



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS AND THE EFFECTS OF POST COVID-19 SPIRITUALITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The existence of diseases, misfortunes and calamities have been issues that appears to challenge the credibility of the Christian faith as people of all ages tend to query the very existence of God. This paper presented a critical analysis of Christian apologetics and the effects of Post Covid-19 spirituality in Nigeria.. Christian apologetics as a branch of Christian theology seeks to offer reasonable defense to the authenticity of the Christian faith. Hence, the emergence of the novel coronavirus not only negatively affected global healthy and coexistence but created a new-normal forcing churches to shut down for months or minimal operate under the strict health and policy surveillance of the Government. Thus in the adherence of the Covid-19 protocols and guidelines, the practices of social distancing, use of face masks/shields, use of alcohol-based sanitizer were introduced in the church. Above all, skeptics and cynics saw the spread of the pandemic as a frontal challenge to the spiritual claims of faith healers and miraculous claims of clergy and other key functionaries of the church as the virus took a deadly toll on the entire planet leading to the massive deaths and hospitalization of some many across the world. With the use of qualitative and literary research method, this paper extensively explored through reliance on primary and secondary data, the history, spread of Covid-19 Pandemics and its effects on people's spirituality after the pandemics drawing inferences from the church's age- long engagement in Christian apologetics. In the foregoing, it was discovered that the church was not totally silent nor totally render redundant neither was the Christian faith discarded for being clueless. Rather, the pandemics provided a rare opportunity to many for sober reflection on the essence of life, the need for sustaining the family bonds/affiliations the concern for the less privilege. The Post COVID era presents new opportunities for the churches to reflect on their practice and praxis in line with the realities experienced during the pandemics.

Keywords: Apologetics, COVID-19, pandemics. theology, pandemic, spirituality

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

The church all through ages has existed in the face of challenges, criticisms and attacks. From her inception the early church faced the challenges of her contemporary world which had fast advanced not only in government but in civilizations philosophies and social organizations.

The Christian church was born in a world that was already old with great empires risen and fallen. (Cf Opara, 2020). Thus she was beset with misconceptions misunderstanding and thus labeled non conformists to the status quo. The church at the very early times suffered persecutions under several Roman Emperors, even the presence of inexplicable phenomena or natural of disasters are squarely blamed on the early Christian believers Christian Apologetics grew as a tactical response to the misconceptions and misunderstand of the Christian faith seeking to present the rational bases for their Christian profession.

Christian apologetics is not in any way rendering apology for the lapses of the Christian faith. Neither is it likened to a defendant's case in a law suit that seeks to contain and controvert the legal punches of the plaintiff. It is truism that Christian apologetics is broader than that. To Edgar (2006), apologetics is the art of persuasion the discipline which considers way to commend and defend the living God to those without faith. However a comprehensive appreciation of Christian apologetics does not just start and end at the aim to defend that faith, it begins with an emotive and love-laden heart who is not just concerned but committed to sharing the truth of the faith either to put through a questioner or enlighten the 'less' informed of the immense treasures of the Christian faith and conviction.

A typical example of such case that requires a passionate apologetics is the monstrous evolution and spread of Coronavirus. COVID-19 is a novel disease that erupted during the last quarter of 2019. Experts opined that COVID-19 is a disease said to have been caused by the new and resistant strain of Coronavirus. This infectious disease was later declared a pandemic as a result its high, virulent and contagious spread leading to the death and illness of several thousands of people. The disease spreads from persons to persons through droplets released when an infected person either coughs, sneezes or talk or a mere surface contact by an infected or asymptomatic person (World Health Organization, 2021). The spread of the disease apart from leading to the death of many elicited international Inter- Governmental intervention to stem the tide of infection and protect the lives of the citizenry.

The effects of the post- pandemic evoke a number of questions of faith of which Christian apologetics seeks to address.



