

## **THE CHALLENGE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE LIGHT OF GOTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ THEODICY**

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### **Abstract**

*Challenges are not new to man or his institutions. Mankind has boldly confronted many challenges at the levels of politics, religion, health, economy, and environment. However, none of the many challenges that have confronted man and his institutions in recent times has had a greater global impact and imposed misery, perpetual fear, and feelings of uncertainty on mankind than the Corona virus, also known as COVID-19. Man's helplessness, frustration, and hopelessness in the grip of the Corona virus (COVID-19) since its outbreak has wracked the world's foundations and posed serious challenges to all disciplines. COVID-19, which many scholars and laymen relegate to the problem of evil, has been interpreted from different points of view in Nigeria. Christians and Muslims alike have interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the signs of the end times. It is a vivid sign communicating the impending end of the world. Some view it as a result of human sin and God's anger. This necessitates asking, "How do we reconcile the existence of evil in the world with a good and loving God?" Why would God create a world like this, where this corona virus can wreak such havoc on our daily lives and even kill people by hijacking their respiratory systems? This study seeks to examine the COVID-19 pandemic challenge in Nigeria in the light of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It adopts a descriptive and analytical research method. In data collection, secondary sources were engaged. Findings from the study have shown that COVID-19 has caused havoc to humanity; however, the pandemic also came with many opportunities. The study recommends that the government should invest massively in research and development that will help the nation deal with the pandemic and embrace the good that come with it, and that there should be a mass campaign among Nigerians to change their negative perception of the pandemic and capitalise on the opportunity that the pandemic has provided.*

## **Introduction**

The Coronavirus pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to the day-to-day lives of people all over the world. The virus has been particularly devastating in its impact on human life, health, and economic resources. It has also reawakened the age-old question of the problem of evil. This problem, simply put, is this: How can a world created by a good and loving God be filled with so much suffering and evil? In other words, it has posed the challenge of how to reconcile the reality of suffering with the notion of a benevolent, all-powerful God.

Mankind has been plagued by numerous epidemics, pandemics, wars, and natural disasters throughout history. However, the year 2020 brought an unprecedented challenge in the form of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19). None of the many challenges that have confronted humans in recent times has had a greater global impact and imposed misery, perpetual fear, and feelings of uncertainty on mankind than the Corona virus.

Corona viruses are a group of enveloped viruses with non-segmented single-stranded and positive-sense RNA genomes, which are descriptively spherical or pleomorphic in shape with a diameter of 80–120 nm. (Fung and Liu 19). The first known occurrence of the virus began in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of the Hubei province of China. It began as a form of pneumonic cases in the province. The cases were reported to the World Health Organisation (WHO) country office and it was discovered to be a new strain of the SARS-CoV virus of 2002. The name Covid-19 was given to the virus by the WHO on the 11th of February, 2020. It is an acronym which stands for CoronaVirus Disease of 2019 (Reena 20).

The first cases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria were reported on February 27, 2020. According to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), the cases involved an Italian citizen who had recently traveled to Nigeria from Milan and a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian. The Italian citizen, who was the first confirmed case, arrived in Lagos on February 25, 2020, and developed symptoms two days later. He was immediately isolated and tested for the virus, with the results coming back positive on February 27.

The Nigerian citizen, who was the second confirmed case, was a contact of the Italian and tested positive on the same day (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020). Since the discovery of the first case in the country in February 2020, the number of people confirmed with the virus has been increasing exponentially. Available data from the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) on the spread of the virus shows that there is no single state of the nation that is free of this viral infection. Since the outbreak of the virus and its discovery in Nigeria on February 27, 2020, to this present time (precisely January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023) there have been 266, 463 confirmed cases, of COVID-19 with 3, 155 deaths.

COVID-19 which many scholars and layman relegate it to the problem of evil has been interpreted from different points of views in Nigeria. Christians, and Muslims alike, have interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the signs of the

end times. It is a vivid sign communicating the impending end of the world. Some view it as a result of human sin and God's anger. This necessitates asking; how do we reconcile the existence of evil in the world with a good and loving God?, Why would God create a world like this, where this coronavirus can wreak such havoc on our daily lives, and even kill people by hijacking their respiratory systems?

This study seeks to examine the challenge of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria in the light of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Theodicy. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's Theodicy is a philosophical work that explores the problem of evil and attempts to reconcile the existence of evil with the concept of an omnipotent and benevolent God. Leibniz's Theodicy proposes that God, being omnipotent and benevolent, created the best possible world out of all the conceivable alternatives (Adams 2).

According to Leibniz, evil and suffering exist in the world because they are necessary for the greater good, and they contribute to the harmony and perfection of the overall divine plan. This perspective is known as the "best of all possible worlds" theory. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, one might consider how Leibniz's ideas apply. The pandemic and its associated suffering can be seen as part of a greater plan, where the presence of evil and suffering ultimately leads to a better world or serves some higher purpose. Also one might argue that the pandemic presents an opportunity for personal growth, societal change, or even spiritual transformation(Colin Temple).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Theodicy:** A philosophical and theological framework that seeks to reconcile the existence of evil and suffering with the belief in an all-powerful and benevolent God.

