

God, Science, and Covid-19: A Threesome at Work from a Nietzschean Perspective

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Introduction

It is seemingly very easy to claim that God is dead given the view that many people nowadays have recourse to science when faced with pandemics and other calamities rather than to God. This is exactly what Nietzsche has prophesied when he claimed that God is dead.ⁱ However, Nietzsche is often misunderstood by some people who do not read him so closely. What he exactly said is that during his time science was more flourishing and providing more solutions to the problems of humanity than religion was doing. He did not say that God is dead to mean death in the strict sense of the word ‘death’ but death in the sense that people were no longer having recourse to God for the solutions of their problems. During this time of the novel Covid-19 pandemic, the so-called churches were closed and almost everybody including the Holy Father was forced to remain at home.ⁱⁱ Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has proven that the real church is not all about the buildings. It is instead a convocation or an assembly. In this respect, it «designates the assemblies of the people, usually for a religious purpose.... In the Church, God is calling together his people from all the ends of the earth”¹ With Covid-19 Pandemic, there is a spirited dispute about where the solution to the Covid-19 scourge should come from. Many are those who are waiting for the solution to come from science. Many again are those who despise science and cling to their God as the ultimate respondent to their queries including the eradication of Covid-19 and other calamities. There also exist others whose views are mixt. For them, they believe that God can provide an answer to those problems through his people especially the scientists. As a result, their prevailing demand to God, via their prayers, is the discovery of a vaccine, indeed an efficient and effective vaccine, or simply a

ⁱNietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1966) 12.

cure for this pandemic. I cannot forget to mention that there are even other people who are neither waiting for the answer to come from God nor Science. Hence, the existence of the divisions brought about by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, given that very many people have despised religion and God for not being able to eradicate both the covid-19 pandemic and its adversities, should we conclude that God is dead? This paper aims to provide an answer to this problem. It argues that the advancement of science does neither prove death nor silence of God during the calamities such as the Covid-19 pandemic because science is arguably a language of God. For God is a scientist par excellence. The paper posits that Covid-19 is a test to humanity to revisit the mirror in which they view one another.

Nietzsche and Death of God

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is a German philosopher deemed to be one of the most influential among modern philosophers. He has lived when science was beginning to flourish. That was the time of enlightenment. For Kant, enlightenment is "...man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without the guidance of another person." That is an understanding guided by reason. It is claimed to be a new intellectual movement whose teachings were about the capability of reason, thought and the power of individual persons to solve problems themselves. Enlightenment indeed is often understood as the age of reason. The advancement of science during Nietzsche's times came about as a result of man's insatiable desire for knowledge. Considering how things were turning upside down during his time, Nietzsche claimed that God is dead simply because most people

ⁱⁱBy churches, I mean the building inside which people come together to pray to God. However, the correct view of the church should be understood not as buildings but as visible and spiritual. The word 'visible' is meant to depict the community of faith, hope, and charity, as a visible organization through which Christ communicates truth and grace to all men [and women] (The Catechism of the Catholic Church 210). With this idea in mind, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that the Church, often mistaken to be the buildings, is not all about the building. One can stay at home and still pray to God and prayers in this regard should not necessarily mean attending the Holy Mass every Sunday because with Covid-19 there is more or less one year that people spent at home without attending any Mass and still pray to God.

of his time were no longer waiting for God to answer their problems or were leaving God to pick out other alternatives. The picked-out alternative is ex hypothesis, science and reason. These people began to trust their reason which led to the very many inventions in various fields of science and many others to that effect. For Nietzsche, there is no such thing as an answer outside what one's conscience can suggest to him or her, to begin with. He maintains that it is better to listen to one's interior self rather than appealing to the exterior forces such as God or another person.² For God remains silent when people cry out for support during hard times of their existence. The silence of God when the inventions and advancement in science and technology are busy attending to human's needs entails the death of God in the Nietzschean community. In his book *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche forcefully argues that Gods undergo the process of putrefaction, just like any other organic matter such as human corpses. This means that "God, too, decomposes. God is dead. And we have killed him."³ Nietzsche is not preaching the Gospel of the death of God. He is, in my understanding, simply suggesting that science has replaced God in terms of the sources of answers to humans' problems and the problems facing the universe in large.

