

Scourge Of Covid-19 Pandemic And Its Implications For Religion And Society In Nigeria

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Abstract

Popular discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic have depicted the virus as a contemporary source of human and sundry miseries. There has been health, socio-economic, humanitarian, political, religious strains among others occasioned by the pandemic. The government's imposed restrictions (lockdown) to checkmate the viral spread heightened issues around the pandemic in Nigeria. Similarly, some religious leaders have cried foul over the emergence and spread of the pandemic and consistently displayed their public suspicion of this public health emergency. Yet, there remains a dearth in empirical literature on the extent of debilitations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis its implication for the interaction between religion and society in the Nigerian context. Premised on exploratory research design, the paper seeks to examine the implications of the pandemic on religion and society in the Nigerian context. The research utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data collection. The primary source was gotten through key in-depth interview (KII), focused group discussion (FGD) and structured observation, while the secondary sources relied principally on newspapers, journal articles and books. It was discovered that religious worship and behaviour, belief, charity, and ritual practices were major areas that the COVID-19 impacted on organized religion. Also, the economy, moral-political climate and the environment were aspects of the society that were mainly affected. More importantly, the scourge threw open some implications for the interaction between religion and society by confirming that religion as a social fact does not die; that religious actors are committed to pro-social and critical support of people in need; and that religion adapts to the instrumental use of science and technology, despite the avowed ideological distinction between the religious and the secular. The paper recommends that there is urgent need for inclusion and bridge building between religion and science especially in the health and medical sector. Thus, policymakers should integrate religious voices and works more into public health, economic and social recovery frameworks in the society.

Keywords: COVID-19, Religion and Health, Scourge, Society

Introduction

A major task of one who studies Religion is not to collect dead facts but to conform such facts to live issues. Issues are alive because they arise out of the tensions that people have to face in every generation, tensions that shape

lives. At times of looming catastrophes, such as pandemics, religion becomes an arena of social life that faces challenge and change. Religion offers performative or practical and ideological, cognitive or theological responses:

healing and solace for human suffering, explanations for the meaning of tragic events, and support for communities; these include decisions on the degree and forms of cooperation with government authorities, which for some will include a quandary of choosing between mainstream medical and faith-based solutions.

Traditional ways of maintaining faith and societies are challenged while fresh innovations and reforms are birthed. The economic and social disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is devastating because millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of 2025. Millions of enterprises face an existential threat. Nearly half of the world's 3.3 billion global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods. Without the means to earn an income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves and their families. For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food (Who.int. Retrieved 25 November, 2020).

Nearly every sector has been deeply affected. The pandemic has decimated jobs and placed millions of livelihoods at risk. As breadwinners lose jobs, fall ill and die, the food security and nutrition of millions of women and men are under threat, with those in low-income countries, particularly the most marginalized populations, which include small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples, being the hardest hit. The list is endless; but how does it affect religion? What does a virus have to do with religion? How has the pandemic triggered religious innovation? Does state responses to

the current pandemic point to a displacement of religion in favour of secular, scientific approaches? Does religion give people the spiritual agency to transgress state imposed legal boundaries or, conversely, to cooperate with the state in confronting the virus? To what extent are religious organizations active participants in pandemic-related governance? This paper aims at addressing these questions and other related issues.

Conceptual Clarification COVID-19

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines COVID-19 as an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. It was first discovered in Wuhan, a district of China, in the late 2019 (hence, the acronym COVID-19). Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause diseases ranging from the common cold to Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness. The COVID-19 virus spreads primarily through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Pandemic

The term 'pandemic' means a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but around the world (Hawker, 2005; Crowther, 1998). The Online Wikipedia defines a pandemic as an epidemic of an infectious disease that has spread across a large region, for instance multiple continents or

worldwide, affecting a substantial number of people. A widespread endemic disease with a stable number of infected people is not a pandemic. Widespread endemic diseases with a stable number of infected people such as recurrences of seasonal influenza are generally excluded as they occur simultaneously in large regions of the globe rather than being spread worldwide.

Religion

Different schools of thought perceive religion in various dimensions as it appeals to them. Bouquet (1963) argued in his book: "Comparative Religion" that "the word religion is of European origin and that it acquired many meanings in Europe" (p. 59). He observes that scholars in the ancient world did not agree on the etymological connotation of the word. Some scholars connected 'religio' with other Latin terms "relegere" which means to re-read, 'relinquere' which is to relinquish or 'religare' which means to relegate, to unite, to bind together. However, from the sifted definitions given by scholars, this research defines religion as a social-cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organizations, which relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements.