**COVID-19 pandemic:** A global health crisis caused by the spread of the novel coronavirus, resulting in widespread illness, death, and socio-economic disruptions.

**Evil:** Actions, events, or conditions that cause suffering, harm, or moral wrongdoing.

**Leibniz's Theodicy:** Refers specifically to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's philosophical work that explores the problem of evil and proposes the concept of the best of all possible worlds.

### **Origin of Covid-19**

The actual cause of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is still a subject of investigation. However, there are several hypotheses that have gained currency since the emergence of Covid-19. This paper shall discuss only three that have enjoyed prominence.

### **Live Animal Market Trading**

There are some research works that have identified the likely origin of the corona virus to bats and pangolins that are sold in live animal markets in China, for their use in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Among those who have recently

supported this theory are Wassenaar and Zou; Turcio-Casco and Gatti; and Salzberg. According to this theory, the handling of bats and pangolins at these markets poses a risk of contracting the corona virus disease, as these animals are the primary hosts of the virus (Wassenaar and Zou 343). Bats, in particular, are highly sought after for reasons revealed by Turcios-Casca and Gatti (2):

... a bat genus supposedly responsible for previous epidemic viruses, are captured in China and sold in wet markets because their dried body parts are added to wines or powders to detoxicate the body. Moreover, in some regions of Asia, many people continue to eat bats' flesh because it is considered a delicacy, and in China it is believed to have medicinal qualities.

On the medicinal use of bats, Wassenaar and Zou concur with the above that "... bats and their excrements are often used in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which may be a reason for their legal or illegal trading" (343). Interestingly, some animal rights groups and vegans condemn the Chinese practice of traditional medicine, not only for its link with the emergence of Covid-19, but also for acts of animal cruelty that are purported to be taking place in these market (23). These groups have made vociferous calls on the World Health Organisation (WHO) to withdraw China's licence to trade in traditional medicine. Salzberg, a professor of biomedical engineering at John Hopkins University, in a magazine, *Forbes* (Salzberg), expresses his objection to TCM as follows:

TCM is not medicine. It's little more than a set of traditional beliefs (or a philosophy, as Nature called it) about various concoctions and their effect on one's health. Most of these beliefs have no evidence whatsoever that they provide any health benefits. Many of them derive from a pre-scientific view (which is not at all unique to China) that eating an animal gives one some of the properties of that animal. This is utter nonsense, of course(Provide page number)

The comments in the previous quote may raise concerns of ethnocentrism and cultural insensitivity. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been widely utilized by many people as an affordable alternative to conventional medicine. However, it is important to acknowledge that opposing TCM practices can have certain consequences. Not only does the practice of traditional medicine in China potentially involve issues of animal cruelty, but it may also pose risks for the transmission of diseases such as COVID-19. Further research is necessary to determine the validity of the theory suggesting bats and pangolins as the source of COVID-19.

### **Viral Leakage from Wuhan Institute of Virology**

According to Ando, one of the alternative theories proposed regarding the origin of COVID-19 suggests that the virus was genetically engineered by unidenti-

fied scientists in a laboratory in Wuhan (not specified). Another version of this theory, which is somewhat more lenient towards China, suggests that the corona virus may have been accidentally created during the process of developing an AIDS vaccine (20). This theory has been supported by various individuals, including Luc Montagnier, a French virologist who is a Nobel laureate for his work on discovering HIV (Ando 23). According to Montagnier and his supporters in the United States, it is alleged that the corona virus may have inadvertently escaped from a laboratory.

It is important to note that these alternative theories regarding the origins of COVID-19 are subject to ongoing investigation and scientific scrutiny, and no definitive conclusions have been reached at this point.

The theory suggesting that COVID-19 originated from a viral leakage from a laboratory has been dismissed by certain researchers. They argue that the virus has naturally evolved from animals, specifically bats and pangolins, and then crossed over to humans (Ando, 2020). These researchers further contend that if the corona virus had been engineered in a lab, there would be evident signs of genetic manipulation in the virus's structure (Ando 24). Institutions such as France's Institute Pasteur and the National Center for Scientific Research emphasize that a virus of this nature requires animal hosts for growth and transmission to humans.

It is worth noting that the debate surrounding the origin of COVID-19 has strained diplomatic relations between the United States and China. Former US President Donald Trump's derogatory reference to the virus as the "Chinese virus" has further exacerbated these tense relations (The Indian Express, 11 October 2020; The Conversation, 21 April 2020; The Washington Post, 16 September 2020). Further research is still needed to conclusively determine whether the virus was indeed engineered in a Chinese laboratory.

### **The Fifth-generation (5G) Technology**

Van Prooijen, submits that another theory has emerged in an attempt to explain the origins of COVID-19, linking it to the fifth generation (5G) technology. 5G is the latest wireless mobile phone technology that operates on higher radio frequencies, delivering data more quickly and supporting greater cellular connectivity capacity. According to Morgan (as cited in Euro News, 15 May 2020), there is a widespread belief that 5G may have detrimental effects on human health by exposing individuals to radiation levels beyond what the body can handle. This theory suggests that radiation from 5G technology is responsible for causing COVID-19 (12).

