

‘WE WOULD RATHER OBEY GOD THAN MAN’: INTERROGATING CHURCH ACTIVISM AND PUBLIC POLICY DURING COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Many fascinating studies have been done since the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent government response actions. Of interest to this paper is the belligerency and activism of the church that resulted in open confrontation and rejection of the government’s safety measures and policies in Nigeria. Although existing works have made attempts to interrogate the response of the church to the pandemic and its effects, the obvious gap is the church’s questioning of the monopoly of the state to regulate behaviour and exercise restraints, through the instrumentality of public policy particularly on religious activities during the pandemic. Methodologically, the paper draws on newspaper reports, audio-visual sermons and publications to achieve its objectives and answer the research questions. The policy network theory was found suitable as the theoretical anchorage for the study. It was found that activism by the church rose significantly due to its perceived alienation from the different COVID-19 management platforms set up by the government. Besides, the conspiracy perspectives, which associated clandestine motives to the pandemic resulting to ban on religious activities and the introduction of the controversial Infectious Disease Control Bill were other factors. The paper posited that the success of a policy is not determined by its sophistication, but the ability of policymakers to recognize critical factors within the policy context, such as formal, informal and primordial groups, that are affected to the policy.

Keywords: Church activism, public policy, policy implementation, state monopoly, COVID-19, Nigeria.

Introduction:

The eruption of the Coronavirus disease also called COVID 19 at the terminal end of 2019 remains one of the most devastating events in the world’s history. Although the outbreak of pandemics is one indisputable fact of human existence, that has required inter-state collaboration, that of COVID-19 stands out in many ways. Its (initial) etiological ambivalence, causative incongruity, therapeutic chaos and variants made the virus a nightmare to world

leaders, which they described as “an invisible enemy” (Adefisoye & Aladegbola, 2022; Cathey, 2020). Put differently, Jones (2022) opined that COVID-19 unsettled the world because it defied the flattering optimism invested in technology.

Attesting to its devastating and brisk propensity, the virus led to the death of an estimated 6, 955, 497 people around the world (World Health Organization, 2023), destroyed the economies of countries and disrupted social, political, sporting, commercial educational and religious activities. The pandemic rendered the most sophisticated health systems of the world, and the most experienced health professions paranoid. Government responses, policies and action plans to the pandemic were haphazard, chaotic and spontaneous, which thus validated the aphorism that “crises have always played a role in policy formation” (Clary, 1985, p. 1)

Of particular interest to the paper is the effect of the pandemic on the church and the rise of church activism during this period, especially against certain government policies. It is important to note that, in order to ostensibly contain and curtail the spread of the virus, there were restrictions on movements, and public convocations, especially religious meetings. In a country such as Nigeria, these measures graduated from restrictions on the number of worshippers to total ban of religious activities. Consequently, fascinating reactions and responses were provoked from Nigeria’s vibrant religious spaces, particularly, from the Pentecostal-Charismatic sphere; challenging the legitimacy and legality of government’s actions.

In all, five notable schools of thought emerged during the pandemic: the divinely-permitted pandemic/punishment perspective, the eschatological perspective; the Satanic orchestration perspective; the conspiracy perspective; and the pragmatist’s perspective (Adefisoye & Aladegbola, 2022). In particular, the Satanic-orchestrated and Conspiracy perspectives labeled the pandemic as a ‘plan-demic’, and described it as a ploy to weaken the influence of the global church, establish a new world order through the internet of things and ultimately pave the way for the eventual coming of the anti-Christ. This notion, no doubt, went a long way to determine the level of support given to the government and compliance with government actions during the pandemic. This is seen as a direct affront to the state’s monopoly and right to give orders and enforce obedience within its jurisdictions. The foregoing had a lot effects on the implementation of public policies, actions plans and protocols during the period in view.

To this end, this article sets the following objectives, which are to:

- i. interrogate the rise of church activism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria; and
- ii. examine the effects of church activism on public policy and government actions in Nigeria during COVID-19.

In the same vein, the following related research questions are generated:

1. What factors led to the rise/resurgence of church activism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?
2. What were the effects of church activism on public policy and government’s actions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?

