

DEVELOPING ALTERNATIVE TEACHING CONTINUITY PLANS TO MOVE CLASSROOMS ONLINE AT COVID-19 ERA IN NIGERIA

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS INTERPRETATIONS/MISINTERPRETATIONS OF COVID-19 IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The role religion and religious groups play in Nigeria is highly influential both positively and negatively on its followers and in the light of COVID-19 pandemic, it is not an exception. The researcher is trying to report and analyze some religious interpretations/misinterpretations of COVID-19 in Nigeria and its possible effect, explained the possible origin of COVID-19 then went further to report statements going round on print and social media by some highly respected Nigerians from the two major religions, Christianity and Islam. Does pandemic know religion or Yoruba, Igbo or Hausa? This question begs for answer. The researcher has however discussed some of the possible effects of statements/interpretations from religious leaders/groups in Nigeria because it can unsettle existing tolerance enjoyed by citizens and had made valuable suggestions.

Keywords: COVID-19, Religion, Interpretations, Misinterpretations, Effects

Introduction

To say religion is a unifying as well as a separating force is apt, existence of some form of religion in every human society is a given fact because religion is a unique phenomenon in the Nigerian society which Nigerians take seriously. Nigerians also try to link religion to almost everything that is happening or that happens (Akwe, 2018). COVID-19 which stands for Corona-Virus-Disease 2019 came into public notice on 29th December, 2019 in Wuhan, China and was officially announced by World Health Organisation (WHO). The Coronavirus belongs to a family of Viruses that may cause various symptoms such as Pneumonia, Fever, Breathing Difficulty, and Lung Infection (Adhikari et al, 2020). These viruses were common in animals worldwide, but very few cases have been known to affect humans. As at the time of writing this paper, the total number of infected persons in the world stands at over 10 million (Collier, 2020) with Nigeria recording over 40,000 (forty

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thousand) cases as at July 2020 (NCDC, 2020) COVID-19 had its first confirmed case in Nigeria on 27th February, 2020 in Lagos when an Italian citizen who works in Nigeria returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos on 25th February, 2020 (NCDC, 2020).

The advent of COVID-19 in Nigeria since then has been called different names and had been given different interpretations and or misinterpretations. From the religious perspectives too, it is not left out. Most low-income earners in Nigeria had linked the COVID-19 infection to the wealthy or the rich. The assumption was that the disease was foreign, since they (low income earners/poor) do not have the means of boarding Airplanes to go for either tourism or business abroad, they cannot be infected. The above was a major myth surrounding the existence and infection of COVID-19 which is however, tip of the iceberg.

Nigerians, as religious as they are, are not left out. There have been interpretations and misinterpretations of this very pandemic that has ravaged almost the entire continents abound in the news and social media (Dailysabah, 2020). For the followers of Christ (Christians), this pandemic is linked to end time. Kenekwukwu (2020) reportedly quoted a clergyman and politicians of Christian faith in an online news titled ‘Adeboye, Melaye, Keyamo... leaders who attributed COVID-19 outbreak to end time, religion.’ Pastor Enoch Adeboye, the General Overseer (G.O) of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) was reported in newspaper saying, “I want to assure you that there’s no virus that will come near you at all because it is written that he who dwells in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadows of the almighty” (Psalm 91:1). He went further to state that, “I believe that this is a time for God to show you that there’s difference between those who serve Him wholeheartedly and those who do not. It shall be well with you. You’ll have peace and good health” (Kenekwukwu, 2020).

The implication of the above quotations is that COVID-19 is a punishment from God on those who are not in tune with God’s ways. Dino Melaye, who was a former Senator representing Kogi West also had this to say, “All leaders in Nigeria including Me (SDM) must retribute and reconcile with God. Judgment is neigh. These are signs of the end time. The battle against COVID-19 is not about face masks or hand sanitizers.” Senator Dino Melaye centered his interpretation of the COVID-19 pandemic to signs of end time and he focused on leaders including himself, calling on them to come back to God (Kenekwukwu, 2020). On the other hand, Festus Keyamo who happens to be the serving Minister of State for Labour and Productivity has this to say according to Kenekwukwu, “The outbreak remains a plague God allowed to afflict humans so that they could retrace their steps back to him after a derailment in values.” From the foregoing, one could undoubtedly link

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Adeboye, Dino with Keyamo as sharing the same sentiment(s) as to why COVID-19 is dealing with human beings.

In response from Islamic background, an Islamic scholar Abubakr Imam Aliagan on 18.03.2020 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' (From poverty to power, 2020). Since a person of this status are heard and obeyed in a strict sense, some of (if not all) his followers could decide to continue with their normal way of life by not observing the safety measures put in place nationally and internationally to curb the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the 12.04.2020, an anonymous who happens to be a Muslim, walked into MTN office in Akwanga Local Government Council of Nasarawa State and the gateman politely called his attention to either use the sanitizer or use soap and water provided by the office before he steps into the premises. After he had done that, he walked in and started talking while I was also waiting to be attended to. He said, 'This pandemic is evil. How can they (Muslims) be asked not to go to the Mosques for their Friday (Juma'at) prayer which is a ritual, obligatory and norm' (2020). For this man, COVID-19 is a way or means of stopping him from worshipping his creator as usual.