It is important to note that the theory surrounding the connection between 5G technology and COVID-19 has three variations. The most radical variation asserts that COVID-19 is directly caused by harmful radiation emitted by 5G networks. The second variation claims that 5G networks weaken the immune response of individuals, making them more susceptible to the virus and its effects. The third variation suggests that while radiation from 5G networks does not directly cause COVID-19,

it facilitates the rapid transmission of the virus, potentially implying that the virus can spread through the airborne transmission of these radio waves. However, there is a lack of detailed information regarding the specific mechanisms through which this transmission could occur.

Van Prooijen, further state that the belief linking 5G technology to the spread of COVID-19 has had significant real-world consequences, influencing the actions of some individuals. Instances have been reported in the UK and the Netherlands where protesters destroyed 5G network transmitters and threatened workers involved in the deployment of these networks (24). Despite its prevalence, the 5G theory is opposed by critics who view it as a conspiracy theory lacking scientific evidence. Alexander Morgan, for example, argues against the notion that 5G technology is responsible for the pandemic, asserting that COVID-19 is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets from coughing or sneezing. He dismisses the idea that the virus can be transmitted through radio waves (87). Van Prooijen also supports the rejection of the 5G theory, highlighting that COVID-19 outbreaks have occurred in regions without 5G networks, such as Iran, which experienced a significant number of confirmed cases and fatalities (Van Prooijen 23).

While these theories do not provide conclusive explanations, they offer insights into the complex origins of the virus. It is important not to dismiss them outright but to continue conducting rigorous scientific research to ascertain the true origins and transmission mechanisms of COVID-19.

Alam, asserts that the pandemic has disrupted global supply chains, leading to shortages of essential goods and raw materials. Factory closures, transportation restrictions, and reduced production capacities in various countries have created bottlenecks in supply networks. This has not only affected industries reliant on imports and exports but also caused a domino effect across sectors. With the imposition of lockdowns and social distancing measures, consumer spending has witnessed a sharp decline. People's reluctance to engage in non-essential activities, coupled with increased economic uncertainty, has resulted in reduced demand for goods and services. Industries such as travel, tourism, hospitality, and retail have borne the brunt of this decline (11).

## **Godttfried W. Leibniz Theodicy and the Challenge of the Covid-19 Pandemic in Nigeria**

### **Covid-19 Pandemic: The Nigeria Experience**

The first case of COVID-19 in Nigeria as indicated earlier occurred on 27th February 2020 in Lagos state. The number of cases within the first few weeks of outbreak was gradual with no record of death and number of cases, below emergency threshold. However, surges of daily increase in the number of new cases began to occur from the 19th of March 2020 with the number of confirmed cases rising steadily to emergency level. As of April 30, 2020, the total number of confirmed cases rose to 1932 with 58 deaths and 319 discharged cases.

The total number of blood samples tested from the first day of outbreak to 30 April 2020 was 15,759 out of which 1932 were positive. Epidemiological data of those tested that positive revealed that 210(11%) had travel history, 539(28%) had contact with infected persons, 986(51%) were from unknown sources and 197(10%) had incomplete information. It was also observed that males (70%) were more likely than females (30%) to be infected and that 22 percent (22%) of those between the age of 30- 40 were more likely to be infected than other age groups (Kalu 34)

### **Government Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Federal Government of Nigeria has demonstrated a proactive approach in addressing the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Nigeria was among the first countries to recognize the risk and initiate planning ahead of the epidemic curve; starting one week after China initially reported cases of COVID-19 (Unah, 20). The Nigerian government has implemented a range of health, social, and economic measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 (Dixit et al.34).

According to information from the Nigerian Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) (2020a, b, c) the government, in collaboration with the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, Federal Ministry of Health, and Nigeria Center for Disease Control, has worked closely with relevant ministries, departments, agencies, partners, and other stakeholders. Their collective efforts involve coordinating and reviewing national response strategies and implementation activities on a daily basis to effectively control the spread of COVID-19.

### **Lockdown Measures and a Ban on Mass Gathering**

The formation of the Presidential Task Force (PTF) on COVID-19 was initiated to address the outbreak using a comprehensive and collaborative approach across various sectors and levels of government (Agbakwuru 20). In a bid to further contain the spread of COVID-19, a five-week lockdown was implemented starting on March 30th in Abuja, Lagos, and the adjacent Ogun state. Additionally, the Control of Infectious Disease Act was enacted to enhance efforts to manage the corona virus pandemic in a country with a population approaching 200 million (Ayeni 23).

Supplementary measures included compulsory face mask usage in public areas, extensive flight cancellations with the suspension of international flights, the adoption of telecommuting for government employees, a partial closure of major food markets, the prohibition of all religious gatherings, and the suspension of all sporting events. In tandem with these actions, contact tracing and other public health measures received bolstered support. The Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) also deployed the Surveillance Outbreak Response Management and Analysis System (SORMAS) to enhance contact tracing efforts.

### **Fiscal Policy Measures**

The Central Bank took significant steps to alleviate the economic impact of the pandemic. They extended the loan moratorium on principal repayments for one year and lowered interest rates on all intervention loan programs. Additionally, specific credit facilities were directed towards industries severely affected by the pandemic, such as hotels, airline service providers, and healthcare merchants, while offering credit support to the healthcare sector, including pharmaceutical companies and hospitals (Ozili 20).

