

The Virus of Terror and Prejudice: Using Ebola to Close Borders and Foment Racial Discrimination

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Paranoia is the first symptom of a plague. – Nicholas Powers, The Independent, Oct 28, 2014

The Ebola virus has assumed every single form of terror imaginable. It has resulted in the closure of borders. It has seen people targeted by means of quarantine. It has also become the basis for stigmatising, condemning, and targeting. Groups have become fair game. Some have cited acts of racial abuse. Others claim that homosexual groups are receiving a degree of unhealthy scrutiny.

The crestfallen LGBT activist Leroy Ponpon told Reuters of his woes:

“Since church ministers declared Ebola was a plague set by God to punish sodomy in Liberia, the violence towards gays has escalated. They’re even asking for the death penalty. We’re living in fear.”[1]

In May, Archbishop Lewis Zeigler of the Catholic Church of Liberia showed that he going through a dry spell in religious discourse. Ebola was the perfect opportunity to strike with a rather far fetched exegesis. Homosexuality was a terror, indeed “one of the major transgressions against God for which He may be punishing Liberia” for.

The Liberian Council of Churches was also pent up with anger against the anal pursuing habits that had brought misfortune upon the country. “God is angry with Liberia, and that Ebola is a plague.” Short on scripture, but heavy on the literacy of doom, the statement continued to insist that, “Liberians have to pray and seek God’s forgiveness over the corruption and immortal acts (such as homosexuality, etc.) that continue to penetrate our society.”[2] For Liberia’s Wilmot Kotati Bobbroh of the Living Water Pentecostal Church, there was only one solution: God’s all-healing mercy (*Religious News Service*, Aug 11).

Ebola channelled as a prejudice that cleanses the society of suggested wickedness is a perfectly decent narrative for some preachers and the bible bashing radio hummers. Oklahoma conservative Christian radio host Rick Miles is happy to read the disease into the morality play book. External conditions are the doing of internal faults. Terrible diseases are only ever as bad as the moral quality of the people who are infected. Ebola “may be the great attitude adjustment that I believe is coming. Ebola could solve America’s problems with atheism, homosexuality, sexual promiscuity, pornography and abortion.”[3]

The fear of disease is a poorly fastened mask that, when removed, reveals something far more descriptive and raw. “There’s nothing like a new outbreak,” observes Kei Miller, “to have countries fall back on old prejudices, fortifying their borders against diseases that will

slip in nonetheless like the most cunning refugees.”[4]

African diaspora members face the prospects of restrictions in travel. Rumours have been circulating for some time that treatment of the illness is a pretext for taking resources. Poison the state’s people, and you will go far. “These people (NGOs),” Luxembourg-based David Foka, President of African body “Maison d’Afrique”, “arrive in their country, dressed like men on the moon. They spray people with chemicals and people start to run.”[5] Health centres are being emptied in Sierra Leone for one vital reason: the locals fear being killed off instead of being healed.

Then there is the traditional prejudice that has no coherent target. Kagure Mugo suggests in the *Mail & Guardian*(Nov 21), that “many in the West” are “convinced that anyone with a tan from out of their local area has the disease”. [6] But Mugo admits that the phenomenon is not confined to developed countries, or those of the “West”. South Africa, heavily populated with workers from other parts of the continent, is prime territory for suspicion. “I recently contracted summer flu and thus had the delightful experience of coughing and sniffing on South African public transport – while looking very much East African.”

It has reached institutional proportions, with Morocco citing the Ebola outbreak in three west African countries as the reason why it decided to pull out of the African Nations Cup for January 2015. All the more dire for the fact that Morocco was scheduled to host the event. “The reason is,” went a statement from the country’s sports ministry, “dictated by health reasons because of the serious threat of Ebola and the risk of it spreading.”[7]

Moroccan authorities were visited, in turn, by the relocation decision by producers to move production of *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* from the Moroccan desert to the sands of New Mexico (*Moroccan World News*, Nov 21). All of this, despite not having a single reported case of the virus striking in the country.

The hypocrisy on dealing with Ebola was all too evident in the address to the UN Security Council by Australia’s foreign minister, Julie Bishop. Prejudice is a protean creature, self-condemning even as it launches into the next attack. The statement read by Bishop expressed concern by members about the “detrimental effect” arising from “trade and travel restrictions and “acts of discrimination against the nationals of Guinea, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone”.

The same minister is also a member of the government that announced last month that it would cease granting temporary visas to visitors from West Africa. The categories of refusal cover humanitarian and immigration visa applications, while those with existing visas must submit to a 21-day quarantine period before arriving.[8] The mask of sympathy has well and truly come off.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/23/us-foundation-ebola-liberia-gay--idUSKCN0IC1GV20141023?feedType=RSS&feedName=healthNews>

[2] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/08/06/god-is-angry-with-liberia--ebola-is-a-plague/>

[3] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/07/rick-wiles-ebola_n_5658481.html

- [4] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/10/ebola-is-frightening-so-are--prejudices-outbreaks-provoke>
- [5] <http://www.wort.lu/en/luxembourg/ebola-virus-africans-in-luxembourg-snubbed-because-of-ebola--fears-546dfad80c88b46a8ce3f4b8>
- [6] <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-11-21-youre-from-kenya-got-ebola>
- [7] <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/nov/08/africa-cup-nations-jeopardy-morocco--ebola-fears>
- [8] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2014/oct/28/australia-immigration-ebola--west-africa-video>

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