The late 2019 brought the evolution of a dreaded form of Coronavirus which negatively affected global society in all ramifications. Ever since then, it has been tales of deaths, woes and losses occasioned by the spread of the pandemic. At December, 8, 2019 when the outbreak of the disease was first recorded in Wuhan China, later the World Health Organization declared the disease a Public Health Emergency of International concern on 30th of January 2020. As a result of the intensity of its spread, the WHO declared it a pandemic on 11th March, 2020. Current data on COVID-19 infection puts it as at 25th May, 2021 at 168,508,539 confirmed cases 3,499,134 deaths with 150,013,919 recoveries (World Health Organisation,2021). The spate of this human tragedy has continued to affect human existence in most negative ways. The outbreak of the virus led to the overwhelming of health facilities, fatalities of health personal, restriction of social relationship, closure of all forms of means of transportation, stoppage and closure of schools and institutions, restriction of individuals freedom, ban on all forms of social or religious gatherings, stoppage of public learning among others.

Above all, the advent of the pandemic resurged the perennial theological debate of the sovereignty of God and theodicy. Some of the questions of faith which would elicit doubt include; why would God permit the infestation of the disease that causes so much harm to humanity? To what extent is God involved in this human tragedy? How would we trust the ministry of the church which appeared as adjudged by some as helpless hopeless and invisible especially during the hey days of the 2020 lockdown? To what extent is the church remedying the situation occasioned by a dreaded and vicious pandemic? These questions can go on and on rhetorically.

In any case, the above scenario brought about by Covid-19 pandemic was not the first of this kind. During times of heartbreaking human tragedies, questions are raised on God's position and the need for apologetics. However, various attempts have been made to proffer theological answers to situation at hand. Prominent among such efforts were the erudite works of John Lennox (2020), "where is God in a Coronavirus world" written in April 20, 2020 and another book 'Coronavirus and Christ' written by John Piper (2020). These books though erudite and prompt apologetic responses to the situation at hand more or less aimed at offering solace and hope in the midst of the pandemics. Their concise volumes greatly illustrates the pungency of their task, however they lacked a comprehensive and indebt reflection and obviously does not reflect the sinister African bias with reference to our religious milieu and inadequate social provisions hence the next for the need for this paper.

Nigeria has its own hit of Covid-19 which claimed the lives of many people of which the political class are no exception. This paper is therefore pertinent so as to lay a proper theological



spiritual, apologetic and literary background to the church's response and continuing response as the disease have not been totally tackled in most parts of the world . The literary prism will be cast on the effects of the post pandemics in Nigeria.

2.0. CONCEPT CLARIFICATIONS AND DISCOURSES

In the course of this research, it is pertinent some underlying concepts be holistically defined to engender an engaging literary excursus. These concepts namely are Christian apologetics and Covid-19 pandemic. This section will be delved into ad seriatim;

2.1. Christian Apologetics

Christian apologetics is a very old discipline and practice of the church. It could be said that the church at all ages have grappled with the issue of apologetics. Christian apologetics came from two root words Christian and apologetics. The word "Christian was first used as a pejorative term to describe the Antiochian early Christianity as in Acts 11:26. It was derived from the Greek *Christianos* meaning a follower of Christ (*Xpiostos*) the anointed one. The word Christian describes all that pertains to Christ. The word "apologetics" evolved from the Greek word *apologia* meaning a reasoned defense of one's view or perception.

The classical Greek *apologia* literarily means verbal defense or speech in defense. To simply present, Christian apologetics is a reasoned defense for Christ. Scholars however have put the concept in more comprehensive understanding. According to Craig (2021), Christian apologetics may be defined as the branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide rational warrant for Christianity is truth claims (Craig, 2021). Coulter defined Christian apologetics as the task of developing and sharing argument for the truth and rationality of Christianity and falsehood and irrationality of alternatives with the aim of strengthening the faith of believers and provoking non believers to consider Christ (Coulter, 2011).

