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**COVID-19, 2020 Prosperity Gospel, and Belief in Prophetic Churches in Nigeria:
Repositioning Perspectives**

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic was a ravaging storm cloud with silver lining. It took the world by surprise and left mixed actions and reactions in its wake. COVID-19 in Nigeria went down in history as a public health crisis that triggered a religious renaissance. It shook Nigeria's health care system and prophetic churches to their foundation. This paper problematizes the failure of the December 2019 prosperity prophecy for 2020. Using the historical research method, it corroborates primary and secondary data to demonstrate the impact of the failed 2020 prosperity gospel on social interactions and belief in prophetic churches. It finds that out of all the organized religions operational in Nigeria, prophetic churches are the most attractive. Prior to COVID-19, they stood tall as acclaimed healing centers, seers, and breakers of evil yoke. And belief in the potency of their prophecies was strong and unshakable. On December 31, 2019, both staunch and irregular Christians made it a date with prophets and pastors to obtain New Year prophetic messages. They prayed their way into 2020, casting and averting all supposed forces of evil deployed to hinder their prosperity. They sowed seeds through offering and tithing to back their beliefs. Resultantly, during the pandemic some staunch believers in prophetic churches cruised under the prophetic delusion that coverage by the blood of Jesus builds immunity and inoculation against COVID-19. In a highly prophetic environment, some Nigerians wonder: how come no prophet saw COVID-19 coming? Why were they unable to heal any COVID-19 patient? These thoughts are repositioning beliefs in prophetic churches in Nigeria.

Keywords: COVID-19, religion, beliefs, perspectives, perspective transformation

Introduction

Mankind's search for God (Jehovah's Witnesses, 2006) is dynamic and eternal. The fluidity of this search is responsible for the emergence of divergent organized religions. From Judaism, Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Taoism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, African Traditional Religion, Baha'i Faith, Native American Religions, to Protestantism, religions, since their emergence, have played strong roles in shaping human beliefs, behaviors, and history (Lugira, 2009). Politics, statecraft, economics, international relations, epidemic control, morality and law, and justice system of national groups have religious imprints on them. Religion and the state have for long cohabited under one territoriality. St. Augustine explained this development with the concept of dualism: the church and state existing autonomously and interdependently in one domain (St. Augustine, "The City of God against the Pagans" cited in Brown & Nardin, 2002). But their relationship is delicate and fragile. Religion can be weaponized against the state and can be used to secure the submission of the people. In India, religion influenced the adoption of civil disobedience as a weapon to fight against colonial oppression and domination (Stoessinger, 2001). And Karl Marx (1844) in his work, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," argued that religion is the opium of the people. This implies that religion is like a hard drug capable of distorting human thinking and behavior. It is people's general theory of this world and their universal basis for consolation and justification. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions... (Marx, 1844).

Under the Mosaic Law, religion was useful for tackling and managing epidemics. Religious protocols such as quarantining of infected persons kept Jewish society safe. The law mandated infected persons with diseases such as leprosy to call out "unclean" "unclean" as warning when approaching other members of society (Leviticus 13: 1-59). This protocol enabled the observance of social distancing. Hence, while it cannot be said that mankind is better without religion, Karl Marx believes that its utility as opium of some sorts needs to be eradicated for people to regain their true senses and freewill. He puts it this way:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The criticism of religion disillusion man so that, he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses... (Marx, 1844)

When religion is not an opium, it is considered useful to the legal and constitutional development of democratic societies. For instance, divine principles such as natural justice, an eye-for-an-eye (equity and fairness), and the right to fair hearing are religious contributions to democratic orders. Hence, the centrality of religion to national development and security cannot be overemphasized. In societies such as the United States of America (USA), China, Russia, Britain, and France among others where religion has been significantly downplayed in statecraft, religion is promoting social reengineering which is essential for character building and human capital development. More so, it engenders civil obedience to constituted authorities and promotes law and order in ungoverned spaces. However, in societies such as Afghanistan and Iran, when incorporated into politics, religion is obstructing human freedom and capacity building, especially for women. It serves more as the opium of the people. This results when religious teachings are fanatical, sensational, and doctored to capture membership. In this wise, religion is antithetical to national security and a weapon of mass destruction. In Nigeria, religion is fast snowballing into a

national security threat. The high incidences of poverty and illiteracy among the population have made some Nigerians subservient to prophetic churches to the detriment of national development goals. And the dilemma of enforcing the COVID-19 safety guidelines in Nigeria brings this challenge to the fore.

Nigeria is one secular state where religion is observably the opium of the people. The high religiosity of the people explains why belief in prophetic churches like the Synagogue Church of all Nations, Living Faith Church, Omega Fire Ministries, Adoration Ministry, Solution Prayer Ground, and Finger of God Prayer Ministry (aka Fire Barracks) among others that pose as solution banks in Nigeria is unshakable. It is against this backdrop that this paper interrogates the impact of COVID-19 on belief in prophetic churches and their 2020 New Year prophetic prosperity gospels in Nigeria. The paper maintains that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the religious pandemonium rocking Nigeria. Despite the presence of many prophetic churches with acclaimed ability to foresee, avert and destroy evil, and cure maladies, none of them foresaw coronavirus and the hardships it causes coming nor have been able to miraculously cure any confirmed case. Therefore, this paper problematizes the failure of the 2019 New Year prosperity gospel for 2020. And it raises the following research questions: Why did the prophesied prosperity for 2020 in Nigeria fail? Why did Nigeria's prophetic churches fail to see COVID-19 coming? Why has no prophet and miracle worker in Nigeria been able to cure any COVID-19 patient? How are blind faith and perverse beliefs affecting the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria? And how has COVID-19 repositioned religious perspectives in Nigeria?