Society

Etymologically, it is from the Latin word 'societas' which in turn is derived from the noun 'socius' (meaning comrade, friend or ally); and from the adjectival form 'socialis' (meaning a bond or interaction between parties that are friendly, or at least civil). Without an article, the term can refer to the entirety of humanity (like 'society in general', or 'society at large', etc.). Those who are unfriendly or

uncivil to the rest of society in this sense may be deemed to be 'antisocial'. In line with the above notion, the Scottish Economist, Adam Smith cited by Briggs (2000) taught that "a society may subsist among different men, as among different merchants, from a sense of its utility without any mutual love or affection, if only they refrain from doing injury to each other" (p. 22).

According to the New Word Encyclopedia Dictionary:

a society is a grouping of individuals, which is characterized by common interest and may have distinctive culture and institutions. An organized group of people associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic, or other purposes may also be considered a society. (Encyclopedia.net; Retrieved 22nd November, 2020)

In the sense of an association, a society can be a body of individuals outlined by the bounds of functional interdependence, possibly comprising characteristics such as national or cultural identity, social solidarity, language, or hierarchical structure.

Method of Data Collection

The study employs the exploratory research design and primary sources of data collection were derived from key in-depth interview (KII), Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and structured observation. Twenty respondents made up the sample size for the study. A Focus Group Discussion Guide and an In-Depth Interview Guide were the instruments utilized for data collection. The selection of respondents was purposive. Representatives and members of religious communities, who were considered knowledgeable, were recruited in the study via zoom meeting held on the 29th

November, 2020. For secondary data, we prioritize newspapers, journal articles especially online sources, and books. The data analysis was sociological and evaluative. Although much of the information gathered pertains to Christianity, which is a central, though not the exclusive focus of this research. It was meant to give specific and exemplary focus to the research.

Scourge of COVID-19 in Nigeria and Its Implication for Religion

The Coronavirus crept into Nigeria in late February 2020, and by April 2020, became so dreaded. A total lockdown was declared in Lagos, Ogun and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja and a partial lockdown was imposed on the rest of the country. By this, most public places such as schools, market places, churches and mosques were indefinitely closed down. Hospitals were not closed down but the uncertainty of the period made Nigerians to get their patients forcefully discharged and taken home. A number of measures were put in place nationwide to stem the tide of the possible community spread of the viral disease.

Ironically, no appreciable measures were put in place by the Nigerian governments for the amelioration of the socio-economic hardships that do accompany such emergency situations. This is contrary to the case in the Western world where cash and food items were brought to the door-steps of citizens to cushion the negative effect of the lockdown. The hardship and suffering which the lockdown brought on Nigerians caused much uproar, especially from religious circles, such that the Federal Government had no option than to unwind the lockdown nationwide. Thus, churches and mosques were declared free from the embargo placed on them. But their operations were to

follow some strict guidelines put in place to checkmate the possible spread of COVID-19. Here we turn to how the COVID 19 pandemic affected both religion and society.

Throughout the nation, religious activities were affected. Most religious centers were turned ghost centers. The government, both state and federal, made announcements during the lockdown that no religious activity or gathering above twenty members were allowed and each gathering must comply with the use of nose mask, washing of hands with soap and water, and the use of hand sanitizer. Broadly speaking, COVID 19 pandemic has affected four dimensions of religion, namely: religious worship and behaviour, religious rites and rituals, religious beliefs and charity/giving.

Religious Worship and Behaviour

The most dramatic result in religion has been the exceedingly quick shift of religious services from in-person to online worship. The cancellation of the worship services of various faiths and the closure of Sunday schools, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals lasted for about five to seven months across Nigeria. Many churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples offered worship through live stream amidst the pandemic whereas for almost a hundred years, churches have used various communication methods to reach their audiences, such as radio, television and online media, Frank (2020) avers that "the halting of in-person worship is one of the most significant sudden disruptions in the practice of religion in Nigeria's history. There has been an increased interest in watching and participating in online church services under lockdown" (p. 43).

