

Christian-Muslim Perspectives on Coronavirus Pandemics and Lessons for Contemporary Believers in a Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Context

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Abstract

This study aims to elaborate on the responses of Christians and Muslims to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lessons that contemporary believers (Christians and Muslims) could derive from this deadly disease. The study employs the use of the qualitative method of data collection through interviews, observation and text reviews. Those interviewed were Christians and Muslims within Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau state. The paper examines the COVID-19 pandemic from Christian and Islamic perspectives through which it seeks an answer to the fundamental question of how Christians and Muslims view this disease. The study found that Christians and Muslims have a diversity of views regarding this deadly virus. Some of the adherents of the two religions interpret it as punishment for the evil deeds of human beings, and at the same time a realization and a reminder for people to turn to God for forgiveness and ultimate reward. While others see it as a test from God, and not really as a result of the sins of human beings in the world. For them, COVID-19 is a substance created by God; and humans can avoid it by carrying out healthy lifestyles and getting closer to God. The study reveals that the pandemic has had a significant impact on Christians and Muslims, especially concerning they are coming together for worship. Almost all places of worship (Churches and Mosques) had to undergo some modifications in their worship practices, while others suspended or drastically reduced their religious practices.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Christian, Muslim, responses to pandemics.

Introduction

The word “pandemic” originates from two Greek words- *pan*, meaning “all”, and *demos* meaning “the people.” This word is commonly used to refer to a widespread epidemic of contagious disease throughout a country or one or more continents at the same time.¹ For a pandemic to occur, there must be an epidemic. The term epidemic is used since antiquity to mean any disease that kills many people quickly unpleasantly and arbitrarily regardless of age, gender, religion, race, nationality or health of the victims. When an epidemic is experienced in several parts of the world at a given time, it is then categorized as a pandemic.² Therefore, a pandemic is defined as an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people.³ That is why by 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic because it had spread to over 110 countries around the world. Over 118, 000 cases had been reported at that time.⁴

The coronavirus disease was first discovered towards the end of 2019 in the Chinese province of Hubei in Wuhan. It then spread to other countries across the globe.⁵ Within the first three months of 2020, the disease had ravaged the entire world, killed thousands of people, and left several infected and bedridden.⁶ The socio-economic and religious lifestyle of the world was affected, with the most immediate intervention of ‘social distancing’ prescribed for all people as a way of curtailing the spread of the disease.

Since the outbreak of this deadly disease, pro-contra responses have emerged among believers, particularly of Christian and Islamic faiths. Several Christians and Muslims view COVID-19 as God's weapon to destroy evil humans on earth, while others view it as a common disease that appears naturally. The diversity of views and attitudes among believers cannot be separated from their worldview in understanding reality. Different perspectives among believers towards the reality of COVID-19 have implications for the way they respond to this virus. Therefore, different understanding regarding the virus among believers leads to a variety of appropriate practical actions in the face of spreading the virus. Historically, religious bodies have a long view that

often contradicts scientific beliefs in understanding diseases, including viruses. For example, White A.D explains that Origen, one of the early Church's rulers stated that disease is a monster which produces drought, unproductiveness, corruption of the air, and contagion; they hover camouflaged in clouds in the lower atmosphere and are engaged by the blood and incense which the heathen offer to them as gods.⁷ Also, White further quoted Augustine, one of the most influential early Church fathers thus; "All diseases of Christians are to be attributed to these villains; chiefly do they afflict fresh-baptized Christians, yea, even the guiltless, newborn infants."⁸ In this regard, Husni et al, state that even doctors are required to be called 'mental doctors' because 'weaknesses of the body often arise due to sins; and that Satan's spirits and evil causes illness.'⁹ Therefore, for some Christians, and even Muslims, plagues such as smallpox and cholera are viewed as God's punishment. They argue that disease is "a judgment of God on the sins of the sins of the people, ... to avert it is but to provoke him ore."¹⁰

However, some scientific studies have tried to understand the relationship between religion and epidemics, among others, were carried out by Marshall, who stated that religious actors played distinctive roles at various points and across different sectors.¹¹ Other studies conducted by Blevins, Jalloh, and Robinson have concluded that religion conflicted with public health responses to HIV or aligned with public health as a force for improved HIV responses. They further discussed the similarities and differences between the influence of religion during the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the 2014 to 2016 Ebola outbreak.¹²