The government implemented various measures to support farmers and small businesses, including freezing loan repayments and reducing the budget by NGN 1.5 trillion (\$4.90 billion) (Oyekale 2). These actions collectively represented the initial efforts of the Nigerian government to not only curb the spread of the virus but also to mitigate the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic, especially for the country's impoverished and vulnerable populations. These government responses played a crucial role in shielding some citizens from the severe hardships of hunger and starvation brought about by the pandemic, while also preventing the collapse of businesses.

### **Private Sector Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Churches and various non-governmental organizations played a pivotal role in supporting communities throughout Lagos and the rest of Nigeria (Obansa&Orimisan221). They were instrumental in organizing numerous food distributions in some of the most impoverished areas of Lagos and other regions across the nation. While several humanitarian organizations distributed food to alleviate the hardships caused by the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of the corona virus pandemic (Jalloh4), only a small portion of the population reported receiving such assistance.

Non-monetary donations, including medical supplies and a variety of food items, were received from various groups. Both the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) supported the government's lockdown measures and collaborated with local and state governments to disseminate accurate information and promote compliance (Omorogiuwa 646). These responses from the private sector, select non-governmental organizations, and religious institutions, when combined with government efforts, made significant contributions to enhancing the well-being of the most vulnerable individuals in the country. Their contributions complemented those of the government in mitigating the socio-economic impact of the pandemic to the greatest extent possible.



## **Factors That Worsened the Spread of the Pandemic and Its Attendant Socioeconomic Crisis**

Despite the concerted efforts made by both the government and other pertinent stakeholders, the impact of this pandemic on the country's economy was profoundly challenging. Some of the support and stimulus packages offered were deemed inadequate and not commensurate with the significant number of impoverished individuals scattered across the nation. Additionally, certain policy responses displayed vulnerabilities and loopholes that contributed significantly to the continued spread of the virus and exacerbated the socio-economic hardships faced by the population.

### **Insufficient Palliatives/Faulty Distribution Pattern**

While some countries like the United States responded to the crisis by allocating trillions of dollars in relief packages, Nigeria provided limited cash assistance. The situation in Nigeria was further complicated by a rising inflation rate and civil unrest, as noted by Adepoju(447). The challenges were exacerbated by emerging reports highlighting the inadequacy of the relief measures including instances of affluent officials diverting these limited resources for their own benefit. Reports indicated that officials responsible for distributing the relief items were not transparent and were involved in corrupt practices, leaving the poor and vulnerable segments of the population still struggling with hunger (Ebenso& Out 20).

The Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs admitted that the Federal Government lacked a comprehensive list of relief beneficiaries. Furthermore, the ministry acknowledged issues related to transparency, accountability, and proper planning within the relief scheme. Some residents of Abuja reported that the distribution of relief did not consider family size, as families with as many as 12 members received the same quantity of food as those with only two or three members. The items distributed included a loaf of bread, a kilogram of rice, and two tubers of yam.

Some also noted a significant disparity between what was promised on television as lockdown relief and what they actually received. The entire process lacked adequate record-keeping for spending details, both for public funds and private sector donations aimed at providing socioeconomic benefits to the country's poorest and most vulnerable individuals, including those with disabilities. There were no comprehensive records of beneficiaries for cash payments, cash transfers, food distribution, and other benefits provided during the lockdown(Ebenso&Out20).

### **Poverty**

The majority of Nigerians depend on a daily income for survival (Esi-dene&Onyebuch21). As a result, hunger and starvation kept pushing residents to the streets against the order to stay at home, which posed a great barrier to adhering to the COVID-19 measures intended to inhibit the spread of the virus, amidst other challenges recounted (WHO 220b). The COVID-19 preventive measures in Nigeria

appeared unfeasible and unrealistic as a result of poverty and vulnerability many residents did not mind violating lockdown orders at the risk of contracting the virus rather than staying at home to die of hunger and malnutrition.

### **Illiteracy, Misinformation, and Distrust of the Government**

Many Nigerians initially perceived COVID-19 as a distant affliction, something belonging to the "white man," unlikely to affect their own communities. Some even viewed it as a "big man disease," mainly affecting influential individuals, particularly because it claimed the lives of some political figures. Moreover, the proliferation of misinformation and stories about COVID-19, coupled with the promotion of unscientific traditional remedies within Nigeria, significantly hampered the adoption of preventive measures.

Certain influential religious leaders sowed doubt among the public regarding the existence of the virus, disseminating conspiracy theories about its origins and interventions (Benedict 52). Various groups also propagated unverified cures and interventions. The lack of awareness contributed to a sense of apathy and adherence to false and superstitious beliefs, further impeding the country's readiness and the effective implementation of COVID-19 protocols.

While social media played a crucial role in disseminating information about the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, it also facilitated the spread of exaggerated, unverified, and fake news about the virus (Reuben et al., 202). Some Nigerians believed that prayer alone could combat the spread of COVID-19, leading to a lax attitude towards adhering to safety measures. Since the onset of the corona virus outbreak in Nigeria, a significant portion of the population has remained firmly convinced that the COVID-19 pandemic is more of a hoax than a reality. This widespread disbelief in the number of confirmed cases has resulted in a general nonchalant attitude towards the pandemic. These challenges have directly hindered efforts to prevent the spread of the novel corona virus in Nigeria (Ibama & Dennis 152).

