

Fake News, Fake Prophets: Mis/Disinformation, Public Health and the COVID-19 Global Pandemic in Nigeria. The Christian Narrative.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The social history of viruses, their influences, and viral infections dates back to antiquity. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 virus in Wuhan China from the tail end of 2019 has spread so fast around the world, such that WHO declared it a global pandemic. The devastating effect of the virus so affected the world that over ten million are reported infected, and some hundreds of thousands confirmed killed by it. Africa's response has been marginal due to poverty, underdevelopment, and alleged selfishness among the political class. According to NCDC (2020), there are over 47743 confirmed cases in Nigeria. Of these, over 33943 cases have been discharged and over 956 deaths recorded in 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory (Abuja) as at the end of August 2020. In order to stem community transmission, the Government protocol has been closure of schools, Churches, Mosques, public parks, and markets; prohibition of public gatherings; enforcement of the use of face mask; maintenance of social distance in public places; and interstate lockdowns. These measures have impeded the movement of goods and services; and thus clogged the economic wheel of the country. The grand narrative among many pastors, prophets and prophetesses, especially among the African New Religious Movements (ANRMs) like the Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria has taken diverse strands. Popular among these is that the Wuhan virus is indicative of the apocalypse as predicted by Apostle John in the island of Patmos, as documented in the Bible as the book of Revelation. Others demurred dismissing it as a mere health challenge. However, these outbursts from these "men of God" highlight either true knowledge of the situation, or conspiracy theory, misinformation, disinformation to deflect the global health challenge. The question is how do religious groups react in the face of health challenges? What is the impact of their rhetorics on their members and the society? What is the role of social media in this challenge? Does this challenge rekindle the old controversy between science and faith? Who are the most vulnerable in the mix of fake news, mis/disinformation in a global pandemic? How can scholars of religion as public intellectuals react in this quagmire? Unarguably, the COVID-19 pandemic has inaugurated a new World order, a *new normal*. These contestations are examined in this chapter by adopting a methodology that focuses on group discussion supplemented by journal articles, magazines, newspapers and online resources. The chapter avers that religious organization as agency for social mobilization should be sacrosanct in what to tell their congregations. It also recommends that the protocols of WHO and NCDC on COVID-19 like masking, social distancing, hand sanitizing, and modern technologies should be adopted in order to cope with the new World Order.

Keywords: Fake News, Fake Pastors, Churches, Conspiracy theories, COVID-19, pandemics, Nigeria.

The ANRMs and Health Pandemic in Retrospect

The 1918 influenza pandemic, otherwise known as Spanish flu, is recorded as one of the most devastating disease outbreaks in the history of humanity. Its spread was not just global, but devastating unto the most isolated of human communities; causing clinical disease in a third of the world's population and infecting nearly every human alive at the time. The determination of its mortality rate and numbers is complicated and foisted with uncertainties by weak contemporary surveillance in the developing world. However, recent estimates put the death toll at 50 million or even higher (Humphreys 2018, 219).

This 1918 outbreak seems more of great interest to the modern day epidemiologists, virologists, global health researchers and evolutionary biologists. But it is also of great import to the historian and social theorists for obvious reasons. In Nigeria, the historical background of the ANRMs dates back to the influenza of 1918. Although recent study suggest that African Instituted Church's foundation in Nigeria dates before the 1918 (Gbule and Nwaka 2019, 61), Aladura Christianity, the foundation of Nigerian Pentecostalism, came to

