

The Scourge of Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Religious Beliefs in Nigeria: Matters Arising

Ewere Nelson Atoi

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Abstract

COVID-19 is the most recent deadly disease currently ravaging human lives, causing serious socio-economic hardship and generating different religious responses the world over. The various responses and interpretations given to COVID-19 by religious believers in Nigeria necessitate an appraisal of this subject-matter. Therefore, this essay examines the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and religious beliefs in Nigeria with a view to analyse the responses of religious believers to the outbreak of the disease. Data was obtained from existing literature, media reports and observations. Content, critical and constructive methods of analysis were used for data interpretation. The paper avers that Nigerian religious believers express both positive and negative responses with regards to the outbreak, containment and treatment of COVID-19. While some religious believers acknowledged the reality of corona virus and gave the government necessary assistance in tackling the menace, others denied its reality and formulate different conspiracy theories to fault government actions and scientific solutions regarding the containment and treatment of COVID-19. The paper submits that emerging evidences have shown that COVID-19 is real, as such; Nigerians should create a synergy between religion and science in finding lasting solution to the problems emanating from the outbreak of the disease.

Keywords: COVID-19, Religious Beliefs, Religious Believers, Responses, and Disease

Introduction

From antiquity to the contemporary times, human life has always been threatened or cut short as a result of terrible and malignant diseases that occasionally ravage different societies of the world. Some of these deadly and life threatening diseases are caused by animal viruses which are transferable from animals to humans and from person to person through various means, such as, human consumption of infected agricultural products, body contacts, sexual intercourse, cuts and wounds, coughing and sneezing, among others. The most prominent ones among these deadly diseases that have continued to claim millions of human lives over the years in world health history include HIV/AIDS, Cholera, Bubonic plague, Smallpox, Influenza, Ebola, Corona virus, among others. The outbreaks of these diseases have continued to created fear and panic across international borders in such a manner that they are constantly attracting the attentions of global health agencies and humanitarian organisations. This is because the crises caused by the emergence of these diseases have serious negative effects on the socio-economic wellbeing of the people in different societies the world over. The occurrences of global pandemics have always attracted the interventions of multilateral international organisations and other concerned agencies. As a matter of fact, there have been various declarations of global health emergencies at different times in world history by concerned international health agencies such as the world health organization (WHO) in a bid to workout modalities on how to fight such diseases (Wilder-Smith and Osman, 2020). The most recent outbreak of deadly diseases in the history of global pandemic is the novel Corona virus (COVID-19) that had ravaged and partly still ravaging human lives and causing very serious socio-economic hardship in nearly every country of the world. The corona virus pandemic has changed the life style of many people in different societies the world over. Residents of different countries of the world are forced to adapt to a new way of living commonly refers to as the

“new normal” in contemporary social lexicon. Meetings, seminars and conferences, among others are now held via ZOOM and other online collaboration platforms because of the effects of corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic. According to Hart (2020), the outbreak of corona virus has brought a lot of restraint in many aspects of life and many people are trying to get use to the “new normal” imposed by the pandemic.

The world over, individuals, corporate bodies, governments, religious organisations, among others, have been looking for ways to solve the problem caused by COVID-19 pandemic. The world health organisation and other health agencies of international repute have continually expressed concern and shown some signs of readiness to come up with strategic plans in order to defeat this dreaded disease that has been waging intense biological war against humanity and crippling almost every aspect of human life across different countries of the globe. In Nigeria, the agency responsible for the control of infectious diseases known as the Nigerian centre for disease control (NCDC) and the ministry of health have been working round the clock in collaboration with the world health organisation to provide lasting solution to the challenges posed by the novel corona virus (COVID-19) infection since the first index case of the disease was reported in the country on the 27th of February 2020 (NCDC, 2020). Apart from health agencies, religious bodies have also expressed serious concern over the corona virus scourge in Nigeria. In fact, a lot of religious interpretations have been ascribed to the outbreak of corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic. This can be clearly seen in the daily reactions of religious believers to the pandemic in the form of giving spiritual reasons for the outbreak of the disease and offering different kinds of prayer to God in order for the country and by extension the entire world to find a lasting solution to the problem. The religious interpretations and responses of the various faith-based organisations in Nigeria to corona virus (COVID-19) are not strange or surprising because like Idowu rightly observed, Africans are in all things religious (1996). Therefore, this