Development of Organized Christianity in Nigeria: Prophetic Churches

The peoples of Nigeria and Africa in general never existed in a religious vacuum. Their spirituality and search for God birthed various organized indigenous religions. Aloysius Lugira (2009) observed that Africans generally turn to superhuman powers for help when they are in need. They pray either directly to a God or indirectly through lesser gods or spiritual go-between (Lugira, 2009). In pre-colonial Igboland in Nigeria, some of the traditional religions, to mention just a few, included the worship of *Ibini Ukpabi*, *Amadioha*, *Arochukwu* deity (known as Long Juju by the British) and *Agballa*. But the *Arochukwu* deity was the most famous and commanded a lot of reverence among the Igbo people because of its impartiality and supernatural knowledge of peoples and events (Onwubiko, 1973). In Yorubland, the worship of *Sango*, *Obatala*, *Orunmila*, the *goddess of River Oshogbo*, and *Ifa* worship were some of the dominant religions (Olupona, 2011). In Benin kingdom the worship of *Olukun*, *Ogun*, and *Osu* were the dominant traditional religions (Bradbury, 1957). And in Hausaland, the *Maguzanci* religion was widely practiced. During the period, African Traditional Religion was so entrenched in Ile-Ife that it became known as the city of 201 gods (Olupona, 2011). Lugira (2009) observed that traditional African religions differ from other world religions because they had their origins in the people. They are the fallout of many thousand years of the people living close to the land and seeking answers to the mysteries of life. Over time and space, the practice of African Traditional Religions has been spearheaded by priests, priestesses, healers, diviners, seers, rainmakers, elders, and rulers (kings) charged with special roles in preserving the spiritual life of the community and people (Lugira, 2009).

These African religious practitioners in pre-colonial times shaped the beliefs and attitudes of their followers, served as checks on leadership, and satisfied the spiritual needs during the period. According to Worldmark Encyclopedia of Religious Practices (n.d.), African Traditional Religions have no predominant doctrinal teachings, but are based on sacred cultural elements that

form the core beliefs of the religion. They include the presence of deities, ancestor veneration, and divination. Festivals and rituals to appease the gods are other core foundation of African Traditional Religions to the extent that in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria (the city of 201 gods), there is only one day in a year when a festival is not performed (Olupona, 2011). However, Africa's traditional organized religions started experiencing a decline with the arrival of Islam from Arabia and later Christianity from Europe. Islam and Christianity grew overtime to become the dominant organized religions in Nigeria eclipsing the traditional religions. Michael Ndemanu (2018) puts it this way: "In the era of burgeoning Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa, traditional African religions have been under relentless assault and bastardization" (p. 70). This implies that Christianity developed in Nigeria more at the expense of African Traditional Religions unlike Islam that shared many similarities with it (Lugira, 2009). However, the focus of the paper here is to historicize the development of prophetic churches as a brand of organized Christianity in Nigeria.

The historical origin of Christianity in Nigeria is traceable to the Benin Kingdom. The kingdom in pre-colonial times was reputed to be the first Nigerian society to have contact with Europeans. Portuguese explorer Ruy de Sequeira discovered Benin for Europe in 1472 A.D. (Osagie, 1997). And this paved the way for Affonso de Aveiro to visit Benin Kingdom in 1486 A.D. under the reign of Oba Esigie. Aveiro introduced Christianity to the monarchy and urged the Benin King to embrace the new religion on the grounds that the religion will make his country better. In response, the Benin monarchy through its diplomatic representative in Portugal, Ohen Okun (the *Olokun* priest of *Ughoton*), requested the Portuguese government to send Christian priests to Benin to teach the king and his people Christianity (Egharevba 1968). But this early effort to plant the religion in Nigeria was ephemeral as the Oba of Benin and his people quickly abandoned Christianity than they accepted it. It was not until the nineteenth century that Christianity began gaining firm foothold in Nigeria with the return of enslaved Nigerians abroad. T. G. O. Gbadamosi and J. F. Ade-Ajayi (1980) explain their conversion and importation of Christianity as follows:

In 1842, the first batch of Christian missionaries landed at Badagry on their way to Abeokuta. They came in the wake of liberated slaves returning home to Nigeria... The Christians were all converted during their period of captivity in Brazil or Cuba, or after they were granted freedom from there or in Sierra Leone. (p. 349)

When the Christians landed in Badagry, they were not welcomed by the peoples. And this propelled the Christian missionaries to migrate to Abeokuta where they were accepted. From Abeokuta, Henry Townsend, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, and Charles Andrew Gollmer spread Christianity into all Southwest Nigeria. In the Southeast of Nigeria, Scottish Christian missionaries from the United Free Church of Scotland pioneered the spread of Christianity in Igboland; while in Calabar Hope Waddell pioneered the spread of Christianity in 1846. And from 1857, Crowther and William Balfour Baikie championed the spread of Christianity in Northern Nigeria (Gbadamosi & Ade-Ajayi, 1980). These missionary efforts gradually bore fruits with the entrenchment of mainstream orthodox Christianity as the most dominant organized religion in Nigeria. The development of organized Christianity in Nigeria turned a new leaf with the rise of Pentecostalism. This is a renewal movement that placed emphasis on direct personal relationship with God through baptism of the Holy Spirit (Rotimi et al., 2016). Nkechi Rotimi, Kanayo Nwadior and Alex Ugwuja (2016) traced the rise of Pentecostalism in Africa to anti-European

imperialist encrustation struggles. But its development in Nigeria in the twentieth century was as a part of a growing worldwide movement.

The development of organized Christianity in Nigeria reached a new height in the 1970's with the rise of Prophetic churches as the newest brand of Pentecostalism and Protestantism. Benson Andrew Idahosa (Dictionary of African Christian Biography.org) the founder of the Church of God Mission International in Benin City, Nigeria emerged as the progenitor of prophetic churches. The core teaching of these churches is the prosperity gospel. Although the prosperity gospel (Ukpe, 2019) originated in the United States of America (USA), the growth and international appeal of Nigeria's prophetic churches have made Nigeria the arguable new world headquarters of prosperity theology. Beyond prosperity, prophetic churches in Nigeria promote a new fire-for-fire brand of ministration centered on the demolition of all enemies and forces of evil. In Nigeria, they function as destiny changers, demon destroyers, healers of sickness and diseases, averters of doom and solution centers for all kinds of generational problems.

