

RELIGION AND THE RAYS OF HOPE IN THE POST COVID-19 REGIME

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Abstract

The entire global society has been thrown in continuous trepidation with the surge of Covid-19 pandemic in recent times. The phenomenon has brought an unimaginable anguish both physically and psychologically to mankind. Perhaps, the direct consequence is more visible in both social and economic lives of the entire human race. The human suffering posed by the deadly corona pandemic, and the grave fear it has created in the minds of people have exerted a consternation not only on the economic or social lives, but also wield a threat on the spiritual lives of the entire human beings. Different social and economic measures are taken to ameliorate the general suffering posed by the pandemic through the promotion of welfare and stimulus packages. Various governments and the International Community are committing both human and material resources in the fields of science and medicine towards eradicating the menace. However, much is needed towards building the hope of the entire mankind ravaged by the impact of the pandemic. The research employs religion as a tool to forestall the fears that keep creeping in the minds of people, with the aim of providing hopes to individuals that are wrecked by the deadly pandemic.

Keywords: religion, post Covid-19, human suffering and fears, spirituality and healthcare, hopes.

Introduction

A new wave of influenza popularly known as Covid-19 has plagued the global society which was first noticed towards the end of 2019 in Wuhan city of Hubei province, a business hub in China. It is a high-risk flu that attacks the lungs, nose and throat belonging to a deadly group called Corona virus. The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has the semblance of the old species of pathogens that manifested at various times in the last century. The covid-19 variant is proven to be the deadliest than the ones that emerged, and glaringly posed ravaging effects on both health and socio-economic lives of the entire human race.

Covid-19 is perhaps a dire contagious disease that has devastating effects, with a terrific mortality rate. Hence, the whole wide world is living in tremendous fear due to the unpredictability of the nature of the virus, which the human vulnerability to it is capable of endangering the entire human race.¹ This has caused enormous panic and despair in the minds of the entire humankind. The ravaging damages associated with covid-19 could be seen having repercussions – not just physically but also psychologically – brought about by certain reactions of depression and persistent feelings of fretfulness, beyond other social and economic consequences.

Although, human and material effort is committed toward combating the deadly disease, conversely, the current human inoculation against the pathogens and the provision of succour which the various humanitarians seek to promote the general human welfare and happiness are not sufficient in combating the huge effects wielded by the infectious disease. Beyond scientific innovations, government policies and humanitarian assistance in combating the disease, there is need for other measures that will provide mental or psychological security which will inspire hopes in the post covid-19 regime. The research seeks to employ the use of religion as a tool and suggest how it can inspire ultimate optimism in human psyche in the post covid-19 regime.

The Nature of Covid-19

With the advent of the deadly infectious coronavirus (Covid-19 variant) recently, innumerable misleading and superstitious descriptions were given which brought a feeling of extreme anxiety among people in different societies. Expressly, the devastating dynamism of the pandemic has paved for several opinions circulating concerning its nature, which are often found not consistent with scientific findings. The devastating wreck caused by the fatal disease has

indeed sparked up various conspiracy theories among people. The pathogenesis, the molecular mechanisms of viral replication, their modes of transmission made various researchers to be divided at the initial stage on which finding to accept.

However, the major concern of this part of research is to attempt a concise description of Covid-19 variant that would give a glimpse on its ravaging nature rather than engaging on a complete metascience of the molecular mechanism and the pathogenesis of the bacterium.

The brand of influenza popularly known as the coronavirus, which is of various variants, has a century long history that manifested at various times. It consists of tiny bacteria with round shapes and crown-like spikes on their surfaces.² Perhaps, this is what won it the name corona – which is a Latin word for a crown. The bacterium is believed to belong to a viral family of coronaviridae in the order of nidovirales. The virus has been described in various ways, but the most consistent description is the emerging account in the field of scientific researches or strict metascience. Its anatomical composition is succinctly depicted as:

...minute in size (65–125 nm in diameter) and contain a single-stranded RNA as a nucleic material, size ranging from 26 to 32kbs in length. The subgroups of coronaviruses family are alpha (a), beta (b), gamma (c) and delta (d) coronavirus. The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV), H5N1 influenza A, H1N1 2009 and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) cause acute lung injury (ALI) and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) which leads to pulmonary failure and result in fatality. These viruses were thought to infect only animals until the world witnessed a severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak caused by SARS-CoV, 2002 in Guangdong, China. Only a decade later, another pathogenic coronavirus, known as Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) caused an endemic in Middle Eastern countries.³

