The Panacea for the Ravaging Covid-19: The Role of Religious Studies Students

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Abstract
COVID-19 has come as a shock to society, health systems, economies and governments worldwide. The pandemic has affected all strata of the society, leaving in its wake devastating consequences and unprecedented global challenges. The pandemic has exposed the hard times many people are facing, even in some of the world’s richest countries. It has also exposed the need for a collective action from all sectors of the society in tackling the multi-faceted challenges facing our world today. This paper posits that religious personnel at all levels have a crucial role to play as powerful stabilizing force enhancing trust and cooperation within and among communities. The paper examined the many ways stakeholders in religion have contributed their quota in ameliorating the impact of the pandemic in their various communities. The paper shall cover the invaluable role played by the Association of Religious Studies Students of the Lagos State University (ARAPSS) during the lock down within the university community and its environs. The study reveals religious studies as a field of study is not only a spiritual encounter but also an intellectual necessity, which opens for man inexhaustible treasures of sound thinking and right actions. The ARAPSS model of coping strategy highlight the potential for successful, context-specific solution in keeping hope alive within their communities. The methodology adopted by the paper is qualitative approach with the use of secondary sources.

Key words: Panacea, COVID-19, Pandemic, Quota, Religious Students

Introduction
The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two.
Nigeria confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on February 27, 2020, through an Italian business man (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020) since then the virus has spread rapidly claiming lives across the country. (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). The virus is much more than a health crisis, it is also an unprecedented socio-economic crisis which has portend vicious side effects on all strata of the society. It has exposed the existing cracks in the country’s social, political and economic systems including access to health services and social protection. (Aaron, 2020). The current public health emergency has definitely impacted negatively on the already fragile economy of the country eroding the limited gains made so far over the years. The economic paralysis have resulted in layoffs and furloughs mostly in the private sector, and this will probably continue as businesses remain shuttered and workers stay home. (Bachman, 2020).

There is no doubt that the virus has changed permanently the global system and exposed human weaknesses in all endeavors including medically. Presently, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19, however, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. The implication of this is that while the world awaits a potential drug in treating the virus we continue to experience devastating challenges from the pandemic. The challenges are far too enormous for any government to single handedly manage, therefore all hands must be on deck. Consequently, there is a need for a concerted effort in confronting the unprecedented challenge before us which requires a joint approach to curtail the impact and to cushion the potential damage on the citizenry and the economy. This is the time for all stakeholders including religion to play a vital stabilizing role within and among communities and, between people and the Government. This collective response plan, may very well be the only sustainable means of curtailing the impact of the pandemic, pending the discovery of a pharmaceutical solution.
In examining the burdens imposed on the world by the pandemic this paper advocates for a holistic approach from all sectors to partner with the government. It tries to consider the many ways the religious sector can and have contributed its quota in ameliorating the effects of the pandemic. Because human life is at stake this is the time for religious stakeholders to bridge the gap between the state and religion specifically on the war against COVID-19 in Nigeria and globally.

**Theoretical Framework**
The coronavirus pandemic (like any other pandemic) disrupts every aspect of people’s lives including religious life. COVID-19 has played different impact globally accounting for the diverse public policies used in containing the virus in individual countries. (Nanshan et al., 2020). In Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa the death toll is reasonably small compared to developed nations such as USA, Spain, Italy and UK meaning that the virus is not as deadly in Nigeria as witnessed in other countries (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). However, there are identified similarities in methods of limiting the expansion of the virus globally. Two of the fundamental methods are social distancing this means quarantine and a radical change in contacts between people and the lockdown approach requiring people to remain at home, only leaving for essential journeys. This is a severe measure, but also a logical way to combat the spread of the virus. While this appears to have slowed the spread of infection, the cost to the economy of such measures is considerably high. (Fernandes, 2020).

The mass lock down weigh most heavily on the poor, who are often part of the informal economy and thus dependent on face-to-face contact. For many of them, a day without work means a day without food. (Campbell, 2020). Palliative measures were employed by the government to cushion the impact on the poor such as food distribution and sharing of cash but unfortunately, many did not receive them. This led to many breaking the legal imposition of the stay-at-home order. The difficult situation faced by
many is observable from the comment of a citizen named Hezekiah who told Al Jazeera, “I know the lockdown is for our own safety, but I and my family needed to eat to survive. It was tough” (Mbah, 2020).

