
MEDICINE AND RELIGION IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY: CONFLICTS AND CONTROVERSIES

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ABSTRACT: *This topic is borne out of the need to check an ugly trend which is now a cankerworm eating deeply into our health indices and progressively leading to the increasing mortality of our citizens even at a rate that may be far more than the activities of the terrorists. Shortly I shall be looking at the crack (conflicts and controversies) that have been created between Religion and Medical Science which unfortunately is widening by the day for no just cause.*

KEYWORDS: medicine, religion, Nigeria, society, conflicts, controversies

INTRODUCTION

Peter Atkins: 'Science is almost totally incompatible with religion'

Anon: 'There can never be a conflict between true sciences and true religion because they both describe reality'

While the former is describing an ideal situation, the latter states it the way we have found it in our society today. Therefore the pertinent question to ask is 'should religious intervention (prayers) be seen as complimentary to or an outright replacement for medical Science? 'Medicine and Religion have existed since the creation of man without any form of conflicts or controversies. Indeed the act of creation of the woman from man could be regarded as the first surgical operation recorded by man, in which God caused a deep sleep to fall on man (a form of general anesthesia) following which He(God) harvested part of his rib (costal resection) and used it to form the woman.

The duo enjoyed fellowship with God in the garden periodically and were also blessed with trees and medicinal herbs which they utilized whenever the need arose. Medicine took origin from mastery of these medicinal herbs which were subsequently processed and refined as knowledge and modernization came to be, leading to the production of all sorts of orthodox medications seen today with defined modes of action and uses.

The early Missionaries also anchored their evangelism on a tripod stand: Health, Education and Mission work and so went with health professionals, educationists and clergy men. There were neither conflicts nor controversies in their operations; followers/converts were told the truth and followed up appropriately based on their needs thereby attending to God's people in a holistic manner.

What do we have presently in our society?

Many modern day preachers whom at best could be described as motivational speakers, have so much indoctrinated their congregation to the extent that many of them now view faith healing a.k.a miraculous or divine healing as an absolute replacement for medical treatment.

Many even go as far as labeling people who seek medical treatment for their ailments as 'unbelievers'. It is therefore presently fashionable to give testimonies of how one flouted/disregarded medical or surgical advice and resorted to prayers with allegedly resultant positive outcome. Shouts of joy and Hallelujah commonly welcome such testimonies which end up misleading a lot of those who swallow it hook, line and sinker.

Ironically in many instances, it might interest you to note that most of such testifiers tactfully jettison or remain silent over aspects of medical intervention on the said condition no matter how little it is perceived or better still misrepresent the testimony to depict how powerful or spirit-filled the spiritual leader is, so as to grow her membership to the detriment of the unsuspecting public many of whom unfortunately are attracted to signs and wonders and not to the true gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Such testimonies are known to trigger a vicious cycle, as a naïve listener may subsequently go on to apply the same principles with unpalatable or catastrophic outcomes as the case may be. Testimonies like insisting on a normal vaginal delivery 'like the Hebrew women' against medically advised caesarean operation abound with thunderous claps and shouts of joy. Another prospective pregnant woman who has had two or more caesarean operation or any other indication for a caesarean delivery now goes ahead to claim same 'Hebrew woman-like' delivery with a resultant uterine rupture and death of both mother and baby.

Those of us in medical practice have also seen many instances of couples giving thanksgiving of child birth after many years (upwards of 10 to 15 years) of childless marriage and testifying of how their 'faith' triumphed or how a certain man of God performed wonders in their situation.

While I have not set out to discredit all such claims, I also owe it as a duty whenever able to intimate us that a good number of these claims represent successful cases of Assisted Reproductive Techniques commonly known as in- vitro fertilization (IVF). Some resulted from proper timing of intercourse, myomectomy for fibroid, satisfactory treatment of chronic genital infections, successful hormonal manipulations etc. You can imagine how some of us health workers who probably were part of the treatment usually open our mouths in amazement when coincidentally present and watching our patients give such 'testimonies' and shamefully come to the clinic the next appointment day for their follow up therapy.

Is medical knowledge not from God who giveth all wisdom? ; does seeking for medical treatment make one an unbeliever, sinner or men of little faith? Does the inclusion of medical intervention in one's testimony nullify the potency of God?

These are some of the questions I keep asking those who have such jaundiced and unbalanced inclination as well as spiritual leaders with same.

There are many instances of gullible women who felt lumps in their breasts and were prayed for by their spiritual leaders and subsequently declared healed. Even when these women still felt the lumps in their breasts, they were intimidated or brainwashed into exercising faith in God and accepting total healing of their problems. Many eventually ended up with advanced breast cancers at which stage cure was no longer possible. One came back to my clinic while I was doing a posting at UNTH Enugu, shedding tears uncontrollably and cursing the pastor who ridiculously was still attributing the woman's predicament to the little size of her faith.