What this means is that, the coronaviruses are a large viral family that are believed to cause respiratory related illnesses or infections in both human and animals; the infections are related to common cold and other severe diseases like the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).⁴

The descriptive account of the latest viral variant has it that:

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic emerged at the end of 2019 in the business hub of Wuhan in China which infected and claimed many

lives. The pathogens are however phylogenetically reported to be a member of the b group of coronavirus, which derived its name from the novel Wuhan coronavirus (2019-nCov) by the Chinese researchers. However, the virus was categorized as SARS-CoV-2, which the disease itself is named COVID-19 by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Virus (ICTV). It is a pathogenic viral infection caused by acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 –SARS-Cov-2 – that is highly transmittable. The viruses have a glycoprotein spikes on their outer surface that are responsible for their attachment and entry through the hosts' inlets – the mouth, nose and eyes. Scientists are at one that the receptor-binding domain is slackly attached among viruses, which makes it easier to infect multiple hosts.⁵

The viral pathogenesis is one big issue that seem difficult to be reconciled by scholars, as there is no certainty, even its exponential mode of human-to-human transmission has made the viral surge to remain a mystery. Other accounts posit that:

The source of the virus is not known, but bats are however the most probable intermediate source and transfer of pathogens to humans. It is apparently transmitting rapidly from human to human, and the molecular mechanism of the viral replication is not yet satisfactorily explained in the field of science, no clinically certified antiviral against the global infested pathogens is available now. “However, few broad-spectrum antiviral drugs have been evaluated against COVID-19 in clinical trials, resulted in clinical recovery.⁶

The covid-19 variant is perhaps a respiratory disease with a high mortality rate. Those with the disease may appear asymptomatic in some cases while others may visibly exhibit some common symptoms such as dry cough, fever, and fatigue. Others may have nasal congestion, aches and pains, sore throat or diarrhea, which may manifest mild at its initial stage. People with low immune systems, underlying illnesses and the aged are more prone to its devastating effects that lead to difficulty in breathing, with high ratio of deaths among victims.⁷ However, the mode of acquiring the covid-19 infection is manifold; it spreads exponentially from the carriers to other victims through tiny droplets expelled from the mouth or nose while sneezing, coughing or talking. This gains entrance through inlets of the victim, such as nose, mouth, or even opened wounds. The droplets however could remain on surfaces and be conveyed through contamination into the inlets of the potential host.⁸

The attendant effects of the surge of covid-19 that includes high mortality rate creates great anxieties and persistent foreboding in the minds of people, which made the global society and various heads of governments to promulgate certain precautionary measures to curb the exponential rate of human-to-human transmission. Physical distancing and ban of all social gatherings, the use of facemask to cover the mouth and the nose, the regular washing of hands with soap and clean water, the use of alcohol-base sanitizers, the use of hand gloves etc, were the first steps towards curbing the spread of the disease;⁹ which significantly broken the chain, and to some extent, flatten the curve of its spread, before certified vaccines were announced to be ready for use.

The Impact of Covid-19 and the General Perception

The amount of anxiety among people with the surge of covid-19 pandemic cannot be underestimated. Perhaps, the foreboding phenomenally creates uncertainties on the true meaning of life due to the wreck it caused to the global society, which had not been experienced through the epochs. No aspect of human life was left unaffected – directly or indirectly. It suffices here to say the world is currently facing both human, economic and social crises.

Since the surge of the virulent disease (Covid-19), the trajectory is such that the long time effects are gauged to be socio-economic and psychological, where it creates a human condition that requires prompt response – a sort of proactive response that is nonetheless critical to the containment of any pandemic outbreak. Certain guidelines and updates on the disease were however issued by the global community on how to mitigate its spread, which many nations adopt various measures in addition to the guidelines of world Health Organisation to combat its spread. On its part, the government of Nigeria shutdown all forms of social gatherings as part of her response to the spread of coronavirus. By so doing, businesses fold down and workers too were put away which exerts more burden on the global economy. It is truism that coronavirus took the world by surprise, which most countries were not prepared, including the world powers. Nonetheless, most African nations (like Nigeria) need to do more in terms of disaster preparedness and response as the surge of COVID-19 has exposed the inefficiency of such nations' health sectors and facilities which have been in the state of total decay.