limelight from about 1925. The influence was born as a child of circumstance; coming as a response to the influenza epidemic, which defied modern and traditional medicines. In the heat of the influenza, a number of persons formed a prayer group within Saint Saviour Anglican Church, Ijebu-Ode in the southwest of Nigeria. Discourses point to Joseph Sadare, alias 'Esinsinade', and suggestively some four other pioneers members as expressing unflinching determination and faith in fervent prayers, by forming an Aladura brand of Christianity (Turner 1967, 9-10; Peel 1968, 62; Ayegboyin and Ishola 1999, 66-67; Olofinjana 2011, 21). Later, the group operated as Precious Stone Society (PSS). By 1925, the move has metamorphosed into the birth of the Cherubim and Seraphim through the evangelistic and prophetic works of Moses Orimolade and others. Thus the foundation was laid for the earliest form of Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria, the groups fondly called Aladura, spiritual or praying churches (Turner 1979, 121). The hydrotherapy, which Sophia Odunlami proffered as divine solution to the outbreak of the influenza has become a marked feature of Aladura healing practice. The introduction of indigenous forms of symbols, worldview, rituals and music into worship and healing practice seems to make the Aladura and Pentecostal churches appealing to a wide range of believers. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, the Aladura churches indeed redefined the religious landscape of Nigeria and the neighboring West African sub-region. It became the quintessential Christianity that gained the interest and participation of members from the mainline Churches and non-Christians (Baiyewu 2014, 27).

Conceptual Definition

Fake News

The attempt to understand fakes news underscores the question of what constitutes the nature of real news. Different perspectives have been applied in defining news. The range covers from being an account of a recent, interesting, and significant event (Kershner 2005), an account of events that significantly affect people (Richardson 2007), to a dramatic account of something novel or deviant (Jamieson and Campbell 1997). Guy Berger (2018, 7) defines 'news' as verifiable information in the public interest. News is often seen as an output of journalism, providing "independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information" (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007, 11). Thus journalism, expected to present the truth, is guided within the ethics of the profession. But news is socially constructed (Herman and Chomsky 2002; Tuchman 1978), and thus, becomes a vulnerable tool both for and against journalists' own preferences (White 1950), external forces, such as the government, audiences, and advertisers (Shoemaker and Reese 2013), and to market forces too (Tandoc, Wei Lim, and Ling 2017, 4).

On a general note therefore, 'fake news' considerably becomes an oxymoron; portraying the distortion of truth. The word "fake" is often used interchangeably with words such as copy, forgery, counterfeit, and inauthentic (Andrea 2016). Contemporary discourse, especially in media coverage, seemingly perceive fake news as referring to viral posts based on fictitious accounts made to look like news reports (Tandoc, Wei Lim, and Ling 2017, 4). But recently, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, 213) defines fake news as "articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers." Another study defined fake news "as deceptive reviews provided with an intention to mislead consumers in their purchase decision making, often by reviewers with little or no actual experience with the products or services being reviewed" (Zhang et al. 2016, 457).

Fake news has now become a buzzword with current references enlarging it in meaning and scope. Earlier studies applied the term to define related but distinct types of content, such as news parodies, political satires, and news propaganda. Current applications cover the description of false stories spreading on social media, and the smearing of some news organizations' critical reporting. Hence one is moved to poke into the motive(s) of the fake content producers. Two main motivations are conspicuous: financial and ideological (Tandoc, Wei Lim, and Ling 2017). Fake news is most times outrageous. As it goes viral because it is outrageous, the content providers are patronized with clicks and traffics to their domain, and thus advert revenue is generated. Beyond the finances, the content promoter seems to stand out, commanding followers. By promoting ideas and people they favour, content providers become opinion and ideological molders, commanding the anticipated influence. (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017).

Misinformation/Disinformation/Mal-information

The term "fake news" has permeated both the academic world and public daily conversations, and is invoked in efforts to point out false information and also demonize traditional news organizations. It is today so much more than a label for false and misleading information, disguised and disseminated as news. It has become an emotional, weaponised term used to undermine and discredit journalism. For this reason, Wardle and Derakhshan (2018) suggested the terms misinformation, disinformation and mal-information for proper communication of the intended concept. Differentiating between these terms, therefore, would make for clarity of usage and the application of systematic study. Yet, some scholars situate fake news within the larger context of misinformation and disinformation (Wardle 2017).

Indeed, much of the discourse on ‘fake news’ conflates two notions: misinformation and disinformation. Wardle and Derakhshan (2018, 44) attempt to differentiate between these terms. They propose that misinformation is information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true. On the other hand, disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. The former is inadvertent, while the latter is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively *disinformed* by malicious actors (Wardle 2017, para. 1). Mal-information is information that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018, 44).

