

*PANDEMICS AND THE CHURCH AND STATE IN
HISTORY*

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The ban on religious activities during the Covid-19 Pandemic[1] was perceived by many within the church as a resurgence of the age-old tussle over power and authority between the church and state.[2] The history of the church and state dichotomy is worthy of a brief review in the light of the prevailing circumstances for the purpose of pragmatic application. Historically the appearance of religion among ancient social constructs had predated state polities. However, it is important to observe that the humanistic nature of both endeavours had ensured the cohabitation and consistent Intertwining of their mutual interests over the centuries.

The juxtaposition of church and state interest over the centuries has a long and checkered history with roots in the Judeo-Christian religions. Even in primordial societies, priests found favour in the eyes of kings and vice versa since they were valuable in controlling people. The king kept the priest as a close ally because he held spiritual sway over the people and the king could take advantage of that for political gain while on the other hand the priest treasured their royal allies because they provided the political leverage to compel people physically to do the bidding of the priest if the need arises. Thus the parallel rise of the royal and priestly institutions over centuries of human evolution was to be expected. This accounted for the phenomenon of 'priest kings', especially within African religions.[3]

The primacy of western civilization during the Greco-Roman empire further advanced the ascendancy of the priestly institution over time. By 325 AD when Constantine became the sole emperor of the east and western parts of the Roman empire, he unified the western church at the council of Nicea and subsequently elevated the power of the church to levels yet unknown, to the extent that the power of the church eventually eclipsed that of the state.[4] The church became the sole custodian of power in the middle ages as the pope became the benefactor of all kings. Since church doctrine designated him as the representative of God on

earth, he thus reserved the right to ordain kings since the authority of kings ought to come from God himself. This reasoning equally evolved within African societies as the high priests of local gods also gained prominence as earthly sanctions to the power of kings. Coronations were never complete until the king or chief submitted himself to rituals overseen by the chief priest as a final validation of the political power of the Chief or king. Thus the perception of church and state in both African and European communities retained the religious institution as the validating structure for political authority.[5] Consequently, in view of this historical backdrop, it is no surprise that, the ban on church activities during the Covid-19 pandemic was highly resented by some churches globally.

This Romance would however last a couple of centuries and then fall into abeyance in the age of enlightenment. At this time the dark ages in Europe was waning and the age of reason had ushered in scientific advancement which glorified the accomplishments of men. This in turn elevated humanism as a social and political philosophy and by so doing turned the attention of men from God to themselves because of their accomplishment.[6] The results of these developments were tested in bloodshed of the reign of terror in the French Revolution of 1793. The revolution was the height of man's rise to himself. The authority of the church was soundly rejected and replaced with that of the republican principle of the rights of the people. The king and nobles were slaughtered signaling the end of divine authority and the rise of republicanism. [7]

Although the marriage of church and state has been effectively separated, the contest over who reserved final authority over the lives of people still remained to the modern and post-modern era. The strain in this contest became more pronounced when large scale threat to life and property is anticipated or experienced as in times of war or pandemics like the Covid-19 pandemic. Most importantly pandemics were viewed as ominous signs of supernatural imbalance between man and deities and as such the church held the keys to final resolution. This belief was often re-enforced by the fact that most pandemics in history defied medical treatment at the initial stages, thereby lending credence to the conviction that the supernatural were active components of the plague.[8] This was typified by the Bubonic plague in Europe that ravaged the continents during the middle ages (1347 through 1351) and as such the church should be seen providing solutions.

In fact theologians and some contemporary doctors agree that the epidemic had both religious and physical causes. The first and most important was God's judgment on a sinful humanity; the second was a lack of balance in the body's humors, or fluids. As with earthquakes, floods, and fires, medieval Christians assumed illness was a call to repentance. In response, some Christians, known as flagellants, began to ritually beat themselves as penance for their own and for the sins of others. Although groups of flagellants had existed since the

10th century, the outbreak of the plague radically increased their numbers. These new groups of flagellants appeared first in Hungary and Germany and then spread throughout the rest of northern Europe. They held processions through towns that lasted for as long as 33 days, each day representing one year in the life of Jesus Christ. These processions varied in size from just a handful of people to perhaps thousands in the largest processions. Flagellants traveled as a group and were led by a cleric. They went from town to town and at each stop, after a short sermon by the leader, the penitents would whip or flog themselves before moving on to the next town. This may not have been generally regarded as being effective, it nevertheless provided a largely religious population with solace in the supernatural plane. More importantly, it was seen as solution-oriented.