essay examines the outbreak of corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic and religious beliefs in Nigeria with a view to analyse the responses of Nigerian religious believers to various issues emanating from the outbreak of the disease in the country. Data for this study was obtained from existing literature, media reports and careful observation of the health and socio-economic state of the nation, and subjected to content, critical and constructive analysis.

An Overview of Corona Virus (COVID-19)

Corona virus disease 2019 alternatively known as COVID-19 is a novel respiratory disease or illness caused by the new corona virus reported to have originated from Wuhan city in the Hubei Province of the Republic of China in the last quarter of the year 2019 (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir and Siddique, 2020). COVID-19 is a new disease introduced to humans for the first time in history. The outbreak of the disease was first reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) country office in China on the 31st of December, 2019. COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global health emergency of public concern on the 30th of January, 2020 by the World Health Organisation. On the 11th of March, 2020, the WHO eventually declared COVID-19 a global pandemic as a result of its presence in nearly every part of the world. The virus responsible for the outbreak of the corona virus disease 2019 was initially called 2019 novel corona virus (2019-nCoV) and now called severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus two (SARS-CoV-2). The new name of the virus was announced on the 11th of February, 2020 by the international committee on the taxonomy of viruses (ICTV). Severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus two (SARS-CoV-2) was chosen as the official name of the virus that caused COVID-19 outbreak because it is genetically related to the corona virus responsible for the SARS outbreak of 2003. Although the two viruses are related, they are different types of viruses altogether in the final analysis because each of them has its own distinctive features. For

clarity sake, it is imperative to state at this juncture that the new corona virus is called severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus two (SARS-CoV-2) and the illness or disease it caused is called corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The World Health Organisation derived the acronym “COVID-19” from “corona virus disease 2019.” Both the name of the virus and the disease it caused were carefully chosen to avoid stigmatizing the virus origin in terms of populations, geography, or animal associations (World Health Organisation, 2020; Cennimo, 2020).

There are varieties of corona virus disease (COVID-19) symptoms that have been identified by health experts since its outbreak in 2019. However, the common symptoms of COVID-19 include dry cough, sneezing, fever, sore throat, diarrhea, loss of taste or smell, tiredness, and difficulty in breathing or shortness of breath. Nevertheless, it was reported that some researches have shown that there are some COVID-19 infected persons who do not show any of these symptoms but still tested positive for the disease (World Health Organisation, 2020). The implication is that people could have corona virus disease yet do not show any sign of the infection, and this is very dangerous for the community because such infected person may have the tendency to infect so many other people with the disease before it could be detected. It is imperative to note that corona virus disease 2019 spread primarily through droplets. It is easily transmitted from one person to another through droplets from the mouth or nose of an infected person who is coughing, sneezing, talking and breathing out within a close distance with another person. In essence, corona virus disease 2019 is basically transmitted through a close contact with an infected person. Individuals could also contact the disease through touching of contaminated surfaces with their hands by using it to touch their mouth, nose and eyes. Available research findings have shown that droplets that transmit COVID-19 from one infected person to another are too heavy to travel far in the air; they can only travel approximately one metre

and quickly land or settle on any surface within the environment. Health experts have not been able to determine the exact duration that the corona virus can survive on surfaces yet. COVID-19 infected person may start manifesting the symptoms from two to fourteen days after contacting the disease (World Health Organisation, 2020).