It is noteworthy that the term propaganda is not synonymous with disinformation, although disinformation can serve the interests of propaganda. But propaganda is usually more overtly manipulative than disinformation, typically because it traffics in emotional rather than informational messaging (Neale 1977).

Notwithstanding the distinctions above, the consequences of these terms (including fake news) on the society is seemingly similar. They corrupt the integrity of the system and processes. Hence, in the attempt to describe one, particular cases may exhibit combinations of the other conceptualizations; borrowing an individual example to explain the other(s) as part of a broader information strategy by particular actors. Nevertheless, it is helpful to keep the distinctions in mind because the causes, techniques and remedies can vary accordingly (Wardle and Derakhshan 2018).

Conspiracy Theory

The hullabaloo about conspiracy theory is steadily increasing on an unceasing manner. However, it was in the last decade that coordinated research interest began to come up as the academia grapple to unravel the causes and consequences of conspiracy theory. This interest rose for many reasons linked to prejudice, witch hunts, revolutions, and genocide (Douglas et al. 2019, 3); and further re-echoes the various issues that are linked to conspiracy theory. Douglas et al (2019) points out that many perpetrators of terrorist attacks were known to be keen supporters of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories have also driven people to reject mainstream medicine to the point where once-cured diseases are now making a comeback in some parts of the world. Also, conspiracy theories drive people to reject scientific consensus, most notably the consensus around anthropogenic climate change (3).

But what is conspiracy theory? The word “conspiracy” refers to any secret plot by two or more powerful actors (Keeley, 1999; Pigden, 1995), typically channeled towards usurping political or economic power, violating rights, infringing upon established agreements, withholding vital secrets, or altering bedrock institutions (Douglas et al 2019, 4). In all, whether conspiracies fail—or are otherwise exposed—the appropriate experts deem them as having actually occurred (Levy, 2007).

Following from above, Conspiracy theory is the attempt to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors (Aaronovitch, 2010; Byford, 2011; Coady, 2006; Dentith & Orr, 2017; Keeley, 1999). The actors channel their forces against government, or any group perceived as powerful and malevolent. For instance, conspiracy theories about the 9/11 terror attacks accuse the Bush administration, the Saudi Government, corporations, the financial industry, and the Jews; conspiracy theories about climate change accuse scientists, communists, the United Nations, Democrats, the government, and the oil industry among others (Douglas et al 2019, 4). While a conspiracy refers to a true causal chain of events, a conspiracy theory refers to an allegation of conspiracy that may or may not be true (Douglas et al 2019).

For a reading on the history of the term, McKenzie-McHarg (2018) is a comprehensive study; while Walker (2018) did a critique of its usage.

Douglas et al (2019, 5) takes the study further by pointing out that the term “conspiracy theorist” refers to a variety of concepts in both popular usage and in the literature. For some people, the term refers to a person who believes in a particular conspiracy theory or has a strong tendency toward conspiracy thinking. It is sometimes used more specifically to denote a person who propagates conspiracy theories professionally (e.g., Alex Jones, David Icke). It could as well refer to people who advocate strongly for a conspiracy theory, such as former Florida Atlantic University Professor James Tracy who claims that the 2012 killings at the Sandy Hook elementary school in Connecticut in the United States were a hoax, or Piers Corbyn—brother of UK Labour Party Leader Jeremy Corbyn—who claims that climate science is a fraud. We avoid this term in this review in exchange for more precise language.

Fake Prophet(ess)

Ordinarily, a prophet(ess) is believed to be a person who predicts the future. But from Biblical perspectives, this is just a part of the entire truth. Primarily, a prophet(ess) is an intermediary between God and humans. In this regard, the office of a prophet(ess) could include, but goes beyond, foretelling events of the future as ‘revealed’ to him/her. For instance, Moses did not usually describe or forecast the future; yet, he stands

as a prophet per excellence. Similar understanding is carried into Christianity and Islam (in the persons of Jesus and Muhammad respectively). These three, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, in their capacities, were founding prophets, who relayed divine messages, but in most cases, did not function as prognosticators. (Coogan 2008, 74). A prophet(ess) thus operates in the office that is equipped with some supernatural revelatory gifts and prophecy (Haggin 1983, 13). Revelatory here portrays inspiration.

