The Christian Family under Global Pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic that started as a moon light folk tale has put the entire foundation of the universe at a standstill and has challenged both theologians and scientists on their basic knowledge of the metaphysical and physical reality. The theologians, who are definitely in a state of pandemonium and dilemma for lack of proper interpretations of the cause of the pandemic to convince the theists beyond the shadow of doubt, are so much concerned presently about the effects this pandemic may have on the faith of the theists. The scientists on the other hand, who so much relied on empirical and experimental based findings to disprove faith and metaphysical exploits are also confused as the theologians in proffering a lasting solution to this pandemic. This work sets out therefore to examine the faith of an ordinary lay man on the street that placed his hope on religion or science. It will further examine the aftermaths of this pandemic how it will affect the faith of the Christians who believe in miracles. In our contemporary Christian world, most of our Churches have been transformed to miracle centers and competitive business ventures. This pandemic poses a challenge to such miracle centers, and members of such Churches are watching keenly what the miracle ministers are capable of doing with their acclaimed spiritual powers. This pandemic, as observed in this work, will also expose the genuineness and authenticity of our acclaimed Christian unity in relation to palliative to the poor and the needy in our Christian family. The coronavirus pandemic, as noticed in this work, may lead to a total transformation of the Christian faith and strengthen the faith of those who are nominal Christians. Those Christians who believed that the pandemic is a sign of the end time may also change their styles of life. This

work will adopt an eclectic methodology to unravel some of the key issues involve in our discourse. This chosen methodology will not put us in a strait jacket in our approach to the issue at hand.

Keywords: Christian, Family, Global, Pandemic.

Introduction

The centrality and importance of the family unit makes it imperative that the care and the wellbeing of the family should constitute the preoccupation of Christian reflections especially in times of global pandemics. The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 is imparting the lives of millions of people in an unimaginable proportion that now cumulates into what most refer to as the "*new normal".* Changes are taking place so quickly that most of the world's population is caught off guard. The whole world is trying to adapt to this new reality in the hope that the pandemic will end soon, although it is impossible to predict precisely how long it will last and what consequences it will have on humanity. In these days of crisis, there is no doubt that the impact of this global pandemic on the Christian family can be far reaching, which cannot be simply "prayed away", "caste out" or dismissed without serious consequences as every aspect of the family become complicated. The time of a global pandemic is usually not the time for "escapist theology" or dancing around the edges of the truth.

Christianity has a tendency to produce contradicting reactions to a number of key issues, including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Some religious leaders have shown that a Christian response to the global emergency involves following public-health guidelines and safety measures, while some others have made it clear that their Christian faith gives them reason not to follow public-health protocols. The reasons behind these acts of defiance are, of course, varied. Some said that public-health protocol and safety guidelines on COVID 19 violate their religious belief which gave them immunity from viruses and sicknesses.

The discordant tone emanating from different religious leaders and pastors in Nigeria further compounds the predicament of the Christian family as to what theological disposition to adhere to concerning COVID 19. Some Nigerian pastors are of the opinion that Covid-19 and its concomitant restrictions and safety measures are satanic, which they claimed can be overcome quickly through the miraculous intervention of God. Prophet T. B. Joshua predicted that Covid-19 would disappear after a heavy rainfall on March 27,

2020.[1] Chukwuemeka Odumeje, in his declaration about the dreaded coronavirus stated that the virus will be gone in April 2020.[2] Elijah Ayodele claimed that he was in possession of holy water and oil that can cure COVID 19.[3] Goodheart Val Aloysius of Father's House International Church in Calabar asked the Nigerian government to gather all those who had tested positive for Covid-19 in an isolation center for him to heal them.[4] He called on the government to hang him if he failed to heal all those who had tested positive.[5] Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the flamboyant prosperity pastor of Love World Incorporated, also known as Christ Embassy, in Lagos, Nigeria, has made some wild comments since the pandemic began in the country. On April 8, 2020, Oyakhilome delivered a sermon with over 12,000 viewers on YouTube in which he claimed that the introduction of 5G technology was responsible for the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. He also alleged that the administration of a COVID-19 vaccine will be used as a ruse to enthrone a "new world order" led by the anti-Christ.[6]

Whatever the theological persuasions of these pastors, there is no doubt that these various misinterpretations of COVID-19 can compound and render even more vulnerable Christian families who have already been compromised by other socio-economic factors. From a historical perspective, depositions and attitudes towards global pandemic have largely connote some forms of hermeneutical predilection. The objective of this discourse therefore is to undertake an excursion into the hermeneutics of global pandemics; to examine the effects of global pandemic on the Christian family, and propose an authentic Christian response.

