
FAITH AND SCIENCE IN LIGHT OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA: DECONSTRUCTING THE BOTTLENECK

By

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Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind

Abstract

This paper shows inter alia the unarguable loggerhead between religion and science. Philosophers, scientists, and theologians have always debated if there should be any synergy between science and religion. The most recent turn that has so far reawaken this long crisis between religion and science is the Covid-19 pandemic which has not only left Millions dead but also a handful fighting for their lives. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted religion and faith in different ways both in religious and circular institutions. Now that a medical crisis has ensued once again, where do we pitch our tent: Science or religion? This paper is not an attempt to end the long dispute between science and religion but to add to the existing voice on the alleged dominance of science over religion and vice-versa in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. It will bring to fore contemporary challenges posed by the covid-19 pandemic and how both science and religion have fared in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It concludes that both religion and science play a pivotal role in human existence and one must learn to accommodate the other if humanity must have a meaning.

Keywords: COVID-19, Science, Religion, Spirituality, Faith, Spirituality, Pandemic

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the Covid-19 pandemic has created a global medical emergency. The virus seems to be relentless as it ravaged the globe and Nigeria is not an exception. According to Quadri, COVID-19 is spread through droplets; the [basic reproduction rate](#), a measure of transmissibility of the virus ranges from 2.24 to 3.58 (219). Public gatherings increase transmission, and therefore social distancing was recommended as the foremost preventive strategy. As the world number of coronaviruses confirmed cases as of 12th July 2021 stood at 187,793,202 (4,051,695 deaths have been reported so far) retrieved from (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>). Accessed 3 May 2021. Scientists and politicians struggle to agree on a response to the economic, social, and health crisis occasioned by the pandemic. Many people are turning toward faith as their hope in science continues to wane. Religion plays a major role in countries like Nigeria, where church and mosque gatherings are a consistent part of everyday life. Yet some citizens have raised serious concern over the danger of spreading false hope and misinformation at a time when fact-based action is critical to curbing the contagion.

As the total confirmed covid-19 cases in Nigeria stands at 166,730 and 2,117 confirmed deaths as of 4th June 2021, (retrieved from Twitter@NCDCgov. Accessed on the 12th June, 2021) Nigeria has taken a series of measures to stem the spread. On March 20, 2020, the National Economic Council (NEC), which includes the vice president and governors of the 36 states, strongly recommended a ban on all public gatherings of 50 people or more. Following suit, precisely on March 21, Adewale 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, 2020, 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. This was evident on their Twitter handle which read: “Methodist Church makes U-turn, directs compliance with the ban on large gatherings”(https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/across-africa-covid-19-heightens-tension-between-faith-and-science. Accessed 3rd August 2021).

Conversely, 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.”(https://oxfamapps.org/fp2p/across-africa-covid-19-heightens-tension-between-faith-and-science/. Accessed 4th August, 2021)

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. This is evident in the online article which reads Coronavirus: Muslims immune, don't stop mosque prayers- Scholar warns Buhari, Islamic Council - Daily Post Nigeria https://t.co/gGiTy89KSYpic.twitter.com/98BXcmFAuf(nigerianbulletin. Precisely on March 18, Islamic scholar Abubakar 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.”((@nbnews247) March 19, 2020) Accessed 4th May 2021.)

From the foregoing, it is evident that 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 continents have taken stringent methods to slow the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus that causes covid-19, including school closure, travel bans, social distance mandates, and contact tracing, not all leaders agree with banning one kind of public assembly; faith-based gathering. Some leaders have aligned their policies with medical expert's advice to practicing physical distancing to slow the spread of the virus and have

agreed to postpone religious gatherings. But others have involved religious ideology to confront the virus, assuring followers and devotees that faith offers adequate protection.

Science and Religion: Deconstructing the bottleneck

Has Covid-19 made religious institutions accept the supremacy of science over religion? Is 'science and religion' a clash of ideas? From time immemorial, Philosophers, theologians, and scientists have argued whether there should be any basis for a synergy between science and religion. Lots of texts have been written for and against these claims but I think the greatest difference between science and religion, however, and the one that I feel causes the perceived conflict, is a difference in scope. Science is not intended to explain and direct every aspect of life: It is meant to present certain realities about the world we live in. Religion, on the other hand, addresses moral issues, values, rights, and relationships. Francisco Ayala, a professor at the University of California, made the distinction with these words when he asserts that: "Science seeks material explanations for material processes, but it has nothing definitive to say about realities beyond its scope. Once science has had its say, there remain questions of value, purpose, and meaning that are forever beyond science's domain, but belong in the realm of philosophical reflection and religious experience." (Ayala 2001).