Looking at the above-mentioned three religions, for example, the position of the prophet(ess) supposes that the medium sees, hears or even is inspired (in the form of feeling) to convey a message. Thus, experiences like dream, trance, vision, and forms that are similar to these are ways through which the prophet(ess) receives the message(s) that is conveyed. In other words, a prophet(ess) creates the spiritual and emotional atmosphere for the formation of the message. Hence, environments like mountains, sacred places, riversides, etc are usually explored in this process of incubation (Magubane 2020). However, there are cases where the prophet(ess) develops himself/herself through studies to claim knowledge or such explanations that are hidden to the public.

From the Judeo-Christian perspective, the prophets/prophetesses stand out as very integral part of the society that hopes to walk on the path of enlightenment, justice and fairness. They are messengers of the Supersensible, watchmen (Ezekiel 3:17; 33:7), prognosticators, healers, and guide. Consequently, the prophet(ess) commands attention and great followership. But in all, the functions of the prophet(ess) can be classed as to edify, exhort, and comfort (1 Corinthians 14:3).

To understand the fake prophet simply means defining the opposite of the true prophet. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines 'fake' as not true, real, or genuine; counterfeit, sham. A 'fake' prophet(ess), simply put, describes one who portrays himself/herself as a prophet(ess) but fails to provide edification, exhortation and comfort. S/He becomes a misleading channel, instead of one that directs his/her followers properly.

The 5G Misconception in Nigeria

Abuja, Nigeria's capital, became the first to experience the 5G Network in West Africa, courtesy of the testing of the MTN network in November 2019. The successful trial followed that of MTN South Africa in June 2018. Both in South Africa and Abuja, the demonstrations highlighted the deliverables of 5G wireless communication network which include swift automation and rapid immersive entertainment (Awojulugbe, 2020). But it, however, failed to address, firstly, Nigeria's readiness for a nationwide rollout especially due to its well documented epileptic power supply. More important, but salient as well as, are the questions on the safety of the technology to human, other living organism and the environment where the technology would be deployed (Ndinojuo 2020, 1-2). This fear is not limited to Nigeria and Africa. More than 180 doctors and scientists from 36 countries appealed to the EU, warning about the dangers of 5G rollout, which will lead to an increase in involuntary exposure to electromagnetic radiation (Hardell & Nyberg, 2020). Feldman et al. (2008; 2009) also warned that the ability of the human skin has the tendency to act as antennas and therefore respond to millimeter waves. Other health concerns for effects of 5G applications echoes that its radiation could lead to cataract of the eye, diabetes, and the troubles of UVB exposure (Russell, 2018; Abraham, Condon & Gower, 2006; Ellwein & Urato, 2002; Ye et al., 2001). Even when the WHO tries to establish that "no adverse health effects have been established as being caused by mobile phone use", has classified all radiofrequency radiation (of which mobile signals are a part) as "possibly carcinogenic". (Ndinojuo 2020; Foster 2019; Reality Check 2019).

Other research have followed to either affirm or allay the fears that surround the introduction of the 5G network, especially as it relates to health. This explains why theorists were quick in establish a link between it and the outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan China. Wuhan received 5G coverage in August 2019, almost 18 months after O2 launched its first London test-bed for the technology on the Greenwich peninsula. Yet, the rumour went up that Wuhan was the first city in the world to receive 5G network. Hence, it became the birthplace of Covid-19. Interestingly, Iran, one of the hardest hit nations by the pandemic is yet to rollout any 5G coverage.

With the increase in the conspiracy theory that 5G was an accelerator for Covid-19, interest grew across the social media interest, and the avenue was created to generate clickbaits. Measures were taken against conspiracy theorists. For instance, Facebook started to actively remove fake claims that linked the corona virus to 5G (Waterson & Hern, 2020).