To put apologetics which comes from the Greek root '*apologia*' meaning 'answer', 'defense' 'providing answer' to critical questions raised by unbelievers or skeptics regarding the Christian faith or giving a rational account or justification for the authenticity of the Christian faith. However, Coulter (2011) delved into a literary appreciation of this etymological root from a profound definitive interpretation. To coulter, although apologetics is derived from the very same roots of apology, but the adjective 'apologetic' means a significantly different concept. *Apologia* in the Greek word is aid oneself or one's action akin to the lawyers' advocacy in the courtroom. Yet coulter submits that apologetics does not convey' a regretful acknowledgement of an offence



or failure' as in the denotative dictionary sense. Coulter (2011) further defined apologetics as the 'task of developing and sharing arguments for the truth and rationality of Christianity and the falsehood' and irrationality of alternatives with the aim of strengthening the faith of the believers and mocking non-believers to consider Christ. However, this definition extended the very original frontiers of early Christian apologetics which was far more defensive with little or not much evangelical objectives. Bringing the Concept of Apologetics into the realm of reality and everyday living instead being merely a purely academic exercise conducted in an ivory tower, Coulter (2011) further posits that Christian apologetics ultimately aims at seeing people led to faith and strengthened in their faith not just developing clear intellectual arguments.

Asamoah (2018) borrowing Coulter's framework defined Christian apologetics simply as "the art and science of apologetics as understood and practiced by (the) Christian. This definition though appeal very simple still did not facilitate a simple explanation of the concept. However, the scientific nature of Christian apologetics needs to be highlighted as a field of science apologetics bares itself to the processes of scientific enquiring based on objectivism, experimentation and does not rush to a conclusion without engaging on an empirical – based findings. This angle distinguishes apologetics from dogmatic theology in as much as the aim of apologetics is to reinforce Christian doctrines and dogmas and present them in an appealing manner to both honest inquires and objectors alike, yet these dogma are presented within the bounds of 'logical reasons' to conviction and conversion. Boa and Bowman (2012) took an integrative approached to the study of Christian apologetics. Gleaning from the profound insight from Greek philosophical background, they asserted that in Athens, they referred to a defense made in the courtroom as part of normal judicial process. After the accusation, the defendant was allowed to refute the charges with a defense or reply (*apologia*).

Many scholars have tried to separate apologetics form the task of evangelism while very many have seen both as inseparable and intertwined.

2.2. Coronavirus

The word Covid-19 or Coronavirus had become very popular in recent times. This intriguing notoriety came about with the global spread of the virus. Suffice it to stay the Coronavirus disease is an infectious disease caused by the novel specie of Coronavirus called severe acute respiratory syndrome. This brand of disease was first discovered in an animal market in Wuhan city in the Hubei Province of China. Thus illness caused by SARS-COV-2 was formally called COVID-19 on February, 11 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) hence derived from the acronym 'coronavirus disease 2019' in other to avoid any form of stigmatization owing to the virus origin as regards population, geography or animal association (Medscape,2021). The



symptoms associated with the virus include fever, cough, shortness of breath, loss of smell, loss of taste, pneumonia, viral sepsis, acute respiratory distress syndrome, kidney failure among other complications. The name Coronavirus was said to be derived from the Latin “corona” meaning ‘crown or wreath’. The name was said to have been given this class of virus by scientists who first noticed the sinister appearance of virus in the microscope that have large bulbous surface projection looking like a solar corona kind of image this feature is said to have been created by the viral spike known as peplomers which are proteins found on the surface of the virus (Holmes,2021). These proteins show a large, distinctive petal shapes akin to a crown like the corona spinarum in religious aesthetics. In a comprehensive study, Jie GM, Fang Li and Zhengli Shi(2020) identified coronavirus as members of the subfamily coronavirus kin the family coronavirinae and other Nidovirales. The subfamily consists of four genera; Alphacoronavirus, Betacoronavirus, Gammacoronavirus and Deltacoronavirus. The gammacoronavirus and betacoronaviruses infect birds but some of them also infect mammals. Alphacoronaviruses and Betacoronaviruses cause respiratory illness in human and gastroenteritis in animals. According to Anad .S. et al(2020) , Coronavirus (COV) was first isolated from the nasal washing of a male child in 1965. This novel discovery led to the ultimate identification of number of strains of coronaviruses which hitherto were considered harmless pathogens which causes cold and mild upper respiratory illness.

The seven identified human coronaviruses include, SARS-COV₂ (COVID-19), SARS COV (severe acute respiratory syndrome) MERS-COV (Middle East respiratory Syndrome), HCoV-NL63, HCoV-229E, HCoV-OC43 and HKUI. Among all the families of coronaviruses SARS-COV and MERS-COV were said to have caused severe illness to man. Studies had it that SARS-COV was said to have recorded the outbreak of the disease in humans.