Taiwo-Hassan of Premium times wrote a report, that Muslim Rights Concern (MURIC) released a statement published on April, 28.2020 in Newspaper by its director, Prof. Ishaq Akintola lamented on the unusual deaths in Kano State which has a high population of Muslims saying that Kano needs help urgently before he surprisingly delved into religious angle. Akintola, was quoted saying,

'We are surprised that testing centers are almost nonexistent in the north. Is this a deliberate attempt at debilitating northern Nigerian population with its attendant impact on Muslim majority population in the country?'

Akintola went further to say,

'Nigerian Muslims are currently enjoying majority population status in the area of demography. We must avoid anything capable of decimating our population' (2020).

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Drawing from the above quotes, anybody whether within or beyond Nigeria reading this will surely have a religious interpretation to his statement. The argument most especially from the Christian perspective will be that, COVID-19 pandemic is a planned activity by the Western-World brought to Nigeria in order to kill Muslims in Kano state of Northern Nigeria aimed at reducing their numbers. To an average and fanatical Muslim, this statement could be taken seriously not minding whether it is a personal opinion or a groups' opinion that does not really bind on all. As a researcher, one is forced to ask these questions, of what benefit will the death of Muslims in Kano state be to any Christian living there? Is it for political gains or economic gains? Can a Christian be an Emir, or an executive member of the political class in Kano? These and many more questions are begging for answers.

COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria has a wide spread, starting from the South-West, down to the North Central, then to the North-East, North-West, South-South and the South-East. By this, it shows that this pandemic does not know religion or region. It does not have boundary. It only depends on how it is managed by the Federal, States and Local Governments and the citizens.

From the foregoing, statements of this nature by religious groups and or individuals grossly has effects on the society whether in the present or the future. The researcher hereby discusses some of the possible effects of the statements made about COVID-19 with religious coloration to the society;

1. Disunity
2. Lack of Trust
3. Religious Violence/ Violent Conflicts

1. Disunity

According to Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, disunity is simply defined as 'a situation in which people are not in agreement or are not working together to achieve an aim.' Holding unto this definition, one could see how the comments and statements of some religious leaders and followers has caused the Nigerian nation. Because of religious interpretations to COVID-19 pandemic, most Christians and Muslims do not agree with the safety measures and precautions laid down by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Federal Ministry of Health. When the guideline stipulated that there should be a maximum number of Fifty (50) persons during prayers in Mosques and Churches on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays respectively, this has been disobeyed flagrantly. Also, the social and physical distancing rule at worship centers and other public places are also disobeyed. These obvious practices by religious groups/organisations shows that they are not working together with the government to achieve the aim of curtailing the spread of the virus and the eventual and

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gradual bringing to an end the pandemic. As Brian rightly puts it, ‘this is a multi-faith, multicultural challenge in our society that is best combatted by a united community’ (Brian, 2020).

2. Lack of Trust

As citizens of Nigeria, we hardly believe the government (s) because, most if not all of them are manned politicians. The researcher always says, ‘Our politicians cannot be trusted.’ Because, I do not believe our leaders (political leaders), but our trust, believe and confidence most times is on our religious leaders. That is why, statements on COVID-19 coming from religious leaders could make followers not to agree with governments’ rules and regulations. Ayeni (2020) asserts that, lack of trust in the political class means that many people are more likely to listen and believe the words of their religious leaders and traditional rulers, thus, the reason why there are more places of worship than schools and hospitals.

3. Religious Conflicts/ Violent Conflicts and Effects

When statements of suspicion and hatred are allowed to be used by religious leaders who equally have large number of followers, it leads to religious conflicts which could nose-dive into violent conflicts if not checked. The statement that was released by one of the religious groups that COVID-19 pandemic is targeted at Muslim population in Kano state in order to reduce the population of Muslims in the Northern part of Nigeria is clearly a divisive statement that could result to violent conflict as a pay back, if not presently (immediately) then in the nearest future. The effects of conflict(s) vary from political, social, psychological and economic as opined by Andrew & Ipilakwagh, violent conflicts have led to communities being dispersed, good plans truncated, women and families displaced with children seriously affected because they are the most vulnerable. Lives and property are lost, foreign investments are discouraged (Andrew & Ipilakwagh, 2014).

Conclusion

It is unpatriotic for any individual or group (s) to disrespect or disobey a constituted authority. Religious practices are performed only by the living, only those who are alive can praise and pray to God. Let religion not take away our humanity, COVID-19 IS REAL!

Suggestions

In the light of this, the researcher has postulated the following as suggestions;

1. That Federal, States and Local Governments in Nigeria should not take lightly any breach by any individual or group (s) that will endanger the lives of its citizens without being punished in accordance with law because, the government is saddled with the responsibility of protecting the lives and property of its citizens.

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2. Public figures and elder statesmen should refrain from making unguarded and misleading statements that creates unnecessary tension in the society.
3. Religious group (s) or body (ies) should work hand in hand with the government at all levels in order to create a conducive and peaceful environment for their followers rather than going against national and international protocols.
4. On the need to observe safety rules, the Ministry of Health should collaborate with religious groups, bodies or organisations in order to sensitize the populace on COVID-19 and other health related matters because health is wealth.

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