The interconnectivity promoted by digital technologies has helped promote the ability for individuals to participate in religious activities despite physical distance, including those who previously may have never stepped foot in a church. Christians who regularly attended physical church services have been less keen to participate online, especially among the old. 90% of the respondents said they participated in church service via online methods such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram and television channels. Less than 10% admitted they did not attend neither physical nor online worship during the pandemic but just stayed indoors.

Before now, many considered worship through electronic gadgets a wrong thing to do, an aberration that leads to false worship. But the experience of COVID-19 has changed that notion. The facts of these experiences are evident that religious behavior may be dynamic but religion itself remains relatively the same. In other words, the adherents may change their behavior but the essence of religion itself does not.

Also, in times like these, people become more or less prayerful depending on how they interpret their experiences. Their interpretation of these experiences can encourage compliance or deviance with government rules and regulations. This was demonstrated clearly in Borno State. While the restriction order was still in force, three Imams of a weekly Friday Mosque went ahead and encouraged worshippers to congregate for the Friday Prayer, the consequences were that they were arrested and sanctioned (Haruna, 2020). Also, in Lagos State, during a church service, the pastor of a church and four others were arrested for violating the COVID-19 regulation (Alabi, 2020). Here, the interpretation is that 'only

God' can save mankind from such calamity and so, there is more need to come together and pray to God more powerfully. These notwithstanding, some Muslims in the mostly dominated parts of Northern Nigeria insisted on celebrating the feasts of Ramadan despite lockdown restrictions.

Religious Practices and Rituals

The coming of COVID-19 meant new rules, new rituals and new ways of doing things everywhere including the church and other religious institutions. The impact of the closure and subsequent new regulations for places of worship has been deeply felt across Nigeria, a devoutly religious nation. The ritual practice of keeping holy water at church entrances, shaking hands during mass and receiving Holy Communion with the tongue have been completely changed or omitted in some places to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. While this may not be the first time such measures have been taken, it was actually much more severe during this period. In 2014, widespread fear that the deadly Ebola outbreak could spread led to swift changes in religious practices, but not to the extent of the COVID-19 disruption.

Also, the tradition of many Christians observing the Christian penitential season of Lent through the abstinence from meat on Fridays, especially by Roman Catholics, Methodists and Anglicans were lifted by some Roman Catholic Bishops amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which partially coincided with the Lenten season in 2020. Again, the liturgies normally held during Holy Week (especially those on Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday), were canceled by many churches belonging to mainstream Christian

denomination. Furthermore, episcopal and Catholic churches requested that older worshippers remain at home rather than attending Sunday Mass which is usually required.

Religious Doctrines and Beliefs

Some Christians believe that the pandemic is not merely extraordinary but apocalyptic. Such beliefs seem to appear in all or most religious groups, although a serious conviction that apocalyptic change is imminent may be confined to a minority of individuals within the faith tradition. Some Christians claim that COVID-19 is proof that the plagues of the book of Revelation, and more specifically, the seven Seals of Revelation 6:1-8:1, are occurring now and Jesus' return is imminent. For them, Revelation has indeed predicted the COVID-19 pandemic. Corona has been associated with the fourth horseman. Christian sources on the internet quote a range of biblical sources about the preceding of the end of time with pestilence.

For example,

Revelation 6:8: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth." (NJB)

Matthew 24:7-13: "For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places". (NJB)

Ezekiel 38:22: "I will plead against him with pestilence and the blood" (NJB)

While the increased prominence of apocalyptic texts and beliefs can offer comfort in the time of COVID-19, some religious doctrinal responses may have been counter-productive and have led to spreading of infection, and also to dislike by others towards those holding to these doctrines. There are many kinds of other religious beliefs that could offer comfort in relationship to COVID-19 (such as beliefs in a loving, protective God, beliefs in an all-knowing God).

Charity/Giving

The importance of caring for the most vulnerable in the society is deeply embedded in many traditions, and many religious communities provide essential social services like child care and hunger relief. Closing a house of worship to prevent the spread of the corona virus can put the beneficiaries of these programs in serious danger. Philanthropic responses to the pandemic have generally followed two tracks: that of responding to the immediate crisis, such as donations of cash and in-kind items to private and public healthcare providers, and that of addressing the economic effects caused by strict lockdowns. Christian denominations in Nigeria were involved in both.