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[1]"Coronavirus Will Disappear by 27th March 2020 Says, TB Joshua," *The Independent*, March 2, 2020, https://www.independent.ng/coronavirus-will-disappear-by-27th-march-2020-says-tb-joshua.

[2]Chioma Gabriel. "What Nigerian Pastors said about COVID-19", *The Vanguard,*May 23, 2020, https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/05/what-nigerian-pastors-said-about-covid-19/.

[3]John Owen Nwachukwu, "Coronavirus: I Have Cure for All COVID-19 Patients – Primate Ayodele," Daily *Post*, April 2, 2020, https://dailypost.ng/2020/04/02/coronavirus-i-have-cure-for-all-covid-19-patients-primate-ayodele/.

[4]BasseyAsuquo, "Gather All COVID-19 Patient in Nigeria Let Me Heal Them – Pastor Tells FG", *Paradise News,* April 10, 2020, https://paradisenews.ng/49357/gather-all-covid-19-patients-in-nigeria-let-me-heal-them-pastor-tells-fg.

[5] Jacinta ChiamakaNwaka,"Between Religious Freedom and the Public Good: Reactions to Religious Restrictions to Prevent the Spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria", *KujengaAmani*, accessed August, 12, 2020. https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2020/05/20/between-religious-freedom-and-the-public-good-reactions-to-religious-restrictions-to-prevent-the-spread-of-covid-19-in-nigeria/

[6]Nwachukwu Egbunike, "Nigerian Pastor Spreads COVID-19 Conspiracies and Disinformation," accessed August, 12, 2020. https://globalvoices.org/2020/05/15/nigerian-pastor-spreads-covid-19-conspiracies-and-disinformation/

The Hermeneutics of Global Pandemic

One of the basic questions that have perplexed the mind of religious philosophers and Christian thinkers for ages is the question: "If God is good, why do bad things happen?" One of the biggest questions we can ever ask as Christians is who is behind a catastrophic world event like COVID-19; is it a judgment of God or as a result of personal/corporate transgressions? Is it a punishment for the sins of mankind? For a Christian family living through a global pandemic, this is both a natural and necessary question to ask. It is natural because suffering seems like the exact opposite that a good God would want to happen. Additionally, this question is necessary because a misinterpretation of the sufferings caused by a global pandemic will have devastating consequences on human harmonious existence.

There are abundant archeological evidence and extra-biblical sources that state that pandemics, diseases and death indelibly marked human experience since the beginning of human existence. However the book of Genesis asserts that in the beginning everything was "very good" (Gen 1:31). Things changed when sin entered the world, shortly after man's disobedience. The Old Testament explicates the point that without sin, human beings would experience neither death nor disease and illness.[7] The Jewish understanding is that God alone has the ultimate authority to "afflict" and to "heal" (Deut 32:39; Job 5:18). A reading from this disposition would mean that God has a role both in bringing about a pandemic and also in curing it. The Jewish understanding was that God will afflict the unfaithful and the disobedient, while rewarding all those who obey him with the good things of life. In the book of Exodus God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians before the Jews were liberated from their slavery in Egypt. One of the plaques was the plague of boils on human and animal bodies (Exodus 9:9). On several occasions in the Old Testament, God afflicts his people with pestilence because of their unfaithfulness. God struck the land with pestilence, and 70,000 men of Israel perished (1 Chronicle 21:12–14) and because Jehoram walked in the way of the kings of Israel and led Judah into spiritual harlotry, the Lord brought a great plague on the people and the wicked king with a severe, incurable disease in his bowels, and he died in great agony (2 Chronicle 21:12–19).[8] Therefore the idea that God punishes the wicked with diseases to which the virtuous will be immune is not new to Old Testament theology. Psalm 91 reassures believers that God will protect them from "the pestilence that walketh in darkness… A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee"

[7]Donald ArthurCarson, How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 98.