Hence, prophetic churches in Nigeria hold different kinds of religious services in line with their vision and mission. However, the most prominent service they organize is the "Crossover Night". Every last day of December, this service is held to celebrate the outgoing year with thanksgiving and tithing, and usher their members into the New Year with good tidings. During this service, prophetic prosperity messages such as 'My case is different', 'Possess your Possession', 'Pursue and Overtake', 'My year of open doors', and from 'Grass to Grace' among others are commonly prophesied from the pulpit. Nigeria entered the twenty-first century with prophetic churches standing tall over the mainstream churches: the Catholic church, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist. Providing insight into this development, Robert Katsina (2020) explains that:

Its (prophetic churches') influence and impact on all other denominations in Nigeria are beyond comparison. The Pentecostals (prophetic churches) do not only increase in number of converts; but they have also won other churches over to their side. (p. 22)

Prophetic churches have ridden on the back of the general appeal of their prosperity messages to poor and illiterate Nigerians to become mega churches (DW.com, 2020; Okosun, 2018). 2 Timothy 4: 3-4 in the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures alluding to the rise of prophetic churches across the globe revealed that:

For there will be a period of time when they (people) will not put up with the wholesome teaching; but according to their own desires, they will surround themselves with teachers to have their ears tickled. They will turn away from listening to the truth and give attention to false stories.

They hoodwink their members with the teaching that financial prosperity and good health are God's irrevocable plan, program, and desire for them (Rotimi et al., 2016). Temitope Ogunlisa (2018) describes this as the health and wealth gospel and gospel of success. And the Harvard Divinity School (n.d.) conceptualizes it as a predatory and manipulative gospel through which pastors obtain huge offering and tithes from their congregation. In Nigeria, Bishop Oyedepo of Winners Chapel among others epitomizes this reality. He teaches that: "If you don't pay tithe, you will end up a permanent beggar" (Kingdom Boiz, n.d.).

On December 31, 2019, staunch believers in prophetic churches and irregular Christians made it a date with them. They converged in their auditoriums, sowed seeds through offering and tithing to obtain prophetic prosperity packages for 2020. To this end, E. A. Adeboye prophesied that 2020 will be a year of plenty joy and victory, and Daniel Olukoya declared that 2020 will be a year of revival, new glory, and perfection of vision (BBC News Pidgin, 2020). And in 2020, prophetic churches in Nigeria continued to make prophetic statements that undermine COVID-19, science, and reality. For example, Prophet T. B. Joshua prophesied that coronavirus would end on March 27, 2020. And Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka in the month of September declared that “Heaven will not rest until the problems of his members are solved.” While Apostle Victor Ijegbe of “Fire Barracks” assured his congregation that there will be no deaths and burial in Nigeria from September to December 2020. But COVID-19 has partly punctured beliefs in prophetic churches and their prosperity prophecies.

Understanding the Outbreak of COVID-19: Biblical Perspectives

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Wuhan, China in 2019 has been subjected to different causal explanations. Political, religious, and scientific personalities across the globe have divergent understanding of the outbreak of COVID-19. Donald Trump, President of the USA, promoted a political and racial conceptualization of the outbreak of the coronavirus disease by terming it “Kung flu” and “Chinese virus”. Conspiracy theorists explain the outbreak of COVID-19 as part of China’s grand plot to take over the world through chemical warfare. Nigeria’s pastor Chris Oyakhilome posits that the COVID-19 pandemic was caused by the 5G Network (Global Voice, 2020). There was also the religious explanation that COVID-19 broke out as punishment from God for mankind’s sins. However, while the causal narratives of COVID-19 have continued to widen, this paper seeks to narrow them. It advances a biblical perspective of COVID-19 outbreak that bridges the gap between science and religion.

Chaolin Huang et al. in their scientific study found that the coronavirus disease was caused by the betacoronavirus. They classified the disease as non-segmented positive-sense RNA virus belonging to the coronaviridae family. These scientists reveal that the coronavirus infection exists in two forms: the Severe Acute Respiration Syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-COV)²⁻⁴ and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-COV)^{5,6}. And they are capable of causing mortality rates of 10% and 37% respectively (Huang et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that COVID-19 is an infectious disease that spreads from person to person through contact with droplets of saliva or nasal discharge through coughing and sneezing (World Health Organization, 2020). Thus, following the global spread of COVID-19 from the fish market in China where it was first discovered, WHO declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020. But as a contagious disease, the symptoms vary from one infected person to another. The general signs that a person have contracted COVID-19 include:

- Mild cold or flu (within 2-4 days of infection)
- Sneezing and coughing
- Running nose and sore throat
- Fever
- Loss of smell
- Difficulty in breathing, and
- Fatigue

However, to complement science and provide a biblical framework for understanding COVID-19 outbreak, this paper maintains that the disease can best be explained as part of the foretold critical times mankind deal with before the 'Great Tribulation'. It is one of the composite signs of the biblical last days (JW.org, 2020). Although the Bible did not directly mention diseases such as COVID-19, Spanish flu, and HIV/AIDS by name, however, it foretold their outbreak in generic terms. In Luke 21: 11, the Holy Scriptures revealed the sign of the last days as follows:

There will be great earthquakes, and in one place after another food shortages and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and from heaven great signs.

And in the book of Revelations, the Bible discusses the ride of the 'Four Horsemen' as symbolic representations of the problems mankind would face in the biblical last days. The pale horse and its rider mentioned in the prophetic vision for our day refer to the outbreak of epidemics and pandemics of all kinds. Revelation 6: 8 puts it this way:

And I saw and look! A pale horse, and the one seated on it had the name Death. And the Grave was closely following him. And authority was given them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with... deadly plague and by the wild beasts of the earth.

It is discernible from these biblical texts that pestilences and deadly plagues such as COVID-19 among others are inescapable today. Whether they will breakout from wildlife or scientifically manufactured in the laboratory is not determined. What is certain in the scriptures is the fact that they will cause the death of many people from one part of the earth to another. But this does not in any way mean that COVID-19 is an act of God to punish mankind for their sin. To buttress this point, the paper contrasts the impact of epidemics caused by God in the past with that of modern pandemics. In Bible times, Mariam and Gehazi were punished by God with leprosy because of their sin. But then Jehovah, as a God of justice, ensured that only the sinners suffered the pain of the epidemic. However, unlike the epidemic caused by God, modern pandemics plague and kill both the righteous and unrighteous. COVID-19 and other modern pandemics know no boundary. They create health crisis, socio-economic dislocations, disrupt international relations and alter civilization across the globe to produce a new normal. More so, epidemics caused by God were religiously managed by priests, who were empowered to quarantine infected persons, observe them, and declare them clean when the disease is over. But natural or man-made pandemics are scientifically managed. In modern times, the shift to scientists in the management of pandemics is arguably due to the rise of free-thinking. Free-thinkers and atheists are people who were hitherto raised in religious households but later stopped believing in God either because of difficult experiences and world problems they blamed God for or scientific pursuits. Without doubt, COVID-19 as a modern pandemic is best explained, managed, treated, and perhaps cured by science and medical experts; while the Bible is valid for helping mankind understand COVID-19 outbreak as part of fulfilled last-days prophecies and a pointer to the nearness of the end.