The devastating index of economic and social disruption caused by the virulent disease reveals the degree of threats which its surge wielded. Various statistics on the human costs by the epidemic have been made known on both print and social media ranging from physical effects of the infection and the mental

trauma, its effects on the economic, physical and mental well-being caused by the increasing anxiousness or anxieties, unhappy and loneliness due to the social distancing policy – a social order that the world has not experienced before. Meanwhile, the joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO made it categorically clear on 13th October, 2020 that:

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions 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 the year. 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. Informal economy workers are particularly vulnerable because the majority lack social protection and access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets... The pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and laid bare its fragility. Border closures, trade restrictions and confinement measures have been preventing farmers from accessing markets...disrupting domestic and international food supply chains...¹⁰

The deplorable human condition that exists in the regime of COVID-19 surge is cannot be underestimated; the preventing measures taken by the globe which are enforced by the various heads of governments were not without different degrees of concomitance. Such resultant consequences are not exacted strictly on the social and economic wellbeing of the globe, but also ushered a direct psychological distress that is a human condition whose magnitude is not less than those of the disease, if not checked.

The socio-physical distancing and lockdown/quarantine policies which aimed at checking person-to-person viral transmission is in some way widening the social crisis created by the pandemic; which on one hand potentially increases inequality, exclusion or discrimination, and global unemployment in the medium and long term, and deny various social gatherings in form of recreations and other religious meetings on the other hand. The long-term COVID-19 effects are still not certain, researches are still ongoing within the social, economic and medical frontiers, but not much is committed on the assessment of the general human psychological dispositions in the post-Covid-19 era.

There were wrong assumptions on the nature of COVID-19 throughout the globe. Several speculations and conspiracy theories concerning the origin and

nature of the coronavirus filled the public space. There were certain assumptions, particular in Nigeria, that the virus does not exist; that, it is a complete scam. It was perceived to be a grand ploy by the ruling elites to siphon funds from the public coffers. This could either be as a result of the distrust the populace harbour over the years against those in authority, or it was hatched out of sheer ignorance of the masses, since there was no proper orientation or awareness campaigns concerning the nature of the novel influenza. Other views had it that the dreaded infection surfaced as a result of the 5G network from the existing service providers of other advanced economies, which the government showed readiness to accept into the country. This made the government decision at the time to be politicised and also met with stiff resistance from the populace. Another school of thought posits that the COVID-19 pandemic is an invented biological weapon by the Chinese government to gain supremacy in the competitive global economy. Other quarters believed the disease to be a conspiracy of the Satanists and the Illuminati groups to check the world's population to bring about a New World Order that entails one world religion and one world government.¹¹

The general perception is that Covid-19 surge is a direct punishment from God for the sins of mankind; this, of course, was a sort of admonition various religious leaders gave to their adherents. The aforementioned assumptions were conceived to be as a result of the great panic caused by the exponential surge of the pandemic and the resultant degree of deaths which the virulent disease plunged the global society into. However, the various negative assumptions were understood by those who believed it to be as a result of sheer ignorance of the masses concerning the nature and the degree of the deadliness of the disease.

The Role of Religion in the COVID-19 Era

Religion which is commonly held to be a system of beliefs and practises relating to the divine has suffered severe hits, particular in modern era, than all areas of human endeavours. The question often asked is "What can religion offer?" Inadvertently, the global developmental history has considered the comparison or the correlation of faith and science, which in most cases different scholars argued for one to be superior to the other. Of course, since the rise of positivism, which dismisses theological and metaphysical tenets as baseless assumptions, religion has suffered worse hit, and never thought to have contributed something meaningful to the progress of the world. Perhaps, many assume religion to be a contradictory delusion, which, to them, is the symptom of a psychiatric condition. However, a cursory view on the activities of mankind shows that, the larger percentage of people, either faintly or deeply, reveres certain objects or beings as deities, which they believe answer some of their

spiritual needs; a practice that is consistent with the basic notion of religion. What then is religion? And, what role does it play in the society, especially in the rising wave of the Coronavirus pandemic era?

