every community in every nation of the world. It caused the systems of work, education, finance and domestic lives to grind to a halt, affecting nearly every aspect of people's lives (UNICEF, 2020). In the case of Nigeria, the country announced its first COVID-19 case on February 27 2020. The virus entered the country through an Italian who came into the country on February 24 and displayed symptoms of the disease while visiting Lafarge Cement Company in Ewekoro, Ogun State (Abati, 2020). Since then the number of infected persons in the country has been increasing, such that as at July 9, 2021 following collection and testing of 2,331, 734 samples. The total confirmed cases in the country stood at 168, 256 with 1,719 active cases, and 164,415 discharged cases and 2,122 deaths (<https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/>). The state by state break down of this number is presented in the table below:

Table 1: Confirmed Cases of Covid-19 in Nigeria by State

States Affected	No. of Cases (Lab Confirmed)	No. of Cases (on admission)	No. Discharged	No. of Deaths
Lagos	60,097	1,126	58,515	456
FCT	19,906	187	19,552	167
Kaduna	9,127	13	9,049	65
Plateau	9,068	5	9,006	57
Rivers	7,356	45	7,210	101
Oyo	6,882	20	6,736	126
Edo	4,910	0	4,725	185
Ogun	4,696	12	4,633	51
Kano	4,006	5	3,891	110
Ondo	3,483	27	3,391	65
Kwara	3,156	33	3,068	55
Delta	2,650	22	2,556	72
Osun	2,578	6	2,520	52
Enugu	2,482	18	2,435	29
Nasarawa	2,384	0	2,345	39
Katsina	2,110	21	2,055	34
Gombe	2,101	21	2,036	44
Ebonyi	2,039	5	2,002	32
Akwa Ibom	1,935	5	1,912	18
Anambra	1,909	64	1,826	19
Abia	1,693	-2	1,673	22
Imo	1,661	0	1,624	37
Bauchi	1,549	0	1,532	17
Benue	1,366	15	1,327	24
Borno	1,344	1	1,305	38
Adamawa	1,134	4	1,098	32
Taraba	1,001	0	977	24
Niger	935	5	913	17
Bayelsa	906	1	879	26
Ekiti	881	7	863	11
Sokoto	775	0	747	28
Jigawa	536	8	512	16
Yobe	499	0	490	9
Kebbi	450	42	392	16
Cross River	402	0	384	18
Zamfara	244	3	233	8
Kogi	5	0	3	2
Total	168, 256	1,719	164,415	2,122

Source: <https://covid19.ncdc.gov.ng/>

The information contained in the above table was arranged in descending order of magnitude starting with the state with the highest number of cases and ending with the one with lowest number of cases. In terms of its mode of transmission, the World Health Organisation states that:

Covid-19 is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing), touching surfaces contaminated with the virus. There is also a possibility of transmission through feces. Since this is a new virus where the source and how it develops is not yet entirely clear, the risk of transmission from the body can be caused by the fluid coming out of the body.

Current evidence, suggests that transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (Covid-19) primarily occurs between people through direct, indirect, or close contact with infected people through infected secretions such as saliva and respiratory secretions, or through their respiratory droplets, which are expelled when an infected person coughs, sneezes, talks or sings.

Responding to the rising menace of the virus, the federal government in an attempt to contain its spread and transmission to other parts of the country that were deemed safe at the time issued stay-at-home order on March 30, 2020 on Lagos and Ogun state (due to its proximity Lagos as well as that most people that do business in Lagos resides to Ogun), as well as Abuja, the nation's capital. As the situation, started spiraling out of control, which is evidenced in the discovery of the virus in the other parts of the country; state governments taken cue from federal government replicated the lockdown measures specifically stay at home, closure of schools, places of worship, markets, offices, businesses, transportation, intra and inter-state travel, imposition of curfew, compulsory use of face shield, nose mask, sanitizer and washing of hand with soap, social/physical distance, etc, in their respective states. Again, all social activities such as wedding ceremony, funerals, cinemas, clubs, viewing centres, and beer parlors, etc, were prohibited. Besides, most states not only adopted the federal governments' lockdown measures; they added to it based on their peculiar conditions. Expectedly, the President, while issuing the lockdown and stay-at-home order exempted hospitals and all related medical establishments as well as organizations in healthcare related manufacturing and distribution. He noted that the lockdown (especially the initial 14 days imposed on Lagos, Ogun and the FCT) was to identify, trace, and isolate all individuals that has come in contact with confirmed cases of COVID- 19 (Ibrahima, 2020).