2.3. Origin of Covid-19 Pandemics

Earlier before the spread of COVID-19 Pandemics, China has had a history of the plague of several diseases and pandemics and more especially viral infections. Among the leading pandemics that was said to have originated from China include the Black Death that ravaged entire Africa, Asia and Europe from 1343 to 1353 which saw to the death of between 75-200 million persons others, the three (3) major waves of plagues of the 6th, 14th and 19th centuries killing 20 million to 50 million people , the Asian flu of 1857, the Hong Kong Flu of 1968, the Russian Flu of 1977, the Severe Acute Respiratory syndrome of 2002, the bird flu of 1997 and lately the novel COVID-19 in December thus making China a hotbed for pandemics historically(Forum Staff,2021).



The precise origin of coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has been an issue of on-going investigation. The very first case of a discovery of an epidemic was first report at Wuhan, Hubei province. However the source remains largely debatable as initial cases were linked to a suspected bat origin associated with Huanan South China seafood market that sell birds and other animals such as snakes, bats civets etc. It was strongly suspected that the transmission emerged from there as index cases were said to have worked in or visited the market from Wuhan. The epidemic first broke out all over China and to the entire world. With the increasing cases in China, it became imperative for this novel virus to be properly studied. After the declaration of coronavirus a pandemic by the World Health Organization in March, 2020, the Pandemic spread to all parts of the world including Nigeria. One of the agents of the fast spread is globalization. Globalization is simply the growing interdependence among nations of the world. This is gradient in the frequent international travels, exchanges and relationships Based on this, it was simpler for Nigeria to have its own unpleasant experience of COVID-19 infection. With the knowledge of the spread of the virus in far away Wuhan China, the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) moved to action and commenced training of rapid response teams across the 36 states in Nigeria about December 2019 this led to establishment of emergency operations centers and linking of coordination centers all through the country. The index case of COVID-19 was said to be an Italian who had visited some states of the federation before testing positive for COVID-19. This discovery changed the entire health landscape of the country as more revelations of infection followed in quick succession. In any case, government initial response within the first 90 days included response to COVID-19 Pandemic by the Federal Ministry of Health facilitating training developing public health protocols, communication for public engagement supporting compliance to COVID-19 Advisor secondly Agencies among others. Oluwaseun and Sokeye (2011) outlined ground breaking achievements of the Federal, State Governments and other state Governments in the fight against COVID-19 and containment of the spread of the virus. These achievements include but no limit to restriction of interstate travel and movement, by the fifth week establishment of six additional molecular laboratory by the six week, lockdown of FCT, Lagos and Ogun State, prohibition of religious gathering establishment of a more molecular laboratories, etc.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized the phenomenological approach to religious studies and the hermeneutical method in exploring theological and social issues. Hence, primary data, relevant texts, and cogent scholarly opinions were used to effectively engage the subject matter of the research.



4.0. DISCOURSES ANALYSES

4.4. The Effects of Covid-19 on Christian Spirituality

It is no gain saying that the outbreak of coronavirus brought about changes in almost all spheres of lives. The pandemic affected businesses social life, educational institutional, corporate governance to mention but a few. Christian spirituality is not left out also in the effect of this pandemic.

The effect on Christian spirituality may be either positive or negative as spirituality operates mainly at the individual level. The word 'spirituality' came from the Latin etymology "spiritualities" being 'spirit' or 'spiritual' as 'opposed to the material or mundane'. Suffice it to state that a clear and generally accepted conceptual location of Christian spirituality may not exist as spirituality is approached more from the subjective level rather than the objective perspective.. McGrath et al (1993) denotes that Christian spirituality arises from a creative and dynamic synthesis of the faith and life forged in the crucible of the desire to live out the Christian faith authentically, responsibly, effectively and fully. Furthermore, Christian spirituality generally are the sum total of our relationship with God through Christ which manifests in what we believe, how we respond to God and to other realities around us. Spirituality is expressed in some many practices which includes but not limited to our beliefs, devotion, and attitude to God, understanding of life and in a nutshell how we respond to God.