The concept of religion has various connotations to different scholars; however, the concise general notion is that religion is a strongly held attitude, values or practices of systems of beliefs, and a devotion to or obsession about a deity or deities, with the conviction on divine involvement in the universe. The basic truth about religion is that, it is never at war with other fields of specialties, particularly science; each strives towards solving problems peculiar to them. Religion appears to provide answers that man need, which science cannot provide; just as science answers those probing questions that are beyond the scope of religion. Their respective findings often complement one another, in which religion is often found to amplify some of the emerging scientific findings, especially in this most challenging COVID-19 pandemic era. Contrary to the general understanding about the role of religion, faith actors often think logically and rationally about the societal happenings. And, the most familiar philosophical tradition that is thought to be objective is predominantly the sort that seeks a point of intersection between religion and other sciences. Perhaps, the responses on the question of the role of religion when the whole wide world is in turmoil with the dire pandemic regime would be, as Catherine Marshal suggested, “keep your religion to yourself and don’t mix it up with common-sense and science.”¹² This presupposes a fixated labelling surrounding the notion of religion – which depicts it as an irrational belief that is assumed to be the predetermination of some imaginary super beings.

However, Catherine Marshal swiftly considered the report on U.S. foreign policy under Biden’s administration. Two sides of the religious roles (positive and negative) seemed to feature in the discussion; she said inter alia:

The exchange shed light on two diametrically opposed perspectives about what religious institutions and beliefs have to do with the current global pandemic, and how they matter for policy. On one side, the long history of pandemics demonstrates that religious factors are integral parts of the story every time, especially since religious traditions, beliefs and institutions play important roles in everyday life for the majority of people worldwide. On the other side are sceptics who see faith as opposed to science, religious worldviews as separated from secular norms and “religious literacy” as a bias that distorts both data and anecdotes. Religion featured prominently in the early reporting on the coronavirus pandemic, often in a negative light...¹³

The sceptics' positions as alleged in the report is as a result of certain countries, like the South Korea, that experienced an exponential rise of confirmed cases of COVID-19 which the church featured in a negative light that accounted for more than half of the country's total cases. The same applies to India where over thirty percent of the cases were attributed to a Muslim gathering of Tablighi Jamaat; a group to which the outbreaks and the rise of cases of the pandemic in Malaysia and Pakistan were also tied to.¹⁴

Beyond the laboratory researches, the various religious groups were visibly active in collaboration with the different public health authorities in providing both human and material response with the aim of flattening the curve of the wave of the virulent disease. For instance, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria offered a total of 456 Hospital facilities and their personnel to the central government of Nigeria to be use as COVID-19 treatment centres across the country, to augment the overstretched medical facilities and resources of both federal and state governments.¹⁵ Human and material needs were significantly provided by various missions; and their impacts were felt way beyond other corporate bodies, because the offered things that were the immediate needs of the people. By so doing, the religious groups were closer to the people at the grassroots than other governmental and corporate bodies, which aid in solidifying trust between the people and the various religious groups. Nonetheless, hunger exerted more threats than the pandemic,¹⁶ this and other areas of immediate needs were the aspects the missions were so committed and acted swiftly than various governments which were slowed down by bureaucratic systems.

The physical distancing policy that is central to the public health were enforced by the leadership of the various religious groups, and such a joint venture of effective response has come to be known as public-faith partnership. By so doing, various heads of governments, like those of Nigeria, appeared to be more comfortable in the integration of certain religious voices in public health, in response to the pandemic. At some point, religion is seen to play the role of the mouthpiece for the government. Most pulpits of the religious organisations are now platforms for providing public sensitizations or conduit for views between the governments and the people. Such public information on COVID-19 by religious leaders is taken with utmost seriousness and trust by the adherents of the various religions than policy statements from the government. This was displayed in various places at the peak of the COVID-19 surge, particularly in the Northern Nigeria, where Muslim umma starkly depended on what their clerics told them, without regards to government policy.

Conversely, emerging evidences reveal that the COVID-19 surge has mutated resulting in various variants of the virus, which the latest is commonly known as the *delta variant*. This is one of the multiple variants of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus which appear to be different from the original version that were first noticed in Wuhan, China. The variant is the most contagious and deadly than the earliest versions. The emerging laboratory facts reveal how less effective the ongoing vaccination could be against the latest variants.¹⁷ With this report the global society is increasingly plunged into trepidation. Perhaps, various assumptions are emerging, whereas some people assume science is failing, others feel religion has nothing to offer, hence, the looming danger is such that the human life is in great jeopardy. This has created grave resentments and fear in the minds of many. There is indeed no certainty what would befall mankind with the series of more severe mutations that the global society is experiencing now. Even if science provides a permanent cure, how can the global state of depression, resentment or hopelessness caused by the wreck of the new influenza be handled?