Ladies and gentlemen, I think that many of the present day preachers and their followers are simply mocking God by so doing. The holy book says clearly that faith without works is dead.

Many children have died from diseases that are easily treatable medically simply because their parents withheld treatment for religious reasons. This is very pathetic especially because these

ones, as minors, rely on the judgment of their parents or guardians for decisions that may lead to severe morbidity or in some cases instant mortality.

Another dimension to these whole scenarios is the penchant to attribute aetiology of illnesses to satanic powers thereby instilling fear into the person(s) involved making them resort fully to spiritual manipulations of all sorts. In our society today, people who die from liver diseases with marked anasarca (body swelling) and abdominal swellings (ascites) are often said to have been charmed by either a 'wicked' family member or 'jealous' neighbor.

I had once that a young man who came to my consulting room when I was at National Orthopedic Hospital Enugu with a chronic leg ulcer that had lasted for up to 7 years. He had visited many quacks and traditional healers before presenting to a popular man of God (name withheld) in Lagos who prayed for his healing having attributed his leg ulcer clearly to mystic powers. Rather than producing an instant healing of the ulcer, the Lagos based pastor cleverly convinced the young man that he had cast out the cause of his ulcer and that he could now go to a medical doctor for care. I walked him out of my clinic and asked him to go back to the Pastor so he could complete the process he had started. He quickly came back to his senses and apologized profusely, after which on assessment, I found out he had varicose veins which was the cause of the non healing nature of the wound. He subsequently subjected himself to the standard treatment outline and had a successful outcome.

A very sad observation is that the victims of these cut across the entire spectrum of our social strata ranging from the poor to the rich as well as from the illiterate populace to the very literate ones.

An ideal testimony is the testimony of trial of faith in God or triumph over temptations and not that of acquisition of wealth or abandonment of medical/orthodox treatment for prayers. We want to hear people of God testify of how in spite of pressures to compromise by accepting bribe/inducement of any kind or being awarded academic grades for sexual gratification, they stood their ground, did what was right even if it came with pains, failures or poverty.

I wish to state without any fear of contradiction that medical science has been made available to mankind by God himself, an act that is divine, and so keying into it does not in any way negate

divine or heavenly principles laid down for us by Christ himself. Prayers when superimposed on medical treatment truly make it most effective.

Therefore any act of self-deprivation of medical treatment or indoctrination of someone into refusing same is tantamount to suicide or murder respectively.

In my 15 years of medical practice, I have treated some 'men of God' who are known advocates of divine healing with many not ever disclosing to their congregation that they ever fell sick.

Why is it that the so called miracle workers follow other natural principles and protocols like erecting a building by using builders, travelling with vehicles rather than achieving these by mere verbal proclamations. Are these processes immune to miracle? Once it has to do with illnesses or acquisition of wealth, they very readily lay hands or ask followers to touch any part of their ailing body and thereafter comes the prophetic declaration of divine healing. One is thereafter asked to accept it even when the symptoms are still very much present.

Medical science is a blessing from God to us to help nourish and rejuvenate us until the appointed time when every one of us will transit to face his maker. Death and diseases are therefore inevitable and sometimes unavoidable components of life on earth that are only overcome on the day of resurrection.

The early missionaries while evangelizing went with the gospel, education and Health care, none was in isolation and so came the balance needed for optimal human existence and communion with God.

My respected audience, it is very disheartening that while other nations of the world are making advances and optimizing their health indices, ours is declining partly due to poor funding of health, poverty, but most regrettably due to the recent imbalanced indoctrination by many religious leaders. We seem to be retrogressing to the medieval ages when most diseases were surrounded with myths and superstition. In those stone ages, people living with sickle cell disease were thought to be ogbanjes (those that die at appointed time and reincarnate) and were readily sacrificed, twins were seen as taboos; people who developed body or scrotal swellings were said to have committed abominations and were asked to confess or end up in the evil forest.

As medical knowledge and practice evolved, so did the understanding and approach of man to diseases. The reverse is the case in our clime. We interpret every new technology and breakthrough in science to mean signs of the end time and every disease or human problem to have a spiritual undertone.

The situation is such that while Europeans of this age are busy in Science laboratories researching for the next scientific breakthrough, Africans are being convinced to wait and hope for miracles to happen in their lives. At a time that Americans are being taught Advanced Mathematics and Engineering to probe the under seas and space, we are striving to learn to speak in tongues for financial breakthrough. At a time others are being taught Advanced Engineering, robotics, and modern farming techniques to be able to improve their nation's net worth, we are being trained to sow seeds in churches to ward off the devil and end poverty in our families and heal diseases by laying on of hands.

