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ONWUKWE Chimaobi

***“WE DON’T DEAL WITH
SCIENCE, WE DEAL WITH
THE TRUTH.”***

**RELIGION AGAINST SCIENCE IN
NIGERIAN NEO-PENTECOSTAL
SERMONS ON COVID-19.**



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“WE DON’T DEAL WITH SCIENCE, WE DEAL WITH THE TRUTH.” RELIGION AGAINST SCIENCE IN NIGERIAN NEO-PENTECOSTAL SERMONS ON COVID-19.

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the interaction between religion and science in the Covid-19 discourses in Nigeria, drawing on a thematic analysis of Neo-Pentecostal sermons. If authors have mostly noted the complementary and dynamic relationship between science and religion in the context of the Covid-19 epidemics, this article shows how Nigerian Neo-Pentecostal sermons mostly contradicted scientific and State-sponsored information on the virus. Key themes that emerged from the analysis of sermons include: religious conceptions/interpretations of Covid-19 that negate or contradict science-based facts about Covid-19; contention of the reality of Covid-19 cases in Nigeria; emphasis on spiritual exemption; and the power of anointing for healing, as well as divergent views on adherence to safety measures. Building on Barbour’s four models of interaction, the study identifies a tension or conflict rather than a complementary relationship between science and religion in the Neo-Pentecostal discourses on Covid-19 in Nigeria. This represents a unique contribution to discussions on the relationship between religion and science, and an original insight into Covid-19 discourses in Nigeria.

Key words: Religion, science, Covid-19, Christian sermons, Neo-Pentecostalism

Introduction

Science and religion have more often been at conflict than complementary to each other, and the relationship has been dynamic (Gyekye, 2009). While the former hinges on faith or belief, the latter anchors on (scientific) facts. Yet, among other topics, health issues are explained by science but do appeal to religion. The beliefs (faith) of religion may be at variance with and/or complement scientific positions or explanations but both have different explanations or judgments about life, as well as specific issues relating to existence. In the recent years, research has shown that religious beliefs and practices are often associated with various health aspects, such as ability to cope with the disease, recovery after hospitalization and a positive attitude in a difficult situation, including health (Albers et al. 2010; Puchalski et al. 2009; Phelps et al. 2009).

The pandemic has seen renewed discussions on the link between religion and science and has given rise to the need for a better understanding of their dynamic relationship. Indeed, studies have revealed that faith is one of various strategies for survival that allows to keep hope and a sense of security in the time of health crisis like Covid-19 (Kowalczyk et al. 2020) as well as religious responses to Covid-19 (Isiko, 2020).

This study adds to the discussions on the relationship between religion and science through analyzing Neo-Pentecostal sermons on Covid-19 in Nigeria. In particular, the study investigates how Neo-Pentecostal sermons on Covid-19 establish the reality or not of Covid-19 as well as complement and/or contradict Covid-19 information (for example hand washing, self-isolation, wearing face/nose masks and social distancing). On the basis of Barbour's (1997, 2000) four models of interaction between religion and science, this study identifies that the relationship between religion and science is not always, but can be, conflictual. It thus represents a unique contribution to the discussions on the relationship between religion and science in the context of Covid-19.

Religion and science: a conceptual framework

Barbour's (1997, 2000) typology explains the ways in which religion and science relate around four types of interactions : conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration - though certain issues may lend themselves more to one category than another.

The conflict model posits science vs religion and claims that, *a priori*, either science or religion is true and the other is necessarily false. The model assumes a

conflict in the interaction between religion and science and is based on the assumption that both are distinct areas and/or parallel lines that would not meet. The model also claims that science and religion make rival literal statements about the same domain, so a person must choose between them (Fuller, 2010). Gyekye (2009) also observes that the conflict view of the relationship between religion and science means that religious doctrine and scientific perspectives are incompatible and so cannot in any way be reconciled.

The independence model retains a good deal of popularity among those who attempt to strike a balance between science and religion. According to Barbour, science and religion can be distinguished by the questions which they ask, the domains to which they refer, and the methods which they employ. This model implicates the independence of each of them which reduces the number of conflicts and agrees with other ways humans compartmentalize knowledge. Further, many people agree with the claim that science is public and objective while religion is private and subjective. The problem with this model comes when people disagree about where specific topics, at the interface of science and religion, should be placed (the theory of evolution, for example). The conflict thus arises as some seek to put an issue in the religion camp while others put the same issue in the science camp.

