

COVID-19 ECONOMY AND SPIRITUALITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The first quarter of the year 2020 saw Nigeria grappling with covid-19, a deadly virus that broke out in the Wuhan city of China during the last quarter of 2019. This virus spread like wild fire to almost all parts of the world and heralded shut down of national and global economies. Prior to the period when the virus got to Nigeria, some Nigerian pastors had declared that distance was not a barrier and spiritually travelled to China to destroy the corona virus but became handicapped when the virus finally got to Nigeria. This paper, on the main, focuses on Churches in Nigeria. Based on both observer and participant point of view, this paper reveals that the economic hardship caused by prevalence of the virus made the Nigerian Church leaders to engage in different sides of critical thinking in order to survive. The paper reveals further that Pastors fall within the category of those that depend on daily income for survival who constitute the worst hit by covid-19 pandemic and its attendant lockdown. Drawing from both primary and secondary sources, the paper concludes that covid-19 exposed the spiritual and economic inadequacies of Nigerian pastors whose greatest problem during the covid-19 lockdown just like every other group was hunger, and adopted different strategies to survive as ban was placed on religious gathering.

Keywords: Covid-19, Religion, Spirituality, Economy, Lockdown.

Introduction

Spirituality can be said to be inseparable from religion. In the Nigerian setting, especially, in the era of proliferated religious and prayer arenas, a large number of the people have fallen and remained prey to the facilitators of such arenas especially the operators of the 'New Generation Churches'. No doubt, the quest to seek the face of God has remained the driving force behind the patronage such operators enjoy. No doubt too, some operators of such arenas may be genuine in their operation, concentrating more on the teachings that 'win souls to God'. Men and women in the latter category appear not to dwell on the material benefits of their operations. While the leftists among them are those whose motivating factor to joining

such spiritual operation or Church business per say largely and mainly remain the material things accruing from such vocation. The teachings of this category of acclaimed anointed men of God largely focus on prosperity, teaching their congregations the importance of 'seed sowing' and the humongous blessings to accrue to whoever that blesses the man of God. Prophecy, weather real or fake remain a major tool in the hands of these acclaimed men of God and they appear to have attracted more patronage and on the interim, very large congregation than the real or genuinely anointed men of God.

The last quarter of the year 2019, the month of December to be precise, saw the outbreak of a deadly virus that has its origin traced to the city of Wuhan in China.ⁱ The virus referred to as covid-19 spread very rapidly to almost every part of the world and was declared Global Health Emergency. Supporting this assertion, Solomon Salve writes thus:

*Corona virus disease (covid-19) has gone global affecting almost all countries, societies, and health systems. It is disrupting varying spheres of social, political, or economical lives. It is also intruding into spiritual domain. [He defines spirituality as] the foundation of human existence.*ⁱⁱ

The situation described by Salve above greeted Nigeria from the first quarter of the year 2020 when the country registered the first index case of the covid-19 in Nigeria. This was in the month of February, 2020 when an Italian tested positive of the virus in Lagos.ⁱⁱⁱ March 9, 2020 marked the second index case in Nigeria when a Nigerian said to have had contact with the Italian first index case carrier also tested positive of covid-19.

To say that Nigeria had its share of the adverse effects of covid-19 is however, stating the obvious. This is due to the fact that, like other countries of the world, health facilities got overwhelmed, leading to the adoption of drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus. Such measures included lockdown, restriction on inter-state movement, social and physical distancing measures, public health measures as well as ban on religious gathering. In the words of Onyekachi G. Chukwu, "it brought about obvious changes in numerous practices of churches in Nigeria. Long-standing traditions of churches such as solemnisation of Holy Matrimony, Holy Communion, baptism, prayer and sharing of peace have been modified or suspended."^{iv} Ilaria Coppola, Nadia Rania, Rosa Parisi and Francesca Lagomarsino fin tune the situation further that,

During the covid-19 pandemic people and families experienced a new and sudden situation that forced them to stay in their homes for a long period... In this context, many people found themselves in great difficulty, not only because of the fear of contagion...[but] the economic problems deriving from the closure of production [among other] activities.^v