COVID-19 and 2020 New Year Prosperity Prophecy in Nigeria

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United Nations set new Millennium Development (or prosperity) Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. Along this line, Nigeria initiated her Vision 2010 geared towards eliminating poverty, illiteracy and improving social wellbeing and living standards. It was later rolled up into the Vision20:2020. This vision is a prosperity and economic development plan that sought to place Nigeria's economy among the top 20 economies in the world (National Planning Commission, 2009). Keying into Nigeria's manifest destiny, prophetic churches became the religious vanguard heralding the nation's prosperity and greatness. During the 2019 crossover service, different New Year prophetic prosperity messages for 2020 were served from the pulpit. 2020 was prophetically backed to be a year of greatness, and the year of the Bible (Fox News, 2020). Chris Oyakhilome prophesied it to be a year of perfection, alignment, completeness, excellence, and fruition; David Oyedepo saw 2020 as a year when Nigeria and Nigerians will break all limitations to prosperity and development. And this prophetic declaration aligns with Biodun Fatoyinbo prophesy of 2020 being a year of unprecedented exploits. Therefore, it is safe to contend that across the spectrum of Nigeria's prophetic churches, none of them saw COVID-19 coming to wreck their 2020 prosperity gospel.

Figure 1

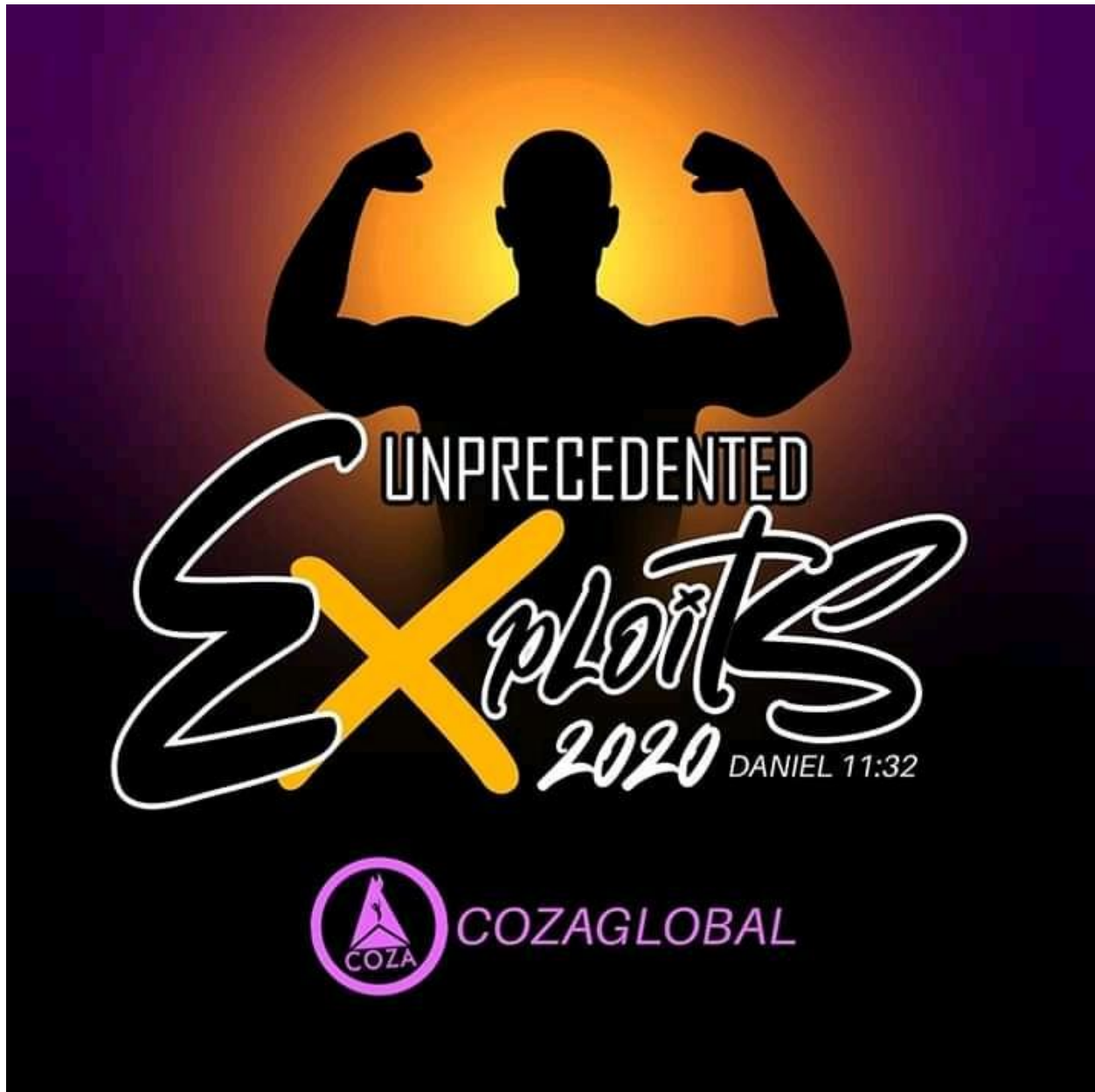
Winners Chapel's Prophetic Prosperity Gospel for 2020 in Nigeria



Source: Living Faith Church Worldwide (Winners Chapel)