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Nigerian Sacred Space: The Christian Perspective

The sacrality of religion in Nigeria pervades all sphere of the polity. Hence, the supposition to divulge religion from secular life seems abortive. Of the three major religions visible in Nigeria – namely African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam -, the last two have gotten such prominence that some of their holy days have become holidays. It is therefore common to see politicians approach the churches and mosques for blessings and support during political campaigns, and reciprocate with their thanksgiving after winning. Even when some ulterior motives may be hidden by these politicians, this is an acknowledgment and affirmation of the prime place religion occupies in history.

But beyond the political, religion continues to be employed as a tool in the explanation of events that seem inexplicable to common reasoning and even science. In Nigeria, religion was similarly applied in explaining Covid-19. The attempts to unravel the *mysterious* Covid-19 from religious perspectives followed the daring consequences the pandemic had on the religion. The sacred space, which boomed with the patronage of its adherents, was greeted with low or almost no attention. Those that ministered on its altar felt both the adverse economic and social impact. The introduction of social distancing, the wearing of face-mask, imposition of curfew during the most part of the night hours, and the closure of the worship centres, followed by the limiting of the number of worshippers to a maximum of 50 persons at a time, all dealt a devastating blow on the religious centres. To survive in the face of this quagmire, the social media and the internet became the worship centres. The church became the point where the religious leader was as at the time of prayer. The congregation followed online. The Electronic church (E-Church) grew in prominence, size and form. Every religious group developed strategies to show their presence, and reach out to their members and non-members. The followers, indeed, needed to be kept “together”.

In the course of this, there was the need to explain what the pandemic stood for. Three strands held sway; namely, 5G Conspiracy Theory, Apocalyptic Theory, and Health Challenge Theory.

5G Conspiracy Theory

One of the groups of Nigeria’s religious actors who tried to explain Covid-19 traced it to the effects of the 5G. For this group, 5G, which came as a relief for a better society and humanity, was a monster in disguise. It carried the agenda of the secret powers that controlled the world; the agenda to control the population. Hence, for them the introduction of the 5G birthed Covid-19.

With the global lockdown introduced as one of the measures to forestall the spread of the pandemic, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the founder and President of Believers Loveworld Inc (alias Christ Embassy) added his voice to the 5G debate. Pastor Chris claimed that the lockdown of Lagos and Abuja was to enable the Federal Government to install 5G infrastructure, which the presence and possibly resistance of the masses would have stalled. In his YouTube message, he contended that

The federal government was pushed to lockdown Abuja and Lagos specifically. Why? Because of 5G in Abuja and Lagos. They already tested 5G in Abuja and they are engaging it already in Lagos. That’s the reason the federal government had to lockdown Abuja and Lagos. So the 5G could be installed. There are other cities planned for (Augoye, 2020).

According to him, what killed people in Wuhan, China was not coronavirus, but 5G. Hence, he concluded that the noise about the pandemic is a global deception to deceive the people to the true situation being dealt with (Ndinojuo 2020, 8). Pastor Chris adds that if the virus is claimed to be airborne, then isolation or staying at home cannot save anyone from the virus.... the reason for the social distancing campaign was to make sure people could not gather to protest and or communicate with one another when the effects of 5G start manifesting, thus, the best way of striking fear into the population is to stoke the existence of a phantom and deadly virus. Categorically, he states that this should not be seen as a conspiracy theory but rather a proven reality, a fact, and an antichrist initiative. He also claims that the images being shared on the internet about the impact of the virus may be doctored images (Ndinojuo 2020, 9).

Pastor Chris accuses the media and health bodies of insincerity. According to him these agencies carry photos from China, or from Italy, or Spain and show to the Americans, show to the British. You see things like “oh this is really happening,” but it’s not. They do not tell what’s killing the people. Two things are killing the people. The first one is where those 5G signals are being tested and have been turned on. A lot of people died. This is real. Number two, where are the people that normally got sick with the flu? Where are they? Nobody is talking about the flu right now” (Augoye, 2020).