### **Negative Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Nigerians**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has inflicted severe socioeconomic and livelihood consequences on many impoverished communities around the world, especially in developing countries, including those in Africa (World Bank 220). This pandemic poses a substantial threat to all aspects of people's lives globally, but its impact is most pronounced among those who are already vulnerable, lacking access to economic, social, health, and educational services. Many Nigerians fall into this category. One of the most devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic is its adverse socioeconomic impact on the livelihoods of the poor (Isanghaet al. 50).

Nigeria, already designated as the poverty capital of the world by the World Poverty Clock in 2018, had more than 40% of its citizens living below the poverty line. Consequently, a significant portion of the population relies on daily income

without savings to serve as a financial buffer during lockdowns. People in overcrowded, impoverished neighborhoods were particularly concerned about how they would cope with hunger and starvation.

The elderly, individuals with disabilities, the homeless, and those working in the informal sector have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Despite calls for their inclusion in relief distribution programs, women with disabilities in Nigeria were often excluded from government interventions designed to cushion the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the poor and small businesses received considerable attention in government relief efforts, it appears that persons with disabilities were marginalized. Many reported significant difficulties and frustrations in obtaining relief or financial support during the COVID-19 lockdown (Ibeneme et al. 76). Globally, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have faced especially harsh challenges during the corona virus pandemic, necessitating special support.

The current economic downturn, described as the most severe since the Great Depression by the IMF has resulted in mass layoffs, salary cuts, and unemployment, including in Nigeria, surpassing the impact of the Great Recession of 2007-2009 (IMF, 2020). Moreover, due to limited access to state-wide 3G mobile networks in some states, final-year secondary school students preparing for their senior school certificate examinations had to rely on radio lessons. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, Nigeria had a weak and underdeveloped digital economy, with few institutions offering a complete online educational curriculum.

As a result, many students were unable to learn during the entire lockdown period. The pandemic has also led to a disturbing increase in sexual violence against women and children across the country. For example, between January and May 2020, Nigeria's Inspector General of Police reported the arrest of 799 suspects linked to 717 rape cases (Benedict 55). The restrictions on movement, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding, and elevated stress levels have all contributed to the rise in sexual violence in various households, as the stay-at-home order made it difficult for victims to escape their perpetrators. Additionally, there has been an increase in reported cases of other forms of domestic and gender-based violence due to the forced proximity caused by the lockdowns.

### **Religious Beliefs and Treatment of Diseases in Nigeria**

Nigeria is a diverse and pluralistic society characterized by a multitude of faith traditions and belief systems, encompassing both traditional and missionary religions. The religious landscape in the country is rich and varied, with temples, altars, shrines, and sacred artifacts found throughout its regions. While there are numerous belief systems, three major religious traditions stand out: African traditional religion, Islam, and Christianity (Atoi, Sadiku and Kume 67). Each of these religious traditions holds strong theological doctrines regarding the spiritual aspects of treating diseases.

Practitioners of these religious traditions provide spiritual interpretations of the causes, prevention, and treatment of various illnesses and diseases. Throughout Nigerian history, religious adherents have attributed different types of diseases and ailments to spiritual factors. There are various explanations within Nigerian and African communities for the causes of diseases or ailments. These explanations include the belief that many diseases or ill health conditions are the result of attacks by evil and malevolent spiritual forces.

Additionally, it is believed that neglecting or disrespecting spiritual beings can lead to punishment in the form of diseases (Westerlund 26). Other causes of illness or disease include spell-casting and witchcraft activities. Many African religious adherents believe that certain illnesses that defy biomedical treatment and scientific explanation can only be caused by witchcraft and other unseen malevolent forces as a form of punishment for those perceived as enemies (Obinna 201). According to Olupona (24), some individuals with malevolent powers may inflict sickness upon those they consider their enemies or those who disrespect them as a form of retribution.

Another way in which members of society can fall victim to diseases, according to some African religious believers, is through the commission of taboos or abominable acts. Disobeying taboos is viewed by many traditional religious healers and practitioners as a pathway to illness. It is important to note that taboos play a significant role in African traditional religion and are practices, behaviors, or ways of life that are forbidden by a particular group within the society (White 15).

What is termed as taboo in African traditional religion corresponds to the concept of sin in Christian and Islamic theological frameworks, representing wrongdoing or misconduct. In Christianity and Islam, it is believed that sin is an abhorrent act that could cause God to avert His gaze from a believer who transgresses, thereby allowing evil forces to afflict the individual with chronic diseases, ailments, and other forms of misfortune within society.

It is crucial to emphasize that certain elements of African traditional religious beliefs are woven into Christian and Islamic liturgies in Nigeria, as well as in many other African countries where these two monotheistic faiths are practiced. Cardinal John Onaiyekan, the emeritus Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, has strongly argued that every Nigerian, whether Christian or Muslim, retains within them some fundamental elements of African Traditional Religion. This is because many aspects of traditional religious beliefs are reflected in both Christianity and Islam (Okoye56). This explains why many Nigerian Christians and Muslims tend to conceive and interpret most illnesses and diseases in spiritual terms. It is believed that events in the physical world are manifestations of occurrences in the spiritual realm.