The implication of such restriction on religious and mass gathering was the crumbing of income for daily income earners. Church operators are among Nigerians in the category of

daily income earners, especially those that took the vocation as full time job. From the inception of the virus in December, 2019 to the last quarter of 2020, the number of covid-19 index cases continued to rise making the numerous restrictions to linger and appeared to have left no hope in site. The major problem that faced Nigerians during the period under review became hunger. Church operators or Pastors as the case may be, who on the main, depended on the offerings and tithes paid by members of their congregations and who constitute focus of this study started thinking outside the box and adopted strategies which included violation of the covid-19 protocols and deceit to survive. This paper therefore, dwells on Churches in Nigeria and the strategies adopted by these Church operators or Pastors and their members to survive during the period under review.

Historicising Spirituality and Christianity in Nigeria

By habit, Nigerians are ecumenical. This is made manifest in the prevalence of both Christianity and Islam, foreign religions that have been accommodated by the indigenous African Traditional Religion.^{vi} The African Traditional Religion is indigenous with the people of Nigeria and can be said to be as old as the people. That is to say that from time immemorial, the people had lived their life having immeasurable attachment to metaphysics. Certain things in life have always been seen to be beyond human comprehension, hence, the quest for the explanation of such things. The process of search to understand the unknown leads to spirituality.

By the 19th Century, Thomas Birch Freeman was said to have arrived Badagry and marked the first European missionary to come to Nigeria in the year 1842. He built the first mission house in Badagry and from there, extended his Christian missionary work to Abeokuta and beyond. In the contemporary Nigeria, there is virtually any part of the country without the presence of at least a Church. Examples of such Churches include the Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Church, and the Methodist Church among others. These early European Churches, albeit with peculiarities, appear to have a procedure and are organised to the point that even their daily activities have been designed to run at the same time all over.^{vii} Prosperity teaching is either very minimal or completely absent in their teachings.

The 20th century marked the founding of Churches by Africans. The Churches founded by Africans are referred to as African instituted Churches. These Churches developed indigenous forms of worship, theology and social organisation.^{viii} Examples of such Churches include the Cherubim and Seraphim, the Celestial Church of Christ, the Church of the Lord Aladura among others. These Churches founded by Africans in the 20th Century are big Churches today and also appear to have organised programme too. There are other Churches too numerous to mention as Nigerians have in recent history, founded more Churches and have continued to found more even in contemporary time.

The seeing of visions, release of prophecies, performing of miracles both real and arranged and declaration of unimaginable and imaginary blessings for groups, families and individuals through prayer took over the space in the African religious circle with the founding of these Churches with African form of worship and theology and made worse with advent of

the 'New Generation Churches'. These have been used as major tools to win membership and, in some cases, deceive the gullible population and no doubt, made Church operation and the running of prayer centres very lucrative businesses and produced a lot of Church mafias. Some of these mafias have attracted imaginary spiritual healings to sicknesses, reversed curses and destroyed charms that may not have existed with the sole aim to deceive the people. A repentant Church mafia who also made the list of the researcher's respondents has fin tuned the above when he asserted that a large number of people in the society have their minds programmed to spirituality and once one begins to portray oneself as having the power to do extra ordinary things such as identifying their problem(s) and tying such problem to either one of their friends and or a member of their family, you have become the messier of their time.^{ix} He adds that nothing interests such programmed minds more than giving them prophecies and that fake pastors and fake prophets continue to think on how to manipulate and maneuver such minds in order to remain in business.^x

Covid-19 Schools of thought

It is common knowledge that restrictions on religious activities among others was imposed as part of measures to coattail and contain the spread of Covid-19. Mentioning one of the effects of such restrictions as adversely affecting the citizens economically is stating the obvious. However, daily income earners remain the worse hit by the measures imposed by government during the period. At the inception of Covid-19 and with the rise in index cases in Nigeria, total lockdown became eminent and speculated widely. Realizing the danger of such lockdown, different schools of thought began to emerge.

