

A Religio – Ethical Evaluation of Covid-19 Protocol And Vaccination Compliance In Nigeria

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Abstract

The reality of Covid-19 birthed a number of disruptions, modifications and protocols in society and its vaccine met with stiff opposition from some Nigerians, thereby jeopardizing efforts to mitigate its spread. This qualitative and explanatory study evaluates the level of compliance of Covid-19 protocols/vaccination, vis-a-vis religion and ethics in Nigeria with utilitarianism as theoretical framework. Findings show that many Nigerians do not observe Covid-19 protocols and are hesitant taking the vaccine for a number of reasons, chief of which borders on religion. This raises issues on the clash between religion and science; clash of rights of the government to protect lives and that of the individuals for autonomy, violation of basic freedoms and so on. The paper concludes that religion is encroaching into the space of science in this matter and recommends heightened sensitization by government and dispassionate cooperation of religious bodies on Covid-19 protocols and vaccination compliance.

Keywords: Covid-19, Protocol, Vaccination, Autonomy, Utilitarianism

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I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 pandemic and its concomitant adverse impacts on lives and businesses all over the world is quite pathetic. Covid-19 represents a disease caused by a novel corona virus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (SARS-COV2) that appeared in late 2019 and became a pandemic in 2020. SARS-COV2 is thought to have originated in bats as they were not previously identified in humans (Habib et al, 2021).

The epicenter of the outbreak of SARS COV2 is Wuhan, Hubei province, China. Owing to the contact of initial patients with animals and seafood, animal to human transmission was originally suspected. Later on, person to person spread was reported outside the epicenter. In a swift succession, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 and a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

In Nigeria, the first case of COVID – 19 was confirmed on the 27th of February 2020 in Lagos state, by the Federal Ministry of Health. As a result, the Federal Government, through the Federal Ministry of Health began to put measures in place to control person-to-person transmission and spread of the virus in Nigeria. Consequently, a Presidential Task Force (PTF) was inaugurated by the President to coordinate all strategic efforts towards containing the spread of the virus (Majemu, 2021).

Nevertheless, when the novel corona virus (Covid-19) was declared a pandemic in early 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the first case confirmed in Nigeria, some religious groups in Nigeria resorted to praying it away. While some religious leaders in the country were skeptical as regards the veracity of the existence of the virus, others treated it with kid gloves. It was this proselytized opposing narrative that compelled the office of communication (OFCOM), the British broadcasting regulator to sanction and prevent Pastor Chris Oyakhilome's Love World Television from airing in the British air space in May 2020, due to his strong conspiracy theory that associates Covid-19 pandemic to the development and launching of 5G networks (Ibrahim, 2020 as cited in Okoye and Obulor, 2021). In view of this, some religious leaders and their followers severally violated, with reckless abandon, the preventive measures that were put in place to checkmate the

spread of the virus by the Presidential Taskforce (PTF) on Covid-19, especially with respect to wearing of face masks, constant washing of hand, use of hand sanitizer, practice of social and physical distancing, lock down rules, ban on religious gatherings and so on. Some religious leaders have also kicked against the Covid-19 vaccines, citing eternally debilitating and earthly morbid consequences for anyone who takes such vaccines. This, no doubt, is not unconnected to the low turnout for Covid-19 vaccine. This situation therefore ignited the famous age-long clash (real, imagined or misconstrued) between science and religion.

While religion (not in the generic sense), on one side, flouts and disregards government directives on Covid-19 protocol and vaccination, it has also played phenomenal roles in the fight to limit the spread and community transmission of the virus through provision of face masks, alcohol based sanitizers, drugs, ventilators and so on to individuals and communities. Government, on the other spectrum, seem to be violating certain rights of individuals by making attempts to impose strict adherence to Covid-19 protocols and vaccination on the people. These issues prompt a complex mix of religio-ethical questions. Is the government culpable for enforcing adherence to Covid-19 protocol and vaccination? Is religion overstepping her boundary? Is the issue of sanctity of human life germane in this case and whose responsibility is it to protect lives of citizens? Is there a collision between religion and science, especially with respect to Covid-19 in Nigeria? At what point is freedom of religion violated and is there a line between religious sensibilities and government responsibilities. This study attempts to interrogate the above probing questions and more.