Nietzsche's Idea of the Death of God Interpretation

The death of God that Nietzsche talks about is totally different from the death of any person such as you or me. The death of God that he talks about symbolizes the taking over of God's responsibility to safeguard humanity against pandemics such as Covid-19 and natural disasters like Cyclones Idai and Kenneth, floods, landslides, to name just a few, to respond to people's daily needs by any other created thing or discipline. The killing of God suggests the impact of the age of enlightenment on the significance of the idea of God in the context of the western civilization which is deemed to be Christian in nature ever since the late Roman Empire. The Enlightenment as I alluded to earlier led to the triumph of science over sacred revelation for Nietzsche. Furthermore, the intellectual and philosophical movement of the Enlightenment period distanced itself from God. In claiming that God is dead, Nietzsche held that there could be some positive novel possibilities for humans to live in the absence of

God. He believed that this relinquishing in the belief of God would open up new ways for humans' creative abilities to become full-fledged. The death of God that Nietzsche talks about. Yes, the only begotten son of God has indeed died to save humanity from their sins for the hereafter. In this regard, «a great battle is fought between life and death, in which Christ, to break forever death's hold over mankind, allows himself to become mortal, and so act as bait for death to swallow. Christ's death, then, poisons deaths, and causes death to die.»²⁴ When Nietzsche is not closely read, it is *prima facie* tempting to pour scorn on the claim that Nietzsche made about the death of God. I do not know the feeling of Nietzsche when he decided to spring a surprise on his readers and his contemporaries that God has been buried and subsequently decomposed. My argument is that it is true that Christ came down on earth, born and died on the cross, killed. His death is an inflicted death. If Nietzsche is alluding to this death, then he is right. *Ex hypothesis*, it seemed to me that he is wrong in claiming that God has undergone decomposition because it is argued that his body was risen from the dead intact, to begin with. However, he was not meaning it in the sense that most people understand him. I suggest that this was a figure of speech, a metaphor in this regard, he was using to pass his message about the progress and ability of science to solve some of the puzzles which were facing humanity that God was not attending to. Let us suppose that God has died in the wrong interpretation of Nietzsche's argument. If he died, then he died to provide life to the world. It is the case that Christ has died. Therefore, he died for the world and the world's inhabitants to live and have life in full. Even if he underwent putrefaction, though I do not subscribe to this theology, he would still remain the giver or sustainer of life. For, according to science that Nietzsche preaches about, "far from being 'dead'...a rotting corpse is teeming with life. A growing number of scientists view a rotting corpse as the cornerstone of a vast and complex ecosystem, which emerges soon after death and flourishes and evolves as decomposition proceeds."²⁵ Hence the formation of the cadaveric ecosystem. We are energy, science tells us. This energy, science argues, cannot be destroyed. Instead, it is transformed into another form of energy and it is never lost. For, according to the laws of thermodynamics,

Energy cannot be created or destroyed, only converted from one form to another, and the amount of free energy always increases. In other words, things fall apart, converting their mass to energy while doing so. Decomposition is one final, morbid reminder that all matter in the universe must follow these fundamental laws. It breaks us down, equilibrating our bodily matter with its surroundings, and recycling it so that other living things can put it to use.⁶

Science Does Not Disprove the Presence of God during Calamities

There have been several arguments to prove the existence of God and the non-existence of God. These are, for example, the cosmological arguments of Thomas Aquinas and teleological or design arguments to prove the existence of God. There is also an ontological argument attributed to Anselm of Canterbury. These arguments were evolved because, to philosophers, mere faith was not enough to believe in the existence of God. In this section, I am going to talk about neither of these. Rather, I am going to argue for the presence of God during the times of pandemics and other calamities such as natural disasters. It is often argued that science has disproved religion and God. However, though this view can be proven to be logically true, it can also be proven materially false. This is because, as a scientist, I do not see anything contradictory about claiming that science is the language of God spoken by God and God's creation, for those who believe in him. Far from disproving God and religion, science actually complements the two. In this regard, one of the main reasons for people abandoning religion and spirituality in the western world whose views influenced Nietzsche to claim that God is dead is arguably that science has disproved religion and the reality of Spirit. It is true that so many people who were committed to the spiritual path have or might be having doubts since both science and God are silent during the times of pandemics and natural disasters and other calamities. It is also true that their numbers have gone higher because the building in which the church would gather to pray has been closed to prevent the spreading of the Covid-19 pandemic. But it is also true that this view is false because the church is quite different from these buildings. That is why, thanks to technology and science, some people can follow the Holy Mass from