The dialogue model comes from a realization that science and religion have more in common than many people think. In other words, "dialogue portrays more constructive relationships between Science and Religion. Dialogue may arise from considering the presuppositions of the scientific enterprise, or from exploring similarities between the methods of science and those of religion, or from analyzing concepts in one field that are analogous to those in the other. Dialogue emphasizes similarities in presuppositions, methods, and concepts" (*SERC Pedagogic Service*). Gyekye (2009) notes that the assumption of the dialogue model is that while the differences between the methods of religion and science may be different, there may be similarities which must be acknowledged.

Finally, the integration model assumes interrelatedness of science and religion in explaining natural, spiritual and metaphysical issues. Espousing this model, Gyekye (2009) observes that the integration view argues that religion and science can contribute to the development of a metaphysic that has the potential of satisfying the demands and goals of both. This view, however, requires that some of the traditional religious beliefs or doctrines should be reformulated in the light of scientific discoveries or theories. Barbour (2000) identifies three distinct

versions of the integration model: natural theology (the existence of God can be inferred from, or is supported by, the evidence of design in nature, of which science has made us more aware), the theology of nature (the main sources of theology lie outside science, but scientific theories may affect the reformulation of certain doctrines, especially regarding creation and human nature), and systematic (both science and religion contribute to an inclusive metaphysics).

In relation to this study, we try to apply these models and look for the particular model that best lends itself to the interplay of religion and science in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Religion and science in times of Covid-19: the case of Nigeria

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the role of religious leaders and organizations in the management of the crisis was central. During this time, many authors have highlighted the complementary relationship between science and religion (among others, see Gyekye, 2009). For example, Isiko (2020) speaks of the synergy between religion and science in the government's response to the pandemic in Uganda. He observes that:

'In Uganda, the religious sector became pivotal during the pandemic. The government of Uganda relied on the religious institutions and their leaders to enforce early phase responses to the pandemic... Because of the undebatable significance of religion in Uganda, the first overt response to COVID-19 was government engagement with religious leaders. For Uganda's case, a successful fight against COVID-19 lay in how much the religious leaders and institutions cooperated with government to enable it roll out its preventive programmes [...] What gave Uganda an upper hand in the management of Covid-19 is not only government rapid responses but also what seems to be a complementary role played by the hitherto opposing religion and science. We see religious leaders emphasize all the science information regarding Covid-19, and health experts promote the religious angle of managing Covid-19. This synergy was the game-changer.'

The observation above speaks of the complementary relationship between religion and science, as well as the assumption that religion and science are two independent areas which also have some commonalities as held in the

'independence', 'dialogue' and 'integrative' models (Barbour 1997, 2000). The common ground is that the different fields/areas have to be harnessed in order to achieve a common societal goal, which in this case is to stop the spread of Covid-19, and ensure adherence to safety measures. Many authors have also noted how religious testimonials have influenced adherence to safety measures (Kowalczyk, et al. 2020). Others have noted the importance of religious coping strategy in the times of distress such as Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Isiko (2020) argues that in times of crisis, religion becomes crucial in an attempt by humans to seek explanations and stress relief. Bentzen (2020, 20) sums up that:

'The demand for religion has risen dramatically since the onset of the pandemic with political leaders and self-organized groups urging their fellow citizens to pray. The tendency for people to use religion to deal with crisis can be understood within the religious coping terminology. Religious coping means that people use religion as a means to deal with adversity and uncertainty. They pray, seek a closer relation to God, or explain the tragedy by reference to an Act of God. Empirical evidence suggests that people impacted by adverse life events such as cancer, heart problems, death in close family, divorce, or injury are more religious than others. Adversity, caused by natural disasters, instigates people across the globe to use their religion more intensively.'

In the case of Nigeria, Kazzim (2020) supports the idea of the complementary relationship between religion and science in the discourses on Covid-19 and identifies the 'accommodationists' as opposed to 'science-centrism' schools of thought. He observes that "accommodationists' insist that during crisis moments like the current Covid-19 pandemic, scientists should lead with research and innovation while the believers should pray to God to bestow scientists with the knowledge to produce the needed vaccines" (p.1). In other words, 'accommodationists' approach pandemics with an understanding that prioritizes both religious faith and science. In this school of thought, there is an underlying agreement that science is important for human flourishing, and that it is equally important to admit that the search for objective truth has led scientists to questions that science cannot answer. Science, for 'accommodationists', cannot address all the questions that exist, especially metaphysical ones. Unlike the advocates of science-centrism, 'accommodationists' do not believe in ideological scientism or the uncritical application of science to all human situations,

including those that are not amenable to the scientific method. Instead, they would argue that the vaccines that will cure diseases like the novel coronavirus will come from scientists, but that the scientific knowledge needed for that invention is based on God's design. This gives credence to complementary and not conflict interplay of religion and science in the discourses of Covid-19 in Nigeria.

