

Across Africa, COVID-19 heightens tension between faith and science

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In times of crisis, faith can be a source of huge personal comfort and community resilience. But as Covid-19 arrives in Africa, some faith leaders are making things worse. This is an edited version of a piece by [Amanda Lichtenstein](#), [Rosemary Ajayi](#) and [Nwachukwu Egbunike](#) that went up on [Global Voices](#) yesterday.

Leaders in Africa are grappling with faith in their messaging on COVID-19, the potentially deadly disease that is spreading rapidly throughout the continent.

While many African governments have taken stringent measures to slow the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus that causes COVID-19, including school closures, travel bans, social distance mandates, and contact tracing, not all leaders agree with banning one kind of public assembly: faith-based gatherings.



Some leaders have aligned their policies with medical experts' advice to practice physical distancing to slow the spread of the virus and have agreed to postpone religious gatherings. But others have invoked religious ideology to confront the virus, assuring followers and devotees that faith offers adequate protection.

Religion plays a major role in countries like [Nigeria](#), [Tanzania](#), and [Ethiopia](#), where church and mosque gatherings are a consistent part of everyday life. Yet some citizens have raised serious concerns over the danger of spreading false hope and

misinformation at a time when fact-based action is critical to curbing the contagion.

As of March 25, 2020, over 436,000 people worldwide have been infected with the novel coronavirus, with at least 1,500 confirmed cases in Africa.

Nigeria: ‘No virus can come near your dwelling’

With 46 COVID-19 cases and one confirmed death as of March 25, Nigeria has taken a series of measures to stem the spread.



A nun holds a cross in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Photo by Pernille Bærendtsen, used with permission.

On March 20, the National Economic Council (NEC), which includes the vice president and governors of the 36 states, “strongly recommended” a ban on all public gatherings, including religious gatherings.

Lagos State specifically banned religious gatherings of 50 people or more.

On March 21, Adewele Martins, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos suspended Sunday masses for one month. The church encouraged vulnerable people, such as the sick and elderly, to watch church services on TV or via online streaming.

Upon confirmation of the index COVID-19 patient, the Catholic Church in Lagos on February 29 banned “shaking of hands as a sign of peace during Mass,” and also suspended some services.

The Methodist Church in Nigeria sent a letter to archbishops and bishops on March 18 directing all branches to continue holding services, despite the Nigerian governments’ advice against large gatherings.

By March 20, they reversed course, directing compliance with the 50-person limit and limiting services, including those conducted online, to one hour or less.

Others were less willing to abide by the guidelines.

Nigerian pastor E. A. Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), posted a message on Instagram to assure his followers that “no virus can come near your dwelling” but also reminded them that “basic hygienic measures are next to Godliness:”

“I want to assure you that so far you are in the secret place of the Most High, no virus can come near your dwelling. Remember being able to abide under his shadow involves you living a life of cleanliness. The basic things like washing your hands, keeping your environment clean and adhering to basic hygienic measures are next to Godliness. God bless you.”

And while the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) urged Muslims to comply with the ban on congregational prayers, some Muslim leaders continued to share misinformation that Muslim believers are “immune” to the contagious disease.



"If God say yes, who will say no?" writing on a wall in Yei, South Sudan.

Photo by Pernille Bærendtsen, used with permission.

On March 18, Islamic scholar Abubakr Imam Aliagan warned President Muhammadu Buhari's government, the Sultanate Council and Muslim authorities not to shut down mosques in Nigeria, claiming that Muslims "have already been endowed with natural immunity to the virus."

Tanzania: 'True healing' at church

The government of Tanzania has confirmed 12 COVID-19 cases as of March 25.

As the numbers continue to rise in Tanzania, President John Magufuli took some heat from critics for comparing the coronavirus to Satan and encouraging worshippers of the Christian faith to continue to congregate and pray, despite health experts' advice to practice social distancing and stay home.

Magufuli in fact attended church in Tanzania's capital, Dodoma, on Sunday, March 22, where he told fellow congregants that mosques and churches will remain open despite the overall recommendation to ban public gatherings, because "true

salvation” can be found in religious spaces: ‘we are not closing places of worship. That’s where there is true healing. Corona is the devil and it cannot survive in the body of Jesus.’

Netizen Said Muhammed questioned this faith-based reasoning: ‘To people saying we need to pray to (some) god. I am just asking you: has god been on paternity leave or something since January? Is he unaware of what’s going on? If Mecca and the Vatican have closed up shop then maybe he’s not listening, not caring, or.. not there. Stay At Home!’

Gabriel Baaba Gwanga’Mujje expressed admiration for the president’s faith in God, but called for balance: ‘This man honors God. I agree with him. But I would suggest that we rethink this strategy....balance honoring God, and health protection..’

And Frank Kinubi wondered if greed might be a factor in the reluctance to close mosques and churches: ‘Church and Mosque attendance is going to be the Final nail in the coffin to African Countries. Religious leaders’ desire for charity — it will cost us.’

Abdifatah Hassan Ali alluded to the church that was responsible for a large cluster of COVID-19 cases in South Korea: ‘Magufuli is playing with fire and he’s not taking this pandemic seriously! Does he know that secretive church gathering with its rituals demanding mass human contact was the main factor of spreading the COVID —19 in South Korea?’

Ethiopia: ‘I saw the virus completely burned into ashes’

Ethiopia currently has 12 COVID-19 cases as of March 25, and in response, the government has decided to close schools, ban public gatherings, close all land borders and enforce a 14-day quarantine for travelers who enter the country.

Fifty million-plus Ethiopians belong to the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC), and faith plays a huge role in shaping public thought.

When Ethiopian Prophet Israel Dansa, a Protestant preacher, told his thousands of followers that he “saw the virus completely burned into ashes” with the power of his prayer, US-based professor Endalk Chala (a Global Voices contributor and former editor) warned on Twitter:

Elsie Eyakuze: There are two terms for people to whom the gods speak directly. One of them is prophet. The other is madman. I think we need to embrace a third one: charlatan.

‘An Ethiopian prophet says “Last night when I pray I saw the Spirit of God putting the coronavirus in my hand just like this water. Then when I put the word out, I saw the virus completely burned into ashes” This kind of misinformation will cost lives & YouTube should remove it.’

Chala also told Global Voices that as of March 25, EOTC priests in the city of Addis Ababa are still performing their ritual of going around with thuribles (censers) wafting frankincense and myrrh through the streets 'praying to their God to eliminate coronavirus from the face of the earth'.

In times of great anxiety and fear of the unknown, religion and faith can be a major source of comfort. But given the exponential growth in cases of COVID-19 worldwide, heeding the advice of medical experts is more likely to save lives.

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