General Overview of Pandemics in Human History

There had been pandemics right from ancient times, which had profoundly affected and influenced human beings in every aspect known. Medical experts assertively argue that the coronavirus is not a new virus rather it has been there for decades.¹³ Medical experts defined it as "Any of a family (*coronaviridae*) of large single-stranded RNA virus that has a lipid envelope studded with club-shaped spike proteins, infect birds and many mammals including humans, and include the

causative agents of MERS, SARS (Merriam Webster.com). World Health Organization (WHO) explains coronavirus disease thus:

Coronavirus disease (covid-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Most people infected with the covid-19 virus will 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 illnesses (W.H.O. org).¹⁴

Therefore, the emergence and spread of infectious diseases with pandemic potential occurred regularly throughout history. Major pandemics and epidemics such as plague, cholera, flu, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) have already afflicted humanity. This section of the work attempts a brief review of major pandemics that have afflicted humankind throughout histories such as plague, cholera, influenza and coronavirus diseases and the way they were controlled in the past. Below are some of the pandemics:

1. The plague of Justinian

The plague of Justinian occurred in Egypt and spread throughout the Eastern Roman Empire and its neighbours. According to Jocelyne Piret and Guy Boivin, between 541 and 543, the plague killed an estimated 100 million people in the Roman Empire and especially in its capital, Constantinople.¹⁵ They further explain that the highly developed structure of the Roman Empire facilitated the spread of the Justinian plague along its trade and military routes. This plague was transmitted through rodents.

2. The Antonine plague

The Roman empire was at its height during the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antonius who lodged successful campaigns in Dacia, Armenia, and Parthia. Unfortunately, the victorious Roman army returned with an infection that ravaged not only Rome but the entire empire and its vassals in Eastern and Western Europe and left five million people dead

in its wake. Soumit Dasgupta and Rosa Crunkhorn state that the direct fall out of this plague was increased persecution of Christians in the false belief that they started the pestilence and served curtailment of the mighty Roman army; and that the plague significantly affected Roman trade, especially with China, leading to a substantial drop in revenue and adding to the weakening of the empire.¹⁶

3. The Black Death

The Black Death originated in East Asia and swept across Central Asia into Europe through the land and sea trade routes of the medieval Silk Road. The plague pandemic lasted in Europe until the early 19th century and killed 200 million people.¹⁷ Soumit Dasgupta and Rosa Crunkhorn quoted Guy de Chauliac, the eminent contemporary French surgeon who wrote in 1363 thus: "The father no longer visited the son or the son his father. The charity was dead and hope abandoned."¹⁸

4. The Cholera Pandemics

The persistence of the cholera pandemic is related to poor living conditions including a shortage of safe drinking water, insufficient sanitation, crowded housing and the lack of efficient sewage systems. Re-emergence of the disease can also occur following natural disasters such as earthquakes that disrupt access to a safe water supply. Cholera disease could be prevented by the implementation of public health measures to ensure adequate sanitation and safe water supply. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation are among the primary priorities of the Millenium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals.¹⁹

5. The Flus (influenza)

There had been several flu pandemics with evolving strains of the influenza virus over the last two centuries. This pandemic was most rapidly spread as a result of the increased world population and massive transport revolution brought about by the railways. The most well-known and intense flu pandemic, from the number of dead point of view, was the Spanish flu, so named as it was most reported in Spain which had been neutral during the first world war and was not subjected to wartime censorship.²⁰ Surprisingly, the flu only lasted for one year from 1918 to 1919, yet it killed nearly 40 million people worldwide.