Figure 2

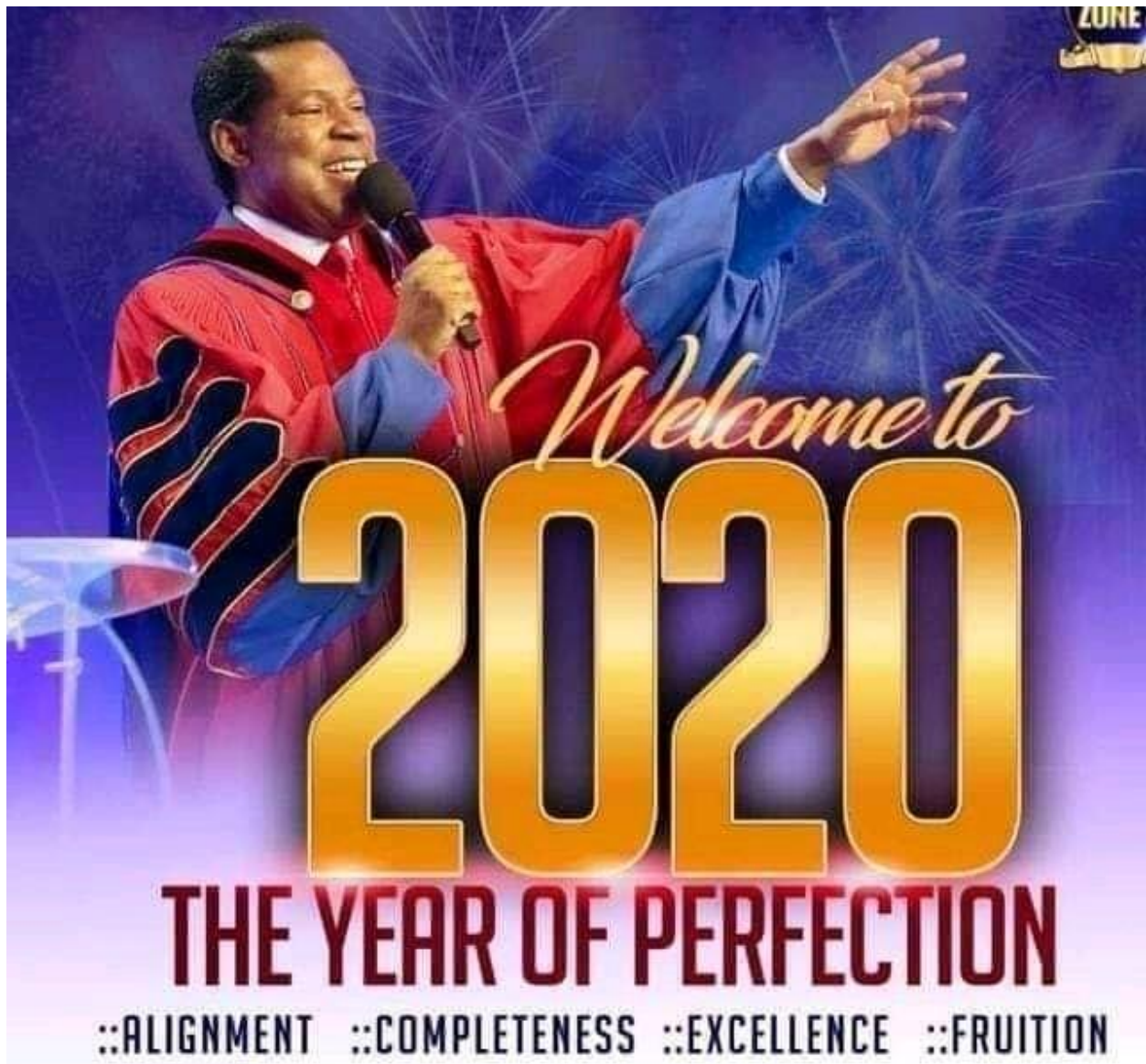
Coza Global's Prophetic Prosperity Gospel for 2020 in Nigeria



Source: The Commonwealth of Zion Assembly (COZA Global)

Figure 3

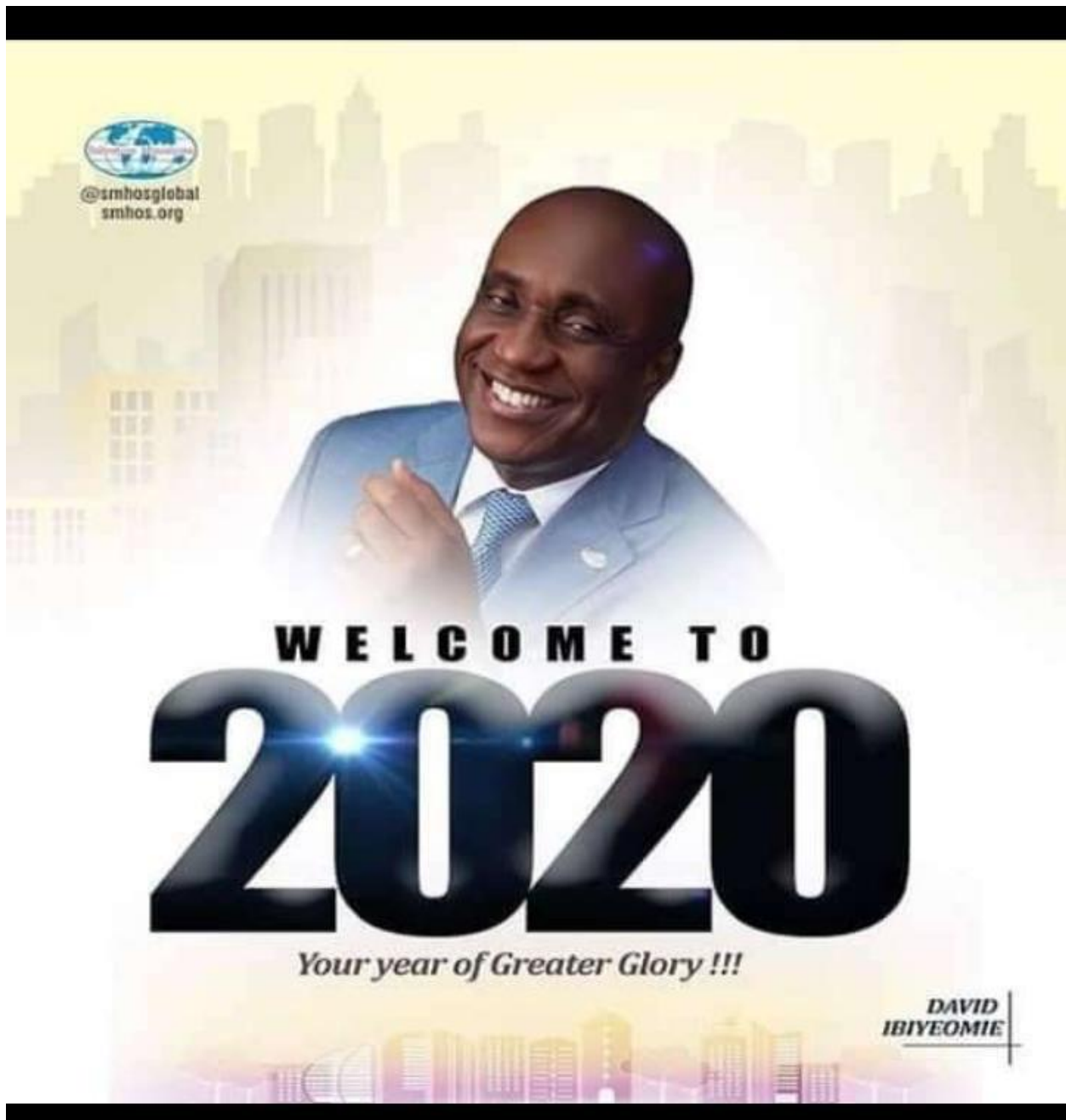
Christ Embassy's Prophetic Prosperity Gospel for 2020 in Nigeria



