

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE INFODEMIC OF DISCORDANT PROPHECIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The present paper sets out to examine the phenomenon of proliferation of prophecies in Nigeria particularly as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus is on Christian prophecy as reeled out by some acclaimed Nigerian pastors. The approach is both analytical and phenomenological. It is discovered that, the infodemic of contradiction prophecies grossly deviate from the raison d'être of Christian prophecy. In the circumstances of COVID-19, it impedes the authentic efforts to combat the spread of the disease by dissemination of wrong information about the pandemic and brings about social division. The otherworldly and extraneous nature of the prophetic ministry vitiates its application to methodic or systematic solution of problems. Borrowing a concept from the field of public health, the paper sounds a caveat that such discordant prophecies should be "quarantined" and be taken with a pinch of salt. This simply makes a clarion call for skeptical attitude towards the prophecies.

Keywords: *infodemic, prophecy, covid-19 pandemic, extraneous, quarantine.*

Introduction

The preponderance of misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic poses a big challenge in the battle against the dreaded disease. At the Munich Security Conference on 15 February 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health

Organization (WHO), remarked that, “We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.” He further stressed that, the plague of infodemic spreads faster and more easily than the virus (Ghebreyesus). While the focus has predominantly been on the misinformation coming from the social circle, that from a more subtle and less susceptible source like religious circle which is often taken as sacrosanct by both members and nonmembers alike, seems to draw less attention. Above all, given the sensitive nature of religious issues in a volatile nation like Nigeria, to combat such misinformation becomes an uphill task. The present work isolates and examines one of such religiously motivated infodemic, the COVID-19 prophecies. The focus is on the prophecies reeled out by some popular Nigerian pastors or ‘men God.’ In the misty twilight of the COVID-19 pandemic, a critical mind, like the owl of Minerva which according to Hegel flies at the dusk, is compelled to ask questions or appraise how the prophecies which reverberated around the pandemic have fared.

The paper therefore examines the essence or *raison d’être* of prophecy, causes and effects of proliferation of prophecies on COVID-19 in particular and in the Nigerian society in general. To what extent does this modern trend synchronize with the ‘reason of being’ of the biblical prophecy? How does this proliferation impact on the control/spread of COVID-19 disease and on the society? How reliable and sustainable is the prophetic exercise as a tool for problem solving in the society? Though the prophetic malfeasance obtains in the three major religions in Nigeria (Christian, Islamic and African traditional religions), the focus of the present work is on Christian prophecy which leans heavily on the biblical prophecy. The paper gleans from available literatures, news and social media. As part of the phenomenological approach, the work sometimes allows the authors speak for themselves by way of direct citation of the authors. As we shall see, it’s quite informative that, the linguistic style of some of the citations in Pidgin English rhymes with the aberration of the discordant prophecies as distinguished from true or genuine prophecy.

In the first section, I present a bird’s eyes view of biblical prophecy which simultaneously serves as background and model for modern Christian prophecy. The *raison d’être* and mechanics of

prophecy is here also x-rayed. The second section is on proliferation prophecies especially as it relates to COVID-19 pandemic, nay infodemic of incongruous prophecies. The causes and effects are highlighted. The third section is a critical consideration on the phenomenon of COVID-19 and proliferation of prophecies. The final section concludes by sounding a caveat by way of adopting skeptical approach to prophecies.

The Nature and Mechanism of Biblical Prophecy: A Bird's Eyes View

A *prima facie* prejudice about the prophet is that he/she traverses the mystic or esoteric spiritual realm and is famous for reeling out predictions and messages which for most parts spell doom. But, a flashback to the biblical prophets shows that the prophet is not so much the one who traverses the spiritual realm as to be traversed by divine influence; nor so much an announcer as to be called to announce. His or her concern is most often about the present or current situation and problems bedeviling the immediate environment. These immediate concerns however, may have future consequences. The content of their message most times revolve around social justice, issues of fundamental religious importance and prevalent problems in their times. Joseph Ratzinger succinctly articulates the essence of the prophet in these terms:

What is a prophet? A prophet is not a soothsayer; the essential element of the prophet is not the prediction of future events. The prophet is someone who tells the truth on the strength of his contact with God— the truth for today, which also, naturally, sheds light on the future. It is not a question of foretelling the future in detail, but of rendering the truth of God present at this moment in time and of pointing us in the right direction. (vii)