The vast majority of mortality was in young adults. The death toll was attributed to secondary bacterial infections and possibly a cytokine storm much like what is happening in the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹

Having briefly considered the general overview of pandemics in human history, it is curious and fascinating to note that COVID-19 can be a mixture of all pandemics from ancient times to the present day in terms of its effects on humans. It is believed that infectious diseases are caused by pathogens. According to health experts, there are several types of pathogens, including fungi, viruses, and protozoa (single-celled organisms and bacteria). Peter Reley explains that bacteria are single-celled organisms that range in size from 0.001um- 0.05um.²²

Therefore, from this scientific evidence on the history of coronavirus, it can be deduced that this new virus is not new to the world, but new to humans. When scientists found out that it was making people sick in 2019, they named it the "novel" coronavirus, that is "new" coronavirus. Rifai states that scientists have divided coronavirus into four sub-groupings namely; alpha, beta, gamma and delta. Coronaviruses have all their generic materials in something called RNA (ribonucleic acid); RNA has some DNA similarities but they are not the same.²³ Biello David states, "In the air samples, the researchers uncovered at least 1,800 types of microbes, including those such as the diarrhoea-causing arcobacter and ulcer-inducing helicobacter genera that can be dangerous to human health. The diversity of microbes in the air is on "par" with the diversity of microbes in the soil."²⁴ Microbiologists have analyzed the functions of microbes in many ways. Microbes serve people in many ways, they help in the fermentation of food, treat sewages, and produce fuel and enzymes.

Christian – Muslim Perspectives on Pandemics

From the interview conducted among Christians in the Jos North Local government area of Plateau state, in addition to text reviews, some Christians assert that covid-19 pandemic is apocalyptic and not just ordinary. For them, the book of Revelation accounts for events that will happen at the end of the world. Though no consensus has been reached among biblical scholars on the correct interpretation of the

book. Several people have viewed the book of Revelation as a detailed account of the end of the world. While others, in contrast, perceived it as a manifestation of the heavenly will.²⁵

On the root cause of this deadly disease, there are widespread beliefs among Christians that diseases generally result from sins. The medieval thinkers believed that sickness is often a trial from God or a weapons of punishment. Olonade and his colleagues quoted Pollak explaining five means of understanding illnesses: first, amongst the believers, diseases occur to intensify their faiths by proving their endurance. Second, to protect the righteous against self-esteem. Third, to draw sinners towards repentance. Fourth, for God's glorification due to significant restoration. Fifth is God's punishment that one has to encounter during one's lifespan.²⁶ For instance, evangelist Franklin Graham asserted that COVID-19 results from the world's disobeying God.²⁷

Again, it is good to briefly discuss ways in which some biblical scholars interpret plagues generally. The first among these scholars is Walter Brueggemann, who distinguishes three ways in which the plagues are interpreted in the Old Testament. He calls the first option, the "transnational mode of the covenant", meaning that God rewards obedience and punishes disobedience. According to such a view, plagues are a form of divine punishment against those who violate the covenant order.²⁸ The second option is described as God's purposeful enactment of force and refers to instances where God uses force to achieve a specific purpose, as happens in the case of the plague in the Exodus narrative. The third option is God's holiness enacted in freedom. This refers to the fact that God sometimes acts in utter freedom without reason, explanation and accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all.²⁹ He refers to the Book of Job as an example of such a view. He believes that one can interpret the covid-19 crisis in terms of any one of these three options.³⁰

The second scholar to relate biblical records with the pandemic is Ying Zhang. She relates the pandemic to the light of Job's existential suffering. She raises two issues: first, the way people hurt Job by their aloofness as a result of his health problem, and she put it thus:

The same feelings of being loathed and discriminated against have been experienced by many who were healthy yet had geographical, ethnic, or other connections to the place of the coronavirus outbreak... it is certainly not right to be biased against those who are simply Wuhanian, or Chinese, or Asian.³¹

Furthermore, Zhang draws attention to a young Chinese woman who reported daily on social media about her struggle with COVID-19. Unlike Job, the woman in question never complained; she finally recovered. How this woman reacted reminded Zhang of a remark by Maimonides, an important medieval Jewish scholar, who noted that Job lacked true knowledge of God.³²

Other scholars who contributed to this subject are John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay who investigate stories about famine and epidemics in Genesis, Ruth, Samuel-Kings and Chronicles. They begin by remarking that quite often, God is depicted as the One who brings epidemics, but this is not always the case; sometimes epidemics just happen. When God is indicated as the only subject, it might be a form of chastisement, but many Old Testament stories (such as the Book of Job) show that one cannot assume that such events are necessarily God's response to sin.³³ Hanna Tervanotko commented on the lessons that people can learn from COVID-19 thus: "It suggests that disasters such as a pandemic can teach people something about how life should be lived. The Bible contains many stories of God-sent illnesses which typically communicate punishment for wrongdoings."³⁴