A patchwork of volunteer welfare programs and private sector-led initiatives are trying to make up for an insufficient government response. Such ventures are not new to religion therefore It is important that religious bodies in general take part in such laudable programs at this crucial point in time. History including the recent one has shown the active involvement of religious communities in such humanitarian response to those affected by pandemics. (Simonsen et al., 2018). For example, there are many literatures attesting to how Churches and religious communities in various countries took actions to help people affected by HIV and indicates educational activities in this regard. (Kagema & Mathai, 2018).

This proves that despite progressing secularization, religion is still a potent, long standing and pervasive force. The social power it generates can be used in helpful ways to slow the spread of the pandemic and to cushion the many challenges of the lock down. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate the many ways religious studies students of Lagos State University have impacted positively on the COVID-19 response. The study shows that faith leaders and their organizations can and should serve as crucial allies in the fight against COVID-19 particularly in places where government and its agencies have less influence or reach. Methodologies include qualitative approach with the use of secondary sources such as Books, Journals, Newspapers and Internet sources. The work aspires to contribute to existing scholarship on COVID-19 pandemic.

Religion is a global phenomenon and an imperative aspect of societal institutions. It carries an unquantifiable significance on a worldwide basis throughout all ages. In Nigeria, there has been prevalence of numerous
religions with among the main religious traditions, African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity to which all individuals are bestowed with the right to practice any of their choice. There is no compulsion in the practice of any religion because Nigeria is a secular country and all religions are considered to be equal. Despite her liberal status, religious norms and values has greatly influenced the people’s outlook on all strata of life. This is typical of many African societies like Nigeria, where religion, like language, lies at the very foundation of culture. It is a virtual binding force and the dominant rule of daily life. (Mulago, 1991). This is because religion is considered to be a long standing and pervasive force which cannot be wished away by new ideologies or technology. (Harrison, 2015). It adds credence to all other social institutions this is probably one of the reasons why religious injunctions are inculcated in the people’s mindset right from childhood. (Magesa, 1997).

With emphasis on secularism, religion has gradually lost the central position it used to hold in the society. This has resulted in varied attitude of people to religion, some are fanatical about it while others are liberal. However, irrespective of our attitudes to it one thing is clear, religion is always with us at every moment of life, in our innermost beings and with regard to the great or minor event of life. (Idowu, 1979). The relevance of religion in this modern age of science and technology has continued to generate controversy which as confronted the subject and its teachings in schools. (Prothero, 2018). It is believed science and religion originate from different perceptions of reality which represent distinct ways of approaching experience. Science is viewed as descriptive and religion as prescriptive and typically involves supernatural forces or entities. Supernatural entities cannot be investigated by science. In this sense, science and religion are separate and address aspects of human understanding in different ways. (Kowalski, 2018). The strict demarcation between science and religion devalued the pride of place given to religion in pre-colonial Nigeria.
In pre-colonial Nigeria, society was anchored on moral teachings which were drawn from religion. These teaching was central to all tribes with its emphasis on the intrinsic value of human life. Society served as the means of ensuring that religious norms are sustained from one generation to another. The young were instructed on social obligations and the inculcation of good manners, through religious teachings centered on the Supreme Being and the influence of the spirits, which frequently intervened in people’s lives. (Mbiti, 1969). Under this traditional system of education, each person in the community is practically trained through informal and vocational system which is usually integrated into the daily activities of the household. It is a lifelong learning process in many cultures. A holistic system, in which storytelling, proverbs and myths play an important role while the vocational training provides the avenue for apprenticeship, to learn under a professional cultic personnel. This oral method of master-scholar relationship system through observation and imitation, is usually until the trainee becomes a trained specialist. (Munroe et al., 2013).

Islamic scholars from Wangarawa heralded the introduction of formal education in Nigeria in the 13th century. (Fafunwa, 1974). Islam brought Arabic education which conferred on those who possess it, spiritual, political and social influence. (Mkpa, 2013). By the 16th century, Islamic studies had spread throughout the country consolidated by the contributions of some northern leaders like Abdullahi Bayero (emir of Kano) who built an Islamic school. This continued to grow and expanded in scope to eventually become Bayero College Kano and later the present day Bayero University Kano. (Farouk, 2001). Many institutions including tertiary have sprung up over the years in many parts of the country for the purpose of Islamic education and practices. However the limitation of this education is the focus on Arabic language which is not the lingua franca.
With the coming of the Christian missionaries Christian religious education was introduced and it became the bedrock of western education in Nigerian schools. In fact all other subjects were regarded as extensions of religious education. (Rothgangel et al, 2014). It was the core subject for all students irrespective of religious affiliation. This is not surprising as the main objective of the Christian missionaries was to use education as a means of conversion. However, when the colonialists came on board their style of education showed they were not interested in pursuing a religious agenda. (Yandaki, 2015). Under colonial government, religious knowledge did not find much favour in the policy of the colonial administration in the latter part of 1800s/19th century because it was not allowed in government schools. (Osokoya, 1989). At the secondary school level the curriculum included British History, Geography, English Language and Literature including Drama. These were regarded as the main subjects while religious studies and some Nigerian languages were considered as optional subjects. (Mahadi, 1996). It was a curriculum that separated knowledge into the rational episteme as opposed to the esoteric episteme. By the time the Europeans made contact with Africa, secularism had been firmly entrenched in their worldview. Thus, the state and religion were regarded as separate entities whose entanglement must be minimal. (Davidson, 1992).