Thus, this explanatory research paper evaluates Covid-19 protocol and vaccination in Nigeria vis-à-vis religion and ethics. It sources qualitative data through participant observation, interviews, and publications and analyzes same qualitatively. This study correlates Covid-19 protocol and vaccination compliance to religious convictions and sentiments and bares the stranglehold of religion on social phenomena. Utilitarianism as espoused by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill forms the theoretical basis for this study. The rest of this paper will take the following layout: theoretical framework; Covid-19 protocol and vaccination in Nigeria; querying a possible clash between science and religion; the role of religion in Covid-19 protocol and vaccination compliance; a clash of rights (responsibilities) of the individual and the government; upholding the sanctity of human life in relation to Covid-19, its protocols and vaccination; ethical evaluation of the phenomenon under investigation; finding a common ground for human flourishing and then conclusions.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ethical theory adopted for this study is utilitarianism. The classical formulation of utilitarian moral theory is contained in the writing of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Mackinnon and Fiala, 2018). Utilitarianism is an ethical theory based on the principle of utilizing, the principle of the greatest good, or the principle of the greatest happiness. According to utilitarianism, utility is the moral standard; it is the criterion with which good actions are distinguished from bad actions. This means that those actions which produce or tend to produce pleasure or happiness are good, while those that produce or tend to produce pain are bad. Bentham notes that humans are by nature, pleasure - seeking and pain - avoiding beings. 'Nature,' he avers, has placed humankind under the governance of two sovereign masters -pain and pleasure.

Similarly, Mill as cited in Van Camp, et al (2015) argues that the principle of utility, or the greatest happiness principle chooses the action that creates the greatest happiness for all concerned as the foundation of all morality. According to Mill, all other principles are "secondary principles" which are adopted because following them will help humans maximize happiness. Furthermore, Mill who championed the cause of utilitarianism and developed it in his book - *Utilitarianism* gave a very clear expression of what utilitarianism means thus:

the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, utility or the greatest happiness principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. But happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain, by unhappiness pain and the privation of pleasure (Mill, as cited in Omoregbe, 1993, p. 235).

Furthermore, Mill emphasized the social and altruistic aspect of utilitarianism. The happiness with which utilitarianism is concerned is not according to him, necessarily the happiness of the doer of an action, but the greatest happiness of the greatest number of people. As such, utilitarianism is therefore not egoistic, but requires the actor to be "strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator" (Mill, as cited in Omoregbe, 1993, p. 23). The moral rules which forbid humankind to hurt one another (in which one must not forget to include wrongful interference with each other's freedom) are more vital to human well-being than any maxims however important, which only point out the best mode of managing some departments of human affairs (Mill, as cited in Graham, 2011, p. 102).

However, utilitarianism may appear to justify any action just so long as it has better consequences than other available actions. Therefore, cheating, stealing, lying, and breaking promises may be justified, depending on whether they maximize happiness in some particular cases. In response to this type of criticism, contemporary utilitarianism, often focus on general rules instead of on individual acts. Thus, the version of

utilitarianism that focuses on rules is called ‘rule utilitarianism.’ This is contrasted with act utilitarianism, which focuses solely on the consequences of specific individual acts. Both act and rule utilitarianism are forms of utilitarianism. They are alike in requiring individuals to produce the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest numbers of people. However, they differ in what they believe one ought to consider in estimating the consequences of an action (Mackinnon and Fiala, 2018). Act utilitarianism states that one ought to consider the consequences of each act separately. Rule utilitarianism, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that one ought to consider the consequences of the act performed as a general practice. Another weakness of utilitarianism as an ethical theory is that it emphasizes ‘the greatest number’ and not necessarily ‘everyone’ involved. This, sort of, allows for exclusion. Such exclusion of even the minority is frowned at in social ethics. Notwithstanding its weaknesses, this study draws insights from utilitarianism, especially as expounded by John Stuart Mill in its analysis of the existing state of affairs and realities as regards the observation of Covid-19 protocol and vaccination in Nigeria vis-à-vis religion.