Source: Believers' Love World (Christ Embassy)

Figure 4

Salvation Ministry's Prophetic Prosperity Gospel for 2020 in Nigeria



Source: Salvation Ministries

The bubble of the 2020 prophetic prosperity vision burst in Nigeria as early February 27, when the country recorded its first confirmed case of COVID-19. According to Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC),

The case is an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria. He returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos, Nigeria on the 25th of February 2020. He was confirmed by the Virology laboratory of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, a part of the laboratory network of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control. (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control 2020)

From this outbreak, Nigeria's COVID-19 profile progressively grew with Lagos being the epicenter of the disease. Thus, as of September 16, 2020, the country had a total of 56, 578 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 10, 960 active cases, 44, 430 discharged cases and 1,088 recorded deaths from COVID-19 (NCDC, 2020). However, to flatten the curve of the pandemic, the Nigerian government in accordance with extant international measures lockdown the country. Consequently, international and domestic travels were restricted, workers redeployed to work from home, and the general population asked to stay at home to stay safe (Office of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2020). This economic lockdown adversely affected production, employment, and livelihood. And it paradoxically pitched COVID-19 against the 2020 prophetic prosperity visions for Nigeria and her peoples.

The complete or partial lockdown of states within the Nigerian federation unleashed untold hardship and suffering on Nigerians and pushed the Nigerian economy towards the verge of recession. The harsh impact of COVID-19 was worsened by the fact that the Nigerian government did little or nothing to alleviate the people's suffering. Pragmatic steps like direct government relief intervention to aid household sustenance was not seen in Nigeria. The nation copied lockdown from developed countries, but failed to copy the welfarism that goes with it. In fact, government palliatives and interventionism in Nigeria were reduced to mere COVID-19 rhetoric. Who gets what, when and how out of the supposed meager palliatives earmarked by the Nigerian government for the people was plagued by another pandemic. This is the pandemic of corruption. The people were bombarded with several government advertorials of support for households, but they were elusive. Instead, COVID-19 rhetoric such as "palliatives will be given to the poorest of the poor," "the elderly and less privileged population," and "Nigerians with less than ₦5,000 in their bank account," were used to tire out the people. And the politics of palliatives, that is the proposed use of religious and traditional leaders to distribute palliatives to the people, was used by the government to evade responsibility. Resultantly, many Nigerians fell deeper into the abyss of poverty.

Therefore, instead of becoming one of the top 20 world economies in 2020, COVID-19 reduced Nigeria to a nation on the tightrope. By the year's end, the country's unemployment rate was expected to reach 33.6%, meaning that 39.4 million Nigerians will be out of job (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2020). Meanwhile, crime and criminalities such as armed robbery, burglary and rape increased because of COVID-19 lockdown. More so, through greedy commerce, businessmen and traders contributed significantly to impoverishing Nigerians. Prices of foodstuffs, drugs and other groceries vitally needed by households to survive and comply with the stay-at-home directive skyrocketed exploitatively. COVID-19 altered the interaction between demand and supply responsible for price fixing. Ironically, instead of the 2020 prophetic alignment and prosperity to fulfill, things fell apart in Nigeria. In figures 1 and 2 above, 2020 was prophesied to be the year of breaking limits and unprecedented exploits for Nigeria and Nigerians, but it turned out to be a year of unprecedented limitations and agony for the country. In figures 3 and 4 above, 2020 was prophesied to be a year of perfection and greater glory, but this was very far from the truth. The year witnessed strike actions by doctors, medical health workers and intellectuals

(ASUU), who were supposed to be partners with the Nigerian government in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. They weaponized the pandemic and turned it into their stranglehold on government. And this aggravated the pain and suffering of Nigerians in 2020 contrary to existing prosperity prophecies. Hence, it is safe to contend in this study that instead of achieving prosperity in 2020, COVID-19 exposed Nigeria's systemic collapse and religious pandemonium. It took away the glory of prophetic churches by plunging Nigerians into economic difficulties, and by defying their 2020 prophetic prosperity messages that promised otherwise.

Perverse Faith and COVID-19 Safety Guidelines in Nigeria

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, WHO and its international partners have been working indefatigably to develop a vaccine. Efforts to treat and contain the disease gave rise to the development or recommendation of treatment drugs such as the Madagascan herbal remedy COVID Organics, Hydroxychloroquine, Remdesivir and Citromax. While the efficacy of these drugs in combatting COVID-19 have remained contentious, scientists and epidemiologists across the globe are in agreement on the safety guidelines needed to stem the tide of the disease. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 are at the vanguard of promoting the universally accepted safety protocols. The NCDC and PTF recommended 14 days self-isolation for all immigrants and people exposed to the virus. The COVID-19 toll free number (080097000010) was also provided for symptomatic people to call for immediate medical assistance. These steps were complemented with the general COVID-19 safety guidelines (NCDC, 2020):

- Regular hand washing with soap under running water / regular use of alcoholic based hand sanitizers
- Proper covering of mouth and nose with handkerchief or tissue paper when sneezing or coughing, or coughing into a bent elbow
- Avoidance of hand contact with the face
- Avoidance of contact with anyone showing symptoms of respiratory illness such as coughing and sneezing
- Mandatory wearing of facemasks/face shields in public spaces
- Staying at home when feeling sick, avoiding self-medication and reporting to the nearest COVID-19 treatment centre; and
- Maintenance of social distancing in public (2 metres, i.e., 5 feet).