The article is divided into six sections. The first section encapsulates the introduction, objectives of the study and research questions. The second part presents the Policy Network theory as the theoretical framework for the study. The third section of this paper interrogates church activism and seeks to establish the interconnectedness among the state, public policy and the management of COVID-19. The following section is the methodology, while the fifth section seeks to achieve the objectives of the study and answer the research questions. This was done using a fusion of secondary qualitative data and techniques. The sixth section concludes the paper.

Theoretical Underpinning

In an attempt to locate a theory or theories to underpin this research, many intellectually appealing theories ensued and were reviewed. Such theories/frameworks of analysis include Co-production and communications policy theories and the policy network theory. Without prejudice to other theories, perhaps, the policy network theory is most suitable to explain the salient aspects of this paper.

The policy network theory has a contentious origin (Adefisoye & Adefisoye, 2020; Peterson 2003). Different scholars from various backgrounds, ideological leanings and intellectual persuasions have attributed the theory's origin to the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe. However, what remains obvious is that the policy network theory is "a heterogenous range of early work in the UK, US and Europe on interest intermediation – via both corporatist and pluralist structures and focused on intergovernmental (that is, local-national) and government-industry relations – attempted to develop the idea of networks as an analytical concept." (Peterson 2003, p. 7).

The concept of a policy network is based on the idea that a policy system is an all-encompassing aggregation of all possible state, non-state, private, and social actors at local, regional, national, and international levels working and interacting within the institutions/policy environment that directly or indirectly affect a specific policy area (Howlett, Mukherjee, & Koppenjan, 2017). According to Peterson, the word 'network' is widely used to refer to groups of various types of players who are connected to one another in political, social, or economic life. According to Rhodes (2008), policy networks are groups of formal institutional and informal connections between governmental and non-governmental actors that are built around common, if endlessly disputed, views and interests in the formulation and execution of public policy. A policy network is also described by Peterson & Bomberg (1999) as a cluster of actors, each of which has an interest, or 'stake,' in a given policy sector and the capacity to contribute to the success or failure of a policy.

It is necessary to point out that the concept of a policy network is based on the idea that the policy system is an all-inclusive collection of all potential state, non-state, private, and social actors acting at local, regional, national, and international levels and interacting within the institutions and policy environment that directly or indirectly affect a particular policy area. The need for networking within the policy context stems from the nature and complexities of the policy process. Adefisoye & Adefisoye (2020, p. 44) put it more succinctly that "the policy process is a complex one that encompasses policy identification, agenda-setting, policy formulation/adoption, policy implementation/execution and policy evaluation". Therefore, it becomes expedient for the various actors involved in the formulation, implementation and

evaluation of the network to attain policy goals which most times are predetermined; failure to do this would adversely affect policy attainment (Adefisoye & Adefisoye, 2020).

From the foregoing, it is logical to adduce that failure by designated government officials and institutions to form a viable network with other informal groups, particularly in an open democratic system would no doubt hamper the process and outcome of any policy. In most extreme cases, such exclusion may spark murmurings, activism, protests, cacophony and conflict in the policy environment. In the case of developing countries and multi-ethnic climes, where political representation is sacrosanct as a means of accessing the national wealth, and where conflict management mechanisms are relatively weak, such exclusion may lead to open confrontation and crisis. Ikelegbe (2019) has argued that the success of the policy process is largely hinged on the ability of policy-makers to recognize certain factors within the policy context. Such factors, with respect to Nigeria, include authority and power, politics and political reasonableness, social and primordial dimensions, technical/scientific factors, rational dimension, extra-rational dimensions and resources (Ikelegbe, 2019). These factors were grossly ignored in the management of COVID-19 in Nigeria, as the church was allegedly ostracized in the protocols, despite having a large membership. This development and the ban on religious activities perhaps orchestrated the activism of the church.

Understanding Church Activism

Religious organizations, particularly churches have been mostly affected by social disorders, economic downturns, political inexpediencies and policy failures since the 18th-century separation of the church from the affairs of the state. Consequently, church leaders have engaged in activism to champion civil rights, civil liberty, and socio-economic, policy and environmental reforms. Although, there are contentions with the church fold over such, the vocality of church leaders on related societal issues has been prominent.