COVID-19 PROTOCOL AND VACCINATION IN NIGERIA

The novel corona virus pandemic is perhaps the biggest scourge and uncertainty that the world has faced since the Spanish flu of 1918-1920 and the world wars of 1914 and 1944 (Abati 2020, as cited in Okoye and Obulor, 2021). The pandemic presented an unprecedented global challenge that affected every community in every nation of the world. It caused the system of work, education, finance and domestic lives to grind to a halt, affecting nearly every aspect of people’s lives (UNICEF, 2020). In the case of Nigeria, since the date of first confirmed case on February 27, 2020, the number of infected person has been on the increase, sometimes fluctuating. It has led to the death of people in their thousands, some recorded, and many not recorded as a result of ignorance, poverty, lack of access to health care facility, skepticism about the disease, inadequate health care facilities, paucity of record keeping mechanism, and so on. These have frustrated efforts by the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) to keep accurate statistical records of infection, transmission and deaths of Covid-19 in the country. The mode of transmission of Covid-19, according to the World Health Organization are through contact with respiratory droplets or saliva of an infected person or contact with the virus on any surface.

Responding to the rising menace of the virus, the Federal Government of Nigeria, as well as some state governments, in an attempt to contain its spread and transmission within the country, issued ‘stay-at-home’ or lockdown order in March/April/May, 2020 as the case may be, as the situation started spiraling out of control. The lockdown measures includes ‘stay-at-home’, closure of schools, places of worship, market places, offices, businesses, transportation, intra and interstate travel and imposition of curfew. Furthermore, certain protocols were also put in place to curtail the transmission of the virus, such as; compulsory use of face masks, hand sanitizers and regular washing of hands with soap in running water, social distancing and so on. Also, all social activities were prohibited (Ibrahim 2020, as cited in Okoye and Obulor, 2021).

Attempts were also made to institute other measures like tracing of people who had contact with infected persons and isolating them, screening of people who showed symptoms, quarantining and treatment of infected persons, and so on. When the government started relaxing the initial total lockdown, attendance for religious activities was limited to a few number at a time (Nwaka, 2020). Unfortunately, these attempts were somewhat stalled by the activities of recalcitrant citizens who were either driven by desperate search for daily bread or disenchantment with the magnitude of attention being given to an issue they consider ‘trivial’ compared to other more serious issues Nigerian citizens are facing. More so, some other Nigerians drew their skepticism towards Covid-19 protocol and vaccination from religious sentiments.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN THE RATE OF COMPLIANCE TO COVID-19 PROTOCOL AND VACCINATION IN NIGERIA

Indeed, religion is a complex phenomenon. It plays preponderant roles in society. Composed of an intricate interplay of beliefs, symbols, myths, rituals, mystical experiences, and social interactions, religion serves the society by bolstering or undermining the society’s structure and culture. Thus, sometimes galvanizing and supporting social alterations and at other times, doggedly defending social statics. As such, it is worthy to note that mainstream Christian Churches such as the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Methodist Church, and others as well as Muslim authorities, such as the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) accepted and supported government restrictions by complying with them. They also instructed their members to abide and practice same (Campbell, 2020). This is diametrically opposed to the attitude of a number of Pentecostal Pastors, some Islamic clerics and their adherents who seemed to be opposed to the lockdown and other corresponding measures put in place by the government. They described it as a satanic maneuver targeted at preventing people from worshipping God. This made some of them violate the lockdown measures with reckless abandon. Consequent upon this, some Pastors and Imams were arrested while others were suspended for violating state imposed measures that were targeted at arresting the spread and community transmission of Covid-19 virus (Okoye and Obulor 2021). Abati (2020) corroborates Okoye and Obulor’s position, adding that

some Christian leaders went as far as claiming that whoever went for Covid-19 testing would be infected with Covid-19 which some pastors described as a scheme of the anti-Christ. Abati (2020) also describes a scenario in Kaduna where the taskforce on Covid-19 protocol observation dispersed the crowd in a mosque and, in reprisal, some of those dispersed stormed a police station and torched vehicles in the compound claiming to be defending their right to pray and assemble.

In another development, some religious leaders claimed to have a quick solution to the pandemic. For instance, late Pastor T.B. Joshua predicted that Covid-19 would disappear after a heavy rainfall on March 27 and Prophet Elijah Ayodele claimed he had a holy water and holy oil that cures the disease. More so, on April 13, 2020, Goodheart Val Aloysius of Father's House International Church in Calabar asked the government to assemble all the people that had tested positive for Covid-19 in an isolation center for him to heal them. To demonstrate his seriousness, he called on the government to arrest him if he failed to heal them (Nwaka, 2020). Okoye and Obulor (2021) therefore note that the utterances and positions of some religious leader whom their congregants look up to for direction is counterproductive in the fight against the virus.