But compliance with these COVID-19 safety guidelines in Nigeria is fraught with many challenges and to some extent hindered by perverse faith in God. Some Nigerians believe the virus does not exist; some are nonchalant about it; and some staunch believers in prophetic churches believe faith is their shield against COVID-19. In fact, one of the prophetic churches in the country during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, as displayed in figure 5 below, assured its members and the general public that there will be no deaths or burial in Nigeria. Prophetic churches in the country, as seen in figure 6 below, also claim to be solution grounds for problems, ailments, and maladies. Under these circumstances, the NCDC and PTF observably encountered a strong religious blockade in their effort to persuade some Nigerians to observe the COVID-19 safety guidelines. It is to this end that the focus of this paper here is to interrogate the role of perverse faith in undermining COVID-19 safety protocols.

Perverse faith is religious sentimentalism, fanaticism and dogmatism that blur reason. Unlike it, “genuine faith” defined in Hebrews 11: 1 as the “assured expectation of what is hoped for, the evident demonstration of realities that are not seen,” agrees with science and logic. It encourages actions based on convincing evidence like scientific findings, and not on mere sensationalism and sentimentalities. This implies that true Christian faith is not gullible nor make-belief. But since the rise of prophetic churches in Nigeria, perverse faith has been on the rise. Perverse faith is the prophetic denial and wishing-away of negative realities beheld. It is also the confession of positivity on oneself that is out of sync with present realities. It is expressed in beliefs such as “all is well even though one is inside a well.” Perverse faith is also manifest in the wishful thinking that “one is rich when one is poor”; and in the claim that “one is strong even though one is obviously sick.” It is the religious arrogance that, when one is born again and covered by the blood of Jesus, one is protected and immune to sickness, disease and even death. It is blind belief in prophetic churches and their teachings.

As a strong social phenomenon in Nigeria, this paper argues that since February 27, 2020, perverse faith had been partly responsible for noncompliance with the COVID-19 safety guideline. Under its influence, staunch believers in prophetic churches observably go about their daily lives under many prophetic illusions. Some believe in the following mantras: “He that is in me is greater than COVID-19”; “No weapon fashioned against me from the pit of hell can succeed”; “I am too connected to fail”; and “My God has empowered me to trample on snakes and scorpions,” among others. Consequently, some Christians blatantly disregard and throw COVID-19 safety protocols to the wind. Some even publicly contend that faith and prayer are the cure for the dreaded coronavirus. Hence, some contend that government lockdown of churches was an obstacle to the timely eradication of COVID-19. While examples of these developments can be found across Nigeria, this paper focuses on eyewitness account of this phenomenon derived from the Benin City metropolis.

In Benin City, the capital of Edo state, some staunch believers and prophetic pastors dismiss COVID-19 with the wave of a hand. Consequently, safety guidelines such as the wearing of facemasks, regular hand washing, and the maintenance of social distancing are downplayed. The adoption of Benin experience here is not unconnected with the fact that the city is the ancestral home of prophetic churches in Nigeria. And they have strong footing and influence on the people. In Okhoro located in Egor local government area of Benin, cronies of prophetic preachers took to the streets evangelism during the closure of churches. They faulted the lockdown measure claiming that people are afraid of a mere virus instead of God. They argued that the decision to restrict large religious gathering and social interactions betrays the Christian faith. As COVID-19, they assert, cannot affect Christians with strong faith in God (Personal observation in Benin City on March 10, 2020). Further, Apostle Suleman the founder of Omega Fire Ministries in Benin City played to the gallery with COVID-19. He faulted Nigeria’s government decision to quarantine coronavirus patients when there are powerful prophets in the country. Hence, he implored the government to grant him entrance into COVID-19 isolation centers to miraculously cure patients. This bravado undermines safety protocols and is a risk to public health. More so, a staunch believer in prophetic churches remarked that her prophet assured her that the wearing of facemask and living in fear of COVID-19 are not for children of God (Personal observation enroute New Benin Market on April 10, 2020). Like others in the metropolis, she has more faith in the prophets and pastors than in the COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Some prophetic churches even defied government orders and held regular Sunday service. And when confronted by the law enforcement authorities, they denied awareness of government

lockdown order of churches. An eyewitness in Egor, who turned out for service the first week of lockdown, reports that when the police asked them to return home, the pastor asked them not to return home with their offering and tithes, as doing so would make God angry with them (Personal Communication with Isaac Akoehule, April 5, 2020). In the Ovia North-East area of Benin City, after the lockdown of churches has been lifted, Apostle Victor Ijegbe, founder of Finger of God Ministry, downplayed COVID-19 and its safety guidelines. He organized a prophetic power packed program from September 2-6, 2020, with the theme “No Death No Burial.” The flier advertising the event illuminated the clash between perverse faith and reality. In the advertorial, the Apostle did not emphasize the need for attendees to come along with their facemasks, hand sanitizers, and to observe social distance. More so, in Okhummwun community of Benin, Prophet Nosakhere Patrick, founder of Solution Prayer Ground (aka *Okiononor*), opened his doors to the public for miraculous encounter with God without urging them to comply with COVID-19 safety guidelines. While these are obviously misnomers during a pandemic, they were perhaps an overconfident way for prophetic churches to assert their prophetic authority.

Figure 5

Non-COVID-19 Compliant Church Advertorial and Billboard in Benin



Source: Photo taken by researcher in New Benin Market, Benin City during field work on August 25, 2020.

Figure 6
Prophetic Solution Ground in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria



Source: Photo taken by researcher in Okhunmwun community, Benin City during field work on August 25, 2020.

Figures 5 and 6 shown above were prophetic churches invitations to members of the public in Benin City metropolis for supernatural encounters during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under a pandemic, it would have been expected that these prophetic churches would enjoin their followers to conform to public health safety procedures, but the invitations in figures 5 and 6 demonstrate otherwise. True Christian faith requires that religious organizations cooperate with all local authorities and comply fully with all safety guidelines. Consequently, religious services, programs and Christian living during the COVID-19 pandemic were rightly expected to be safety compliant. Therefore, as an instrument of nation building, character re-molding and personality reformation, religion should ordinarily make it easy to adhere to the COVID-19 safety guidelines. But in Benin City and Nigeria in general, where the virus of perverse faith has grown exponentially, COVID-19 safety protocols are downplayed and deemed conquerable by faith. This gave the misleading impression that faith and science are incompatible. It is this that makes blind faith a threat to

national security under a pandemic and beyond. Instead of promoting religious obedience to COVID-19 safety guidelines that is critical for defeating the coronavirus, perverse faith is hindering it in Nigeria.