The first school of thought, according to Omaka-Amari, Aleke, Obande-Ogbuinya, Ngwakwe, Nwankwo and Afoke, "believed that the virus cannot thrive in Africa because of its hot climate and thus felt immune to its infection."^{xi} But by the time index cases of the virus got recorded in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, people in this school began to perceive it to be meant for rich people, government officials and politicians since it originated abroad.^{xii}

The second school of thought holds that there was no covid-19 in Nigeria and that the Nigerian government was using it to get funds from foreign donors. People that shared this school of thought wallowed in none acceptance of the reality of covid-19 and may have contributed in spreading the virus in Nigeria. This was made manifest in the number of escapees from different isolation centres recorded in different states in Nigeria, leading to the emergency enactment of the Covid-19 Law or Protocol in Nigeria. One example of such is the Covid-19 Regulations signed by President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria on March, 30, 2020.^{xiii} Different state Governors also joined in the signing of executive orders as measures to cattail the spread of the deadly virus.

The third school of thought holds that covid-19 is an anti-Christ agenda aimed at reducing the world population and planting of chips into the living in the name of vaccination in order to control the world. Leaders of some Nigerian churches belong to this school of thought and have associated the virus with the 5G network. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome as quoted

by Jayne Augoye, has fin tuned this perspective on the anti-Christ agenda of the corona virus in a viral video that the 5G network was part of the new world order where some figures of authority in the world were trying to build religion, economy, and government for the entire universe.^{xiv} Alluding to the Augoye's statement, Ndinojuo adds thus:

5G wireless telecommunication was test-launched in Nigeria in 2019 with expectations to improve its digital economy and better communication. The outbreak of the COVID-19 led conspiracy theorists to link 5G to the virus. As with conspiracy theories, the "who" that lends a voice to it can add a new dimension to how far its flame can travel. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, founder of Believers Love World, added his voice to the 5G debate, claiming that the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria was a decoy to sequester the population for government to covertly deploy 5G.^{xv}

This was purely unscientifically based and made fiercer the flames of this conspiracy theory; which makes waves during uncertainties that were the covid-19 situation all over the world and in the view of Prooijen and Douglas, "assign causes of significant social and political events to secret plots by powerful actors."^{xvi}

However, it should be noted that among Church leaders, there were some who did not live in denial of the reality of covid-19 and conceived the pandemic a global health challenge. The school of thought each one of them belonged determined the different approaches adopted in their responses to the imposed restrictions especially, the ban on religious gathering and in turn, shaped congregants perception on their Churches and spirituality during and after those restrictions.

Responses by different Schools of thought

The covid-19 pandemic impacted on the entire world and different circles significantly and elicited different reactions from different circles. This part of the paper, on the main, concentrates on the different approaches deployed by different Church leaders in Nigeria which came as a result of the restrictions imposed by the government to mitigate the spread of the pandemic. Afolaranmi agrees with this when he asserted that "this lockdown affected churches and the ways pastors are performing their pastoral ministry among the church members."^{xvii}

The first response that followed the above-mentioned schools of thought was the emergence of smart or online worship services. Many Churches resorted to conducting Church services on the internet, through YouTube, Face book, Zoom among other internet and social media platforms on live streaming while their congregants watched or participated from the comfort of their homes. The online Church services served to provide for the spiritual wellbeing of congregants which, according to Coppola, Rania, Parisi and Lagomarsino, "include everything that refers to the need to find meaning, value in one's life, peace and a sense of connection"^{xviii} at such time of uncertainty. Gray adds that spiritual and religious practices

serve as supportive community as both give meaning and purpose for life during such period.^{xix} To keep money flowing into the Church coffers, Churches that adopted the online approach distributed their account numbers through the same avenue and collected offerings, tithes and seed sowing.

Patrick Ojang, a pastor in one of the Churches that adopted the online pattern of worship has identified one problem associated with it. According to him, within a month in the lockdown, the interest and level of participation of congregants waned and that also spelt reduction in Church income. Some of the members when contacted gave reasons for their non-participation to be either poor network in their area or not having data to hook up to the online platform.^{xx} It is also deducible from the fore-going that not having physical contacts with the pastors may have contributed in some Church members not turning up^{xxi}.