Commenting on the etymology of the word 'prophet', W. F. Albright forcefully argues that the interpretation of the Hebrew word *nabhi* which means "prophet," as "speaker or announcer" does not properly convey the essence of the word. For him, the correct interpretation should rather be "one who is called (by God), that is to say, "one who

has a vocation (from God)” (231-232). This, he maintains, is in consonance with the Accadian verb “nabu” which means “to call” and which is predominantly employed in the passive voice. Albright further remarks that, “The king for instance, is acclaimed as the one whom the great gods (or a special high god) have called” (231-232). This submission finds an echo in Hvidt who averred that, “nabi” is the most common designation for “prophet,” which originally meant “one who is called” and came to mean “speaker, spokesman (of God),” or “proclaimer” (40). From the above etymology, one easily deduces that the prophet is called or chosen and not a voluntary exercise. The prophetic function flows or inheres from the encounter or experience with the caller who is God. In the Old Testament, Moses is regarded as the primary and a model of prophet on account of his personal experience of God which shaped his prophetic ministry. “The prophet is someone who, out of his encounter with God, speaks the Word of God to his contemporaries,” Hvidt concludes (36). This underscores the place of divine encounter in the office of the prophet.

The mechanics of prophecy raises serious philosophical concerns given that it is largely extraneous to normal operations of human faculties. Whether the divine message is communicated through direct inspiration, vision or psychic, the fact remains that the will and the mind suffer external and supernatural inducement and compulsion. Hvidt, on this note, affirms that, “the prophet is compelled to deliver his message” (54). This is said to be a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, indeed a gift. No doubt, the mind and will could still be functioning in their proper order without observable changes but at the same time, the element of volition is highly vitiated.

Is prophecy synonymous with prediction? To the above question, Brigit Curtin Frein responds that, “Prophecy is not simply synonymous with prediction; nevertheless, the ability to foretell the future is and was closely associated with prophecy (22). Today, the concept of prediction could be said to have more to do with conscious human action than a supernaturally induced act. Accordingly, “everybody uses his or her brain to make predictions about future events” states Karl Popper (xliii). Indeed one does not need to be a theologian to know that, “Christian prophecy is about much more than

prediction” (Hvidt 57). Here, one is tempted to ask whether what obtains among the Nigerian pastors or men of God can be properly called prophecy or prediction.

The phenomenon of false prophecy has always been a major problem bedeviling the exercise of prophetic ministry from the time of the Old Testament. “Prophecy is constantly challenged by false prophecy, which always represented the greatest threat to the true prophetic gift” (Ratzinger ix). From time immemorial different prophets have had to reel out contradictory prophecies. David Hume submits that many instances of forged miracles, prophecies, and supernatural events which have been exposed at different periods in history not only buttress human propensity to the extraordinary and the marvelous but also raises doubt about authenticity of such phenomena (Hume 85). Unfortunately, both true and false prophets claim to have been sent by God. This is why one has to be careful in dealing with prophets and their prophecies.

The COVID-19 Infodemic of Discordant Prophecies

The phenomenon of false and contradictory prophecies is not new in Nigerian society as an avalanche of such is harvested especially during campaigns for political elections and at the dawn of each New Year. This is when most men of God reel out cacophony of prophecies. Indeed many people have expressed reservations about the so called prophecies, arguing that they are mere predictions. The Nobel Prize winner, Wole Soyinka devoted one of his seminal works, *The Trials of Brother Jero* to satirize the ugly socio-religious malady of false prophecy. The world at large and Nigeria in particular have recently had to contend not only with the COVID-19 pandemic but also with a more devastating plague of misinformation including false prophecies. According to Merriam-Webster, the neologism ‘infodemic’ was coined in a 2003 Washington Post column by David Rothkopf. It states:

Infodemic is a blend of "information" and "epidemic" that typically refers to a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about something, such as a disease. As facts, rumors, and fears mix and disperse, it

becomes difficult to learn essential information about an issue. **Infodemic** was coined in 2003, and has seen renewed usage in the time of COVID-19. (Merriam-Webster)

The World Health Organization (WHO), as reported by the UN Department of Global Communication, “explains that **infodemics** are an excessive amount of information about a problem, which makes it difficult to identify a solution. They can spread misinformation, disinformation and rumours during a health emergency.” It further states that, “**Infodemics** can hamper an effective public health response and create confusion and distrust among people. Similarly, António Guterres the United Nations’ Secretary General twitted: “Our common enemy is#COVID19, but our enemy is also an “infodemic” of misinformation. To overcome the#coronavirus, we need to urgently promote facts & science, hope & solidarity over despair & division” (@antonioguterres). An aspect of the COVID-19 infodemic or conspiracy theory that is yet to be given adequate attention is the cacophony of prophecies that reverberate literally every nook and cranny of Nigeria.

At the heat of the pandemic, notwithstanding, the lockdowns to which a good number of the pastors were reluctant to adhere, the propaganda of prayer and fasting as the sole panacea for the dreaded disease became widely disseminated via the social media. Damilola Banjo, captures this conspiracy theory in BBC Pidgin Service: “Of course, sabi pipo [experts] don tok say na only social distancing and to dey wash hands fit help reduce di spread of COVID-19 but some prophets tok say dem believe prayer and fasting fit work wonders”(Banjo). The contradiction here is apparent.