Moreover, the country took the extra precaution of conducting detailed screening, data capturing and profiling of all travelers returning or coming into the country at airports and other points of entry, in order to ascertain their health status. After which they were mandatorily required to self-isolate for 14 days before mingling with people in the society. This is global best practice and standard procedure that covers the incubation period for persons that may have come in contact with the virus. Depending on the state, guidelines for social gatherings, including religious congregational worship, attendance for religious activities were limited to between twenty to fifty persons, as well as physical/social distancing. In the case of Kaduna, a city in north-central Nigeria, religious congregational worship was suspended outright (Nwaka, 2020).

Whereas mainstream Christian churches and Muslim authorities, such as Catholic Church, Anglican, Methodist, etc, as well as the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) accepted and supported government restrictions by complying with them. They also ask their members to abide and practice same (Campbell, 2020). On the hand, a number of Pentecostal churches and radical Islamic clerics and their adherents were opposed to the lockdown. They described it as satanic maneuver targeted at preventing people from worshipping God. This made some of them violate the lockdown measures with reckless abandon.

Consequent upon which many Pastors and Imams were arrested while others were suspended for violating state imposed measures that were targeted at arresting spread and community transmission of the virus. Abati (2020) noted that:

There are also some religious leaders going about telling the people that Corona Virus cannot touch Christians or Muslims. One popular Pastor even preached on Sunday that whoever goes for testing is likely to be infected and so, no Christian should go for testing because Corona Virus is a manifestation of the anti-Christ. In Katsina, one Muslim cleric insisted on holding Friday prayers in defiance of official directives. The State Task Force on Corona Virus dispersed the crowd. What followed was that some of the members of the group stormed a police station and burnt down the vehicles in the compound. They said they were defending their right to pray and assemble.

Furthermore, some church ministers that were skeptical overviewed Covid-19 and its concomitant restrictions claimed to have quick solutions to the pandemic. In line with their orientation and conception of the entire situation, they readily wrote-off the covid-19 pandemic as plandemic. Among them were T. B. Joshua, who predicted that Covid-19 would disappear after heavy rainfall on March 27, and Elijah Ayodele, who claimed he was in possession of holy water and oil that could cure the disease. In addition, on April 13, Goodheart Val Aloysius of *Father's House International Church* in Calabar asked the government to assemble all the people that had tested positive for Covid-19 in an isolation center for him to heal them. To demonstrate, his seriousness, he called on the government to hang him if he fails to heal them (Nwaka, 2020). The utterances and positions of some religious leaders whom their congregants look up to for directions did not help matters during the pandemic. Evidently, Marshall (2020) while taking a global view of the situation noted that:

Religion featured prominently in the early reporting on the coronavirus pandemic, often in a negative light. In South Korea, it became clear by late March that gatherings at the Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the city of Daegu accounted for 5,080 confirmed cases of COVID-19, more than half the country's total. A gathering of the Muslim missionary group Tablighi Jamaat, which hosts hundreds of preachers at its headquarters in New Delhi, was linked to nearly 30 percent of known cases in India. Other Tablighi gatherings were tied to outbreaks in Malaysia and Pakistan. Clusters of infection elsewhere in the world have also been linked to specific religious communities.