This particular understanding and interpretation of illnesses and diseases have led many Nigerians to turn to spiritual means to seek solutions to their health problems. Africans, in general, have a strong faith in spiritual powers to address the

existential challenges they may encounter in their daily lives. In contemporary Nigeria, religious beliefs play various roles in people's lives, especially in healthcare. In the three major religions in Nigeria, there is a shared belief that God is the ultimate physician with the power to heal all kinds of sicknesses and diseases at all times and in all seasons.

Consequently, some Nigerian religious adherents prefer seeking spiritual remedies for their ailments or diseases. While some individuals may opt for exclusively spiritual solutions to their health issues, others may choose to combine them with Western medical treatments for more comprehensive results. Many African religious adherents firmly believe that Western biomedical sciences alone cannot address all forms of illnesses and diseases, as some ailments have spiritual causes that require spiritual treatment to achieve effective outcomes. It is noteworthy that in most African societies today, despite extensive health education on the scientific causes of illnesses, spiritual health beliefs continue to hold significant sway among religious believers on the continent. As mentioned earlier, any disease or ailment that lacks a clear explanation from the perspective of Western biomedical science is often attributed to spiritual causes (Asare and Danquah 17).

The religious perspective on the treatment of illnesses and diseases in Nigeria, and by extension in Africa, entails a holistic and comprehensive approach. Treatment options are designed in a manner that addresses healing on multiple levels, encompassing the cure of physical, spiritual, psychological, and social symptoms. It is essential to reiterate that many religious believers in Nigeria do not compartmentalize the physical and the spiritual aspects of health.

To them, events in the natural world are seen as manifestations of occurrences that have transpired in the supernatural realm. This holistic viewpoint underscores the interconnectedness of physical, spiritual, and other dimensions in the understanding and treatment of sickness and disease in these societies.

### **Religious Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The global shockwaves caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a wide array of speculations from both the religious and secular spheres. With people's movements restricted, individuals, as social beings, began searching for explanations regarding the unfolding events in their environment. These reactions represent direct responses to the existential crisis brought about by the virus and the underlying power inequalities in society (Simon6).

In this quest for meaning, Faith (21) posits that "any illness potent enough to challenge the sophisticated technologies of China, America, or Europe must be seen as a punishment for the sins of the world." Consequently, as fear gripped the minds of the populace, particularly in religious environments like Nigeria, apocalyptic messages gained prominence and spread widely across social media platforms. An excerpt from a Facebook post by Onyeka(2) suggests that those orchestrating this situation are the same individuals predicted in the biblical book of Revelation:

Furthermore, scientific research in biomedicine unequivocally affirms that COVID-19 has no connection to 5G technology and is not a spiritual issue. Instead, COVID-19 is a highly pathogenic human pathogen, likely of zoonotic origin, transmitted to humans through contact with sea animals and bats. In fact, COVID-19 shares similarities with previously known respiratory diseases such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona virus (SARS-CoV) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Corona virus (MERS-CoV) (Mohammad et al., 20). This indicates that the term "corona" does not represent an entirely novel phenomenon in biomedicine but rather one that has occurred before.

This school of thought redirects interpretations to historical events rather than future ones. On the other hand, the futurists, in opposition to this idea, attempt to place the fulfillment of these prophecies in a future timeline during the biblical end times, far removed from the original writer's era. Nevertheless, none of the numerous predictions regarding the apocalypse and the final destruction of the Earth have ever come to fruition.

Odo(2020) believes that even if COVID-19 is not part of the tribulations of the end times, it is still a malevolent force that must be confronted through prayers. This is not surprising, as many religions, cultures, and scientific theories have made predictions about the end of the world, but none have been realized. Therefore, it is reasonable to concur with the preterists that COVID-19 is not part of the tribulations of the end times or a fulfillment of certain biblical prophecies.

Regardless of the circumstances, it's important to clarify that the end of the world is not imminent, nor is God unleashing evil upon the sinful world. The current pandemic is one of many instances in history when a pandemic or epidemic has affected the world. Such events have occurred before, are happening now, and may happen again in the future. Understanding this perspective makes it easier to cooperate with relevant institutions to mitigate the impact of the pandemic in Nigeria. Propagating conflicting messages and conspiracy theories has never been proven to save humanity during such precarious situations. Human ingenuity has consistently been the key to overcoming harrowing experiences.

The same God who permits or even uses humans to perpetrate evil can also employ individuals to heal the world. If our conception of God is not malevolent, He cannot harbor evil intentions and therefore cannot send a plague to exterminate us. It has consistently been human actions and irrational choices that have led to calamities like this. Even if this pandemic is considered a consequence of human wrongdoing, there is always room for restoration, especially given that this virus has a relatively low mortality rate of 0.3%. Historical events such as the Spanish flu have claimed more lives than the corona virus, yet the world did not descend into apocalypse. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that any of these events are of an apocalyptic nature according to the teachings of various religions.