[8] Brian Tabb,"Theological Reflections on the Pandemic", accessed August 9, 2020, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/theological-reflections-pandemic/

A recent poll of Nigerian Christians found that a higher preponderant of evangelical Christians believe that the virtuous cannot be infested with COVID-19 because it was sent by God, as a warning to the unrighteous. This belief suggests that what is presently happening with COVID 19 is not random: that there is an order behind what appears to be chaos. It also suggests that there may be a way to protect oneself from getting ill: through prayer, penitence and renewed religious faith. However this kind of belief is also potentially dangerous, for obvious reasons. One problem is that it leads to blaming the victims of the disease for their sickness or death. Also believing that God will protect the faithful, may lead people to ignore scientific measures aimed at controlling the spread of the pandemic.[9]

Interestingly however, the Old Testament does not always connect pandemics and pestilence to specific personal or corporate transgressions. The great prophet Elisha who raised the Shunammite's son and healed Naaman of leprosy himself fell sick with a terminal illness (2 Kings 13:14).[10]

In the New Testament, Jesus repudiates the assertion that always ties suffering and sickness with personal sins (Luke 13:1–5; John 9:1–3).Jesus declares that he "came to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10), in contrast to Israel's self-serving leaders who failed to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, and seek the lost (Ezek 34:4). He shown compassion to the harassed and helpless (Matt 9:36) and healed the sick and the oppressed (Acts 10:38). Christ's healings authenticate his ministry as truly from God which signals the dawn of the age of restoration, and also points to the deeper healing that he accomplishes through his atoning death for sins (1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:3–4; Matt 8:16–17).[11]

In the Old Testament, human suffering is rooted in God's justice. In the New Testament it is rooted and grounded in God's love. It is through Christ's salvific work that we see that human suffering takes on a new meaning.[12]

Faith, Miracle and the Christian 'Personhood'

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, there was an impression created by some miracle ministers or men of God that their spiritual power could surmount any physical or

[9] The Conversation, "Why People Believe that Religious Faith will Save them From Disease" accessed August 9, 2020, https://theconversation.com/why-people-believe-that-religious-faith-will-save-them-from-disease-138901

[10] Tabb, "Theological Reflections…"

[11]Tabb, "Theological Reflections…"

[12]Tabb, "Theological Reflections…"

metaphysical problem. A country like ours where crusades are organized both week days and weekends to caste and bind demons, initially took coronavirus as a child's play with the hope that, just like any other demon they could caste and bind it and send it to the pit of hell. The wearing of face mask and washing of hands were considered as lack of faith in God; especially when Churches in the metropolitan cities were closed down to avoid the further spread of the pandemic. Both men of God and members of their congregations protested against the decision of the government with all kinds of insinuations such as no disease/ sickness/ epidemic/ pandemic is above the power of God. Some of the renowned prophets, prophetess, priests, evangelists, apostles and other men of God with different nomenclatures went into fasting and prayers to proffer spiritual solutions to the pandemic.

Enoch Adeboye claimed that God revealed to him that the entire world would go on compulsory holiday and he made an allusion to 9/11 when the America Trade Centre was attacked and the world was close to compulsory holiday.[13] He goes further to allege that the coronavirus pandemic is the manifestation of God showing his sovereignty as the controller of the universe. However the man of God (Adeboye) was not explicit enough to convince an average believer why the compulsory holiday and the benefit of the compulsory holiday to man and God with the shutdown of all worshipping centers. Nevertheless, the average believer would simply deduce that the compulsory holiday was as a result of our sins and a warning signal that the end of time is around the corner. On the contrary, simple logic would reveal to us as believers, that at a time like this the worshipping centers should be opened for confession and repentance for our sins, it is a time to seek for God's forgiveness and not to distance ourselves from the worshipping centers. The man of God did not tell the believers what to do as a way of appeasing God to end the pandemic or plague.