Religion as a Beacon of Hope in the Post COVID-19 Regime

There is no gain saying that the global society is battling with humanitarian crises posed by effects of COVID-19. Several organisations are tirelessly working to ensure that the humanitarian and recovery assistance gets to those who are most vulnerable. Perhaps, the humanitarian situation is so devastating to the extent that the joint statement by ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO on the 13th October, 2020 made a call with a clear high-pitched tone that:

Now is the time for global solidarity and support, especially with the most vulnerable in our societies, particularly in the emerging and developing world, only together can we overcome the intertwined health and social and economic impacts of the pandemic and prevent its escalation into a protracted humanitarian and food security catastrophe, with the potential loss of already achieved development gains.¹⁸

The call for a sustainable strategy here is for all and sundry, which religion forms part of. The joint task is not confined to only food catastrophe, but as a step towards building back a better society. Priority is indeed extended to the development of long-term sustainable strategies to address both physical and mental conditions of human beings in general. This shows that the emergence of the novel pandemic has caused distinct human responses and reactions.

Conversely, scientific solutions alone may not be effective during the great turmoil as preparatory strategy for the post-COVID regime; religions and other pure psychological solutions would seem more effective in providing hopes to human minds, which may combine with the scientific strategies towards eradicating the menace. Perhaps, Religion offers other moral priorities such as spirituality in clinical practices. In the context of healthcare, the notion of spirituality is increasingly becoming more significant; in fact, in more recent findings, religious beliefs and practices associated with various health responses and recovery are significantly becoming positive attitudes in remedying seeming complex health situations.

Spirituality is construed however to be the search for a 'higher sense' with regards to religion or the belief in the supernatural.¹⁹ In an unprecedented era of misinformation, disinformation, conspiracies, and confusion, faith-based spirituality plays a critical role leveraging the battle against the spread and the effects of the pandemic among people. Such leverages extend to include building trust on the stages of vaccine as part of the responses to the surge. Perhaps, this is more significantly a role that inspires more hopes in people's minds. There is no doubt, some emerging facts reveal that faith-based organisations and religious institutions have been in the frontline mitigating the physical and psychological effects of COVID-19, where they provide much needed guidance and supports to various communities as humanitarian responses.²⁰

The religious organisations are increasingly corroborating with the governmental agencies in responding to the ongoing public health crisis; by so doing, the impacts of the pandemic are mitigated in no small measure, by means of offering practical recommendations that help the policy makers and ways to prevent and respond to future disease outbreaks.²¹ In the face of emerging various mutants of the deadly coronavirus pandemic and the great consternation it has brought to mankind, religion is visibly seen to have resorted to both spiritual and psychological alternatives for emotional stability, way beyond the provision of physical responses to the pandemic. This somehow provides a futuristic hope on the anxieties posed by the threats of the virulent disease. Religious teaching centres basically on hopes, which dispels all sort of disturbing thoughts in the human minds, and provides certain reflective conveniences and comforts by way of strengthening the mind from the feelings of powerlessness and fragility of human nature.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the role of faith-based organisations in the COVID-19 regime has significantly created an emotional stability in the human minds, which provides moral alternatives associated with healthcare and spirituality where hopes are kept handy. The prompt responses of the religious groups which are unhindered by certain bureaucratic bottlenecks, unlike the sort experienced by the governmental agencies, and their unwavering presence even in the remotest areas has given hopes to the people. The “theology of hopes” and of the “option for the poor” associated with the various health aspects has bestowed optimism in coping with the disease, just as it is with other difficult situations. Indeed, this often dispels all disturbing thoughts that threatened mankind generally. The general assumption of the theistic religions is that, God is constantly in control of the happenings in the world, and will not allow it to be destroyed; hence, there is hope in the post-COVID-19 era. Indeed, this forestalls the fears that occupy the human minds, due to the grave wreck caused by the deadly pandemic.

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