COVID-19 and Changing Religious Perspectives in Nigeria

Across the globe, COVID-19 has gingered many lifestyle changes now described as the new normal. In Nigeria, changes in beliefs, perspectives and attitude toward prophetic churches and their prosperity gospel is one area COVID-19 has engineered a new normal. The apparent breakdown of the 2020 prosperity prophecies the coronavirus pandemic induced is revolutionizing minds and perspectives in Nigeria. This is worsened by the dark shadow COVID-19 cast on businesses and livelihood across the country. Hence, on the streets, Newspaper stands, and in the privacy of their homes some Nigerians have been heard expressing their disappointment and frustration with the prophetic churches. But social media platform such as Twitter is the domain where these changing religious views are expressed the most. It is arguable the vehicle driving the fledgling religious renaissance in Nigeria.

Blessing Ugonna, a staunch believer in prophetic churches based in Lagos, stated that: “Those that sell us the miracle waters, the holy oils and all that, this is the time to prove it” (Orjinmo, 2020). This is an overt expression of dissatisfaction with the performance of prophetic churches in relation to COVID-19. Like others, Ugonna’s lamentation revealed that before COVID-19, she had strong faith in prophetic pastors who seized the opportunity to exploit her financially. She was a believer in the acclaimed miraculous power the anointing oils, handkerchief, and holy water they sell possess. Before COVID-19, some staunch believers use their products to anoint money, cars, business premises, homes, and even drink them for prosperity and protection. But during the COVID-19 pandemic, they all proved to be useless. Further, the failure of Prophet Chukwuemeka Odumeje of the Holy Ghost Intervention Ministry to end COVID-19, despite boasting that “he will show coronavirus why he is called the end of sickness” (Banjo, 2020), had negatively affected beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes towards his ministry.

More so, the failure of the seven-day COVID-19 Prayer and Fasting Program declared by Daniel Olukoya of Mountain of Fire and Prayer Ministries to end the disease in Nigeria generated serious concerns. But it was the failure of Prophet T. B. Joshua’s prophecy that the coronavirus will end on March 27 that set social media on fire. It prepared the stage for unparalleled attack and mockery of prophetic churches on Twitter. A Nigerian Twitter user with the username ‘Ifa Funsho’ tweeted to mock the prophet thus:

After God told T. B. Joshua that COVID-19 will end on the 27th of March but failed, he has now gone into the bush praying. Whereas in Matthew 6: 5-6 God said, do not be like the hypocrites for they like to pray standing in the Synagogue and on the street corners to be seen by others. (Banjo, 2020)

Another Twitter user by the username ‘Baldilocks’ tweeted his changed perspective of Nigeria’s prophetic churches thus:

I hope when this pandemic is over, Nigerians will remember that Oyedepo, Adeboye, T. B. Joshua, Suleman, Oyakhilome and other miracle peddlers

are simply showmen who couldn't perform when we needed them the most. (Banjo, 2020)

In this tweet, it is noticeable that the Twitter user associated other prophetic pastors in Nigeria with the failure of T. B. Joshua. This demonstrates that the changing perspectives of Nigerians towards prophetic churches are not targeted, discriminatory or selective; it is general. This is further evident in the tweet of another Twitter user by the username 'Online Bestie'.

T. B. Joshua is the only pastor that is concerned about his congregation and Nigerians. Other pastors are chop-life gangs that only care about offering and their pockets. T. B. Joshua legit went to the mountain to pray and do photo shoot; the real man of God with a degree in Theatre Art. (Banjo, 2020)

And 'Ultimate Kombo' expressed his view of the failed COVID-19 prophecy of Prophet T. B. Joshua this way:

I wonder why people still take T. B. Joshua seriously. This guy just like other pastors in Nigeria is not a prophet. He just makes predictions. I remember when he said a woman was going to win the presidential elections in USA and Donald Trump won. (Adekanye 2020)

Some other Nigerian Twitter users taunt prophetic churches with arguments such as: they would have become permanent born again, given their life to Christ, and become life member of one of the prophetic churches, if they had been able to tackle COVID-19. Consequently, Ademola Adebayo urged Nigerians to stop taking the prophets in the country seriously. He argued that were Nigerians to be living in the Old Testament era, all of the prophets operational in Nigeria's religious space would have been stoned to death for their COVID-19 failure (Adekanye, 2020). However, these changing religious perspectives in Nigeria do not in any way suggest that atheism is now on the rise in the nation. They only demonstrate that since the genesis of prophetic churches in Nigeria in the 1970's, the religious sector of the country has been in pandemonium. In 2020, the crisis rocking Christianity reached its grand revelation climax because of COVID-19. The pandemic and its attendant sufferings opened a new vista through which organized prophetic churches in Nigeria are seen. They provided a new yardstick for measuring them. Therefore, COVID-19 in Nigeria has accelerated the reformed view that prophetic churches are religious enterprises feeding and growing fat on the prosperity gospel. Their prophetic prosperity messages, COVID-19 had shown, are not inspired expressions from God, but mere religious contrivances geared towards appealing to the psychology of their members, tantalising their ears, and swelling the profiteering of prophetic churches.

Conclusion

The impact of the novel coronavirus in Nigeria is revolutionary. It exposed the systemic decay of the nation. This paper examined its impact on belief in New Year prophetic prosperity gospel and churches in Nigeria. It finds that since February 27, 2020, when Nigeria's index case of coronavirus was recorded, the outbreak set the country on the path of social change. The

pandemic, this paper finds, helped to clip the wings of prophetic churches, and trigger a silent religious reawakening among some Christians.

On December 31, 2019, the prophetic churches prophesied bliss and prosperity for Nigeria in 2020 that corresponds with the nation's Vision20:2020. But when COVID-19 broke out and economic lockdown was adopted to contain its spread in Nigeria, their economic impact, this paper argued, shook belief in prophetic churches and their prosperity gospel. Psychologically, they repositioned the religious perspectives and attitudes of some Nigerians.

The paper also argued that COVID-19 provided the center stage for perverse faith and science to clash. Blind faith is partly responsible for obstructing compliance with the COVID-19 safety guidelines, when religious obedience to them is what it takes to end the disease. This makes perverse faith a national security risk during a pandemic.

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