Some of the religious ministers focus more attention on faith and miraculous healing of patients while they down played the scientific origin and solution to the pandemic. Chris Oyakhilome attributed the cause of the pandemic to G5, and protested against the lockdown of the Churches and questioned the genuineness of the testing kits.[14] Again his reasons were unscientific and self-centered, because he was only showing concern for the lockdown of the Churches and not market places, schools, business centers and government offices where people earn their livelihood. Everyone was looking forward to the miraculous healing of COVID-19 patients by the well acclaimed Nigerian Pastors who have publicly displayed their spiritual powers before members of their congregations. The Roman Catholic Church loss so many Priests and Nuns in Rome, America, France, Spain

[13] Chioma, "What Nigerian Pastors said about COVID-19"
[14] Chioma, "What Nigerian Pastors said about COVID-19"

and Latin American countries because they never allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to deter them from their pastoral duties of attending to the sick, needy, elderly, orphans and the down trodden. The Roman Catholic Church is one of the first Churches that adhered to the lockdown of Churches to curb the spread of the pandemic. They believe that faith and reason must go together to have a balance religious life. There were prayers and masses offered at the beginning and the pick of the pandemic in the Western World by the Roman Pontiff for God's intervention and final solution to the pandemic. Some religious organization till date are still of the opinion that the pandemic is from God as a sign of end time despite the available data on COVID-19.

In a time like this, the faith of the Christians or believers is put to a serious test. This period will determine/unveil whether the Christians' faith is on their spiritual leaders (men of God/ministers of God) because of the miracles they claim they perform, or on God. In Nigeria, where believers mostly see their spirituals leaders as miracle and wonder workers, COVID-19 would generate the problem of trust; although, the spiritual leaders on the other hand are ready to offer millions of answers to the questions that may arise from the pandemic why it could not be cured miraculously. Their answers to the numerous questions that may arise would be Biblically based such as: signs of the last days/end times, the dissatisfaction of God on man's immorality, man inhumanity to man, the display of God's sovereignty, and other numerous plausible answers. However, are these answers convincing enough to satisfy the believers who so much rely on their ministers' spiritual powers? Again, the approach of the men of God to this pandemic will either affect the Christians positively or negatively. The clergy men should be able to distinguish between physical and metaphysical problems and the best solutions to suit any of such problems. If a physical problem that requires an empirical solution is given a spiritual connotation and interpretation it may cast doubt on the people's mind. Metaphysical problem is beyond human comprehension and also requires a metaphysical solution which may come through spiritual means. When Prophet T.B. Joshua made a categorical statement that COVID-19 pandemic would come to an end on the 27th of March, 2020, he did not consider the consequences his statement might have on the faith of his followers if his prophecy fails.

The scientific explanation of the cause, effects and solution to COVID-19 may not diminish the faith of the believers or Christians; rather, it will bring them closer to God with the belief that man should not place his hope on man. Christianity is not in conflict with science, therefore recognizing the role of science in our Christian life does not in any way affect our faith in God. Science should rather be seen as one of the gifts from God to better and improve the life of man here on earth. In the book of Genesis chapter 1:28 God

commanded man to be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the earth, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. The subduing of the earth and making it comfortable for human habitation can only come to a full realization through science and technology. This does not suppress our faith, belief and the miraculous hand of God in our daily activities, because our scientific knowledge is a gift from God. God gave us different talents in developing our world in various ways and manners to add to the beauty of the universe he created and handed over to man. It would be out of place for any religion including Christianity to always see any difficult challenge as either a punishment from God or an aberration or an abnormality against the will of God for man. At times, we give wrong interpretations to artificial or man-made problems in tandem with God's plan for man.

Before the eyes of the entire world, not a myth or folklore or moon light tail, the world was duly informed about the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and it was traceable to a particular city and people. Scientists and medical practitioners all over the world took it upon themselves as a challenge to find a lasting solution to this pandemic to prevent a drastic reduction of the human race. It becomes worrisome when some men of God are linking it to end time and signs and wonders at the last days. Some claimed that God revealed to them about the outbreak of the pandemic. The men of God did not take into cognizance that the world had experienced such pandemic before, and their uncalculated prophecies and predictions may affect the faith of the enlightened members of their congregations who probably have read about the previous devastating pandemic in the 19th century that claimed so many lives in France, Spain and Portugal. The world is becoming more enlightened (global village) and far ahead of the mediaeval period when all events (both positive and negative) were given religious interpretations. Most of our men of God are presumably educated, enlightened, and exposed, even though some of them are not scholars in sacred theology, they should be able to meet the demand of their congregations in their preaching in order not to ridicule themselves and their vocation. The contemporary preacher or man of God should be able to bridge faith and reason together to convince the members of congregation of his competency in interpreting the words of God correctly.