Furthermore, N.T. Wright is another scholar who begins by pointing out that the best way to react to the virus is not to ask, 'Why?', but 'What can we do?' He rejects what he calls 'kee-jerk reactions' such as conspiracy theories, blaming other people, apocalyptic interpretations or viewing the pandemic as God's punishment because of people's lifestyles.³⁵ Turning to the Old Testament, Wright points out that it is true that the prophets interpreted the great disaster of the Babylonian exile as punishment for the sins of Israel. In some of the Psalms (e.g., 1 and 37), the link between sin and ill fortune is confirmed.

Lastly, Peter Lampe considers the issue of alternative modes of living after the pandemic. Lampe points out that the COVID-19 crisis has brought to light many pre-existing problems such as inequality, consumer behaviour, sexism and racism, and then takes Mark 3.1-6 on the healing of the man with a withered hand as the starting point for suggestions from the New Testament about alternative modes of living. In the first step, he points out that the story begins with conflict because it happens on a Sabbath; however, Jesus focuses on the pain. In His word, he states, "There is no denying, no downplaying, no labelling of medical data as fake news... Taking the problem seriously, looking the pain in the face, is the first step toward healing."³⁶

Muslim Perspective on the Pandemic

Just like the Christian perspective on the pandemic, the Muslims in Jos North during the interview in addition to text reviews, explain that the calamities, catastrophes or disaster today are clear reminders for mankind to realize their transgression, come back, repent and ask for the forgiveness of Allah the Most Gracious and Most Merciful, the Almighty. But when they prove heedless then sooner or later their punishment is certain.³⁷ According to them, Allah commands Muslims to opt for success in this world and life after death by following His commands.

Concerning the pandemic in Islamic history, Michael W. Dols states that Ibn Hajarl-Ashqalani in his treatise on plagues has given a brief historical account of pandemics from Islamic history. He collected some books, manuscripts and treatises on pandemics from the formative period of Islam until his time. He surveyed 33 manuscripts on plagues in Islamic history.³⁸ Sulaiman Rifai explains how the early Islamic empire under the leadership of Omar witnessed one of the most deadly plagues in Islamic history. It is reported that an Arab army was set up in the village of 'Amawas' by caliph Omar to conquer the Syrian region. The plague was named the plague of 'Amawas' because it started in this village. The plague of Amawas stuck in the Islamic calendar year of 18 according to some historians and killed 25,000 soldiers and their companions among them were Abu Ubaid Ibn Jarrah, Yazid Ibn Abu

Sufiyan, and Muaz Ibn Jabal (19). Rifai further states how the plague was handled, which was through isolation; and that the companions of the holy prophet introduced the concept of social isolation during the plague.³⁹

Malik and Gulnaz state that from the Islamic perspective, there are some reasons why God decrees hardship or adversity to befall people; even genuine believers experience hardship and adversity at some stage in their lives following God's wisdom and divine plan.⁴⁰ They added that hardship and adversity serve as a deterrent against sins and unrighteousness. Once the human being is touched by hardship, illness or any kind of adversity, the human being has time to think of what befell him.⁴¹

COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impacts on Christianity and Islam

Throughout history, any pandemic has significant impact on the life of the wider society. One of the manifestations of social activity is religious life. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an extremely significant impact on the functioning of all human societies because the coronavirus pandemic developed rapidly on a global scale. Understandably, it has a great impact on the whole social life, which includes religious life. The essence of this section is to briefly examine the impact of COVID-19 on the adherents of Christianity and Islam in Jos North, specifically.

During the interview with Christians and Muslims within the area of this study, the adherents of the two religions said that the pandemic affected their religious practices, especially they are coming together for worship. The study reveals that almost all places of worship (Churches and Mosques) had to undergo some modifications in their worship practices, while others suspended or drastically reduced their religious practices. Though, the decision to suspend or reduce the number of participants in worship depends on how the religious leaders manage it. During the first phase of the pandemic, some of the churches and mosques limited the number of participations of the faithful in a public gathering to 50 following the instruction of the Federal Government of Nigeria to curtail the spread of the virus. One of the

clergymen during the interview said that services should be kept to a minimum or even suspended during the pandemic. Although it has a great effect on their religious practices, as a necessary evil, they had to comply with the restriction of the number of people in worship to curtail the spread of the deadly virus.