Analyzing Pastor Chris, Ndinojuo (2020) categorizes his controversial view as falling within the sphere of conspiracy theory. First, Pastor Chris is wrong in his submissions on the relationship between 5G and Covid-19. Secondly, Pastor Chris fails to provide any empirical foundation to his claims. “The scientists who have opposed the rollout of 5G technology have done so based on its health implications on human, not because of a new world order, about to take over governments in the world” (Ndinojuo 2020, 10).

Even though Pastor Chris’ theory received diverse reaction (in the form of support, criticism, and caution) both from the religious and political classes, his corresponding action thereafter was a thorough departure from his early stand on 5G and Covid-19. First he backtracked on his earlier claims about 5G being the cause of the coronavirus. He further stated that “he was only opposed to 5G because of its perceived health risks and the seeming silence of authorized regulators to speak on its merits and demerits” He thus claims to be more concerned about the health implications of the technology and as a healing minister that cares and heals the sick, he would not like to see more people suffer. (Ndinojuo 2020, 10; Ojo, 2020).

Apocalyptic Theory

Pastor Chris' conspiracy theory concludes that the 5G and all that it goes with, including Covid-19, are strong signs of the end-times. Pastor Adewale Giwa of Awaiting The Second Coming Of Jesus Christ Ministry towed the line of Pastor Chris. Giwa condemned those castigating Pastor Chris as "rabble-rousers." He added to the conspiracy theory that evil people are using the 5G network to lay the foundation for the coming of the antichrist. Thus both 5G and Covid-19 are part of the signs Jesus Christ warned the people not to be alarmed when they start seeing them (Opejobi, 2020). The activities of Bill Gates towards providing vaccines for Covid-19 were placed side by side with the purported imaginations of the Illuminati to subject the world under One World Government; a state that the Christians believe explain the apocalyptic events of the antichrist. The widely publicized micro-chip that would be introduced to certify those that receive the vaccine was concluded in some circles as the mark of the beast as discussed in Revelation 13. The effect of the lockdown on churches received criticisms as a demonic ploy to stifle the church, believed to intercede for the protection of humanity against the intensions of the antichrist. Consequently, prayers and fasting were advocated as the panacea for Covid-19. The likes of TB Joshua claimed to have healed Covid-19 patients through faith-healing. Some churches embarked on programs to overcome the 'spirit' of Covid-19. Social media became selling point for oil and water for the cure of Covid-19.

But on a close analysis, one sees a decline in the emphasis on this theory which shows a misinformation. Apocalyptic events and the appearance of the antichrist are not tailored to one event. More so, going by the account of John from the Island of Patmos, prayer can neither slow down nor stop the apocalyptic events. The apocalypse represents a set of events that seems to be decreed to take place at a time that cannot be predicted.

Health Challenge Theory

There is yet the third group whose stand became known as reactions followed Pastor Chris' conspiracy theory. Augoye (2020) reports that three pastors stood at different platforms to condemn Pastor Chris' postulations. The three clerics are Poju Oyemade, Sam Adeyemi and Matthew Ashimolowo. For Ashimolowo, the senior pastor of Kingsway International Christian Centre, there was no correlation between 5G and end-time signs. Adeyemi, the senior pastor of the Daystar Christian Centre, recalled that during the 1918 influenza pandemic churches, mosques, schools, and markets were closed in Nigeria. Thus, the closing of the worship centres does not implore a demonic but salient war against any religion. Adeyemi concludes on his Instagram page, there are opportunities in every crisis, and it is the leader's duty to see the opportunities and not to project fear on his/her followers. Adeyemi was supported by Oyemade. ((Ndinojuo 2020, 12-13).

From these expressions, Covid-19 is a health challenge that accosted humanity at this time. Just like other diseases that hit humanity at a time in history, became devastating, and came under control with the manufacturing of medications to handle them, so shall covid-19 be brought under control with the production of the right medication(s) for it. Prayer for cure, from their stand, is needed as Divine intervention in human affairs could make available the wisdom to manufacture the cure. However, God, they believe, can heal Covid-19, but at His discretion.

Conclusion

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