It is a notable fact that some of the orthodox Churches are very careful with their utterances on COVID-19 so that the faith of their members would not be in jeopardy. They were smart enough to quickly realize that it was a pandemic created by man, but they need God's intervention to put everything under control so that the entire human race would not be wiped out. The orthodox Churches though they were also expecting the miraculous intervention of God, but they did not take chances, hence they never protested against the

lockdown of the Churches to curb the further spread of the pandemic; which was more or less a scientific approach to the pandemic. Archbishop Augustine Obiora Akubeze of the Archdiocese of Benin, Benin-City, during the Holy Week before Ester, advised his priests and the Catholic faithful the need to take a precautionary measure in fighting COVID-19 pandemic. He educated the Catholic faithful on the pandemic and the need to stay safe and alive to worship God through maintenance of social distance, constant washing of hands and avoidance of crowded places. He further says that the people should have faith in God as the author of life. He never encouraged the Catholic faithful to engage in a suicidal mission because they worship God of miracle or because their faith could move mountain, but he focused more on the realities on ground. The men of God should be aware that risk taking in a period like this, is not out of faith, but rather putting God to test which Jesus himself did not do. In the Gospel of St. Luke chapter 4:3ff the Devil wanted Jesus to prove his power to the world but he never yielded to the Devil temptation. The conclusion of Jesus' response to the Devil in chap. 4:12 is, do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Christian's Family Unity in COVID-19 Period.

In one of Martin Luther King (JNR'S) speeches on Christians' participation in liberation protest before his assassination, he says any religion that is only concerned about the spiritual needs of the soul and neglects the material needs of the body is as dry and dusty religion. By implication, it is only those who are in good state of mind and body that can worship God in sincerity. It is also in line with St. Thomas Aquinas argument on the immortality of the soul. St. Thomas Aquinas, though an Aristotelian, parted way from Aristotle on the argument of the immortality of the soul because of his spiritual connotation of the soul that was absent in Aristotle's argument even if he (Aristotle) agrees on the superiority of the soul over the body because of the fine substance it was made of. St. Thomas Aquinas is of the strong opinion that the body is very important to the soul even if it is not immortal like the soul, therefore it needs to be respected and cared for. Most Christians strongly believe in the body being the temple of the Holy Spirit according to St. Paul (1Corith. 6:19-20) and needs to be respected and cared for.

The COVID-19 is a litmus test to our faith, doctrines, beliefs and claims as Christians. This is the period the Christians are expected to put into practice some of the homilies we have listened to in different congregational worships on charity, care for the sick, the down trodden, widows, orphans and the weak elderly ones in our neighbourhood. It is not a time we tell the underprivileged people in our neighbourhood that God will send them a helper, but rather we should play the role of a helper. It is not also a time to tell the down trodden that God will comfort them materially, we should play that role of a comforter

materially on behalf of God as our brother and sister's keepers we claim to be. It is a period to cloth the naked and feed the hungry. It is a period to shelter the homeless and care for the sick.

Evangelization becomes more interesting and practicable at this period too, because your attitude towards believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians speaks volumes of your faith and your commitment to Christianity. The preaching of the Gospel at the time of peace and comfort yield little or no expected results because there are no challenges from the part of the preacher and the listener. Christianity thrived mostly at the time of persecution and crisis in the old Roman Empire, hence the slogan that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity in Rome. Tertullian (Apology 50,12ff) confirms this fact when he states:

> But carry on, good officials. You will become much better in the eyes of the people if you will sacrifice the Christians for them. Torture us! Your iniquity is the proof of our innocence. For this reason God permits us to suffer these things… Yet your tortures accomplish nothing, though each is more refined than the last; rather they are an enticement to our religion. We became more every time we are hewn down by you: the blood of Christians is seed…[15]

It is expected like the early Christians in the Roman Empire, that in period like this, the contemporary Christians should unite most as children from the same stock aiming purposefully at the same goal. Love and care for one another should be the dominant factors uniting them in all their dealings. The Christians should act, as portrays in the Acts of Apostles chapter 2:44, like when the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. Though, the Christian population in our time may not allow such togetherness, but in spirit the Christians can still act in the like manner in terms of showing concern towards the less privileged in this crucial moment in the history of the world.