their televisions and radios. This novelty implies the Church, reading the signs of the times and finding new ways and methods of evangelization in a certain context without losing its identity. Despite this novelty and continuity that connotes the basic tenets of the Church, there are some other people due to their financial class who cannot afford any access to these means by which one gets to follow and attend Mass online. Some of these people have lost faith, but some others have not.

Coming back to the question of science being able to disprove religion and the reality of the Spirit, I would like to argue that God is a scientist par excellence. He is the origin of science. If it is true that God created everything that there is in the universe, then he also created people who claim to be scientists. If he created these people who claim to be scientists, then these people exist in the world and he also created science. If they exist in the world and that God also created science, then they are present even during the times of the pandemic such as Covid-19 and other calamities including natural disasters like Cyclones Idai and Kenneth, floods, landslides, among other calamities that awakened us from our slumber to realize our need and concern for another. If they are present in the world during such times, then God is also present not just in themselves but in his entire creation. Therefore, it follows that if it is true that God created everything that there is in the universe, then God is also present not just in themselves but in his entire creation. One objection to this argument would be to argue that if God is not only present during such times but every time because he is omnipresent, then he would not remain silent when his people are dying. The answer to this objection would be that the ways of God are utterly different from the ways of people. His time is not the same as ours. He has a different way of counting time because he cannot be understood or limited in our spatiotemporal understanding of him. He is boundless. It requires human patience and perseverance because when the right time to attend to his people's needs comes, he definitely acts. God is present and his presence can be demonstrated by the intelligibility of the physical world through laws of nature. These laws can be construed to be nothing more than originating from the creator God. In this regard, there are a bunch of scientists who are Christians and who are busy in the laboratories trying to discover a cure or a vaccine

to this pandemic of the covid-19 pandemic. It is God who is working through them. That is why it is the case that Christians cannot not “think rationally about the scientific enterprise without compromising their most cherished Biblical convictions” (Poythress 3).⁷

COVID-19 Pandemic Has Subjected Humanity to Test

Before talking about its challenge to humanity, let me begin by explaining what it is. Covid-19 has been defined as a disease brought about by a new strain of coronavirus. In this regard, CO in the nomenclature of coronavirus stands for ‘corona’ whereas VI stands for virus and D for the disease. It is a pandemic disease that is formally referred to as ‘2019 novel coronavirus’ or ‘2019-nCoV’. As Lisa Benda puts it, the COVID-19 virus is a new virus linked to the same family of the “virus as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of the common cold”.⁸ Notice that 2019 in the name of this virus symbolizes the year in which its strain was discovered.

Today, as the numbers at a glance of the WHO show, there have been 113,315,218 confirmed cases. Of these, 2,517,964 are confirmed deaths.⁹ COVID-19 pandemic does discriminate. It does not look at one’s height or one’s size and shape of the nose as those were some of the grounds upon which whoever was found to meet them was killed during the 1994 Genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu like Sr. Félicité Niyitegekaⁱⁱⁱ in Rwanda. Neither does it look at the origin nor the colour of one’s skin. Even age does not matter to it. It does not only target the rich, for even the worse-off contract it. It does not spare you because you have a disability or not. What I am trying to say here is that Covid-19 has seemingly and arguably equalized us. It has shown the world that these and so many other things on whose grounds some people claim to be superior to others are just accidents of life. This is because being white or black is an accident because nobody chose it, to begin with. When it attacks, it does not show any sign of exclusivity. In all inhabited continents, COVID-19 is there. Having said that, I argue that this pandemic is a call. It is a call to revisit the mirror and angle through which we treat one another. It is a call to bear in mind that the world is a global community.