It is pertinent to note at this point that initially there were no vaccines against COVID-19. To curtail the spread of the disease, health experts recommended some precautionary or preventive measures. These include the practice of personal hygiene and social distancing. Hand washing with soap and clean water regularly or the use of alcohol-based rub to sanitize hands is highly recommended. Also, people are encouraged to avoid touching their mouth, nose and eyes with unwashed hands. The practice of cleaning surfaces regularly with soap and water and other disinfectants is equally recommended because hands touch so many surfaces which could be contaminated with COVID-19. People are also encouraged to cover their mouth and nose with the bend of their elbow when coughing and sneezing or use disposable tissue and throw it into a closed bin immediately after use. Moreover, individuals are advice to maintain some level of distance between them and people who are coughing and sneezing, avoid unnecessary travel and stay away from large gathering of people (World Health Organisation, 2020; NCDC, 2020). Members of the public are encouraged to strictly adhere to these preventive measures as a matter of urgent public health importance. In fact, since COVID-19 became a global health issue, the age along saying “prevention is better than cure” has become a resounding slogan in the global social space. Nevertheless, different categories of vaccines have been developed for prevention of COVID-19 presently. The most popular ones among them are Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Moderna vaccine, Johnson and Johnson’s Janssen vaccine, among others (Center for Disease Control and prevention, 2021). Also, the World Health Organisation has announced that the world is currently experiencing

the fourth wave of COVID-19 with the emergence of the Omicron variant. As such, members of the public are encouraged to take COVID-19 vaccine in order to avoid the deadly effects of the disease (Channels TV, 2021).

Religious Beliefs and Treatment of Diseases in Nigeria

Nigeria is a pluralistic society with multiple faith traditions and belief systems, ranging from traditional to missionary religions, with temples, altars, shrines and sacred vessels in every nook and cranny of the country. Howbeit, there are three major religious traditions in Nigeria; namely, African traditional religion, Islam and Christianity (Atoi, Sadiku and Kume, 2020). All of these religious belief systems have very strong theological doctrines on spiritual treatments of diseases. The exponents of these religious traditions give spiritual interpretations to the causes, preventions and treatments of sicknesses and diseases of all kinds. Accordingly, most Nigerian religious adherents from antiquity to the contemporary times attribute various kinds of diseases or ailments to spiritual causes. There are many ways religious adherents in Nigeria and indeed most African nations explicate the causes of diseases or ailments. These include the claim that most diseases or ill health are caused as a result of attacks from evil and malevolent spiritual forces, and the believe that when spiritual beings are not treated well or dishonoured, they could punish people with diseases (Magesa, 1997; Westerlund, 2006). Other ways that people can become ill or inflicted with diseases are spell-casting and witchcraft activities. Religious adherents in many African communities are of the opinion that certain illnesses which defy biomedical treatments and scientific explanations can only be transmitted through witchcraft and other unforeseen evil forces as a way of punishing those perceived as enemies (Obinna, 2012; Thorpe, 1993). According to Olupona (2004), there is the view that people with evil powers could cause other people they see as their enemies or are disrespectful to them to become sick as

a way of punishment. One other way members of the society can be inflicted with diseases according to some African religious believers is when people commit taboos or abominable act. According to Gyekye (1995), many traditional religious healers and practitioners are of the opinion that disobeying taboos is one of the ways people could become sick. It is imperative to state that taboos form an important part of African traditional religion. Taboos are things, conducts or ways of life, which are forbidden by a group of people in the society (Isiramen, 1998; White, 2015). What is known as taboo in African traditional religion is referred to as sin in Christian and Islamic theological conception of wrong doing or misconduct. In Christianity and Islam, it is believed that sin is an abominable act which could make God turn his eyes away from any believer who is found wanting, thereby giving room for evil forces to inflict such individual with chronic diseases or ailments and other forms of misfortune in the society.

It is pertinent to state at this juncture that some elements of African traditional religious beliefs are replicated in Christian and Islamic liturgies in Nigeria and indeed many other countries where these two monotheistic religious traditions are practiced in Africa. Cardinal John Onaiyekan, the emeritus Catholic Archbishop of Abuja have strongly contends that every Nigerian whether Christian or Muslim retains within him/her some basic elements of African Traditional Religion, since there are many aspects of traditional religious belief systems that is reflected in both Christianity and Islam (Onaiyekan, 2010). Little wonder why most Nigerian Christians and Muslims conceived and interpret most sicknesses and diseases spiritually. It is believed that whatever happens in the physical world is a manifestation of events that took place in the spiritual realm.