This is completely at variance with the African concept of the world. Africans believe in the unitary overarching ethos of religion as fundamental to all other institutions. To Africans, it is the spiritual that controls the physical and both worlds enjoy an interdependent relationship. Any enterprise that does not have a religious flavor is not regarded as suitable for human development and progress. Religious and moral values are considered to be a highly sensitive area which should not be approached simply from a narrow curriculum perspective nor reduced to a mere transmission of knowledge. Consequently, this approach that minimized the significance of spiritual development as none profitable venture in a
secularized world set a pattern of minority status for religious knowledge that has survived till date. It is observable that religious knowledge does not enjoy any dominant influence in the present national policy on education. It is now a non-vocational elective subject. This has affected the outlook and the interest in the study of religion especially at the tertiary level. (Bosco, 2016).

The demand of modern day reality has deemphasized the value of religion. Those who feel they want to make it “big” in life and enjoy enviable status in the society believe that religious studies as a career discipline is a means of killing that dream. The discrimination given to scholars of religious knowledge and indeed the rest of the humanities leaves more to be desired. There are no prospects for employment for the many graduates of religion and other humanities subjects. This has resulted in loss of interest in higher institutions since it does not facilitate gainful employment in modern day Nigeria. (Snibbe & Hazel, 2005). Many go into these subjects only as a last resort knowing the problems they will face when they shall have completed their studies.

Interestingly, religious studies at the tertiary level offer students the opportunity to understand the many religious traditions in Nigeria. The aim is to provide students with the necessary tools for the construction of their own personal worldviews and identity in a multi-religious and multicultural society. It provides a basis for interpersonal relations and social tolerance since religion is centered on character moulding and identity building in general. It is concerned with the moral development of the citizens which is critical to the progress of any society. This is aptly expressed by Omoregbe:

The most important aspect of in the development of the human person is his moral development. Moral maturity is a mark of human development, and is the most important
aspect of national development. Indeed, it is a condition-sine-qua-non for national development. For we cannot talk of the development of a country if its citizens are morally underdeveloped and immature. The moral development of its citizens must precede other aspects of development otherwise the process of development would be obstructed by the immorality of the citizens (Omoregbe 1998).

The disintegration of religious education at all tiers of the educational system has been blamed for the moral decay of our society today. (Familusi, 2018). Unethical conducts have become so endemic that nothing seems to work in Nigeria. Obviously, no society can develop in the atmosphere of moral decadence. Anwukah (Anwukah, 1991) has argued that no matter how the teaching of religion is de-emphasised in the scheme of things in the current Nigerian educational process, religious knowledge or the teaching of religions has a legitimate purpose. Thus religious knowledge needs be given a renewed emphasis because apart from helping pupils learn from and about their religious beliefs, it is invaluable in contributing to shaping society towards the national goals of Nigeria, which are: A free and democratic society, A just and egalitarian society, A united, strong and self-reliant nation, A great and dynamic society, A land full of bright opportunities for all citizens (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1996). This is probably why Stephen Prothero, suggests that all individuals should know the basic beliefs of all the major religions. He further posits that all public high schools and colleges should require all students to take one course in religious studies. (Prothero, 2007). It is believed that the principles of religious education if properly channeled would contribute immensely to growth and development of Nigeria. This segment argues that this is what is required if we desire to see a better Nigeria.
Religion Students as Ambassadors of their Faith Community in a COVID-19 Era.