Furthermore, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, of Believers' Love World (aka Christ Embassy) and Bishop David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church (Winners' Chapel) who arguably represent the current dominant version of Christianity in Nigeria and who are also active on the global scale were cited making statements that were apparently anti-Covid-19 protocol and inundated with skepticism about the reality of Covid-19 (Ugba, 2020). For instance, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, in April 2020, stated that the corona virus was linked with the 5G network. According to him, the virus and the network were in fact part of a grand plan to establish a dreadful 'New World Order'. In this conspiracy theory, Bill Gates, the owner of Microsoft is said to be complicit in establishing this new world order and reducing the world's population through vaccination.

It is worthy to note that it was not all pastors or religious leaders that propagated such theories. For instance, Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC) debunked Pastor Chris Oyakhilome's unfounded claims about the relationship of the virus and 5G internet connection (Ibrahim, 2020). More so, during the new year eve, on December 31, 2020, Pastor Chris further linked his controversial 5G theory with nanotechnologies, and with Covid-19 vaccine. At that time, his audience were persuaded to believe that the vaccine includes nanoparticles actionable through the 5G network. He claimed that with the immunization, one would become an object, like any other part of the internet of things (IOT). According to Pastor Chris, being vaccinated implies that one is possessed with 'the beast', and is no more a (saved) member of the body of Christ. The reservation displayed by these Pastors may not be unconnected to the fact that the measures put in place to limit the spread of the virus are averse to the serene operation of Church activities, in which mass-gathering represent a critical element (Meyer, 2021).

With the breakthrough in Covid-19 vaccine in late 2020 and subsequent shipping of AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine into Nigeria within the first quarter of 2021, came another bout of resistance from Nigerian citizens. This time around, among other reasons, brandishing religion as well as distrust of the intentions of the producers of the vaccine as reasons for the resistance and rejection of the vaccine by many citizens. Then came a season of another cycle of conspiracy theories against the vaccine from within and outside Nigeria, no thanks to the internet and social media that helped them spread like wildfire. Among the conspiracy theorists, are religious leaders and laity who propagate religious sentiments to demonize the lock down measures, restrictions on religious gatherings as well as the vaccine. They covertly or overtly dissuade their followers from taking jabs of the vaccine.

Despite the seeming clash between religion and science, as seen in Covid-19 vaccination and protocol in Nigeria as well as in other instances, religious organizations have apparently played some crucial roles in mitigating the spread and community transmission of the virus through aggressive sensitization and provision of running water at strategic places, face masks and hand sanitizers (Majemu, 2021). Some religious groups and leaders equally assisted with food provisions to cushion the plights of citizens during the lockdown.

As earlier mentioned, most orthodox Churches as well as the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) recognized the existence and threat of Covid-19 pandemic consequent upon which they took necessary steps to ensure their followers abided by and observed lockdown measures initiated by government in order to eradicate the virus or slow down its spread (Okoye and Obulor 2021). Thus, while it is easy to identify pitfalls in the way some religious groups conduct themselves with respect to Covid-19 protocol and subsequent vaccination which emanates from their spurious claims and theories with religious garb about the virus, it is also pertinent to commend the phenomenal efforts of religion at containing and mitigating Covid-19 in Nigeria.

Be that as it may, there are Nigerians who without recourse to religion, are irritated at the fuss about Covid-19 and believe that the threat from corona virus is exaggerated and that government is inflating figures of infected persons and deaths in order to fuel such threats and syphon public funds allocated for the fight against the virus.

A CLASH BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION?

In the annals of human existence, religion and science have always been perceived as phenomena that are incompatible. This has generated huge debate among scholars of scientism and religion. However, Isiramen (2005) as cited in Owete et al, (2012) is of the view that conflict exists and persists when some religious scholars and fundamentalists tend to engage themselves in the maximum interference of dogma with theory, presenting religion as the only means by which a phenomenon can be authenticated when it is in ultimate harmony with natural science. On the other hand, when scientists begin to hold tenaciously to the position that the scientific method is the only accepted means for ascertaining the truth, conflict arises.

Nonetheless, the clash between religion and science is fore grounded within the purview of the current discourse. Practically, both science and religion are used as the basis of statements about the truth (Gaskell et al, 2010). From the scientific perspective, scientific truth trumps any other form of knowing, and some scientific authorities argue that religion is at best, wishful thinking and at worst, a malignant force in society. Also, religious faith that once enjoyed a field day in the past no longer enjoys same as an exclusive privilege as science has become just as pervasive in the lives of individuals. However, there are both scientists and religious leader who see no intrinsic conflict between these two pillars of truth. Therefore, the seeming conflict between religion and science with respect to Covid-19 truths is uncalled for and artificial.