In England, the Wesleyans in the 1700s sought to minister to people that others did not care about and still maintain such a 'compassionate' position today. As Carson & Shepherd (1999) have rightly observed, Churches were crucial in the American Civil Rights Movement's efforts to promote social justice and racial equality, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) coordinated peaceful demonstrations and marches with significant church support. According to Gutierrez (1979), in Latin America, a movement in the Catholic Church known as liberation theology evolved to champion the significance of resolving social and economic inequalities, and thus, promoted participation in initiatives aimed at reducing oppression and poverty. However, such activism met resistance from both within and outside the confines of the church and from various groups, although without evident proof of success. Harold Quinley captures that:

During the 1960s, public affairs were hotly debated within church councils, and religious leaders became involved in a variety of public issues. Such actions were opposed by many within the church, especially by the rank-and-file membership- and resulted in laymen leaving the church or withholding financial contributions in protest of their leaders' activities (Quinley, 1974, p. 1).

Other prominent areas are environmental/ecological rights (White, 1967), refuge rights (Deyoung, 2008), and anti-war and non-violent campaigns (Gregg, 1960). In addition, the anti-apartheid movement was prominently led by an Anglican Bishop and Noble Prize Winner, Desmond Tutu, while many other African church leaders have followed suit. In a country like Nigeria where the Pentecostal-Charismatic Church Movements occupy a frontline in the making of the Nigerian State, church activism has been quite prominent, especially since the 1970s and 80s. Vaughan, argued that:

Pentecostalism has always been at the forefront of providing an important medium for the articulation of religious, social, political and economic conditions that shape local people's aspirations in contemporary Nigerian societies... (especially) as the crisis of the Nigerian state intensified in the 1980s, Pentecostal Christianity did not only fill the gap left behind by the state but also provided a powerful critique of the state's custodians (Vaughan, 2016 p. 140).

From the foregoing, it can be deduced that a church's involvement in social and political concerns with the goal of advancing social justice, equality, and constructive social change is referred to as church activism. It is Christians seeking to be involved in the issues and needs of the day and time. Secondly, it entails addressing numerous issues and arguing for societal advancements on the basis of religious beliefs, values, and teachings. Thirdly, Church activism can take many different shapes and address a variety of causes, including racial justice, poverty, the environment, and gender equality.

The State, Public Policy and the Management of COVID-19 in Nigeria

Many fascinating studies have been done since the outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent government response actions. In particular, the various interpretations ascribed to the pandemic by different religious pundits have submerged socio-cultural spaces, thereby requiring deep intellectual inquiry. Of interest to this research is the belligerency of the church that resulted in open confrontation and rejection of government's safety measures and policies during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Although existing works, such as Ossai (2021), Adefisoye & Aladegbola (2022) and Aluko, Oyebanjo & Ayegboyin (2023), have made attempts to interrogate the response of the church to the pandemic and its effects, the obvious gap is the church's questioning of the monopoly of the state to regulate behaviour and exercise restraints, particular on religious activities during the pandemic.

It is important to note that the fundamental responsibility of government, as an agency of the state, is to regulate behaviour in public spaces, and in many cases, in domains regarded as private through the instrumentality of public policy. Heywood explained that:

The shadow of the state falls on every human activity. From education to economic management, from social welfare to sanitation, and from domestic order to external defence, the state shape and controls, and where it does not shape or control, it regulates, supervises, authorizes or proscribes. Even those aspects of life usually thought of as personal or private (marriage, divorce, abortion, religious worship and so on) are ultimately subject to the authority of the state. (Heywood, 2009, p. 89).

Likewise, Janda, Berry and Goldman (2000, p. 557) have explained that the major thrust of the social contract theory (of the origin/purpose of the state), regardless of its deviations, is that “all citizens are willing to submit their personal freedom or at least, their affairs to the state in return for some benefits from the government”. In other words, the government has both moral and legal backing from the people and by the constitution, which Thomas Paine, described as the act of the people! However, the extent of the exercise of such constitutional rights by the government has been a subject of intense debates among political philosophers, theorists of classical-medieval epochs, and even contemporary scholars of political theory.