Though it is not yet *uhuru*, but we can say bravo to the Christian folds for the role they have played so far since the beginning of this pandemic in areas of charity, hospitality, concern for the underprivileged, the orphans and the down trodden in the society. The Christians truly demonstrated what African traditional society is known for either in time of crisis or peace in terms of generosity, kindness, care, hospitality and love to the have-

[15] A.D Sidler, *Ancient Rhetoric and the Art of Tertullian,* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.12.

not in the society. In African traditional society: orphans, widows, the childless elders, and strangers were able to survive because of the hospitable nature of an average African. Though, they may not be wealthy by the world standard of material wealth, yet they could assist one another to survive the ordeals of life. The Nigerian Christians showed enthusiasm during this pandemic in donating money, clothes and food items to the poor, sick, orphans, widows, and the down trodden. The Church leaders, elders and the lay faithful came out in full force to distribute food stuff, face masks and hand sanitizer from house to house for members and non-members who could not afford them. During the lockdown they did not relent in reaching out to people for assistance.

The action of the Christians this period could be best described as practical evangelization that would go down to history. There was no discrimination in their work of charity. For instance, the Christians in some metropolitan cities like Benin-City, Abuja, Lagos and some other places apart from donating food stuffs and toiletries to their respective States Government to distribute to the poor in the society, they mobilized themselves in groups to distribute food stuffs and toiletries to people in their areas without being selective. They also distributed food stuffs to the poor in their respective Churches and parishes. The Church stood up for the people where civil governance failed. Many people did not get anything from either the States or Federal Government in spite of the money they claimed they have budgeted for palliatives. There was an out-burst cry from the citizens over government negligence on palliatives to assist the people when there was a total lockdown; which was the reason behind the poor compliance to the restriction of movement, curfew and inter State travelling declared by the Federal Government.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped the Christians to spread the spirit of ecumenism that was almost becoming impossible to talk about because of the seeming competition among the different Christian denominations and between Muslims and Christians. In fighting COVID-19, everyone was involved in different ways and manners in protecting one another as children from the same source (God). People were not so much concerned about their religious identity/affiliation, but rather how to protect each other from the attack of COVID-19 pandemic. Ecumenism stresses the unity among the Christians and also having a good relationship with the Jews, Muslims and traditional believers. It is during the COVID-19 pandemic it became clearer that we can work in harmony together with love in spite of our differences in colour, religion, race, ethnicity and ideology. The love of neighbour or our fellow human being is utmost and most important after God than any other thing in life, because all religions and nature have reminded us time without number that man is an image of God (imago Dei), and therefore he is a sacred being not just a being with existence.

With its negative and devastating effects on the entire humanity, there is still an element of positivity in COVID-19, and that is unity. COVID-19 pandemic united the entire world by bringing all races together to proffer a lasting solution to the coronavirus pandemic. It also makes the poor and the rich, developed, developing and underdeveloped countries, races and coluors to humble themselves, because the pandemic was a respecter of no man. It is a period when all religions dim it fit to safe and protect the interest of entire humanity and not only members of the same religion/ faith. This is clearly demonstrated in the distribution of food stuffs and other items to the underprivileged in the society. Different religious organizations especially Christians came out in full force to assist the Federal Government to protect the citizens from hunger, diseases and poverty distress that was already visible before COVID-19 pandemic.

The Effects of Global Pandemic on the Christian Family

In an effort to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, governments throughout the world started to restrict gathering of large number of people in public places and movements from one place to the other, especially interstate and cross-border movements, and advocate stay safe or stay at home. It also involves physical distancing. This situation resulted in the closure of schools, movie theaters, sports events and religious services.[16] With the advent of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the Nigerian governments at the Federal and State levels started imposing series of lockdown measures.[17] The Federal government issued stay-at-home orders to contain the spread of COVID-19, starting on March 30,2020 for Lagos, Ogun state (a suburb of Lagos), and Abuja, the national capital. The order made social distancing mandatory and was enforced, sometimes brutally, by the army and the police. State governors on their own authority have largely imposed the same restrictions on the rest of the country. All Churches and Mosques were closed, large gathering banned, and all other mass events that Nigerians love, such as weddings and funerals. Undoubtedly, the lockdown affected Churches and the way Christian families carry out their social and religious activities.