Given these definitions on Christian spirituality, it is apt to state that scholars concomitantly affirm that COVID-19 pandemic reality affected Christian Spiritual experiences and expressions. Following the declaration by World Health Organization (WHO) of the novel coronavirus as pandemic in March 2020, international community and different countries of the world took several precautionary measures to safeguard the lives of their citizenry. One of the strategies was restriction of individual freedom and total ban on all forms of religious gathering and limiting public spaces to about 50 or 20 persons in line with the guidelines and protocols of COVID-19 under the premise that religious gathering are hot spots for the transmission of COVID-19.

In any case, the effect of COVID-19 on Christian Spirituality differs from localities. Generally, it is believed that one of the positive effects of COVID-19 pandemic was the depending of spiritual consciousness and personal meditation as public gatherings, were stopped. To Salve (2020), despite the uncertainty, COVID-19 silently offers an opportunity to reflect on the spiritual impact it has on the world and our communities. Commenting on how COVID-19 affected personal faith from a personal reflection, Salve (2020) has this to state;



Praying from home will bring in a faithful greater that all can have access to God through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:18) and all have the priestly responsibility of interceding for other people to God (1 Pet 2:9). It will be a time for understanding that similar to fellowships in physical church buildings, family members praying together in their homes is also the real church (Body of Christ) in a spiritual sense. The call to pray from home equally assures God's presence in line with what Jesus said in the gospel of Matthew 18:20, 'for where two or three are gathered together in my name' there I am in the midst of them. Such a divine responsibility needs to be handled with faith. COVID-19 pushes us hard to rekindle our faith to see God's intervention in overpowering the disastrous effect of coronavirus (Ps 91).

Though the subjective posture of the quote is well noted, Salve did not comprehensively appraise the overall impact on personal faith. It is true that the call to stay at home may have helped some develop a higher level of spiritual concentration and faith, yet such can never be overgeneralized. Many may have lost faith and become less spiritual as a result of forced social isolation brought about with the realities of COVID-19 pandemics.

One of the benign benefits of COVID-19 pandemics on Christian Spirituality is the promotion of the spirit of corporation, solidarity and love for others. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic some churches continue to operate bags pantries that are offering bags filled with meat and toilet paper rolls for families in need.

The period of the lockdown led to hunger and impoverishment for many vulnerable families thus, this period saw the greatest and most profound display of Christian charity and piety as churches and faith communities mobilize to support the less fortunate amongst them. Summarizing the effect of COVID-19 on Christian spirituality, Salve(2020) intones;

To sum up, the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us we are deep down spiritual; beings whether we realized it or not, and makes us recognize that the problem of coronavirus is right here at the face of our global community. His challenge that requires global cooperation and unity, a component of compassion to alleviate suffering, and a greater responsibility to exercise our faith to witness divine intervention.... The pros will outweigh the cons making us a global community with spiritual connectivity.

It is apt to state that COVID-19 pandemic developed personal spirituality, enhance philanthropy and humanity as the church connects to herself spiritually even in the face of uncertain physical isolation.

However, the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is also noticeable in the churches' spirituality and witness. During the her days of the lockdown in Nigeria, it was a known fact that



churches and all places of worship were not exempted, buildings and places of worship had to be closed, no public acts of worships were permitted, and ministers were not exempted from limitations of movements such that parishioners in strange circumstances were virtually without pastoral assistance in cases of need. Weddings and funerals were also similarly restricted in the early period of the coronavirus lockdown. These brought about a lot of negative effect on the church clergy and parishioners as well. Laxton (2021) listed the short-term effects of COVID-19 on churches to include;

- i. Interruption to our normal way of doing things.
- ii. Earning for seniors and the vulnerable
- iii. Fluctuation in church attendance
- iv. People will be shell shocked and tried
- v. Finances will be tight
- vi. Staffing hires and staff work patterns will be affected

Laxton's long term effects lists;

- i. Churches will shift the way they handle finances
- ii. Churches will adapt hybrid ministry models
- iii. Churches will have to navigate a deeply divided culture with deep just issues.
- iv. The kind of staff churches hire will change
- v. People will still Jesus more than ever.