Churches raised funds and were prompted to dispatch disinfection supplies, air-purifying respirators, face shields, gloves, corona virus nucleic acid detection reagents, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe pumps, infusion pumps to affected areas. In addition to that, church individuals, and religious bodies provided and donated palliatives to cushion the effects of the pandemic on the populace. There is hardly any Christian denomination that did not actively participate in these acts of charity.

The Scourge of Covid-19 on Society

The pandemic's impact is also felt beyond the spiritual realm, affecting the broader community that benefits from, or even relies on religious charity. We shall selectively discuss a couple of them with greater impact.

Economy

The threat of COVID-19 is not as real for some people as the threat of hunger. With many Nigerians made unemployed by COVID-19, combined with lower volumes of exports such as oil. The *Sun Newspaper*, (14th April, 2020) reported:

Nigeria's economy has contracted by 6.1% year on year in the second quarter of 2020; 27% of Nigeria's labour force (over 21 million Nigerians) are unemployed and there's also little sign of a quick turnaround in Nigeria's economic woes as the World Bank predicts Africa's most populous country is set for its worst recession in four decades.

The economic impacts were obviously caused by external shocks such as less global demand for oil and a global economic recession, domestic policies adopted to reduce viral transmission such as enforced social distancing, lockdown policy that restricted movement of people and economic activities within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja, Kano, Lagos, and Ogun States, as well as state-level lockdowns lasting months in Akwa Ibom, Borno, Ekiti, Kwara, Osun, Rivers, Benue and Taraba states; and indirect impacts of the lockdown policies on the rest of the country outside of the affected sectors or areas.

Surprisingly, domestic production increased as many were engaged in producing locally made

hand sanitizers, facemasks and face shields. The potentials of this domestic production and services would be to maintain local traditional lifestyles rather than adapting to modernity. People may repose their trust in many local-level trades and business firms rather than depending on the supermarket system.

Moral-Political Climate

COVID-19 obviously has affected the moral and political climate in Nigeria. The hunger and sufferings brought about by the pandemic gave a boost against moral and political injustice in the country. Orbi (2020) opines on his social media post titled 'looting of palliatives stashed in warehouses: moral or logical?' he said: "The word 'palliative' is perhaps the most used word in Nigeria today and before COVID-19 pandemic, many Nigerians did not even know that the word existed, talk less of what it meant". (4th October, 2020). The typical Nigerian, he was using the situation to make fun but it is also true that the word has found its way into the Nigerian political consciousness and popular lexicon. This is however not a new experience in Nigeria. The politics of palliative in Nigeria is simply the 'weaponization' of poverty by the Nigerian elites. While this strategy did not begin in the wake of COVID-19, the hardship caused by the pandemic brought it out and revealed the secret to many Nigerians. It has always been employed by the Nigerian ruling class to keep the people too poor to rise up for their rights and crushed enough to be willing to settle for dregs.

It has had different names in the past. Once, it was called 'amala politics, or stomach infrastructure'. It was essentially a three-step process. Steal public money; use the stolen money to buy palliatives; and use the

palliatives to buy the people's votes during elections while posing as a benefactor. The consequences of the change in the moral-political climate include the popular '#Endsars' protest. The campaign was not merely about Nigeria's corrupt Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), it was also a broader call for social, indeed distributive justice from Nigerian youth and a cry for good leadership in the country. Kukah (2020), speaking on the issue of 'Endsars' opines that "this is a great opportunity for the Church to guide its youth so as to guarantee a firm moral foundation for politics in our country". (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 18th October 2020)

Environmental Changes

The imposition of lockdown stopped some of the commercial activities that greatly affected the various important environmental parameters which directly connected to human health. As some types of social, economic, industrial and urban activity suddenly shut off, nature took the advantage and showed improvement in the quality of air, cleaner rivers, less noise pollution, undisturbed and calm wildlife. Experience showed that the pollution level reduced drastically in all the sectors. In other words, while society was at standstill, nature was healing.

For instance, the records according to Science Direct show that:

there was 500% decrease in sewage and industrial effluents in rivers; dissolved oxygen (DO) around Lagos, Biological oxygen demand (BOD) and pH (measure of how acidic/basic) of river water were improved by 79%, 30% and 7.9 respectively; Noise level was reduced up to 35% to 68% in Lagos and wild life got a chance to reclaim their land.