Moreover, religion has its own logic and approach to reality which is opposed to scientific approach. Both have structured their methodologies to suit their objectives and not contradict other approaches. From the point of view of their methods, only an artificial conflict is possible. Hence, science would be demanding too much if it wants to verify issues of religion in a laboratory set-up and vice versa. Practically, religion and science are not mutually exclusive. The rise of one does not necessarily connote the fall of the other. For instance, there is no such thing as an empirically verifiable world on the one hand and a meta-empirical world on the other hand existing apart from and with no link to the other. In reality, both worlds are dimensions of the same reality (Umoh, 2012).

As regards Covid-19 and vaccination, records have repeatedly shown that there is an inverse relationship between vaccination rate and Covid-19 infection rate. In places where vaccination rate is very high, Covid-19 infection rate has continued to drop and vice versa. Therefore, religious organizations must note that scientific truths do not clash with religious truth. Much as they are not mutually exclusive, both have their unique horizons within the same reality. That space ought to be respected.

A CLASH OF RIGHTS

The federal government of Nigeria and state governments adopted or adapted WHO's as well as Nigerian Center for Disease Control's (NCDC) prescriptions and proscriptions to help mitigate the spread of the virus. These prescriptions and proscriptions are otherwise known as Covid-19 protocol. Again, with the availability of vaccines for the virus, the Nigerian government, at all levels, also require 'eligible' citizens to get vaccinated to improve herd immunity and possibly bring the spread of the virus to a halt. Recently (September 2021), Edo and Ondo state governments announced compulsory Covid-19 vaccinations for adults. Even after a court restrained the Edo state government from going ahead, it insists the order stands. The federal government is also currently considering making Covid-19 vaccination compulsory for civil servants (Clowes, 2021).

Worthy of note, is the fact that it remains the cardinal duty of any democratic government to protect individual rights so that citizens in a democracy can undertake their civil obligations and responsibilities, thereby strengthening the society as a whole. Other responsibilities and duties of the government to the people include maintenance of law and order, protection of lives and properties, promotion of democracy and social justice, provision of social welfare services, promotion of economic development, protection of human rights and maintenance of external relations.

Nonetheless, the exercise of the right of the government to protect the lives of citizens from being ravaged by Covid-19 and ensure their welfare seem to be impeding on the citizens' fundamental human right to worship on one hand, and right of autonomy on the other hand. As a moral principle, autonomy refers to a person's rational capacity for self-government or self-determination. It is the ability to direct one's own life and choose for one's self. Individuals have the power to make rational decisions and moral choices. They therefore must be treated with respect which means not violating their autonomy by ignoring or waiving their ability to choose their own paths and make their own judgments (Vaughn, 2017). However, autonomy does not empower the individual to do things that are outlawed, irrational or detrimental to self, other individuals or the society.

Therefore, the question arises: is mandatory Covid-19 vaccination in Nigeria right? While it appears that enforcing strict compliance of Covid-19 protocol and vaccination violate fundamental rights of citizens, citizens on the other hand, have violated government's restrictions and guidelines which directly derives from government's responsibility and right to protect lives and properties, as enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. Moreover, it is absurd to sacrifice public good (public health) on the altar of individuals' rights.

In all, underneath other reasons- distrust for vaccine producers, accelerated and perhaps haphazard testing of vaccine, phobia from some unguarded comments of some over-population theorists or extreme racists who consider blacks guinea pigs for experiments, etc - for the obstinacy of Nigerian citizens in complying with Covid-19 protocol and vaccination lies the big masquerade – religious sentiments. In reality, some religious votaries are convinced that Covid-19 and its protocols and vaccines are satanic manipulations that are geared towards jettisoning the worship of God and on this basis, they hinge their demand for respect of their autonomy without any recourse to scientific facts about the virus which is obviously detrimental to them and others.

UPHOLDING THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

The sanctity of human life explains the principle of inviolability of human life. This means that every human life is sacred and must not be violated. This is to be contrasted with the ‘culture of death.’ Pope John Paul II’s exposition on the issue of the sanctity of human life in his famous encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) is quite instructive.