The most devastating of all the prophetic conspiracy theories was the claim as to non-existence of the COVID-19 disease. Some interpreted it as a charade by politicians and government officials. While the city of Yaounde in Cameroon was mourning the death of Frankline Ndifo, a popular Cameroon prophet, who flagrantly flouted the basic guide of COVID-19 and died of same ailment, as reported by Edwin Kindzeka (VOA), “anoda prophet, Apostle Suleman Johnson, wey be President of Omega Fire Ministries Worldwide, dey beg goment to allow dem go isolation wit corona virus patients” (Banjo). One of the pastors preposterously stipulated the date for the end of the pandemic but failed woefully. What then is the fate of uncountable number of people who have been misled by false prophecy?

The phenomenon of COVID-19 prophecies and similar conspiracy theories are not peculiar to Nigerian. In the US, a popular evangelical pastor, Ralph Drollinger, who leads a Bible study for Trump's cabinet members, is reported to have proffered that the LGBTQ People, environmentalists and atheists are the reason why God exerted his wrath on the people. The COVID-19 infodemic of prophecies is therefore a case of *alii alia dicunt* (some say this, others say that) thus giving rise to discordant prophecies. The obvious truth is that the above the submissions from the so called men of God pass for nothing but conspiracy theories which impede authentic efforts to solve the problem at hand.

Causes and Effects of the Proliferation of Prophecies

The propensity of the human mind to prognosticate into the unknown must be acknowledged. In the first book of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle remarks that, “all men by nature desire to know” (Aristotle). This natural quest manifests in human effort to discover the root cause of any ailment that afflicts man and sometimes compels people to explore even the spiritual realm. David Hume avers that, “the many instances of forged miracles, prophecies, and supernatural events, prove sufficiently the strong propensity of mankind to the extraordinary and the marvelous (85). The human mind continues to

explore and probe intellectual and spiritual boundaries. One perceives in the prophetic adventure, the effort or attempt to satisfy the natural urge to prognosticate into the unknown.

Secondly, it is undeniable that the resilient African concept of sickness has dual but inter-related, corporal and spiritual aspects. Clark Jawanza observes that, “the African concept of person comprises of material and spiritual realities all working harmoniously” (75). Clark further states that, “the chief means through which the ancestors communicate with the living is through divination, dreams, spirit possession, and bodily affliction, or causing disease or sickness” (96). The above background and understanding in a way predisposes for prophetic or spiritual approach to healing. Accordingly, the African is not only incurably religious, as Parrinder wrote (9), but also perceives religion as a tool for solving existential life problems. The diagnosis and cure of sickness come under this spectrum. This is utilitarian or pragmatic approach to religion. The local tutelary deities are expected to be ‘powerful’ enough as to effectively protect the people against all enemies and ward off all forms of infirmities. Meanwhile, the deity should not only have the ability to foresee any impending danger but also alert the people through its ministers. The process of divination through which such alarm could be raised or discerned is part and parcel of African life-experience. Moreover, the dominant means of diagnosis by traditional healers or native doctors is through divination. This traditional practice finds a resonance in prophecy within the context of Christian religion.

On a more serious note, with the upsurge in proliferation of churches and Pentecostal spirituality in the twentieth century, came rapid commodification of miracles and prophecies. Prophetic bazaars became the order of the day especially during the New Year celebration, political elections and sports competitions especially football. Men of God prognosticate into the future to tell the people what will happen next: who will win the election and which football team will loose or win the match. No doubt this approach trivializes the sacred office of prophecy.

Finally, given the hard economic condition and glaring absence of health facilities, people resort to seeking miraculous healing as an alternative. The so called men of God catch on this precarious situation to exploit the vulnerable poor by merchandising anointing oils, holy water, etc as substitute for medication. Above all, prophecy becomes an alternative tool for medical diagnosis and cure. Like every other product or commodity, prophetic healings are aggressively advertised on the main and social media in order to attract more ‘customers.’

Effects of the Infodemic of Prophecies on COVID-19 Pandemic and the Society in General

The first obvious effect of the infodemic of incongruous prophecies is that it misinforms the people about the true nature of the problem. The prophet Hosea could have been right to lament that, “my people perish for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). Given that the prophecies come from acclaimed pastors, most people fallaciously take what they say as authentic. Some adherents become fanatical about what their pastors say. Similarly, the infodemic brings about social divisions with its divergence of opinions. False prophecies have been the bane of many families and kindred. Several families that have been once peaceful are now torn apart, pitching the members against each other.