The aforementioned conception and interpretation of sicknesses and diseases has made many Nigerians resort to spiritual means of finding solutions to their health problems. Africans generally have very strong hope in spiritual powers to solve existential problems which they

may encounter in their daily life experiences. In Nigeria today, religious beliefs play so many roles in the life of the people, especially in the area of healthcare. In the three major religions in Nigeria, there is the common belief that God is the greatest physician who has the ultimate power to heal all kinds of sicknesses and diseases at all times and seasons. For this reason, some Nigerian religious believers prefer to seek spiritual treatments for their ailments or diseases. While some people may choose to seek purely spiritual solution to their health issues, others may decide to combine it with western medical treatment for more effective result. So many African religious adherents believed that western biomedical sciences alone cannot take care of all manners of sicknesses and diseases because some ailments have spiritual causes and need to be treated as such in order to achieve effective result. It is important to note that in most African societies today, despite massive health education on scientific causes of illness, spiritual health beliefs are still very strong among religious believers in the continent. As stated earlier, any disease or ailment which is not clearly understood from the perspective of western biomedical science is usually given spiritual explanations (Asare and Danquah, 2017).

The religious understanding of the treatment of sicknesses and diseases in Nigeria by extension in Africa implies that the process is holistic and all-involving. The treatment options are design in such manners that make the healing all-encompassing; involving the cure of physical, spiritual, psychological and social symptoms. In the light of the foregoing, we need to reiterate the fact that most religious believers in Nigeria do not separate the physical from the spiritual because to them whatever happens in the natural world is a manifestation of events that has taken place in the supernatural realm.

Responses of Religious Believers to Corona Virus (COVID-19) in Nigeria

There are mixed reactions and responses from religious believers to the outbreak and containment of COVID-19 pandemic across religious divides in the Nigerian state. The various religious adherents in the country responded with two different voices to the emerging issues from COVID-19; some gave positive responses and others negative. While some religious believers acknowledged the reality of Corona virus and are doing everything within their power to assist the government in finding lasting solutions to the pandemic, others denied the reality of the virus and are busy spreading conspiracy theories about the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. On the positive side, many religious leaders across the major faith traditions in Nigeria have been raising awareness and sensitizing their members about the deadly effects of corona virus and the need to adhere to the stipulated precautionary measures and health policy directives of the government in a bid to contain the spread of the virus in the country. Some members of the three major religions in Nigeria—African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity have been working round the clock to assist the government in proffering solutions to the problem of COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The efforts of some of these religious believers are channelled toward ending the pandemic completely or providing facilities that will help to reduce to the minimum, the deadly effects of COVID-19 in human life (Adebowale, 2020). Some African traditional religious adherents try to develop traditional herbal medicine that will serve as a cure for corona virus (Coffie-Gyamfi, 2020). They have also continued to offer daily prayers and libation to the Supreme Being through their various ancestors and tutelary divinities in charge of spiritual health and healing in different communities. It is imperative to note that the potency of Nigerian herbal medicine is rooted in African indigenous religious belief system where the diagnostic and treatment process involve both physical and

spiritual exercise (Idowu, 1996). In Nigeria, most traditional healers prepare their herbs based on their existing religious beliefs in the supernatural powers. Traditional herbal medicine is still a very potent means for the treatment of diseases despite the advancement of western medical practices in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Muslims and Christians in Nigeria on their parts have continued to offer individual, congregational and national prayers for God to intervene and save Nigerians and the entire world from the deadly effects of the corona virus. Some religious groups have even developed formal congregational prayer for corona virus. A good case in point is the Catholic Church that offers corona virus prayer at every celebration of the holy mass. The Catholic Diocese of Bauchi (2020) presents the prayer thus:

Jesus Christ you travel through towns and villages “curing every disease and illness.” At your command the sick were made well. Come to our aid now, in the midst of the global spread of the corona virus, that we may experience your healing love. Heal those who are sick with the virus. May they regain their strength and health through quality medical care. Heal us from our fear, which prevents nations from working together and neighbours from helping one another. Heal us from our pride, which can make us claim invulnerability to a disease that knows no borders. Stay by our side in this time of uncertainty and sorrow. Be with those who have died from the virus. May they be at rest with you in your eternal peace. Be with the families of those who are sick or have died. As they worry and grieve, defend them from illness and despair. May they know your peace, through Christ our Lord. (p. 1).