On a side of Christianity, a few denominations in Nigeria, particularly the mainstream Churches and more specifically the Catholics, have seemed to share this 'accommodationist' position. For example, doctors and other health professionals have delivered sensitization and campaign messages on Covid -19 in some Catholic and Presbyterian churches. Also, some churches were reported to have set up testing centers in their premises for prayers and medical attention (BCC Igbo, 2020). However, other denominations and specifically the Neo-Pentecostals have had different views on the relationship between religion and science. Thus, the 'accommodationists' perspective seems not to explain the whole varieties of responses of Nigerian religious leaders to Covid-19. In other words, if many Nigerian religious leaders have adopted a posture regarding Covid-19 that can be classified within Barbour's 'independence', 'dialogue' and 'integrative' models, it is equally important to understand the alternative discourses that have emerged from within Christianity and particularly Neo-Pentecostal churches.

Methodology

Data were collected in the form of twenty documented Christian sermons on Covid-19 since the index case was established in March 2020 in Nigeria. These are in the form of audiovisual sermons shared on the various social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube) that are rendered in English as well as in the Igbo language. The sermons, which were downloaded from the various social media platforms and watched/listened to by the researcher, were drawn from Nigerian Pentecostal churches in different regions of Nigeria including Winners Chapel, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Omega Fire Ministries. Only sermons that focused on Covid-19 were selected.

Analysis of the sermons featured the thematic analysis (which entailed identifying some salient points as key themes in the sermons), and 'Discourse Analysis (DA)' (Fairclough, 2010) - which is an approach that sees discourses as a form of social practice, and is concerned with systematically investigating

hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in discourse. In relation to this study, we focused on ideologies of religion and/or science embedded in Neo-Pentecostals sermons (which is a form of religious discourse) on Covid-19. Specifically, discussions featured identification of faith-based slants or issues raised in the sermons and how they complement and/or contradict science-based facts about Covid-19.

Analyses of Neo-Pentecostal sermons on Covid-19 in Nigeria

As could be expected, the Covid-19 crisis drew huge reactions from leaders of Christian religious bodies in Nigeria, particularly when the government banned the gathering of religious organizations, leading to the shutdown of churches. Churches were ordered to be shut down to curtail the spread of Covid-19 during the monthly briefing of Nigeria's Presidential Task Force on Covid-19 on 20th March, 2020, and implementation committees across the thirty-six states of the nation were set up to enforce the order. While some leaders devoted full sermons to Covid-19, others released shorter comments and admonitions in the course of their sermons. Key themes that emerged from the analysis of sermons include: conceptions/interpretations of Covid-19, Covid-19 in Nigeria, spiritual exemption, and the power of anointing for healing, as well as adherence to safety measures.

a. Eschatological conceptions of Covid-19

In the sermons analyzed, religious interpretations of Covid-19 were promoted while scientific facts were generally downplayed. Yet, there were different conceptions and/or interpretation of Covid-19 including "Covid-19 as satanic manipulation", "the Covid-19 mystery", "Covid-19 as evidence of impending rapture", or "Covid-19 as a sign of end time".

Firstly, the conception of Covid-19 as a satanic manipulation was very widespread in the sermons. It positioned the virus within the perpetual war with the kingdom of darkness - a war that is said to have begun when God cast down the devil and his cohorts to the Earth. This conception is built on the belief that the church and its adherents are in constant war with Satan whose primary purpose is to "kill, steal and destroy" (KJV John 11 : 12). Quite a number of Neo-Pentecostal leaders placed the issue of Covid-19 in this context of this unending

war between the church of God and the kingdom of Satan: they argued that the virus was manufactured by the kingdom of darkness through the instrumentality of the agents of Satan on Earth to further perpetuate the war against the church, thus downplaying the scientific debates on the origin and spread of the virus code-named Covid-19.