It leads to stigmatization. Those who do not accept the conspiracy theories being peddled by the so called prophets and their adherents, in the name of prophecy, are often regarded as faithless or lacking the Holy Spirit. The proponents are also well known to be as dogmatic and fanatical as not to welcome any reasonable criticism.

The discordant prophecies distract from the authentic efforts towards finding proper solution to the problem at hand. In other words, they militate against scientific or systematic approach to solving the problem.

The above demerits notwithstanding, there is positive side of the phenomenon. Prophetic healing ministries contribute immensely to religious or spiritual tourism in Nigeria. Some prominent religious arenas where the prophetic healing ministries are organized have become sort of pilgrimage centers where Nigerians and other foreign nationals flock. It is often taunted that religion has become one of the major items Nigeria exports to the outside world. Such programs as New Year Passover Night, Prayer Crusades, Deliverance Nights, et cetera, attract mammoth crowd and a lot of economic activities. Politicians too are not left out as they do patronize the prophetic centers especially when elections are imminent. They subtly campaign for votes and consult with the prophets in order to discover what the future holds.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Infodemic of Discordant Prophecies: Critical Considerations

The mechanics of prophecy is largely supernatural or otherworldly. The prophet becomes merely an *instrumentum loquens* (a talking instrument). The approach defies empirical analysis. The inherent compulsion and extraneous influence on the human will and intellect simply vitiates or impairs sense of responsibility and systematic approach in problem solving. In other words, the prophetic approach cannot adequately serve as a veritable tool to systematically unravel the root cause of such a problem as COVID-19 disease or similar problems. Unlike sweeping prophetic assertions, scientific theories, according to Karl Popper, can be tested by their practical consequences; this is what distinguishes the scientist from the false

prophets (447). Since science, according to Aristotle and Aquinas, is knowledge of things from their root cause, scientific approach seems more plausible in dealing with problems than blind faith in sweeping prophetic assertions.

Similarly, the discordant prophecies grossly deviate from the *raison d'être* of Christian prophecy which is to draw the people to God. The so called prophets speak when God has not spoken! They operate out of personal interest. The consequence is that false prophecies are churned out and fed to the people. The COVID-19 pandemic becomes a litmus test for the phenomenon of New Year Prophecies that is now a tradition in Nigeria. Despite the purported claim to foresee the future, none of the 2020 New Year prophecies was able to capture the greatest event that shaped the year 2020! This casts a slur on the phenomenon of the New Year prophecy. The watch word should be: *caveat emptor!*

Although WHO, governments and health workers mount robust counter attack against COVID-19 infodemic via the mass and social media such as google, facebook, twitter, TikTok etc. The services of “mythbusters” and anti-conspiracy crusaders are equally employed to aggressively counter the violent attacks of infodemic; much however still needs to be done in terms of equipping the people with the intellectual kit to guard against the contagion or infodemic of virulent false and discordant prophecies that spread with infectious rapidity with. The present paper therefore recommends that such prophecies be *quarantined* and be taken with a pinch of salt. The concept of quarantine derives from the field of public health. Here people and animals coming from elsewhere are placed in exclusion and monitored for a determined period of time. They are finally accepted in the host country only when every doubt has been cleared. Given that false prophecies are often masked as truth and the symptomatic of falsehood hidden, there is need for a time lag or an interval to be given so as to clear the doubt and unmask the false prophecy for what it is. This calls for conceptual quarantining of the prophecy. The conceptual tool of quarantine becomes a readily available kit for *do-it-yourself* in dealing with discordant prophecies and other misinformation. This skeptic approach is also in consonance with the biblical and Pauline

admonition: Be Cautious about Prophets (1 Corinthians 14). The process of methodic doubt is moreover not new in the field of philosophy. Rene Descartes had employed it. The present paper merely points to the fact that it could be used in dealing with prophecies.

Conclusion

The present paper has examined the phenomenon of proliferation of prophecies in Nigeria as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. It briefly x-rayed the essence and mechanics of the biblical prophecy. The possible causes and effects of the infodemic of incongruent prophecies are also considered. African understanding about sickness and religion predispose for such prophetic escapades. The alarming upsurge in commodification of miracles and prophecies contributes to the escalation of prophetic profligacy. Above all, extreme economic hardship and lack of health facilities conglomerate to foster the proliferation of prophecies. The infodemic of prophecies deviates from the essence of prophecy. It misleads the people and creates social division. Above all, the prophetic exercise is otherworldly and extraneous to the operations of human will and intellect as such cannot be employed for systematic investigation of a given problem. Borrowing the concept of quarantine from the field of public health, the paper suggests that the prophecies and similar misinformation should be quarantined and monitored. This is a clarion call to be skeptical with the prophecies reeled out by the so called men of God. In this way the hazardous effects of the discordant prophecies would be curbed.

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