One of the strong points that can be deduced from the above prayer is that those who composed it try to create a synergy between religious belief and medical science. Hence, the assertion “heal those who are sick with the virus, may they regain their strength and health through

quality medical care.” Moreover, the Nigerian government, having been overwhelmed by the effects of the corona virus pandemic on the country’s national life and the insufficient health facilities available to Nigerian citizens, saw the need for spiritual intervention to complement the efforts of medical personnel. As such, the chairman of the presidential taskforce on COVID-19, Boss Mustapha, admonished Christian and Muslim leaders under the auspice of Nigerian interreligious council (NIREC) to coordinate national prayer and fasting in order to seek divine intervention on the issue of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria (Channels TV, July 5, 2020). Additionally, the Nigerian government at all levels have continued to appeal to religious leaders to help enlighten their adherence about the deadly effects of COVID-19 in human life and the need for them to abide by the public health directives of designated authorities charged with the responsibilities of handling cases of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Also, different Faith-based Organisations across religious divides responded to the public outcry for assistance by donating both cash and food items as palliatives to cushion the harsh effects of the corona virus on the most vulnerable members of the Nigerian society as a result of the implementation of the lockdown policy of the federal and various state governments. Many Nigerians were able to put their religious differences aside and try to unite in order to fight COVID-19 which presented itself as a common enemy of humankind. In this light, most faith-based philanthropic groups across religious divides were able to move beyond the boundaries of their religious affiliations to assist their fellow citizens with food items and cash to survival during and after the lockdown of the country’s socio-economic activities (Adighibe and Ireoba, 2020; Egwu, 2020).

On the negative side, there are lots of conspiracy theories being circulated in different quarters of the Nigeria’s religious space. Some of which are as follows: First, there were news reports that some religious leaders in Nigeria categorically told their followers that

corona virus is not real. Some of these religious leaders were able to convince their adherents through their sermons and religious instruction class that corona virus is an illusion and a fabricated story by the enemies of their religions to prevent believers from practicing their faith (Daka, 2020; Okoye and Obulor, 2021). According to news reports, there are Islamic and Christian religious leaders who categorically claimed that corona virus is being used by the enemies of their religious beliefs to prevent them from practicing their religion. A good case in point from the side of Islamic religion is the statement attributed to Sheikh Sani Yahaya, the leader of Islamic Reform Movement (IZALA). It was reported that Sheikh Sani Yahaya claimed in his sermons and press conferences that corona virus is an international deceit and western conspiracy against Muslims. This simply means that corona virus is a false story created and maliciously spread by some western agents in order to prevent Muslims from fulfilling their religious obligation, such as, participating in pilgrimages and congregational prayers, among others (Daka, 2020). From the side of Christianity, news reports reveal that some Christian clergymen such as, Bishop David Oyedepo, Pastor Chris Okotie, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome and others claimed that corona virus is a calculated plan of the anti-Christ to prevent Christians from fulfilling the main mission of the church, which is, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to save humanity from satanic bondage in the contemporary world. These Christian clerics are of the opinion that the lockdown order of the federal government was targeted on Nigerian churches. To them, it was a calculated attempt by the anti-Christ to reduce the strength of the Christian community and weaken the body of Christ in Nigeria (Olatunji, 2020).

Second, some religious adherents insisted that Corona virus is a plague sent by God to punish the inhabitants of the world because of their outrageous sins against him. To them, people of this generation have continued to involve themselves in so many abominable acts

which have provoked God so much, to the extent that he has to inflict humanity with the deadly corona virus to get their attention. This category of religious believers claimed that the only solution to the problem of COVID-19 pandemic is for the inhabitants of the earth to repent from their sins and seek forgiveness from God in order to be free from the pandemic. They insisted that it is not about medical solution but spiritual. By spiritual solution, they mean total repentance from sin and seeking of God's mercy through prayer of forgiveness (Omoniyi, 2020).