Covid-19 is responsible for the death of millions of people around the world. This has been on the increase with new and characteristically weird variants of the virus surfacing. It follows therefore, that the overarching issue in this debilitating situation boils down to human life which is sacred. Life is truly a gift to be held sacred and honored. People exercise, eat healthy, take medications, put on seat belt, and so on, just to protect life. Hence, to protect life in this pandemic, people ought to observe the laid down protocol and preferably, get vaccinated. It therefore appears that arguments from the autonomy principle as well as basic freedoms and rights of individuals against Covid-19 protocols and vaccination negate the sanctity of life, the precepts of altruistic utilitarianism as espoused by John Stuart Mill, social justice and cooperate welfare. In many cases, the most important effect of vaccination may not be the protection it offers to the person who receives the vaccination, who may be of relatively robust health and unlikely to be seriously affected by the disease. Rather, the more important effect may be the protection it offers to those who are much more likely to be seriously stricken by the disease if they were to contract it through exposure to those infected.

As regards Covid-19 protocol and especially vaccination in Nigeria, there are ethical questions begging for answers. For instance, the mandatory vaccination for Covid-19 raises many complex and difficult questions concerning the interplay of competing rights. On one hand, there is the issue of health and safety, on the other hand lies the issue of personal rights. However, mandating everyone to take the vaccine against their will constitutes a breach of the ethical principle of autonomy, freedom, personal choice and respect which they could interpret as a negation of their right and sanctity. Little wonder, some countries in the West, like the United States of America have continued to persuade and appeal to their citizens to observe Covid-19 protocol and take the vaccines and has refrained from forcing disinclined individuals to comply.

Contrarily, the absence of Covid-19 protocol and vaccine or lack of possible solution to the pandemic would be catastrophic and indeed a huge tragedy on humanity. This situation would amount to loss of precious human lives which translates to an abuse on sacred human lives. This is considered an abuse because, science provided a means to secure human life or reduce the morbid effect of the virus but it was rejected on the basis of protection of rights and perhaps, religious sentiments. This scenario is a typical example of a situation in which difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives especially ones that are equally undesirable.

COVID-19 PROTOCOL AND VACCINATION IN THE LIGHT OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

In any issue that has a common nexus with human life, relationships, rights and duties, *inter alia* ethical evaluations are usually pertinent for the general assessment and review of the situation. *Ipsa facto*, ethical principles are used in determining what ‘ought’ and what ‘ought not’ in order to arrive at common good. Therefore, the moral principles with which Covid-19 protocol and vaccination are assessed in this paper are as follows:

1. Autonomy: This simply denotes self-government; freedom to act or function independently or the capacity to make an informed uncoerced decision. In bioethics, autonomy refers to a person’s rational capacity for self-government; the ability to direct one’s own life and choose for one’s self. The principle of autonomy insists on full respect for an individual’s autonomy. One way to express the principle is that autonomous persons should be allowed to exercise their capacity for self-determination. Individuals therefore must be treated with respect, which means not violating their autonomy by ignoring or thwarting their ability to choose their own path and make their own judgments (Vaughn, 2017). Concerning Covid-19 vaccine, it must be noted that an individual has the right to accept or reject a drug (vaccine) irrespective of the prospects of such medication. However, utilitarianism demands that an individual ensures that the consequences of his/her actions produce happiness or pleasure to the greater number of people involved. Such mindset can make an individual to be considerate of others while exercising autonomy. Moreover, autonomy ought not be exercised such that it jeopardizes the government’s responsibility to protect lives and properties. As such, the onus lies on the government to relentlessly present the facts and relevant statistics that illustrate the inverse relationship between

Covid-19 vaccine coverage and infection rate. Perhaps, this will help individuals to exercise their autonomy altruistically based on factual information rather than mere sentiments or unfounded claims.

2. Nonmaleficence: The principle of nonmaleficence demands that harm must not be intentionally inflicted on another. In bioethics, nonmaleficence is the most widely recognized moral principle. Its aphoristic expression – “above all, do no harm” has been embraced by practitioners of medicine for centuries. A more precise formulation of the principle is, ‘do not cause unnecessary injury or harm to those in your care.’ In whatever form, nonmaleficence is the bedrock precept of countless codes of professional conduct, institutional regulations and government rules and laws designed to protect the welfare of patients and persons generally. The question is, with respect to Covid-19 protocol and vaccination in Nigeria, is harm being done and by whom? If the producers of the vaccine are insincere and mean to harm people or surreptitiously reduce population as being insinuated, then they are doing harm. This however, is unlikely the case as such conspiracy would be almost impossible to coordinate and conceal. The Nigerian government is definitely not doing any harm because their goal is the protection of public health. More so, could religion be doing harm to public good by trivializing the pandemic and demonizing the vaccine? Or could the reality of Covid-19 and vaccine breakthrough be deriding, disdainful or undermining the authenticity of religion as an authoritative source of truth? It is an established fact that both religion and science hold different kinds of truth and in different levels of reality and none should undermine the other (Wariboko, 2015). What leads to their clash is when one oversteps its bounds to interpret truth for the other. Covid-19 is an empirical reality which demands empirical measures such as the outlined protocol and vaccination to handle. It therefore follows that religion, in trying to provide explanation to a phenomenon outside its core domain, is perhaps doing a great disservice to humanity.