Irrespective of such age-long debates, the importance of public policy as an instrument of delivering public good and in administering affairs cannot be overemphasized. Johntson captured this and posited that while “the state is a problem-solving mechanism, public policies are deliberate decisions by government (which is the agency of the state) to act or not to, in response to societal problems” (Johntson, 2002, p. 397). Therefore, public policies are channels through which governmental plans are achieved. In other words, the successful implementation of public policies act as an important yardstick for measuring government’s performance. Articulating the views of James Bryce (1883-1922), Gauba expressed that:

The test of a government is the welfare of its people. Thus, the standard of merit of any government can be judged by the adequacy with which it performs the chief functions of government: the protection of its people from internal and external enemies (*which also include natural hazards and man-made disasters*); the securing of justice; the efficient administration of common affairs, and the bestowal of aid to individual citizens in their several occupations.(Gauba, 2007, p. 421).

Particularly before, during and after disasters and pandemics, the government is expected to take the lead by providing necessary information to the people on how to protect themselves and by making resources available to ensure public safety. However, due to the nature and dynamism of some natural hazards, in many cases, government interventions have taken haphazard and crisis forms. Clary (1985, p. 1) explained that “crises have always played a role in policy formation but the entire structure of disaster response was crisis-driven (and fear-laden) when a disaster struck, people acted; society’s attitude toward natural disasters was fatalistic.”

In spite of such seemingly isolated ‘crises’ associated with the policy process with respect to disaster management, the entire process is a deliberate course of action. Although certain intervening variables or unanticipated factors from the policy environment may make an incursion into the process, the policy process still remains an organized one. In many cases, especially in developing countries, the policy implementation stage of the policy process, which is the Achilles Heels of other earlier efforts/phases suffers due to unrealistic goals, lack of correct data, paucity of finance, bureaucratic corruption, lack of political will among other factors; thereby making it the graveyard of many good policies. (Agagu, 2010; Adefisoye&Adefisoye, 2017; Adefisoye&Adefisoye, 2020; Olugbenga, 2013; Adefisoye&Agagu, 2021) In addition, policymakers fail to recognize certain factors that are embedded in the policy context, which has its own uniqueness (Adefisoye& Ifedayo, 2022).

The foregoing rightly captures the policy response to the outbreak and management of health emergencies during COVID-19. Although pandemics are not alien to humanity, what was strange or novel about COVID-19 unlike the Spanish Influenza and other epidemics of an international scale was “its (initial) etiological ambivalence, causative incongruity, and therapeutic chaos (Adefisoye&Aladegbola, 2022, p. 28). One of the consequences of such ambivalence was that public policy was erratic, intuitive, and unstable especially due to the emergence of different variants of the disease, which required different measures in curtailing. In Nigeria, the management of COVID-19 was dramatic and once again brought to the fore certain intricacies embedded in the country’s ‘unique’ policy environment. The daily rollout of figures considered as fictitious amid limited testing capacities, the hasty consideration of the controversial Infectious Disease Control Bill by the National Assembly in May 2020 and the rise of church activism made Nigeria’s COVID-19 experience far more unique (Adefisoye&Aladegbola (2022). Globally, measures, such as border closure, ban on air travels and the movement of persons and goods were introduced to curtail the spread of the virus. In Nigeria, the federal government set up a Presidential Taskforce (PTF) on COVID-19, as a body saddled with the responsibility to coordinate government’s efforts. The government announced the suspension of Visas on arrival (VOA) issuance to travelers from thirteen countries and a blanket suspension of Temporary Work Permit (TWP) to intending visitors to the country (Okafor, 2020).

Subsequent measures with social distancing, restriction (and later ban on social and religious gatherings, closure of schools, use of nose masks and hand sanitizers, ban on inter-state movement and the distribution of palliatives (Okafor, 2020, Adefisoye&Adefisoye, 2020b). All measures had far reaching effects on critical sectors in the country, affected the economies of families, led to job losses, increased household poverty and exacerbate female poverty (Adefisoye&Adefisoye, 2020b). In particular these actions affected church incomes and was seen as a gross abuse on the rights of peace and lawful assembly.