1"Coronavirus is mere noise, noisome pestilence. It is an act perpetrated by some gang-ups to destroy the world and the body of Christ. Don't forget that the church is in constant war with the kingdom of darkness, and this is one of those deceptive ploys to destroy the world. Don't lose your guard, don't be deceived" -(Winners Chapel, 30-07-2020)

2"Let nobody deceive you that there is anything scientific about what is happening. This is pure operation of the devil. Its target is to destroy the church. It is anti-church virus!" -(Omega Fire ministries, 28-03-2020)

Other Christian leaders conceived more specifically Covid-19 as a mystery associated with the anti-Christ, as opposed to broader interpretation of Covid-19 as a satanic manipulation. Indeed, some Christian religious groups associated the pandemic to a sign of the coming of the anti-Christ, more precisely when the devil plans to give some marks to his agents and adherents who will then infiltrate and dominate the Earth. They argued that the agenda was to draw as many people as possible away from the church of God into the church of Satan-the anti-Christ. These beliefs were often associated with various misconceptions and misinformation about Covid-19 including 'conspiracy theories' such as the relation of Covid-19 to 5G network, or the idea that the virus was the power play between the global North and some Asian powers.

2"Covid 19 is not real! It is a chemical weapon and not a biological fact. It is a demonstration of the spiritual war called ANTI-Christ. Those who said they discovered this virus are agents for executing this plan of the devil upon the earth" -(Omega Fire Ministries, 28-03-2020)

3"Coronavirus is an attempt by the kingdom of darkness to destroy the church of God. It is related to the 5G network and is aimed at fostering devilish agenda of 666 in the world. A time will come when they will ask people to be vaccinated. Where will they get these vaccines? The Devil is on the loose..." (Bible Believing Mission Inc., 6-04-2020)

In addition to these conceptions, some sermons were replete with various interpretations of Covid-19 related to rapture - a certain time, at the end of the world, when Jesus will return to the earth to take His people/believers to heaven.

Christian faithfuls, particularly Neo-Pentecostals, are often admonished to prepare for rapture, which imminence would be signaled by strange occurrences such as sickness and diseases. Some religious leaders interpreted the Covid-19 pandemic as a sign of rapture: rather than seeing the pandemic as a health crisis, faithfuls were enjoined to prepare to meet their Savior, to mend their ways, and to live a life of righteousness. Some pastors thus chose to spread the news of rapture and of the end of times as signaled by the Covid-19 crisis, rather than address the reality of the health challenge as proven by science.

⁴“Coronavirus is a sign of rapture (when Jesus will come back to the world to take his people to heaven). Prayers heal coronavirus. Faith is superior to science. As far as heavens are above the earth, so are Christian principles far above scientific knowledge. We need to understand this about Covid-19” .-(**Dunamis Christian Center, 20-03-2020**)

⁵“End time is here. Instead of locking yourself in your rooms and observing isolation, pray to be raptured. Instead of closing your nose and mouths in the name of avoiding a man-made sickness, prepare your ways for the coming of the son of God is at hand. Instead of avoiding people in the name of social distancing, reach out to people in prayers for the world to be raptured”- (**Blessed Chapel, 28-04-2020**).

b. Reality of Covid-19 in Nigeria

Another key theme that emerged from the analysis of the sermons is ‘the reality of Covid-19 cases in Nigeria’. Such views included the arguments that Covid-19 was a game plan masterminded by the Nigerian government to outsmart political opponents, that it was a means of corruption and embezzlement, and/or a sign of ineptitude by government. Some leaders cast aspersions on the reality of Covid-19 in Nigeria while others stated it explicitly that the virus did not exist in Nigeria despite the overwhelming scientific proofs of Covid-19 cases in the country. There was this perception among citizens as well as religious leaders of some conspiracy and complicity by the government.

⁶“Why is there no upsurge of coronavirus in Tanzania? Coronavirus spread in Nigeria is a game. It is not real. Some people are milking the system. Coronavirus does to spread as we are made to believe, it is satanic manipulation” -(**Winners Chapel, 8-07-2020**)

⁷“Coronavirus is not in Nigeria! Governments at all levels are making money out of the scare of coronavirus in Nigeria. Coronavirus is not different from malaria and malaria kills more people than coronavirus in Nigeria”- (**Salvation ministries, 18-05-2020**)

The doubt of the reality of Covid-19 in Nigeria was further revealed in some critics of government responses. Some of the leaders were condemning the response to Covid-19 by the various governments at all levels in Nigeria. They questioned the veracity of the claims of increasing cases/infections, particularly in the light of the closure of churches while other places were open, like markets, and political parties kept holding rallies.