Similarly, Lukasz Sulkowski and Greogorz Ignaowski comment on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious ceremonies in Poland that the Catholic church was convinced that the suspension of religious ceremonies within a certain time frame is not only possible but even necessary in some situations.⁴² The research also confirmed that Churches of the protestant tradition and other Islamic organizations in Jos approached the pandemic more decisively. According to some Christians, their Churches suspended their open-air evangelism programmes during the pandemic. For them, although the pandemic distorted their plan of carrying out the 'Great Commission command', for the sake of avoiding the spread of the disease, they had no option but to comply by taking a decisive approach.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic did not only affect the number of people during worship but brought controversy over the administration of the Lord's Supper, which is one of the key acts of worship for Christians. The study reveals that while church leaders and members are ready to limit the number of worshippers, however, they are not willing to change their position on important matters regarding worship itself, particularly on how to give communion. One of the Catholic priests pointed out that, in the Roman Catholic Church, holy communion is generally distributed in one form – bread/wafer. Another one stressed that the Church strongly encourage that during the pandemic, the form of giving communion is given to the hand of the faithful, not to the mouth. Another clergyman from the Evangelical church also commented that regarding the issue of distribution of the Lord's Supper during the pandemic, one should follow the instructions of the Church liturgical commission, which recommends that bread is served in the hand during distribution. He reminded me that wine should not be drunk from one goblet but poured into small goblets. On the resolution on how to go about this, almost all the Churches agreed that

the clergymen should be provided with disinfectants so that they can use them before distributing bread and wine to the people. Even with that, some interviewees pointed out that some communicant members were sceptical about participating in the communion bread and wine distributed through the hand of the clergymen during the pandemic due to the fear of the possibility of contracting the disease.

To sum it up, the COVID-19 pandemic affected both the adherents of Christianity and Islam, particularly regarding the restriction of their coming together for public worships because members were encouraged to stay at home. Religious leaders had to devise ways of getting in touch with their members through modern technologies. This leads to economic effects as well. Religious leaders had to spend money to get necessary gadgets. Another effect is the drastic reduction of income of the Church because as there was a reduction in the number of participants in worship, it leads to a reduction in the amount of offering too.

Lessons for Contemporary Christians and Muslims in the Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Context

There are many lessons that Christians and Muslims can learn from covid-19. First, some religious adherents believe that covid-19 teaches us that there is a need to embrace spirituality; and that faith can be expressed in nontraditional ways. Faith provides comfort, hope, reassurance, a sense of security and solace during a crisis. This teaches us that we should find meaning in religion. Second, there is a lesson of humility and a call to practice prayer by all Christians and Muslims. Both need to depend on God for protection and survival and pray for peaceful coexistence among the adherents of the two religions since both suffer equally because COVID-19 did not spare adherents of any religion/belief, hence faith has been strengthened by the pandemic.

Again, the way people from all over the world responded to the fight against COVID-19 has taught us that "no man is an island" i.e., the overall well-being of humanity requires that each of us behave in such a way as to maximize the good of the whole society. As long as a sizeable minority of the population remains sceptical of the best scientific

recommendations, COVID-19 has not taught us its most important lesson. Additionally, COVID-19 teaches us that we need to show gratitude to God for keeping us alive. The pandemic has taught us that we are so vulnerable and understand little. Across the world, people have been dying in great numbers from the pandemic. Hence, those of us still living, need to express more gratitude to God.

Conclusion

This study proves that both Christians and Muslims have diverse views or responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them view the virus as destiny, or God's will; while others consider it as punishment from God for wrong deeds. For them, this virus will never attack faithful or pious people. Still, for some, it is a test of faith. The case of Job (Ayuba), who is said to be a just man, is usually given as a good example of God testing one's faith by Christians and Muslims (cf. Al-Qur'an 21.83 and Job 1.1-12, 22). Some believe that COVID-19 is a substance created by God and that humans can avoid it by carrying out healthy lifestyles and getting closer to God.

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