In some places, house fellowship pattern was adopted. Members of a particular Church who live in different clusters, usually small areas that can serve for the size of a hamlet gathered in the house of may be an Elder, Deacon or Deaconess of the Church who live within the neighborhood, especially where the Pastor lived far away from the neighborhood to hold Church service with either the Church Elder, Deacon or Deaconess presiding and reporting to the parish Pastor. The leadership of the Catholic Church in Nigeria for instance instructed their Priest to strictly adhere to the restrictions imposed by government. Jude Otu-Onwa, a Priest in the Catholic Church asserts that the Church has been directed to shut its doors in line with the protocols of covid-19. However, the Priest was allowed to say his private mass for the purpose of having the routine daily mass and not to collect offering.^{xxii} Otu-Onwa adds that the Catholic Church already have organised system that takes care of their priests, especially in time of emergencies.^{xxiii}

The World Health Organisation's interim guidance, 2020 contains that:

Religious leaders, faith-based organisations, and faith communities can play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness related to covid-19. They are primary sources of support, comfort, guidance, and direct health care and social services, for the communities they serve. Religious leaders of faith-based organisations and communities of faith can...provide pastoral and spiritual support during public health emergencies and other health challenges and can advocate for the needs of the vulnerable populations.^{xxiv}

On the realisation of the above, some Churches took to the distribution of palliatives to selected members of their Churches considered the most poor and vulnerable among members during the lockdown. Catholic parishes in Port Harcourt,^{xxv} Afikpo in Ebonyi state^{xxvi} among other places to engage in this act of charity to mitigate the problem of hunger. By so doing, the Church served to provide reassurance to people, assisted to provide health information, and identified those most in need.^{xxvii} That buttresses the fact that in the faith-based communities,

religious leaders provide important safety net for vulnerable people.^{xxviii} Jude Otu-Onwa summerises it by alluding that at a time such as the covid-19 era, the Church needs to give to the people because the people have always given to the Church.^{xxix} Burk adds that;

Relief wings of religious organisations have dispatched disinfection supplies, powered air-purifying respirators, face shields, gloves, coronavirus nucleic acid detection reagents, ventilators, patient monitors, syringe pumps, infusion pumps, and food to affected areas.^{xxx}

However, it should be noted that some religious or Church leaders, instead of doing this fantastic duty, displayed their own vulnerability within their faith-based society as loss of income made hunger to stare them in the face. The hunger situation made Church leaders in this category to visit the homes of their members to request for offerings and tithes. Chinasa Okoronkwo, a member of the Apostolic Church, laments this when she revealed that some of the pastors were just there in the vocation to collect offering and tithes, and wondered why her pastor had to visit her house during the lockdown to ask her to remit her offering and tithe since she was adhering to the ban on religious gathering, instead of proving succor to her family through religious teaching.^{xxxi} Pastors in this category appear to have played insensitive to the plight of their members who were also confronted with loss of income and hunger during the period.

The implication according to Coppola, Rania, Parisi and Lagomarsino, “the main result emerged that the participants perceived lower levels of spiritual well-being...than the pre-pandemic situation...”^{xxxii} Some Churches lost membership as their members left to join other Churches like the Catholic Church for instance because the Catholic Church distributed palliative to even members of other Churches during the covid crisis. Anthonymary Omiko adds that the Catholic Church distributed palliative in clusters even beyond their parishioners^{xxxiii} and earned the Catholic Church the admiration of other Churches’ members. It therefore, suffices to say that one Church’s loss was another’s gain.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, it can be deduced that the spread of the novel corona virus to Africa in general and Nigeria in particular generated different schools of thought. These schools of thought influenced the different approaches adopted by different churches as response to the sudden situation that forced them to close for a long period of time. Churches in this context, experienced discomfort, stress and fears of both contagion and economic difficulties as their income reduced.^{xxxiv} Of course, to say that the covid-19 pandemic changed people’s way of life is to state the obvious.

It is interesting to note that these different responses exposed the financial and spiritual inadequacies of some Church leaders and recorded impacts on the spirituality of both church leaders and their members, leading to loss and gain of membership. As an ecumenical people,

spirituality is a fundamental need in the provision of general people-oriented intervention. This is because spirituality gives meaning, value, peace and sense of connection with the Supreme Being.^{xxxv}

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