(www.sciencedirect.com; retrieved 20th Feb, 2021)

Implications of COVID-19 Pandemic for Religion and Society

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching consequences beyond the spread of the disease itself and efforts to quarantine it, including political, cultural, and social implications. Some of its implication for religion and society are highlighted below.

Firstly, the case of COVID-19 has proven the philosophers and other secularist thinkers who predicted that religion would die out as societies modernize to be mistaken. This is because that has not happened. Today, more than four out of every five people on Earth believe in God. Religion seems to be serving a purpose that modernization does not replace. Religion does not die; the form of faith expression may change but it never dies or fades away like the secularists believe. The explanation for why religiosity increases in the face of disasters could be that people go to church for material aid or that disaster also affects development and other cultural values. However, it turns out that one main reason for the impact of COVID-19 on religiosity is religious coping or resilience. People are currently using religion as a means to cope with adversity and uncertainty especially when they are confronted or hit by various adverse life events such as pandemics, cancer, heart problems, divorce, or injury.

Secondly, religious actors and institutions play a vital stabilizing role during such global crises and can offer a beacon of hope amid this ravaging pandemic. This fact is in opposition to the secularist view that religion is a realm different from the public space and a dying

phenomenon especially in the modern world characterized by science and technology. The ideological opposition of faith and reason similarly is called to question by this reality or happenings during this COVID 19 pandemic.

The fact that faith groups and religiously inspired individuals were dispatching disinfection supplies, powered air-purifying respirators, face shields, gloves, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagents, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe pumps, infusion pumps, and food to affected areas, confirms this assertion. Adherents of many religions gathered together to pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, for those affected by it, as well as for wisdom for physicians and scientists to combat the disease. Some Catholic dioceses and religious institutes offered church facilities to accommodate healthcare operations and provide housing for the needy in the crisis.

People of faith donated immensely in kind and cash to the health sector - food and medical assistance and social justice work, et cetera. Thus, there is urgent need for inclusion and building bridges between religion (faith) and science (reason). Habitual distinctions between the two exaggerate differences at a time when cooperation is urgently needed. Religions should ensure that faith is grounded in realism and help us understand scripture in a historical, cultural and social context.

It will not be out of place for policymakers to better integrate religious voices in public health as well as in the economic and social recovery framework to come. A common trap that policymakers fall into is roping off religious communities from the general public, as though they constitute a separate entity outside of society. In fact, religious communities are

integral parts of societies, economies and polities.

Thirdly, the fact of this pandemic demonstrates that religious factors are integral parts, especially since religious traditions, beliefs and institutions play important roles in everyday life for the majority of people worldwide. It is a resounding note for skeptics who see faith as opposed to science, religious worldviews as sharply separated from secular norms and religious literacy as a bias that distorts both data and anecdote.

It is evident that religious groups deploy scientific and technological tools in the service of man. Such that in the situation of cancellation of the public worship, the closure of Sunday schools, as well as the cancellation of pilgrimages, ceremonies and festivals compelled many churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples to turn to worship through live streaming, radio and television broadcast and other forms of technological aided means of communication. Christians are now using more aggressively online apps such as Facebook and others which contain prayers and daily devotionals, to remain engaged with their faith. Due to social-distancing guidelines, many churches have turned to digital church. According to news on Zenith.com, on Easter Sunday 2020, Pope Francis streamed live mass from an empty St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, while the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby broadcast his sermon from the kitchen of his flat in London. The pandemic rendered it necessary to move to online formats for the common good. (Accessed on 12th May, 2020)

In addition, now, more than ever is the time for global solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in society, particularly in a

country such as Nigeria. Only together can we overcome the intertwined health, social and economic impacts of the pandemic and prevent its escalation into a protracted humanitarian and food security catastrophe (complex emergencies), with the potential loss of already achieved development gains.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine some of the possible impacts and implications of COVID-19 on religion and society. Four general areas of attention were noted: religious worship and behaviour, belief, charity or philanthropy, and practice or rituals. Also examined is the impact of Covid-19 on society

and how these in turn relate back to religion. The result of the study shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating as well as some positive impact on religion and society. Second, religious actors and institutions have been very active and instrumental both in assisting the medical sector as well as alleviating hunger and suffering during this period. We observe that religion does not fade off or become irrelevant, neither is it a private affair as the secularist think. The study recommends that policy makers should better integrate religious voices in public health, as well as in the economic and social recovery to come as there is urgent need for inclusion and bridge building between faith and science.

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