REFLECTIONS ON CONTRIBUTIONS OF RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS TOWARDS THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 IN NIGERIA







Religion has the potential to promote as well as impede the public good. It has a special appeal as compels people even the strongest of men to either refrain from taking a particular course of action or as a catalyst for subscribing to it. Therefore, in the fight against coronavirus, religious leaders constitute veritable support system to government in ensuring that the virus is contained. Experience over time, demonstrates that people obey their religious leaders more than they do any other persons including professionals in various fields of human endeavour. For instance, most Nigerians would rather fast and pray against unemployment, poverty, hardship, and hunger to improving their skills, credentials as well as taking necessary steps that will enable them secure an improve their conditions The point is that religious leaders, posses special influence on their adherents in addition to sharing closely knitted bond with them than government. In fact, when government (public) policies affect people negatively, most persons often turn to their religious authorities for succor and spiritual interventions. This indicates that even

in the midst of the pandemic religious leaders will not only serve as source of hope and inspiration to their congregants but will definitely play vital role in stabilizing their communities of faithful. The validity of this assertion is demonstrated in the conclusions reached at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit that recognised the unique roles and comparative advantage of engaging faith based organizations (FBOs), in humanitarian contexts when it was observed that FBOs:

- Have both close proximity to and are part of populations affected by crises
- Are embedded in local communities and maintain relationships of trust and familiarity
- Are first responders who continue to provide assistance and protection during and after crisis
- Hold influence with national, provincial and local actors including governments and traditional leaders
- Share a critical responsibility and role in working for peace with the ability to facilitate sustainable behaviour changes based on faith motivations and worldview
- Provide ongoing pastoral support to communities including providing a sense of hope during and after disaster. In some crises this has been combined with training in psychosocial support, psychosocial first aid and palliative care (CAN DO, 2020).

Although a number of religious associations violated government’s lockdown restrictions and guidelines; at the same time Nigeria’s religious community contributed in various ways in the fight against the pandemic. Highlighting, the importance of religious leaders in combating health crises, the United States Centre for Biotechnology Information notes “religious leaders and faith organizations have the potential to influence health education, health promotion and positive health outcomes amongst members of their faith community. They also provide potential access to at-risk populations... encouraging health service utilization.” Furthermore, the United States National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health, observes that “As custodians of the day-to-day cultural values, traditional and religious leaders command more respect and authority in their communities than unfamiliar trained health personnel, who can easily be viewed as having suspicious agendas.” This demonstrates that religious leaders provide wide range of supporting infrastructures to the national guidelines and local conditions as demonstrated in the table below:

Table 1: Ways religious leaders can provide support to health pandemic guidelines

 Coordination	 Behaviour Change	 Social Distancing	 Counter-narratives	 Welfare Provision	 Facilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise on policy and public messaging • Make contingency plans for: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) social distancing (2) humanitarian coordination (3) community welfare support (4) fundraising (5) easing of restrictions • Implement contingency plans 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate and model government guidelines and scriptural imperatives and precedents • Empower women and youth • Sensitise local service providers • Resolve disputes • Model responsible behaviour by receiving treatment publicly and with publicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate and model social distancing • Change religious practices • Close selected places of worship • Provide alternative forms of worship (online) • Mobilise mutual community support • Manage safe resumption of group religious practices when restrictions are eased 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter narratives that: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) stigmatise infection (2) risk marginalisation exclusion, domestic or community violence (3) risk spreading contagion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide support to the most vulnerable in the local community • Mobilise the community • Raise funds for the local community • Coordinate with humanitarian organisations • Support reintegration of post-treatment individuals into the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide facilities for treatment or storage purposes such as: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) church, mosque or synagogue halls and kitchens (2) car parks (3) unused residential or other accommodation • Raise funds for provision of essential equipment and supplies for local health service

Source: Tony Blair institute for global change (2020, p.6).

As earlier mentioned, most orthodox religious organisations recognized the existence and threat of COVID-19 pandemic. Consequent upon which they took necessary steps to ensure their followers abide and observed government initiated lockdown measures in order to prevent the spread of the virus. In the light of this, many religious leaders from both Christian and Islamic divide participated actively in the fight against the virus. Specifically, they modified traditional rites and rituals associated with their system/style of worships in line with the lockdown guidelines, suspension of service, and masses (for Catholics), initiation of online worship channels and stations, splitting of congregation into smaller numbers, creation of home cells, provision of water, and hand sanitizers at their places of worship, enforcement of wearing of nose/face mask at worship centres and in public places, educating of their congregants on how to stay safe during the period, etc. Most importantly, religious organisations supported government effort towards preventing the spread of the virus by not only making financial and material donations. In addition to this, some made available their facilities to government to use as isolation and quarantine centres.