Third, there was general public criticism against some clergymen who allegedly asked members of their congregations to be paying tithe and offertory through online medium during the lockdown in order to be protected from the deadly effects of the pandemic. The grievances of members of the public to this development were premised on the fact that there was a general socio-economic hardship in the country as a result of the effect of the pandemic, especially because of the lockdown directive of the government. They argued that religious organisations are supposed to assist their adherents to cushion the harsh socio-economic effects of the COVID-19 scourge and not the church talking about payment of tithe and offertory when members were unable to work, and most of them depend on daily paid jobs for survival (Taiwo-Oguntu, 2020).

Fourth, it was reported that some religious leaders have continue to admonish their adherents not to have faith in Covid-19 vaccine or take a jab of it because they believe that the vaccine will serve believers no good. Some of these religious leaders claimed that Covid-19 vaccine is a product of the devil and one of the antics of the enemies of righteous to trickily initiate religious believers into satanic covenant. To them, taking the vaccine means entering into covenant or agreement with the devil. Pastor Chris Okotie was specifically quoted to have said: "You do not understand the spiritual import but now you know. So when you eat that genetically modified food that you eat and take the

vaccine, you have entered into communion with Satan, with Lucifer. And that involves blood” (“Those who take COVID-19 vaccine ...” 2021). In a related manner, Pastor Chris Oyahkilome slams clergymen who encouraged their members to take the Covid-19 vaccine. According to Adewole (2021), Pastor Chris Oyahkilome states:

I can’t understand how a minister of the gospel will be waiting for some vaccines to be the solution for the world. Where is your faith? What happened to you?” “Where is the word of God in your mouth” “Do you realize that if you would believe in Christ and in the word of God the way you believe in this vaccine, there will be power in your mouth? He (God) made us healers (para. 4 and 6).

One other cleric who categorically told members of his congregation not to take the Covid-19 vaccine is Bishop David Oyedepo. According to Okere (2021), Bishop Oyedepo insisted that he will never take the Covid-19 vaccine because he is not a guinea pig. The aforementioned negative responses to the outbreak and containment of Covid-19 pandemic by some religious leaders in Nigeria have continued to raise doubt in the minds of so many Nigerians about the reality of the virus.

Concluding Remarks

This paper investigated the essential matters arising from the scourge of corona virus (COVID-19) in relation to religious beliefs and practices in Nigeria. It was observed that religious believers across faith divides in Nigeria responded both positively and negatively with regards to the reality of the corona virus and how it should be tackled. While some religious adherents believed in the reality of COVID-19 in Nigeria, others denied it. The reality of corona virus (COVID-19) should not be in doubt because there are overwhelming evidences that it is real and must be tackled through all legitimate means. The nature of corona virus and the threat it pose to the wellbeing of the human race suggest that the disease needs to be tackled with combine approaches

if the war must be won against the pandemic. There should be a synergy between medical science and religious beliefs in the treatment of coronavirus as both will serve humanity better when they are synergized than when people create unnecessary conflict between them. Both science and religion are two areas of human life that must not be ignored. The two are so important to the extent that whenever anyone of them is ignored, a vacuum is automatically created in human life. In this light, man must use religion and science in such a way that they can complement each other for the common good of humanity. The emerging issues of life and the sorry state of human being in the universe have shown beyond reasonable doubt that man needs both religious beliefs and science to solve fundamental problems of human life. It could be said that biomedical science is a product of God's wisdom bestowed on man to preserve life. Therefore, biomedical practitioners are God's assistants in the business of saving lives, hence, the famous medical inscription in various hospitals "we treat and God cures."

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Ewere Nelson Atoi (PhD) is a senior lecturer in Department of Religious Studies, Gombe State University, Gombe, Nigeria.

E-mail: nelsonewere.atoi@gsu.edu.ng