²⁰. “This thing seems like a scam. You asked churches to close so that people will not contract Covid-19, yet you allow markets to operate, you still hold your rallies and meetings which are usually more populated. Now, tell me how this sounds. I don’t think this whole thing is real. Our governments have some questions to answer” (Solution **Ground Church, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, 20-08-2020**)

Other Neo-Pentecostal leaders were critical of the government’s response regarding what they described as an ‘unnecessary lockdown’, particularly its enforcement in some states reported where not a single case of Covid-19 was reported. The leaders interpreted lockdown enforcements in these states as unnecessary, alleging a tacit plan to give the impression that the virus was widespread in Nigeria so as to access financial assistance both from federal government as well as foreign organizations.

³ “In what other better way can you interpret this ‘unnecessary lockdown’, such as in the case of Cross River and other states where the government agency said that there is no case of Covid-19. They just want to make it look like the thing is everywhere in Nigeria and to collect some funds, and embezzle it. This whole thing is planned!” - (**Bible Believing Mission Inc., Aba, Abia State, Nigeria- 6-04-2020**)

They also interpreted the disagreement between the federal government and the Governor of Kogi State in Nigeria on the rate of Covid-19 infections in his state as an action that casts doubt on the reality of Covid-19 cases in the whole country.

¹⁹. “Don’t you see the man from Kogi State? He does not want to be part of this game plan by government. He continues to maintain that Covid-19 is not in his state, he simply does not want to be part of this orchestrated plan to milk the system. We must tell ourselves the truth” (**Mountain of Christ of Nations, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, 12-08-2020**)

c. Covid-19 and the spiritual exemption of the faithful

Spiritual exemption is another key theme that emerged from the analysis of sermons of Nigerian Christian leaders during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is related to the belief that a ‘believer or born-again’ child of God is spiritually exempted from any calamity and challenge that befalls on ‘non-believers’ who have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and personal Savior. This belief draws from the biblical accounts of the children of Israel in the land of Egypt, where they were in captivity but were exempted from all the plagues that came upon the Egyptians. Such speeches were unwittingly aimed at downplaying the importance of Covid-19 from a scientific point of view and promoting religious exemption. This emphasis was part of the efforts to defuse what pastors referred to as an unnecessary fear and panic sown in the psyche of people about Covid-19. Adherents were made to understand that their case was different, and that though ‘they may be in the world, they are not of the world’, and as such they couldn't be affected by what affects other people.

⁸“Scriptural truth is far above and superior to science, Sir. Every child of God is exempted from infection with Covid-19. They don’t understand it, the way the Egyptians did not understand why the Israelites were exempted from all the calamities in the land. Don’t entertain any fear, build your faith to activate the truth that your case is different” - (**Winner Chapel, 27-03-2020**)

⁹“Can I share this good news to you? As a child of God, you enjoy spiritual exemption from any disease that is affecting the world. God proved his divine exemption plan for his people in the days of Abraham and Isaac. You are divinely separated from coronavirus” -(**Redeemed Christian Church of God, 2-03-2020**)

¹⁰“Coronavirus might be real to non-believers but the good news is that a child of GOD is not supposed to be infected with Coronavirus. When once you are serving the interest of God, God in turn exempts you from any disease or calamity in the world” - (**Christ Embassy, 7-08-2020**)

¹¹“Coronavirus is not bigger than Jesus Christ. If you have Jesus, not even Coronavirus can harm you. If believers can strive to have Jesus in their life the way they fear coronavirus, the world will be a better place” - **(Intervention Ministries, 2-04-2020)**

¹²“As believers, we are on a covenant called the Covenant of protection which protects a child of God from all harassment of the devil including infection with Covid-19” -**(Dunamis Gospel Center, 6-03-2020).**

It is pertinent to observe that the Neo-Pentecostal leaders seemed not to have divergent views regarding the conceptions of Covid-19, reality of Covid-19, as well as spiritual exemption. This would require more in-depth analysis as this consensus may be related to a largely common doctrine of the Neo-Pentecostal churches.

d. Safety measures and the power of anointing for healing

The (non) adherence to safety measures was another key theme that was replete in almost all the analyzed sermons but, contrary to the topics of the conceptions of Covid-19, reality of Covid-19 and spiritual exemption, there were divergent views among Neo-Pentecostal pastors.