The university system is another world on its own, a colossal power house that feed the society with its much needed human resources to keep all sectors functioning. Religious stake holders which include religious leaders, teachers and students receive both theological and academic training from this citadel of knowledge to enrich themselves and their experience about the most current facts of any given religion. The vast level of study prepare them not just for priesthood but also exposes them to many practical courses that enable them to be relevant to meet world challenges. (Revised LASU Curricula, 1996). Religion Students are trained to provide physical infrastructure and complex social networks that can be leveraged for a wide range of issues. This makes them well-positioned to respond and communicate information and teachings to their communities in times of crisis. It is a popular fact that in times of world crisis religious communities have never been found wanting. They have always played active role in ameliorating the sufferings of humanity at this crucial times. (Schnitker, 2013). In this unprecedented time of COVID-19, religious studies students of Lagos State University operating under the umbrella of the Association of Religion and Peace Studies Students (ARAPSS) has lived up to this traditional role. The association’s social service programming is small, localized efforts that responded to acute community needs yet an invaluable contribution that cannot be overlooked. The students were able to contribute their quota within the university community and its environs in the following ways:

1. By Giving Religion A Human Face:

   Giving religion a human face connotes that one allows religion to act as an agency of building network for the advancement of humanity. (Rock, 2011). For any response to be meaningful it should be a practical and tangible approach for those suffering from COVID-19. Religion is not solely about having a personal relationship with God it also connotes having a
meaningful relationship with fellow human beings since we are all integral members of a religious community of faith. It is therefore mandatory that we complement our faith in God with works by initiating innovative and creative practical response to human needs. (Haynes, 2007). The practice of religion becomes profitable to humans when it becomes the medium for expressing religious values such as love, empathy, respect harmony and progress to one another. The most valuable and crucial support one can give in this COVID-19 era is solidarity. It can be all too easy for COVID-19 patients to feel isolated from mainstream society, particularly with the measures put in place to curb its spread. This is the time that standing in solidarity with them will be much valued. It is believed the first step to healing is when the sick knows that people are there for them, showing love to them. Giving spiritual and emotional support to those experiencing health disruption and distress is very germane at this point in time. Working at grassroots level within the neighboring communities ARAPSS was able to give the much needed solidarity. The students formed small group fora through which the sick were closely monitored. Home visitations and phone calls were made to those who had survived the pandemic while virtual calls were made to those who were still in critical conditions in isolation centers. They were able to sustain their faith in God through edifying and counselling. As such ‘values in solidarity’ provides a unique insight into values people of faith draw from their religion or belief.

2. Hunger Relief Packages:
The importance of caring for the most vulnerable in the society is deeply embedded in many religious traditions. (Nelson, 2009). It is a fundamental injunction of the three popular religions in Nigeria. These religions stipulates that we must take cognizance of the needs of the less privilege in the society such as the widows, the elderly, the sick, the disabled and so on. (1Timothy 5:3-16; Quran 34:39; Odu IFA: Ika Ofun). Consequently, this is an area the students impacted greatly and which was well appreciated. Many Nigerians felt the pangs of hunger as the nation was on lock down.
Many religious outlets where the needs of these special group in our society are met could not function maximally. Despite many constrains, the students mobilized to respond to the pandemic’s impact on vulnerable communities. If this was not done the threat of COVID-19 won’t be as real for many homes as the threat of hunger. In order to address this ARAPSS built networks for raising funds first at the university level by tasking lecturers and other members of the university community and also prominent Lagosians who readily assisted both in cash and kind.(Dosunmu, 2020). The money raised was used to run a food distribution program for these specially privileged people and low-income students. Through this the students were able to reflect to their communities the priceless value in a shared relationship of trust and goodwill which flow from a sense of shared identity and mutual responsibility. (Scottish Interface Council. (2007).

3. Advancing Coronavirus Education:
This is an area faith-based organizations best aid in the global fight against coronavirus because they provide the backbone of daily life by offering spiritual and moral guidance through education. In times of instability, hardship, and uncertainty, individuals turn to religious leaders, whom they often trust more than media, government, and business officials for direction and information. In Nigeria for example, religious leaders have partnered with the government to educate the people on good hygiene practices, how to employ social distancing, and how to identify misinformation. (Muyiajayi, 2020). These straightforward faith-based organizations-led education campaigns could ensure the most vulnerable communities are both aware of dangers and better able to protect themselves. Conscious effort at sensitizing families and communities about the virus, its spread and prevention must be a priority of all religious stakeholders. This is necessary to correct the inaccurate and false information being peddled about the disease which have heightened fears and distrust. The various theories about COVID-19 which makes the virus seem like a
farce or a created conspiracy of the western people needs to be refuted. (Adelakun, 2020). Raising this awareness have been done through widespread digital infrastructure, such as the social media, live-streamed services and government tweeter handle. ARAPSS also contributed its own quota on raising awareness by organizing a 2day live webinar on COVID-19. (ARAPSS 2DAY Live Webinar, 2020). This was propelled by the realization that if these theories are not refuted our silence can be misconstrued as endorsement of superstitious and fanatical beliefs and statements. The students also heightened focus on hygiene and sanitation by educating members of their community on religious teachings and sacred texts that emphasize cleanliness as an element of holiness. In every pandemic, teachings and practices of religious community leaders serves as the compass providing the required direction for the people. ARAPSS encouraged positive behavioral changes by examples through a 2day educative campaign on the proper way of wearing nose masks, social distancing and hand washing. (ARAPSS, 2020).