Family incomes of those in the informal-sector were greatly affected as their sources of incomes were on lockdown. Some families were affected more drastically than others. The lockdown resulted to a situation where the Federal and State Governments started sending

[16]"Tips forSocial Distancing, Quarantine,and Isolation during an Infectious Disease Outbreak", accessed March 28, 2020, https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/tips-social-distancing-quarantine-isolation-031620.pdf, p.1.

[17]Peterson Ozili, "Covid-19 Pandemic and Economic Crisis: The Nigerian Experience and Structural Causes", International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 2020, accessed August 10, 2020, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3567419,2.

palliatives to families. But again the "Nigerian factor" sets in; many families who were really in need of these palliatives never got them. Some palliatives were distributed on political affiliations, while some never got out of Government warehouses. For a number of families, it could mean making big changes in everyday routine due to financial hardships and lack of basic means of self-sustenance. Some Nigerian families started reacting angrily to lockdown measures with the catch phrase that "it was better to die of COVID-19 than to die of hunger". Many started to disobey the lockdown measures, which led to brutal confrontation between some persons and the law enforcement agencies. To avoid such confrontation, some had to part with money for the law enforcement agencies to allow them circumvent the lockdown measures.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the Christian family in many ways, including the cancellation of in-person worship services as many families opted for worship through live-stream online services. The suspension of the public celebration of the Holy Mass for most Catholics families was most devastating for many, even as Catholics were dispensed with the obligation to attend Sunday Masses. In Nigeria, Catholic Masses were offered on live cable and terrestrial broadcast services, which Catholics were told to participate in from their homes. While many families were grateful for having this opportunity in the mist of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, families were however denied the opportunity of the physical reception of the Holy Communion during masses. With the physical or social distancing restriction, many families were denied the opportunity to participate in the Sacrament of Penance. Some priests who muted the idea of online general absolution via live stream or cell phone, where timely repudiated by higher Church authority upon discovering that the priest who absolves and the penitent receiving the absolution must be physically present in the same place.[18] For the very few Catholics who were able to attend in-person Holy Mass celebration, the Nigerian Church authorized the reception of the Eucharist on the hand, a practice previously not permitted, except during the Ebola crisis of 2014 - 2016. Catechesis sessions, marriage ceremonies and Church meetings on Church premises were suspended and Catholics with chronic diseases, the elderly with potential risk were urged to follow Masses via the media. The Holy Week liturgies, especially those on Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, were cancelled by many Churches belonging to mainstream Christian denominations, including the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist.

[18] "Philippines Parish Cancels Planned 'Online General Absolution'",*National Catholic Register*. 2 April 2020, .https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/philippines-parish-cancels-planned-online-general-absolution

Other Christian Churches used various communication methods to reach their audiences, such as radio, television and online media. The stoppage of in-person worship was one of the most significant sudden disruptions in the practice of Christianity in Nigeria, especially amongst Christian families. The Nigeria Government through the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) limited all religious gathering to only twenty for a congregation that would have consisted of over five thousand in-person service. This limitation resulted in a change in the religious habits of most families. There were few high-profile arrests of pastors that flouted the shutdown measures especially amongst the Pentecostal mega churches.

There is no-gain saying that the lockdown of churches prevented the Christian family from performing religious duties in the traditional ways through physical contacts, churches attendance, praise and worship; and had to explore alternative means of performing their religious duties. Many Christian families in Nigeria gathered together to pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, for those affected by it, as well as for wisdom for physicians and scientists to combat the disease.

The Christian family Response to Global Pandemic

The Christian families can play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness during global pandemic by providing a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and social service for their communities. The Christian family can seek for authentic information about the pandemic and share evidence-based health information to protect their own members and wider communities.

During a global pandemic the Christian family can provide pastoral and spiritual support during public health emergencies and other health challenges and can advocate for the needs of vulnerable populations. The Christian family can promote helpful information that prevent and reduce fear and stigma, provide reassurance to people in their communities, and promote health-saving practices.