The reactions and behaviors described during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria illustrate the deep fear and uncertainty that gripped the population. When faced with a novel and potentially deadly virus, people often seek explanations and solutions that may not necessarily align with scientific evidence. One peculiar example involved the search for a strand of hair purportedly hidden in the Bible as a means to protect against COVID-19. While some individuals claimed to have found such a hair, others did not but still shared water with those who had. Such actions can be seen as a reflection of fear and the uncertainty of what the future held. It's worth noting that similar incidents occurred during the Ebola outbreak in 2014, where people believed that bathing with salt and hot water would protect them from the virus.

Additionally, various Christian organizations and leaders made prophecies about the virus, offering different interpretations and predictions. Some suggested that prayer alone could solve the problem, while others forecasted that the virus would disappear within a specific timeframe. Notably, Prophet T.B. Joshua predicted that COVID-19 would vanish from the Earth on March 27, 2020, insisting that no medicine could eradicate it. However, when this prediction did not materialize, it drew criticism and raised questions about the appropriateness of such declarations during a time of fear and uncertainty (Nduka10). The pandemic also prompted many churches to adapt to the changing circumstances by moving their services online. Some churches streamed prayer services and encouraged members to participate remotely. Additionally, several churches and religious leaders donated resources and supplies to the government to aid in the fight against COVID-19.

However, there were instances of concern raised by individuals who felt that religious organizations were still requesting financial contributions, such as tithes and offerings, even during a period of economic hardship caused by the pandemic. The use of USSD codes for payment raised questions about the priorities of these organizations and whether the funds collected would be used to support members during difficult times (Ovie 20). Overall, these reactions reflect the complex interplay between faith, fear, and the search for meaning and solutions during times of crisis.

While some responses may seem irrational or unverified, they underscore the deeply ingrained role of religion in the lives of many Nigerians and their quest for guidance and protection in uncertain times. The responses and actions of religious communities and leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria varied widely, highlighting the diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives within these communities. Regarding the use of USSD codes for tithes and offerings in churches, some members defended their use, asserting that these codes had existed before the pandemic but had become more popular during the crisis. This suggests that churches may have adapted to the situation by making it easier for members to continue contributing financially, even when physical gatherings were limited.

In the case of the Muslim community, there was a conflict between an Imam, Sarki Aminu, and the chairman of a local government in Zaria, Sheik Sani Yakubu. The chairman removed the Imam from his position, alleging that he did not consult the committee before closing the mosque in compliance with government orders to ban congregational prayers. This conflict underscores the challenges faced by religious leaders in balancing their religious duties with government directives during a public health crisis. In Kano State, residents initially did not take the threat of COVID-19 seriously until many people began to die from undisclosed illnesses. It was only when the Central Mosque was deserted, and residents started adhering to the government's lockdown orders that the gravity of the situation became apparent. This delay in responding to the virus highlights the need for timely and proactive measures to prevent its spread.

Overall, these examples illustrate the complex dynamics between religious beliefs, government regulations, and public health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. It's essential for religious leaders, government authorities, and the public to work together to strike a balance between religious practices and the safety of the community during times of crisis.

For many, theologically speaking, COVID-19 appears to challenge the concept of a benevolent God. However, it is still possible to maintain faith in God even after enduring the pandemic. Many individuals who suffered and passed away continued to hold steadfast to their faith in the living God. As Ratzinger (204) suggests, the world is not solely an endless cycle of suffering from which one must escape; rather, it is fundamentally good, despite the presence of evil and sorrow. Life, as given by God the Creator, should be lived according to His will, and it is a journey replete with dramatic events, as Jenson (1999) aptly asserts. This drama encompasses the infinite conflict of life and death, representing the drama of God.

### **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's Theodicy in Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Nigeria/Africa**

It is an attempt to solve the problem of origin and explanation of evil that Leibniz devoted his theodicy (1710). Leibniz's Theodicy was written at the request of Sophie Charlotte, whose Christian faith had been disturbed by reading the *Historical-Critical Dictionary* of Pierre Bayle (1647 – 1706). Having been embroiled in the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century which affected his father, he became skeptical and engrossed by the problem of evil which has been a fundamental problem in the Christian religion of salvation (Sleigh 34).

Leibniz preceded such evidence with a *Discourse*, because a theodicy must evidently proceed on the assumption that reason and revelation do not contradict each other, and that the former has the ability to recognize the facts presented by the latter, whether in nature or in history. As the aim of theodicy is to refute by reason the objections of superficial reasoners against the wisdom and goodness of God, the work necessarily demands agreement between faith and reason. It is consequently



the primary object of Leibniz to show that such agreement exists, or that it must be presumed to exist as soon as a correct view of the idea and nature of reason is entertained. Reason is the 'rightful combination' of truths, which is recognized, either directly or by means of revelation and there can be no conflict between it and the truth, which God reveals (Onuche et al 110).

In a bid to strengthen his cosmic reassurance in his theodicy, Leibniz undertook a closer analysis of the nature of evil and discovered three kinds of evil, namely. The first is physical evil which he sees as suffering. On his account of this kind of evil, he claims that it is reflected in his optimistic temper. The second kind of evil according to Leibniz, is moral evil. This he considers as sin. He claims that the bodily frailties and ailments are not as common or grievous as complaining men believe, and a great part of them can be blamed on our sin. The gravity of sin must be a central conviction in any Christian theodicy. And finally, the third which he called metaphysical evil is the imperfect character of finite being. For a little more on metaphysical evil, Leibniz began his discourse with the standard definition of God (Onuche et al 114).