This succinctly captures the prevailing spiritual scenario of the churches in the event of COVID-19 pandemics. The emphasis place on online spiritual connectivity' man not be entirely a positive outcome as against the age-long sit-in attendance of believers. The 'new online' spirituality may appear too inadequate as many have not been property groomed spiritually and thus may not have enough stability to stand on their own. The online ministry is quite selective as it has little or no relevance to rural ministry as people do not have access to such 'luxury'. In a nutshell, the effects of COVID-19 could be both positive and negative. People's negative reactions to spirituality may fizzle out after sometime as people merge from the COVID-19 isolations and impacts.

4.2. The Place of God in the Post Covid Economy

This section may appear to look inappropriate in line with Christian theological thinking but this is very far from it. Theistic notion affirms that God is far mightier and greater than any natural or man-made disaster, including coronavirus. The presence of such experience presents some dissenting views about God. To some the COVID scourge portends that either God is far



removed from his creation thus being indifferent to his creation or is not as powerful as we think He is or at worst he is not omnipotent as we assume. The challenges posed to humanity by COVID-19 pandemics do not put God into trial but rather affirms his sovereignty. In the bible, God's sovereignty over sickness and mishaps has been affirmed. A practical application of the lessons from Psalm 91 portrays God's almightiness even in the face of calamities and human challenges. The human perception may tend to put God into the dock for critical examination for his tacit silence in the face of a vociferous plague. This does not negate his sovereignty neither does it diminish his person. God remains good and does not intermingle with evil. (Ex 34:6, 1 Cor 16:34). Lutzer (2006) offers plausible interpretation to the Christian position on God and disasters and events that shake the world such as coronavirus thus.

But when we turn the bible, we are offered insight, not all the questions are answered but at least we can see that God has not overlooked the flaws on his planet. He is neither indifferent nor unaware of what has gone wrong with nature. For openers, there is a vast difference between the world God originally created and the one that erupts with earthquakes, mudslides and floods. Something is out of joint and our world awaits God to make it right. We are living on a once perfect but flawed planet. Sin changed everything.

God is the God who reigns over coronaviruses (Piper, 2020). He is neither silent about the deadly plague neither is he powerless. He is the rock of comfort, transcendent, sovereign, righteous, good and loving (cf Lev 11:44, Ps 31:19) His Sovereignty is succinctly put in the fact that he can do and in fact does do all that he decisively wills to do. Hence, there is no force outside him that can thwart or frustrate his sovereign will. (Piper, 2020). The presence of coronavirus seemingly appears to convey several meanings to humanity. God's ways are inscrutable. Piper (2020) suggests that God is giving the world in the coronavirus outbreak a physical picture or a moral horror and spiritual ugliness of God belittling sin. The pandemic obviously have sent out the clear message of the reality of divine judgment, the need for total implicit trust in God, a renewed sense of human community and solidarity and the need for true repentance in the event of an imminent *parousia*. The presence of evil does not challenge the almightiness of God nor his ability to save his people from a devastating plague. God's answer to the presence of disease and pandemics is in the redemptive work of Christ who bore our transgressions for our healing (Isaiah 53:5). God is not aloof or helpless in the presence of coronavirus but empathizes with our sufferings (Heb 4:15). Lewis (1960) in his meditation on the justification of God in the presence of evil and disease says, 'my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? The Church is saddled with the task of radiating the goodness of God through her caring



ministries to our communities and social concern for the societies. This tasks in great extent the contemporary ministries of the church in the given circumstance.

5.0. CONCLUSION

Christian apologetics is the task of defending the Christian faith against objection. The evolution of Coronavirus disease became a major health challenge not only negatively affecting socio-economic activities but religious practices which enjoyed unchallenged ascendancy in the times past. The presence of the pandemics does not diminish the sovereignty and almightiness of God but challenges the church to advance in the mission to care for humanity, feeding and taking care of the hungry and vulnerable thus fulfilling her mission to the world.

Competing Interest

The author has declared that no conflicting interest exist in this paper.

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