In a developing country like Nigeria, Christian families are integrated into their communities through service and compassionate networks and are often able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. They are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities., preparedness, and response. This should also include promoting ecumenical and interfaith collaboration, and peaceful coexistence during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the light of the Christian mandate, the Christian family can be a source of hope in face of fear caused by a global pandemic as fear is a natural reaction to danger, death, and uncertain times. Fear leads some people to minimize the threat, while others magnify the danger as all-consuming. Some have responded to the COVID-19 outbreak by caring for the vulnerable, while others express their fears by isolating themselves from their communities. As a Christian family, fear can prompt us to return to charity, with realization that the only real treasure is Christ. The Christian family must therefore redirect the social energy from anxiety and panic to love and service, especially with the realization that God is the refuge and strength of the Christian and always present in trouble times. The Christian family can overcome debilitating fears and respond to global pandemic with courage and compassion for the neighbors in need.

The time of global pandemic is an occasion for the Christian family to seek God ever than before. The Christian family must come to the realization that "Christ has already given us his peace, but his peace is not to remove us from disaster and death, but rather to have peace in the midst of disaster and death, because Christ has already overcome these things."[19]What the COVID 19 pandemic has demonstrated beyond all reasonable doubt is that all nations of the world, all peoples: rich and poor, young and old, religious and non-religious are susceptible to sickness and are certain to die one day.

The Christian family attitude to global pandemic should be marked by the Christian virtue of measured concern, not panic. Instead of panicking, the Christian family concern should be how to help those in need. For those with medical knowledge, they have a central role in guiding their members towards healthy behavior change. They are called to do their best to support good research and medical care.

For the Christian family who do not have special training to participate on the medical front lines, they are to responsibly play their part in their communities as parents, children or siblings. They are to communicate faith and hope not fear and panic. For Christians, truth is distinctly important. Every Christian has the responsibility to find and rely on accurate sources of information, having nothing to do with either sensationalism or scoffers.

[19] Clare Bruce, "Wuhan Pastor Asks Christians Worldwide to Join Him in Prayer Amid Coronavirus Crisis", *Hope 103.2* Friday 7 Feb 2020, https://hope1032.com.au/stories/faith/2020/wuhan-church-pastor-asks-christians-to-join-him-in-prayer-amid-coronavirus-crisis/

Global pandemic is constant reminder to the Christian family that lasting security, freedom from ill-health and happiness is not to be found in the present world but in the world to come. Christians must therefore spend more quality time together in prayer, everyone doing their best to take care of each other, offering help wherever possible. This may have a lasting positive impact on social relations after the crisis, promoting community cohesion and building strong neighborhoods. The authentic Christian family response to global pandemic should not dwell on the negative, or messages of threat, but on that which help to keep those who are most vulnerable safe.

Conclusion

This paper surveyed the imperativeness of the discourse on the Christian family in the face of a global pandemic, stating the effects of a global pandemic like COVID 19 on the Christian family. The hermeneutical synopsis revealed that in the Old Testament, human suffering is rooted in God's justice, while in the New Testament it is rooted and grounded in God's love through Christ's salvific work which gave new meaning to human suffering.

The authentic Christian family response to global pandemic is to play a major role in saving lives and reducing illness by providing a primary source of support, comfort, guidance, and social service for their communities. The Christian family is to provide spiritual support during public health emergencies and compassionate networks to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those most in need. They are a critical link in the safety net for vulnerable people within their faith community and wider communities.

Recommendations

This discourse made the following recommendations**:**

i. that theological language which sees global pandemic as punishment from God, or a curse, should be avoided, as a proper theological hermeneutics would reveal that global pandemics like COVID-19 is not a punishment from God or a curse but an opportunity for God's people to show love and compassion in the face of pain and suffering;
ii. that Christians have the responsibility of obeying the guidance from your government. The Christian family has the obligation to follow God who created a world with structure and order, to comply with the guidance from governments to stop the spread of diseases.
iii. to celebrate God, especially during times of crisis. Share His faithfulness, and love for the world to the point where Jesus became one with our suffering through His own suffering and death

iv. to pray for healing, wisdom for scientists, insight for public health officials and politicians, for compassionate responses, for protection of children, and for a speedy end to the crisis.