Ayala's role designation of these two warring entities shows that some people overlap these two very separate issues and therein lay the confusion. Some religious groups view science as a threat to their beliefs. They fear that science is attempting to disprove the existence of the supernatural, thus destroying the basis of their morality. Some scientists treat religious followers with disdain and view religion as nonsense because it cannot be discreetly measured or understood, thus the societal constraints imposed by religion are foolish and should be eliminated. Even worse, some individuals deliberately muddle the two in an attempt to further some personal agenda.

By clearly defining the role of science and the role of religion, and by removing personal bias, I feel that most individuals would see that science and religion are compatible, and that, embracing both ideologies allow a full understanding and appreciation of the world we live in and the quality of life we experience. Thus, the conflict between science and religion is only in the minds of those who do not understand the aims of these venerable establishments. Commonalities exist between the two, but, in essence, they are separate. Each represents a way to look at the world, but choosing one exclusively will not give a holistic view. Science and religion are compatible because they address different aspects of our lives, and, therefore, cannot conflict with one another.

Science and Religion: A Symbiotic relationship

Julie Jackson was apt when she stated that:

"Our modern society is a mixture of many cultures and beliefs, so it is not surprising that opinions will sometimes conflict, and one prime example of this is the controversy over science and religion. Scientists maintain a philosophy that everything in the natural world can be explained and understood; while proponents of religious beliefs deeply feel that supernatural forces exist that affect our lives" (1)

These two views may seem to conflict, but I feel that science and religion are, in fact,

compatible. The basic goal of science is to explain natural phenomena, explore their causes, predict their future behavior, and control the outcomes. Through this process, mankind gains a greater understanding of his past and gains knowledge that can be used to change the future. Studies in physics, chemistry, and biology, for example, have led to discoveries that make our lives easier, safer, and longer. Science achieves these goals by using human intellect combined with scientific instruments to understand the patterns of nature (Rutherford and Alghren 1989). The scientific method of understanding the physical universe uses reason and sense perception to systematically test hypotheses, yielding conclusive, reproducible results. Religion's goal is to propagate certain beliefs about how people should live. Followers of religion usually believe in a supernatural creator who determines whether certain actions are desirable or undesirable. Some religions even promise life after the one we experience in this realm. According to Omsakthi, 86% of the world's population claims to believe in a higher being even though religion is achieved through faith, something which cannot be measured or observed, but only experienced subjectively. (Omsakthi 2004)

Given this information, it would seem that these two views are at odds, but certain similarities do exist. Both science and religion have evolved and changed over time. Many years ago, the science involved a great deal of guesswork, supposition, and superstition. Religion has also changed its tactics: In the past, religion was forced violently upon people, often in conflict with the philosophies of the founders. Secondly, both science and religion disagree within themselves: Scientists argue the interpretation of data much as religious people argue interpretations of ancient texts. Finally, both fields have fringe proponents that damage their credibility. Certain vocal individuals misinterpret and misrepresent science, presenting "pseudoscience" as fact when it is mostly conjecture and opinion (Lipps 1996). Significant differences also arise when comparing science and religion. Science explores the natural world and believes only what can be seen, tested, and repeated using evidence and logic. Religion acknowledges the existence of supernatural forces as a matter of course. These are accepted based on personal feeling or intuition with no empirical evidence, and, therefore, cannot be scientifically proved or disproved.

The interplay between religion and science amid covid-19

Amid a renewed feud between science and religion in the light of the covid-19 pandemic, lots of researches were made to arrest the deadly disease both among scientist, the academia and even our religious institutions among others. A school of thought known as the Accommodationist has insisted that during a moment of crises of these natures, scientists should lead in research and innovation while believers should pray to God to bestow scientists with the knowledge to produce the needed vaccines. (covid-19, pandemics and reconciling religious faith with science (kassim 2020))

Accommodationists approach pandemics with an understanding that prioritizes both religious faith and science. In this school of thought, there is an underlying agreement that science is important for human flourishing, and that it is equally important to admit that the search for objective truth has led scientists to questions that science cannot answer. Science, for accommodationists, cannot address all the questions that exist. It cannot answer why there is 'something' instead of nothing. It cannot explain how and why inanimate matter can organize to contemplate itself.