In March 2020, the federal government of Nigeria ordered the closure of churches, and provided some guidelines or safety protocol to be observed by all churches, bringing the issue of adherence to safety measures to the limelight. Government's regulation on adherence to safety measures such as wearing of face/nose masks, social distancing, isolation, and regular hand washing drew a lot of contentions from Christian religious leaders. There were a range of dominant reactions from Neo-Pentecostal churches including blunt refusal to observe these protocols. In the sermons, many argued that observing safety measures amounted to the church of God bowing to the antics of the kingdom of darkness, that safety measures were means of idolizing the people of God or that a child of God should live above man-made regulations.

In most of the sermons, Neo-Pentecostal pastors rejected the safety measures pushed by the government on the ground of the power of anointing for healing from Covid-19. Anointing, interpreted as the spirit and grace of God at work in the life of Christians, was seen as superior to any medical ailments and disease: once Christian or child of God is anointed as represented in the “holy oil”, there is a siege of protection that comes upon such a person that does not allow any

sickness affecting others to come upon him/her. Indifferent to scientific recommendations to avoid the spread of Covid-19 such as social distancing and isolation, some even argued about the potency of the anointing oil for healing from Covid-19, which resulted in some adherents drinking shots of 'holy anointing oil'.

¹³“Anointing, which is the spirit or grace of GOD upon the life of a person, stops the spread of Covid-19. "Cough the anointing" to stop Covid-19! When they say you should not stay around someone who coughs, tell them you cough anointing. All you need is the anointing of God upon your life, nothing like Covid-19 will come around you” - **(Winners chapel, 25-03-2020)**

¹⁴“Bring me anyone infected with Covid-19 and God will heal him through this shot of anointing oil. We don't deal with science, we deal with the truth. The truth is superior to science. Take me to where infected people are, I would stay with them and even play with them, and nothing like Covid-19 would be found in me. We are spiritual beings. What affects others do not affect us. That is the power of the anointing” - **(Christ Embassy, 12-04-2020)**

Some sermons even argued that adherence to safety measures was one of those ploys by the kingdom of darkness to bring the church under its rules which underscores the conception of Covid-19 as satanic manipulation. Some sermons demonize safety measures and described them as 'man-made regulations' which should not be heeded to by a child of God. They emphasized that the church of God is not subject to regulations of this world.

¹⁵“Wearing of face masks is satanic, will kill slowly. Coronavirus is an attempt by the kingdom of darkness to destroy the church of God. The measures supposedly, to curtail the spread of Covid-19, are to whittle down the power of the church including closedown of churches. Wearing face mask does not guarantee safety but being in Christ Jesus”. -**(Christ Embassy, 18-08-2020)**

¹⁶“We cannot bow to the idol called Coronavirus. I condemn the so-called safety measures. The observance of safety protocols such as washing of hands, wearing face masks, etc. simply implies bowing to the idol called coronavirus” - **(Shepherd House of God, 1-06-2020)**

¹⁷"What we even hear among Christians is laughable: « Covid -19 compliant churches ». The label does not depict the church of Jesus Christ. A child of God should not be infected with Coronavirus and that people infected with Coronavirus cannot survive in the house of God because the house of God is a house of healing. Why do we allow the made-made regulations to determine what we do?" - **(Christ Embassy, 30-04-2020)**

However, even within Neo-Pentecostalism, some leaders took a divergent view and encouraged Christian faithfuls to observe the safety measures. Some pastors were not only admitting the reality of Covid-19 but also they emphasized on adherence to safety measures through different kinds of approaches which included analogy to faith. This position that can be classified as an 'accommodationist' approach (Kazzim, 2020), was aimed at promoting and encouraging observance of the measures for curtailing the spread of Covid-19.