It is important to note that the country’s religious spaces, particularly the Pentecostal-Charismatic space are inundated by various interpretations of COVID-19 and subsequent government response actions, especially the ban of religious gatherings. This triggered the emergence of certain perspectives, that held sway, shaped public perception and went a long way to determine the successes and failures of government actions in managing the pandemic. Adefisoye&Aladegbola identified five of such thoughts: the divinely permitted pandemic/punishment perspective, the eschatological perspective; the Satanic orchestration perspective; the conspiracy perspective; and the pragmatist’s perspective. In particular, the Satanic-orchestrated and Conspiracy perspectives labeled the pandemic as a ‘plan-demic’, and described it as a ploy to weaken the influence of the global church, establish a new world order through the Internet of Things and ultimately pave the way for the eventual coming of the anti-Christ. This notion, no doubt, went a long way to determine the level of support given to the government and compliance with government actions during the pandemic.

Methodology

The research draws its data from secondary data through reports, newspapers both print and online, gazettes, government publications, journal articles, internet sources, audio/visual sermons and other secondary materials. Data obtained were subjected to qualitative methods of data analysis, such the historical, descriptive and content qualitative analysis.

Church Activism and Public Policy Implementation during COVID-19 in Nigeria

Objective 1/Research Question 1: Factors responsible for the rise of church activism during COVID-19 in Nigeria

As earlier stated, church activism is the involvement of Christians in societal issues, which can have different forms: political, economic, environmental, social etc. Church activism is seen to have a long history and its trajectories span epochs and dispensations in different countries. Historically in Nigeria, Mary Slessor's activism against the killing of twins and Arch-Bishop Benson Idahosa's one-man belligerency to the hosting of the convocation of watches in Benin City are popular (Humanists International, 2009; Sahara Weekly, 2018). Subsequently, as the crisis of the Nigerian state deepened, especially under military regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, the church was vocal against such a downturn (Vaughan, 2016).

With reference to COVID-19, there are both implicit and explicit factors that were responsible for the rise of such activism. Foremost, the pandemic was perceived in certain quarters as a deliberate ploy to weaken the influence and dominance of the church globally and locally. Bishop David Oyedepo of the Living Faith Church (aka Winner's Chapel), a notable Charismatic Christian leader in Africa and the voice behind the Satanic-orchestrated school of COVID-19 (Adefisoye&Aladegbola, 2022), claimed that the virus was a church virus and 'plan-demic' not a pandemic.

The clergy unequivocally stated that "COVID-19 was an intended but failed attempt to slowdown humanity" (Agency Report, Daily Independent, 2020, p. 2; Adefisoye&Aladegbola, 2022). Also, he rebuked the government for locking down churches (Makinde, 2020). It is important to note that the Federal Government of Nigeria on March 29, 2020, had placed restrictions on business, aviation, commercial and religious activities. In a similar vein, the pandemic and subsequent government actions were perceived by those who subscribed to conspiracy theories as deliberate. In Nigeria, Pastor Chirs Oyakhilome and Rev. Chris Okotie were notable voices in the direction.

In his views, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, claimed that there is a significant connection between the deployment of 5G telecommunications infrastructure and COVID-19. According to him, the virus was developed by a special Satanic force, the Illuminati being its primary representative, with the goal of automating humanity and creating phony beings whose brains could be controlled and manipulated (*This Day*, 2020). This, according to the clerics, would be accomplished by including micro-chip devices in COVID-19 vaccines that would subsequently be developed. In response to the government's lockdown policies, he asserted that Lagos and Abuja were intentionally kept under lockdown to test the first variant of the virus.

Similar to this, Pastor Chris Okotie, who is well-known for his "apocalyptic" preaching, began by making it very apparent that COVID-19 does not herald the end of the current age or the coming of the anti-Christ. Instead, it serves as a stepping stone (*This Day*, 2020; Adefisoye&Aladegbola, 2022). He identified 'patterns' between the anti-Christ and Bill Gates, the man Okotie alleges to be the COVID-19 conspiracy's mastermind. Reverend Okotie asserted vehemently that a United Nations-sponsored scheme was being carried out with the express purpose of destabilizing the global economy and preventing Christians from assembling. He conducted a thorough examination of the plot. *This Day*, (2020, p. 1-2), stated

that the evil conspiracy also aimed to “systematically reduce world population through the increasing COVID-19 deaths; enforce a global lockdown in order to ruin the economies of nations and impoverish the people; and frustrate true worship of God”. However, Reverend Okotie predicted that such an evil scheme would fail as he wrapped up his explanation.