God he argues is "an absolutely perfect being." In an attempt to explore the consequence of this definition, he used investigation in finding what perfection is, and how many kind of perfection there are. He found two kinds of perfections, namely, omnipotence and omniscience. By these two, he argues that since there is no contradiction, it then follows that "from the omnipotence and omniscience that whatever God makes is perfect in the highest degree.

By implication, Leibniz tends to affirmed that God being an absolute being (bearing in mind his omnipotence and omniscience) creates the best of all possible world evil or no evil Because a real factor in human nature is antagonistic to the perfect Creator, he had to concede to Bayle's dualistic view. In Leibniz, reaffirmation of God's condemnation of sin, he finally reduced it to a variety of metaphysical evil, the imperfection of finite being. This is the moral ambiguity of his theodicy.

In dealing with the ultimate problem of Theodicy, Leibniz exposed two sources of likely errors, both due to defective breadth of outlook. The first is that man "should not judge the divine plan with our brief span of experience, and condemn it because of blind impatience; nor should we draw conclusions about the vast universe from meager range of our life on earth. God's justice operates on an infinite scale, eternal and cosmic.

The second source of error in theodicy according to Leibniz arises "from a one-sided interpretation of God's nature, a preoccupation with one attribute of divine perfection." He insisted on the principle of the 'compos ability' of God's attribute, infinite wisdom, infinite goodness, infinite power, all creatively active in perfect harmony. God's goodness and love will the creation of all possible good. Explaining further, Leibniz opines that when the skeptic asks, why should there be any evil in the world, he fails to learn from God's wisdom, because no created world could be without some imperfections, and for these are the marks of finite existence.

Absolute perfection is for God alone. Summarily, Leibniz believe that if the physical and moral evil are explain ultimately as metaphysical evils, imperfections essential to finite beings, humans will see them as obviously natural conditions in created world and they will have no reasonable complaint against God.

In context of the theodicy of Leibniz, Covid-19 could be view in the following ways. To begin, t we must come to terms with the understanding of evil. Evil is a force that opposes God and His work of righteousness in the world. The word is also used for any disturbance to the harmonious order of the universe, such as disease (Covid-19). Secondly, evil like COVID-19 being a discord or disturbance in the order of the universe may not necessarily be penalty for sin, but can be use of God to foster a greater good for humanity.

With the two exposed angles of errors mentioned by Leibniz in dealing with the ultimate problem of Theodicy, this study submits just as he puts it that we “should not judge the divine plan with our brief span of experience, and condemn it because of blind impatience; nor should we draw conclusions about the vast universe from meager range of our life on earth. God’s justice operates on an infinite scale, eternal and cosmic.

And the second source of error in understanding and explaining theodicy according to Leibniz arises “from a one-sided interpretation of God’s nature, a preoccupation with one attribute of divine perfection.” Just as he insisted on the principle of the ‘compossibility’ of God’s attribute, infinite wisdom, infinite goodness, infinite power, all creatively active in perfect harmony. God’s goodness and love will the creation of all possible good. This is what should matter to us when seeking answers to the challenge and problem of COVID-19 in today’s world.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected Nigeria, straining its healthcare system, economy, and social fabric. Leibniz's theodicy prompts theological reflection on the pandemic's role in the divine plan. It invites individuals and communities in Nigeria to seek deeper meaning in the face of adversity and consider how their actions align with God's benevolent intentions. This reflection can foster resilience and spiritual growth during trying times. The relevance of Gottfried W. Leibniz's theodicy to the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria lies in its ability to offer a philosophical lens through which we can understand the presence of evil, both moral and natural, within the context of a global health crisis.

While it is true that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of havoc, we must also learn to be optimists like Leibniz and see the good things and opportunities that have accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic. For Leibniz, despite natural and moral evils, this was still the best of all possible worlds. It was the best that God could have made. This was because it had both the greatest variety of things and the simplest laws of nature. Natural and moral evils, according to Leibniz, were part of a larger universal good. Although the pandemic has disrupted the universe, it has

also restructured it by narrowing gaps within certain structures in some aspects. The pandemic has collapsed the gaps between superpowers and lower powers in some areas, and poor nations like Nigeria can take advantage of the global situation to redefine their position on the world map

### Recommendations

#### Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

The government should invest massively in research and development that will help the nation deal with the pandemic and embrace the goods that come with it.

There should be a mass campaign among Nigerians to change their negative perception of the pandemic and capitalise on the opportunity that the pandemic has provided.

The pandemic has collapsed the gaps between superpowers and lower powers in some areas; therefore, poor nations like Nigeria should take advantage of the global situation to redefine their position on the world map.

Encourage religious institutions and leaders to engage in theological reflection on the pandemic's theological implications. This can provide spiritual guidance and solace to those grappling with existential questions.

Invest in healthcare infrastructure and resources to better prepare for future health crises, ensuring that Nigeria is more resilient in the face of pandemics.

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