Kassim was apt when he held that unlike the advocates of science-centrism, accommodationists do not believe in ideological scientism or the uncritical application of science to all human situations, including those that are not amenable to the scientific method. Instead, accommodationists would argue that the vaccines that will cure diseases like the novel coronavirus will come from scientists, but that the scientific knowledge needed for that invention is based on God's design. God's omnipotence is a part of the equation. The reason why, for example, Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* failed to account for why the planets tugging at each other's orbits have not made the solar system collapse into the sun (Kassim 2020). To accommodationists, religion is important, not an airy-fairy form of metaphysical speculation or magical thinking. Both religion and science are founded on a belief in the existence of something outside the universe. For religion, it is an undefinable God. For science, it is a set of puzzling physical laws. With or without pandemics, science and religion speak to different realms of human experience, and the two fields of inquiry should be made to complement each other. Accommodationists insist that during crisis moments like the current COVID-19 pandemic, scientists should lead with research and innovation while the believers should pray to God to bestow scientists with the knowledge to produce the needed vaccines. How would the people who believe there can be synergy between faith and science convince the faith-centric clerics to change their position? How can the actions and verbal pronouncements of the faith-centric clerics be carefully challenged before they develop into threats to public health? These are some of the questions religious clerics and scientists have had to grapple with since the outbreak of COVID-19. The most important contribution made by accommodationists to the COVID-19 discourse is their unequivocal emphasis on the dichotomy between the agency of the clergy that addresses matters related to spirituality and the agency of medical experts who research diseases and pandemics. To buttress this point he further went on to highlight how Martin Luther king responded when faced with plague in 1527 in Wittenberg. We were made to believe that he did not wholly embrace the belief that faith would protect against infection. He combined his faith in God with practical steps to ameliorate the situation, including the provision of hospitals for the care of the sick. Similarly, when Islamic scholars encountered plagues and pandemics, they did not peddle conspiracy theories, nor did they wait helplessly and rely on prayer alone. They combined references to scriptural sources with active research on medicinal plants and herbs for possible treatments. According to Kassim, Accommodationists in Nigeria may not necessarily be familiar with the works of Syed Ahmad Khan (founder of the scientific society of Aligarh), Said Nursi (founder of the Nur movement in Turkey), Maurice Bucaille (author of the Bible, the Quran, and Science), and Nidhal Guessoum (author of *Islam's Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*). They might not even have read Ian Barbour's 'critical realism' and his fourfold typology for the interaction of religion and science (conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration). (2020) For Sayid Quadri, the accommodationist believe in the quest to make religion compatible with modern sciences. In one way or another, some people of faith have reconciled the perceived tension between faith and science. For Muslim accommodationists, there is the nostalgic recollection of a golden age when Islamic societies in the Middle Ages were the scientific centers of the world. Muslims who were the dominant cultivators of science birthed modern universities and the notion of science as an empirical inquiry. (219-221)

Covid-19: Hope amid surges

The question of the origin of the disease remains contested but we are glad a vaccine has been discovered to tame is widespread. Dealing with religious congregations in times of epidemics could be challenging but COVID-19 has come and it will go despite the discovery of new cases daily and fear of another wave of its widespread. As Yuval Harari quoted from Sayid Quadrisaid, “the storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alivebut we will inhabit a different world.”(219-211)

While the lockdown has been lifted in Nigeria, it will be beneficial for the Nigerian public to reflect on the intellectual stagnation that has kept us helpless for far too long. If you claim that Western science and civilization have no place for the creator of the universe, then what are you doing to create your science informed by spiritual values? Likewise, it is duplicitous to undermine the philosophical worldview of Western science and yet appropriate its benefits. For the post-COVID-19 world, it will be important to depart from imitative scholarship fixated on medieval texts alone and instead focus on creative learning that build upon the scholarship of the past and addresses modern concerns. It is time for religious scholars to unfreeze their intellectual stagnation and step out from their fixation on the philological attachment and preoccupation with medieval religious literature. It is important to revive the spirit of faith and scientific inquiry and embrace a holistic form of eclectic scholarship.

Conclusion

This work has attempted to show that science and religion coexist in many parts of Africa and the relationship is best described largely as one of accommodation; a coexistence of knowledge systems. This coexistence of knowledge has also been shown to be true in other parts of the world. Few perceive conflict or supremacy. Religion remains a beacon, just as science is also a beacon, particularly for health and disease as the Covid-19 pandemic has again brought to light. Polio and tetanus vaccine controversies, among others, have shown that religious beliefs can aid both the spread and containment of the disease. Science always recovers its status as a beacon and becomes inscribed in common sense, alongside other systems of knowing. Religious beliefs, traditional and clinical medical practices coexist in the treatment of ailments. As the Covid-19 pandemic spreads and religious institutions are once again called upon to adopt behavioral changes in containing these deadly diseases.

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