The implication of the foregoing is that followers of the clergies were discouraged from observing government’s safety measures of social distancing and the use of face covers, besides, the taking of vaccines. Although the veracity of these claims are not scientific and verifiable, they went a long way in shaping public perception and government’s safety measures (Adefisoye&Aladegbola).

Implicitly, the exclusion of the church from the management of the pandemic ostensibly contributed to the rise in activism. One of the fundament pillars of good governance is popular participation/inclusivity. In a democratic system, which arguably provides the most visible platform for good governance, the citizens are stakeholders in the policy process (Gaub, 2007). However, the church which occupies a large section of the Nigerian society was ostracized. Another issue that contributed to the activism of the church was the controversial Infectious Disease Control Bill that was hastily considered by the National Assembly in May 2020, The Bill was to make vaccination compulsory, which was seen by many Christians as a ‘dress rehearsal’ and precursor to the eventual coming of the Anti-Christ and the introduction of the ‘666’ mark (*This Day*, 2020).

Objective 2/Research Question 2: Effects of church activism on public policy (implementation) during COVID-19 in Nigeria

There are crucial variables that influence the entire gamut of the policy process. Recognition and the understanding of the dynamics of those variables would go a long to determine the extent of the success of public policy (Adefisoye& Ifedayo, 2022). With respect to policy formulation, salient factors that must be considered include but are not limited to political logicity, socio-cultural antics, ethnic configuration (in a multi-ethnic society) and religious beliefs. It must however to recognize that every people’s environment is unique in every ramification. With respect to Nigeria’s policy environment, Ikelegbe highlighted the following factors “authority and power, politics and political rationality, social and primordial dimensions, technical/technological factors, rational dimension, extra-rational dimensions and resources” (Ikelegbe, 2019, p. 23). This is further presented in the Table below:

Table 1: Crucial Variables to Consider in Public Policy Formulation:

S/N	Variables	Content
1	Authority and power	Existing power structures; formal power over decision; hierarchy of authority; rules; influence of public officials; configuration of power; inner circles and power blocs in government.
2	Politics and political rationality	The character of politics; nature of support and opposition; alliance in favour and opposition; ideological meanings and constructions; competing interests; the level of cooperation, bargaining, consensus and arguments.

3	Social and primordial dimensions	The framework of values; beliefs and prevalent orientation; social group influence; organized platforms or resistance; prebendal tendencies; influence of primordial groups and networks; and ascribed identities.
4	Technical/Technological factor	Technical capacity; specialized/specialist skills; research and development capacity; data processing and retrieval capacity; existing technology/automation level.
5	Rational Dimension	Intelligence/intellectual requirements; rational and critical thinking; data generation and analysis.
6	Extra-Rational Dimensions	Psycho-social factors; extra-rational influences; belief systems; terrestrial/astrological influences; cult/divination influences.
7	Resources	Availability or scarcity of tangible or non-tangible social, political and economic resources; goodwill and reputation or actors; natural and social endowments.

Source: Ikelegbe, A. (2019). Public policy and social marginality in Nigeria.

From the above table, Ikelegbe added that although the latter set of variables are important, it is the former set, particularly item 2,3 and 6 (on the Table) that actually shape the content, target and beneficiary focus of public policy” (Ikelegbe 2019).

With reference to COVID-19 policy actions in Nigeria, many of these factors were not adequately considered, thus, determining the level of compliance to and popularity of those action plans. For instance, in Item 1 – Authority and power, government officials (the Presidential Taskforce on COVID-19, COVID-19 Response Team, etc.) at both the federal and State levels did not understand the power dynamics of the Nigerian state, especially the informal dimension. It is expedient to posit at this juncture that both the state and the church are important entities in society, which enjoy loyalty, compliance and support. Broadly, religion, which is commonly referred to as the ‘manipulative’ institution of the state (Iloanya, 2020), was not utilized by the government to achieve compliance with its policies. ‘Manipulation’ in this context does not necessarily conjure derogative meaning but underlines the strength of conviction, influence and power attached to religiosity. As Karl Marx has posited religion is the opium of the people (Marx, 1978), and has an overarching influence on its subscribers. As Iloanya has observed, Marx’s aphorism on religion has been maliciously or ignorantly used by different scholars, thereby watering down its pungency. Nevertheless, Marx’s position is apt.