Should a Christian use the services of medical doctors? Does the Bible really forbid the use of medicines? If it is not God's will to heal someone miraculously right now, is it wrong to seek medical aid? Would seeking such help be interfering with God's will?

These are important questions, because the answers have serious implications:

Implications of suffering or relief, life or death. They are also questions that may not even occur to most people, and may seem unnecessary to some. But the questions do occur to sincere persons who are laboring under certain false impressions about divine healing and the Biblical position on it.

Biblical In sight

Since the Bible is the basis for a Christian's faith, we should seek the basis of our answers there.

From my search, God has nowhere commanded Christians to avoid doctors or checkups, nor refuse medicines, blood transfusions, inoculations or surgery.

I found certain verses that are misunderstood as dictating against medical aid. Many other scriptures either show God's neutrality toward medicine, or even lean toward the use of medicines as appropriate.

Genesis 17:10-14 for example, commanded the procedure of circumcision to Abraham. He ordained this minor surgery which is to be a sign of His covenant with His people. This is still being carried out till date in hospitals not in churches.

Physicians are called Joseph's servants in Genesis 50:2 and the word for physicians here is the same word used for God as healer in Exodus 15:26.

Proverbs 17:22 states "A merry heart does good like a medicine". This verse does not cast medicines in a negative light. To the contrary, the metaphor is a positive one.

In Isaiah 38:21 we find prophet Isaiah (upon God's directive) prescribing a poultice for Hezekiah's boil.

Here is a proof that a person may be healed by God even though he or she uses a physical procedure as well.

Ezekiel 30:21 speaks of pharaoh's arm being broken and not healed because it was not bound up. It logically follows that his arm might have been 'healed' if it had been bound. This is a physical procedure called splinting in Medical parlance.

Ezekiel 47:12 shows healing medicine will be made from the leaves of trees that are nourished by waters from the new temple in the New Jerusalem. Revelation 22:2 echoes this as well.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said in Luke 5:31 that "those who are well do not need a physician but those who are sick".

Jesus in Luke 4:23 quoted a proverb, "Physician, heal yourself", and applied it to himself. He never gave any hint anywhere of his disapproval of physicians.

Colossians 4:14 refers to Luke as the “beloved physician”, showing that Luke was a physician and was well thought of. The Bible never reported anywhere that Luke stopped using his skills after conversion or resorted only to miraculous healings.

From the foregoing, no one can conclude that the bible in any way condemns medical science or consultation of physicians. One really wonders on what grounds do some conclude that medical treatment is contrary to Biblical teachings?

The answer is that this misconception arises both from misunderstanding certain verses that at first reading can appear to urge against medical science but in reality do not, or sheer mischief as a result of selfish pecuniary gains or vain self-glorification etc.

In summary, the Bible simply does not condemn people for seeking practical and scientific help for their illnesses. God wants us to examine any health problem and make wise decisions, while looking up to him to lead and guide us in those decisions. No wonder Proverbs 3:5-6 says “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

I am convinced that miraculous healing is not a test of righteousness. On the other hand, going to a physician does not show a lack of faith in God’s ability to heal and it does not prevent God from performing a miracle. He incontrovertibly is the ultimate healer. In fact Medical science works within the physiological laws God has created.

Way forward

Ladies and gentlemen, you will agree with me that there is need for us to strike a balance in all these.

I therefore wish to appeal to all leaders of thought, religious bodies like CAN (Christian Association of Nigeria) and civil society groups to be sensitive to some of the issues raised, do a self and in-house audit of their modus operandi for the over-all good of our society.

Religious bodies should supervise and if possible regulate the teachings of the clerics under them.

Ecclesiastical authorities, theological colleges, and Bible Schools should organize periodic conferences/teachings for Priests and Deacons or Seminarians for a re-orientation on the principles of health care and healing Ministry.

Active effort should be made to fish out those who engage in the prayer-healing ministry because of their inordinate quest for money, power and influence.

Christian-Muslim collaboration is also encouraged for a holistic sanitization of the religious sector.

Government through relevant agencies (National Orientation Agency,NOA and the likes) should also disseminate correct information to the masses and also act as watch dogs for dangerous misinformation in the air waves. Media houses that are used to advertise ridiculous claims by different groups should be called to order by appropriate Government agencies. The Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON) should wake up to her responsibilities. We must not sacrifice the lives of our people on the altar of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR).

Our health facilities should be well equipped with human and material resources and made affordable to the common man to minimize their predisposition to becoming victims of some of these dangerous claims.

In conclusion Medicine and Religion, as ordained by God Almighty for us, are never contradictory but rather complimentary to each other, all to the glory of God and benefit of mankind.

Conflict Of Interest

No conflict of interest was declared by the authors

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