In modern pandemics however, the narrative among church leadership especially in Nigeria has viewed itself in different light regarding the provision of solutions. Essentially the ban on church services has not been perceived by clerics in Nigeria and some places around the world as part of the solutions that the church has the responsibility to provide; rather it has been viewed as a contest of authority. On the contrary, the origins of Judaeo-Christian traditions are firmly rooted in the creation of the nation of Israel in the desert of Palestine centuries ago. This process was an amalgam of both spiritual and secular structures validated by Jehovah himself. Thus in the issuing of medical instructions to the nascent nation of Israel, Moses the servant of God (Head of State) was instructed in Leviticus 13:1-40 to carry out thorough medical examinations on people exhibiting symptoms of a plague and to quarantine them. Furthermore in Isaiah 26: 20, the nation of Israel was mandated to stay indoors and shut their doors till the lord's indignation is past.

Since plagues are traditionally perceived as the lord's indignation by the church, it is logical to expect compliance with the founding principles of public health given to the nation of Israel in the Bible. More importantly, a cursory look at historical precedents also reveals compliance by the church without recourse to the age-old battle over authority. The classical example of St. Charles Borromeo, the great cardinal-archbishop of Milan comes to mind in an attempt to illustrate this point. A plague hit that city in 1576, and the Bishop ordered the churches closed, recognizing that contagion spread more rapidly in enclosed spaces with a large number of people. Consequently, he organized Masses in prominent residential intersections so that people could "attend" from the windows of their homes nearby; he also personally ministered to many of the sick, ultimately contracting and dying of the disease himself.

The essence of this narrative seems to be losing traction within some groups in Nigeria and abroad. While some are calling for defiance to the government's instructions as an affront on divine mandate regarding the gathering of the faithful, others are pointing to the historical

role of the church in providing practical solutions through both spiritual and public health strategies. In fact, as far back as the early Roman empire, early Christians were among those providing food, water and other assistance to victims of the Antonine Plague (165-180 CE), which killed some 7% to 10% of the Roman Empire's population. This same approach has characterized the church right down to the 1918 pandemic. [9]

The troubling dissonance in the character of the church in times of the current pandemic seems to have been initiated by a postmodern narrative in the role of the church anchored by hyper prosperity church factions in Nigeria and abroad. This emphasis on who controls the people rather than who takes care of them is troubling to the extent that it raises fundamental questions regarding the transient nature of the purpose of the Church in Nigeria. The legal character of the church has always been premised on being a charity organization which is why it receives tax exemptions in the first place. In this regard charity organizations during pandemics ought to validate their mandate by doing the work of charity. The church should match the government in every effort to bring relief to both victims of pandemic and the less privileged. Hence the church should be at the forefront of calls for quarantine in line with a biblical injunction (Leviticus 13) and the distribution of palliative measures to its congregants.

The balance between congregating and community service to humanity must be realized within the ambit of the proper interpretation of the scripture Hebrews 10:25. *'not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as in the manner of some, but exhorting one another and so much more as ye see the day approaching'* [10] While the bible is clear about the purpose of congregating (for exhortation and fellowship), it does not restrict the activity to the confines of buildings. The advancement of human civilization (as permitted by God) has redefined the meaning of congregating. Physical presence, touch and sight no longer define the basics of congregating. The infusion of virtual reality and technology into the fabric of human daily lives has recalibrated our tools of analyzing social structures in the 21st century.

Since the church is the custodian of the spiritual, functioning within virtual technology should even go to validate the needless nature of physical contact when it comes to the efficacy of spiritual remedies to life's challenges. It is unfortunate that in Nigeria and some African countries the state had to go to the extent of using law enforcement to disperse congregants in an effort to enforce public health strategies that were already outlined in the bible. Was this a lack of confidence in the biblical injunctions given to Moses? or the manifestations of a discordant relationship between church and state fuelled by the antics of postmodern theology. The questions that arise from this beg the issue of exploitation and control.

In my opinion, the central agitation of the church with regards to this pandemic and possible pandemics in the future should have been over the designation of the churches as entities providing essential and emergency services. This characterization should be based on the

original basis of the relationship between the church and state in which the church is viewed as a charitable organization providing medical, social and spiritual relief to communities. The emphasis of the church should not have been on rights to congregate but rights to work in parallel status with doctors, nurses, police, and other emergency services in providing much-needed relief. Finally, as opined by the catholic church, ‘the Church has direct authority from God Himself over the exercise of religion and the meaning of faith and morals. But this authority does not preclude cooperation with legitimate governmental entities in fostering the common good, which in fact is required by the Church’s own moral teaching.’

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