4. Upholding Human Rights:
During previous public health crises, people with infection or disease and their families have often faced discrimination and stigma. Since the coronavirus outbreak, news reports from a number of countries have documented bias, racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against people of Asian descent. (Human Rights Watch, 2020). They are now fast becoming marginalized groups. The natural tendency to find groups to blame for social ills has ancient roots and modern manifestations, with ample examples in the HIV/AIDS, and Ebola pandemics. (Kiernan & Cohen, 2020). This is why people who tested positive hide their status or seek medical help in private hospitals which are not competent in handling COVID-19. A practical example is the chief of staff to President Muhamadu Buhari Mr Abba Kyari who died on April 17 at First Cardiology Consultants hospital in Lagos. (Olasupo, 2020). This is a time to be propagators against such dastardly act. There is a need for Religious communities to key into this
because they are at a vantage point of reaching out to a wider audience on a personal level. ARAPSS is set to collaborate with the strategies put in place by the management of the universities, the Ojo local government and the Lagos State Government to counter this prejudices. They are conscious of the fact that prejudices can only be countered through collective action. They are currently teaching on ways to overcome prejudice by emphasizing on common humanity. Promotion of attitudes and behaviors to uphold the dignity and rights of COVID-19 victims are vigorously pursued by student activist irrespective of religion.

5. **Spiritual Warfare:**
This pandemic has called for a reappraisal of our religious life style. This is the time to move closer to God in prayer. It is the job of every religious community to turn to God in prayer in order to find wisdom and connection with God. From time immemorial people have dealt with disasters, whether made by humans or by nature, through prayer. Our constant communion with God can be a healing balm for COVID-19's disruption, if applied judiciously. This will help us deal with the impact of the devastation. It will bring a surge of hope for the hopeless that humanity will persevere through this trying times. In the face of insecurity and vulnerability, prayer is the only robust spiritual response we as community of believers can advocate for until scientific breakthrough. God remains the last resort for humanity in times of disaster. Africans especially Nigerians are very religious people and this is a time to put this in action. (Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, 2011). It is believed that the rich diversity of religious expressions in Nigeria will move God to action and heal wounded hearts and souls. It is only when we bow in prayer with a humble heart before God then alone will God heal our land. (2 Chronicles 7:14). Prayer is one of the cardinal activities of ARAPSS. The students solicited with all members of the association and Nigerians as a whole to come together in prayer for the university community and the
nation as a whole. Special prayer sessions are still being offered for COVID-19 patients at the chapel and mosque of the university.

Conclusion
COVID-19 is a virus that has in no doubt devastated and will continue to devastate our communities in many ways that are out of our control. It has played different impact globally accounting for the diverse public policies used in the fight against the virus in individual countries. Irrespective of the approach used to combat the virus one thing remains a fact and that is it requires the joint effort of all sector to fight the pandemic to a standstill. From the religious sector a response that uses the power of interfaith solidarity is not optional but a divine command which religious stake holders must heed. It is a fact that all religions convey beliefs that lead to the welfare of humanity and a collective action from all religions will have a far reaching effect. Religion Students of the Lagos State University (ARAPSS) is one of the active, and effective networks of religious communities working in partnership with local initiatives to alleviate the plight of COVID-19 within and outside the university environs. Through palliatives, advocacy, and education, ARAPSS was able to provide their community with a sense of dignity and hope which is crucial in these uncertain times. These intervention helped to cushion the effect of the lock down and allowed the faithful to continue daily activities from their homes avoiding risking exposure to the virus. This has proven that religious organizations are not necessarily obstacles but crucial allies with the government in the fight against COVID-19. The pandemic as proved that religious leaders at various levels can play a vital stabilizing role much needed by the populace and a sustainable means of managing the impact of the pandemic.

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