Table 2: Selected contributions and donation made by religious organisations in the fight against covid-19 in Nigeria

S/n	Name of religions organization	Contribution
1	Catholic Church	The Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) donated all its 425 health facilities across the country as isolation centres for Covid-19 patients.
2	Anglican church (Church of Nigeria)	The Lagos Province of the Church of Nigeria that covers the 13 Anglican Communion dioceses in Lagos and Ogun States, donated the sum of N5 million to Ogun State Government as part of its contribution in the fight against the virus.
3	The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG)	The RCCG donated 11 Intensive Care Units, ICUs to Lagos, Ogun and Plateau States with ventilators to improve the medical response to the disease. Among these are the Enoch & Folu Adeboye Intensive Care Unit (ICU), Plateau State Specialist Hospital, Plateau State Enoch & Folu Adeboye Intensive Care Unit, Redeemer's Health Centre Mowe, Ogun State and the Enoch & Folu Adeboye Intensive Care Unit, Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Lagos State. It also donated about 8,000 hand sanitizers, 8,000 face masks and about 20,000 hand gloves to Mainland Hospital Yaba
4	Dunamis	The Dunamis International Gospel Centre (DIGC), donated medical equipment and relief materials worth millions of naira to help fight the corona virus to the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja.
5	WINNERS Chapel	The Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners Chapel International) donated state-of-the-art Ambulances and Test Kits and other medical supplies to Lagos and Ogun state governments in the midst of the pandemic. It also donated medical equipment that included 10 cartons of disposable face masks, 40 pieces of infrared thermometers, 2 cartons of blood pressure monitors, 20 cartons of latex hand gloves, 500 pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE), amongst other medical items. Again, it donated foodstuff to cushion the effect of lockdown on the less privilege, which include 400 bags of rice, 150 bags of beans, 400 bags of garri, 500 gallons of vegetable oil.
6	Elevation Church	The Church provided relief to citizens during the lockdown in Lagos state, by providing food materials for 2,000 families to assist them over the 14 days lockdown period.
7	The League of Imams and Alfas	The League of Imams and Alfas in Ogun state donated the sum of N2.5 million to the State government to support its fight against the spread of Coronavirus. The Wakeel Muslim for Yorubaland, Edo and Delta, Sheikh Iskeel Awwal handed over the draft cheque to the Deputy Governor, Mrs. Noimot Salako-Oyedele in Abeokuta, the State capital.
8	The Muslim Coalition Against COVID-19	The group donated food items such as 300 bags of 10kg rice, 300 cartons of spaghetti, 25 Cartons of Royco seasoning, 15 Cartons of 1litre groundnut oil and 50 sacks of Omo detergents to the Minister of State for FCT, Dr Ramatu Tijjani Aliyu for distribution in FCT during the lockdown. The body was established mainly for palliatives distribution targeted at mitigating hardships caused by the Federal Government lockdown order on families and disabled persons.

Source: Compiled by the authors from Taiyese (2020), Adebowale, 2020, Adediran, (2020).

On his part, the president-general of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Sultan of Sokoto Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar, reminded the country's Muslim community that Prophet Mohammed himself advocated for social distancing in times of disease, thus, "leaving the town and hiding on mountains and in caves, [suspending] congregational prayers

and *Jumu'ah* (Friday) prayers, temporarily.” Further, the Sultan notes that Muslims have a religious duty to prevent the spread of disease (Nigeria Working Group on Peace building and Governance, 2020). The spiritual leader, had on March 2020, admonished adherents of Islamic religion in the country to pray against the virus as well as to observe personal hygiene in order to contain its spread. Taking cognizance of the fact that festive periods often witness increased human movements, travels, congestions and contacts that make it a risk factor capable of escalating community transmission and spread of the virus. The Sultan, while declaring Friday, July 31, 2020, as the day of Eid-El-Kabir directed all the Imams and District heads in Sokoto State and the larger Muslim communities in the country, to observe their Eid prayers at the mosques in their towns and villages instead of the customary Eid grounds. This measure according to a press statement that was signed by the Chairman Advisory Committee on Religious Affairs, Sultanate Affairs, Sokoto, Prof. Sambo Wali Junaidu, on behalf of the sultan on Wednesday, July 22, 2020 was attributed to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. The statement reads:

Eminence, Alhaji Muhammad Sa’ad Abubakar CFR, mni, the Sultan of Sokoto and President-General Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) has declared Friday, 31st July 2020 as the 10th day of Zulhijja 1441 AH and the day of Eid-El-Kabir for the year. Furthermore, in view of the current situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Sultan hereby advises all the District Heads and Imams in Sokoto State, to observe Eid prayers at their Jumu’at Mosques in their respective towns and villages and not at Eid grounds. Also, the council advises the muslim communities throughout the country to observe Eid prayers at Jumu’at mosques to curb the spread of the covid-19 pandemic (Olisah, 2020).

As part of the efforts to prevent the spread of the virus, the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) required its members to adopt online teachings during the holy month of Ramadan as congregational worships had been suspended. On this note, Ankara (2020) argued that “Individual Scholars and Organisations were encouraged to employ available means of information dissemination such as radio, television, other virtual facilities, print, social and traditional media for dissemination of tafsir and other da’awah [preaching] activities.”

Meanwhile, the Catholic Churches in Nigeria in its immediate response to the discovery of the index case in the country issued circular containing precautionary measures to be adopted by parishes and parishioners across the country.

Also, in compliance with government directives, religious associations and worship centres adopted new modes of practicing their faith as a way of assisting in combating the spread of the virus. In the light of this, a good number of religious organization resorted to online worship/services, others developed home cell worship services, cancelation of all midweek activities, splitting of members into smaller units at various corners of church premises as well as multiplying the number of masses and services that were celebrated each Sunday. For instance, St. Matthias Catholic Church Amarata, Yenagoa, Bayesla State resorted to the use of tally in deciding who attends which masses, when and where? Given that instead of its original single masses as the hours of 6:30am, 8:45am and 10:45am; the church were celebrating about 4 to 5 masses simultaneously at these various times; while, some others churches completely suspend all religious activities. Again, in identifying with the government to prevent the spread virus in the country while calling for more actions; the Catholic bishops of Ibadan ecclesiastical province in a

communiqué issued after its meeting that was held at the Jubilee Conference Centre, Ibadan from January 25-26, 2021, observes:

We commend the spirited effort of the government at Federal and State levels in providing facilities and regulations for confronting the pandemic at the onset and for support and palliatives arrangements for the vulnerable segments of our population. We however regret that to date, many Nigerians still conduct themselves in a risky manner, hardly observing any of the recommendations issued for their own safety. Seeing that the pandemic remains deadly, we plead with all Nigerians to keep themselves protected by following all the laid down rules meant for their own safety. We urge the authorities and the media to sustain public education and enlightenment, provide more testing centres so as to provide the public with sufficient facility and understanding of what is at stake. We strongly recommend that the authorities not allow anyone to use the COVID-19 pandemic for selfish gains or interests. We also plead that our medical experts be allowed to subject to appropriate test, the COVID-19 vaccines coming into Nigeria in order to secure the confidence of Nigerians so that they may willingly submit to the medication. It would be immoral and unjust to compel anyone to take the vaccine.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In Nigeria religion constitutes one of the greatest source of conflict both at individual and states level, as witnessed in the contradictions between the science and religiosity of Covid-19 pandemic in the country. It was this condition that compelled some men of God to doubt, reject and question the existence of the virus. On the contrary, despite this, religious organizations and religious leaders played and continues to play vital roles by providing various forms of support and assistance to the government in an attempt to ensure that the virus is defeated. While some donated consumables, money, facilities, medical equipments, etc, others contributed through information dissemination, issuing directive to their followers, etc. Besides, majority of religious organizations in the country modified and adopted new form worship especially online worship, live streaming and splitting of members in places where religious activities were not completely suspended. This demonstrates that religious leaders and organizations are active participants in public matters and that people listens and obey their instructions.

In the light of this, the study recommends as follows:

- Government should partner with religious organizations both in formulation and implementation of policies, especially those that touches on humanitarian issues.
- Where possible, government should not just equip and mobilize medical practitioners and law enforcement agents. It should as a matter of necessity mobilize religious leaders to educate and advice the people on what to do flatten the curve of the pandemic.

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