3. Beneficence: The principle of beneficence is believed by many, to constitute the very soul of morality. In its most general form, it says that one should ‘do good’ (be benevolent) to others. Beneficence enjoins one to advance the welfare of others and prevent or remove harm to them. Beneficence demands that individuals do more than just avoiding inflicting pain and suffering on others. It prescribes the promotion of the wellbeing of others. It goes therefore to say that protecting one’s self and especially others through observation of the Covid-19 protocol and vaccination amounts to good deed/outcome and prioritizing the welfare of others. This is what altruistic utilitarianism represent.

4. Utility: The principle of utility which is the theoretical basis for this paper states that one should produce the most favourable balance of good over bad (or benefit over harm) for all concerned. Since it may not be feasible to achieve the betterment of all concerned, this principle prescribes actions that yield the best overall outcome – maximum good and minimum evil. The utility principle supplements, but does not substitute other ethical principles. Going by the principle of utility, making efforts to contain overall harm to Nigerians is a right step in a right direction. Albeit, there could be pockets of restraints, agitations and clamour against rights violation, containing Covid-19 through scientifically ratified means will most likely, yield the best overall outcome (maximum good, minimum evil) on public health in Nigeria.

III. FINDING A COMMON GROUND FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

In order to find a common ground for human flourishing, this paper, drawing from its findings, proposes the following:

1. The Nigerian government should scale up education and awareness campaigns on Covid-19 within communities and possibly, provide incentives for vaccination rather than threatening and coercing them.
2. The act of making vaccination compulsory is not the only way to achieve high vaccination rates. Thus, research into ethical ways to further improve uptake rates among vaccine hesitant citizens is of great import. Academics, researchers and ethicists should be engaged for this purpose.
3. Religious organizations in Nigeria should constitute a national inter-religious committee for Covid-19 response where issues about Covid-19 will be chewed on and demystified. More so, religious guidance (drawn from religious traditions) supporting the observation of Covid-19 protocol - social distancing directives and other preventive measures as stated by health professionals and upheld by the Nigerian government should be put up by umbrella organizations of religious bodies in Nigeria and they should ensure strict compliance by their members.
4. Government should partner with religious organizations both in the formulation and implementation of policies, especially those that touch on humanitarianism. Such a synergy could help to reach logical conclusions on such issues since religion remains a force to reckon with in Nigeria.

IV. CONCLUSION

In Nigeria, the amphibious nature of religion and its concomitant ambivalence presupposes the fact that it is a phenomenon that constitutes one of the greatest sources of conflict at both national and state level. This assertion is evident in the clash between scientific proofs and religious beliefs in the Covid-19 saga in Nigeria. This is also the logic behind the adamant attitude of some religious people towards Covid-19 pandemic. They

find it difficult to come to terms with the reality of this novel development and the way it has obstructed 'normalcy' all over the world.

Notwithstanding, religion also play absolutely phenomenal role towards mitigating and containing the virus in Nigeria. This is seen in different modalities and changes that are put in place in Churches and Mosques in line with government's directives and for the purpose of protecting human life. However, amidst the obvious dilemma and myths about Covid-19 and vaccines, conspiracy theories, religious sentiments and skepticism in the public space, it is certain that, all things being equal, adherence to Covid-19 protocol and vaccination remain the ethically logical thing to do for the benefit of all or at least, a greater number (utilitarianism) and for the betterment of the society. This is however, not without counter arguments that raise questions about autonomy and other human rights of individuals. Hence, the government should continue to dialogue with religious organizations to join in spreading the scientific truths about Covid-19 protocols and vaccine which scientifically, are safe and effective. Most importantly, this truth is not counterintuitive to religion.

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