The church in Nigeria is seen in many quarters as a ‘care center’ in the face of debilitating political and economic realities. As earlier expressed, the church in Nigeria has always been at the forefront of providing an important medium for the articulation of religious, social, political and economic conditions that shape local people’s aspirations in contemporary Nigerian societies... (especially) as the crisis of the Nigerian state intensified in the 1980s

(Vaughan, 2016 p. 140). Many of these churches have been involved in the provision of education, healthcare, social welfare, youth empowerment, family support and emotional relief to many individuals and families in the country. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic Church gave its 000 health facilities as isolation camps. Other churches also followed suit by making relief items, palliatives and financial support to individuals, families and the government.

With reference to Table 1 above, particularly item 2 (Social and primordial dimensions) and item 3 (Extra-rational dimension) respectively, it can be argued that governmental actions on COVID-19 in Nigeria lacked the needed moral and persuasive powers needed for compliance. Firstly, the church is a broad group of individuals clustered into other groups: social/ceremonies, prayer, investment, charity, evangelistic, charismatic, academic, etc. All groups draw influences from the general philosophy, guiding principles, canons, doctrines or the ideology, idiosyncrasies and charisma of its leaders to operate. Since the church and its members are members of a given society, they respond to the stimuli from the environment in which they exist. The import of this is that wields influence and represents an organized platform for group behaviour. However, all these salient attributes were deliberately or perhaps ignorantly overlooked in the country's management of the Coronavirus pandemic. For instance, the cohesion of the church and discipline would have been leveraged to achieve compliance with the various protocols and for the smooth distribution of palliatives and the taking of vaccines. However, the distribution of relief items and palliatives was marred by the inherent criminogenic patterns in the country's public sector (Adefisoye&Aladegbola, 2022).

In a similar vein, the Extra-rational dimension associated with group life was ignored. Prayer, as a church sacrament performs psychological functions of uniting the congregants spiritually and emotionally and conditions them to chart a common front. Similarly, the extra-rational dimension of policy formulation encapsulates the belief system and strong adherence to the "thus says the Lord" (celestial/astrological) mantra associated with Christianity. COVID-19 response actions sidelined the church. The postulation of Pastor E.A. Adeboye of the largest Pentecostal church in Africa - The Redeemed Christian Church of God underscored the foregoing. The Mathematician-turned clergy postulated that church leaders ought to have been drafted as integral parts of the COVID-19 response teams at all levels, claiming that the virus had spiritual dimensions, besides, the church is made up of professionals in many areas (Amen Radio, 2020).

With reference to items 4 (Technological factor); 5 (Rational dimension); and 7 (Resources) in Table 1 above, COVID-19 response actions ignored the strength capacity of the church. Technologically, many churches in the country have long deployed technology for church activities and with a well-organized data management system to monitor their vast membership in and outside the country. These out to have been leveraged as a means of effective communication and dissemination of information during the pandemic. On item 7 (Resources), the church is an embodiment of resources: human and nonhuman, with perhaps impeccable character and integrity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the factors that led to the rise of church activism in Nigeria during COVID-19. Also, it looked at the effect of such activism on government's response actions and

policies. As highlighted in the body of this work, religious (church) activism usually stems as a reaction of the church to social issues: political, social, economic, environment, conflict etc., the situation in Nigeria was not different. Although the activism of the Nigerian church is not new, it took a striking dimension during COVID-19 owing to various reason, which are been exhaustively discussed in this paper. Importantly, the church resisted and defiled government's protocols, owing to the perceived conspiracies around the pandemic, which was infamously referred to as a 'plan-demi'. It has also been established that the success of a public policy is incumbent on the ability of policymakers and government officials to recognize certain salient factors in the policy context. Although COVID-19 may have come and gone, the lessons it left behind viz its management can be used to manage future emergencies, especially by carrying groups along (formal, informal, primordial, etc.) to achieve resounding success.

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