The Socio-Cultural-Politico-Economic Impact of COVID-19

In their nature, human beings are social animals. In this regard, Aristotle argues that “Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual” (qtd. in *The Hindu* 2012).¹⁰ This idea was recently alluded to by the Holy Father in his encyclical letter entitled *Fratelli Tutti* (Brothers All). On his account, Pope Francis addresses fraternity and social friendships. Some of the ‘challenges thrown to us by the COVID-19 pandemic include but are not limited to soulless consumerism, the throwaway culture, inequalities exacerbated by the globalized economy, mass migration, human trafficking, as well as ongoing conflicts. He invites us “to move beyond ourselves so that we can dream together and create a community of belonging and solidarity worthy of our time”.¹¹

For Reno,

One reason our political culture churns with anger is that the post-modern West tends toward atomization, not union. We are in the midst of a crisis of solidarity.... As we enter the third decade of the twentieth century, it is increasingly obvious that the signal need of our time is the fraternity and renewed social friendship.

Covid-19 has turned our culture upside down.¹² What used to be *prima facie* morally wrong, is what is done today. In some countries, some people have lost their family members but could not show them the respect they deserve in burying them respectfully. A friend of mine in Rwanda has recently lost an uncle who was in jail and none from his family went to his funeral. He was buried by the prison. This was due to the restrictions put in place to prevent the spreading of the COVID-19 pandemic by prohibiting the inter-district movement of people. In this regard, one would argue that such government officials who restrict people

ⁱⁱⁱRwandan Hutu Catholic nun belonging to the Abakobwa ba Musenyeri (the girls of the Bishop) religious congregation. She was killed with some Tutsi in a bid to provide a refuge and shelter to them in the western part of Rwanda [Gisenyi] in today's Western province of Rwanda.

from burying theirs by the mere fact that they are preventing the spreading of the pandemic are looking for the greatest good for a great number of people. However, I argue that even if it is one person's good that is violated for the sake of the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people, it becomes ipso facto morally wrong.

Some of our governments have indeed been trying their best to make sure that the spreading of this pandemic is slowed down. However, it is also the case that they failed in certain areas. Consider the case of a lockdown. Ever since the beginning of this outbreak, several series of lockdowns were imposed on people regardless of where they are and what they are doing. Some of these lockdowns are even imposed on people without any reflection at all on the consequences this would bring to people considering that their financial statuses are different. Imagine a poor person X who is living on his/her daily income by working in the garden of other people. Imagine again a person Y who is disabled and living on begging by waiting for generous people for his daily bread on the street. Furthermore, consider a well-off person Z who can afford anything during the rest of his/her life. Is it fair to impose the same level of lockdown on these three different individuals given their differences in financial statuses? Is it morally good to do that? In my understanding, it is morally wrong because, in the course of preventing the spreading of the pandemic, poor people would die, and more often than not their deaths would be confused with the death of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, many governments impose this lockdown on people without any prior notice for people to wind up what they were doing and prepare themselves to go back home. This is not humane. When a government imposes lockdown, it should first of all think of what considered vulnerable people would be feeding on during an entire time of the lockdown. That is why there is an urgent need to revisit our social structures, our respective cultural values as well as our respective financial independences when we devote our energy to end the COVID-19 pandemic by the imposition of the lockdown and its similar treatments on people without any guarantee that it could be of any help in that regard. For it is *prima facie* wrong to adopt a one-size-fits-all measure given our above-mentioned differences and respective various contexts.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide an answer to the question of whether God is dead during the hard times like those inflicted on us by the COVID-19 pandemic or not. It argued that the advancement of science does neither prove death nor silence of God during the calamities such as the Covid-19 pandemic because science is arguably a language of God. For God is a scientist par excellence. The paper posited that Covid-19 is a test to humanity to revisit the mirror and angle in which human persons view one another.

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 - ¹² Uwizeyimana, Claudine. “Impact of Covid-19 on Socials in Rwanda.” (*Oli Health Magazine Organization*: Sept 2020). https://olihealthmagazine.org/impact-of-covid-19-on-socials-in-rwanda-claudine-uwizeyimana-from-university-of-rwanda-entry-63_H240.html/ Accessed: 28 Feb 2021.