¹⁸"Godly insights into the coronavirus pandemic. As Christians we must understand that God expects us to obey constituted authorities for they are set up by Him. We ought to observe safety measures. They do not make us less-Christians." **(The Latter Rain Assembly, 22-03-2020)**

¹⁹"Coronavirus is real and even children of God can be infected. So, children of God should observe all safety measures including wearing face masks and constant hand-washing. We live and do things with other people, so we must observe these safety measures. If they tell you to wear masks, please do. Mary said whatever, he tells you, do it! (-MCN, 12-08-2020)

²⁰"I think that what the measures do among others is to provide basis to measure our faith level. If you have great faith, we see it in the way you observe them as well as those that have little faith. If your faith can carry you, go ahead and do your thing. But if not, please observe them. We must understand that we in the world, and we do not live-in isolation even though we consider ourselves heavenly beings" **(Solution Ground Church, 20-08-2020).**

Summary and conclusion : Understanding conflict between religion and science in the Covid-19 discourses in Nigeria

This study has provided original insights into the interaction of religion and science, drawing on the analysis of Neo-Pentecostal sermons in Nigeria. If many authors have noted the role of accommodationist positions among religious leaders, many Neo-Pentecostal pastors have, to the contrary, promoted alternative religious interpretations of Covid-19 while downplaying scientific facts. Our analysis of Neo-Pentecostal sermons on Covid-19 reveals the conflicts or tensions surrounding the interaction between science and religion in the discourses about Covid-19 in Nigeria. Generally, the religious conceptions and interpretations expressed in those sermons contradicted in many ways science-based facts about Covid-19. For instance, they theorized the outbreak of Covid-19 as a spiritual war between the church and the kingdom of darkness, as opposed to a science-based explanation that it is a virus that erupted in Wuhan, China, and has spread globally. Also, many defended the interpretation of Covid-19 as a sign of rapture, as opposed to science-based explanation of a health crisis. Other observations include varied religious views that speak of a contention of the reality of Covid-19 cases in Nigeria, as opposed to confirmation of the cases by health agencies; faith-based slants such as spiritual exemption, anointing for healing, which negate the science-based facts of the infectious nature of the virus. There were more divergences on the question of whether or not to adhere to safety practices/measures: while some Christian religious leaders emphasized adherence to safety measures, others outrightly admonished against wearing nose/face masks, hand washing, isolation and social distancing.

The analysis reveals the tension surrounding the interaction of science and religion in the religious discourses of Covid-19 in Nigeria. It confirms the applicability of the conflict model between religion and science (Barbour 1997, 2000), as well as the assumption that both religion and science are distinct areas and/or parallel lines that would not meet. In other words, it is the conclusion of this study that the relationship between religion and science is not always, but can be, a conflictual kind of relationship. The conceptions and interpretations expressed in the sermons analyzed clearly contradicted the positions of science about the Covid-19 pandemic. These speak of how religion meddles in secular

affairs in Nigeria, and reveal how the Neo-Pentecostal pastors attempted to strengthen their influence and their criticism of the Nigerian state during the pandemics by providing alternative explanations of Covid-19 based on faith while mostly rejecting State-sponsored and science-based facts and measures.

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Appendix

Messages of religious leaders analyzed and the dates

1. Living Faith Church, Winners chapel, Canaanland, Ota, Lagos, Nigeria-30-07-2020
2. Omega Fire ministries, Auchu, Edo State, Nigeria, 28-03-2020
3. Bible Believing Mission Inc., Aba, Abia State, Nigeria- 6-04-2020
4. Dunamis Christian Gospel Center, Lugbe, Abuja, Nigeria-20-03-2020
5. Blessed Chapel, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, 28-04-2020
6. Living Faith Church, Winners chapel, Canaanland, Ota, Lagos, Nigeria-08-07-2020
7. Salvation ministries, Portharcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, 18-05-2020
8. Living Faith Church, Winners chapel, Canaanland, Ota, Lagos, Nigeria-27-03-2020
9. Redeemed Christian Church of God, Ebutte Metta, Lagos, Nigeria, 2-03-2020
10. Loveworld ministries, AKA Christ Embassy, Lagos, Nigeria, 7-08-2020
11. Mountain of miracles and Intervention Ministries, Onitsha, Anambra State, Nigeria, 2-04-2020
12. Dunamis Christian Gospel Center, Lugbe, Abuja, Nigeria-6-06-2020
13. Living Faith Church, Winners chapel, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria-25-03-2020
14. Loveworld ministries, AKA Christ Embassy, Lagos, Nigeria, 12-04-2020
15. Loveworld ministries, AKA Christ Embassy, Lagos, Nigeria, 18-08-2020
16. Shepherd House of God, Lagos, Nigeria, 1-06-2020
17. Loveworld ministries, AKA Christ Embassy, Lagos, Nigeria, 30-04-2020
18. The Latter Rain Assembly, Lagos State, Nigeria, 22-03-2020
19. Mountain of Christ of Nations, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, 12-08-2020
20. Solution Ground Church, Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, 20-08-2020