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Christianity, “supernatural” beliefs, and COVID-19

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 arguably had far-reaching implications for Christianity and the church as an institution. Issues around social distancing and lockdown directly impacted articulation and religious expression, while understanding of the pandemic and the virus were mediated through constructions of religio-spiritual beliefs. Given this, the study sought to explore some neo-Pentecostal church leaders' messages in South Africa regarding the novel coronavirus or COVID-19, what this meant to their followers and the associated implications for the spread and effects of COVID-19. Methodologically, the researcher viewed and listened to uploaded YouTube video clips of news related to the church and COVID-19, uploaded by media outlets and the neo-Pentecostal church leaders themselves as well as online newspaper reports from the period 2 March to 19 June 2020. The findings of the study reveal that neo-Pentecostal church leaders attributed the origins of SARS-COV-2 to “evil” spirits. Neo-Pentecostal church leaders had mixed messages on the possible cure for COVID-19, with some emphasising miracles as the panacea for COVID-19, and a minority believing that God exhibits his power through epidemiologists. Prayer was also viewed as a tool for Christians to protect themselves from contracting COVID-19 through the invocation of divine powers. The paper concludes that the pervasive influence of church leaders and their emphasis on spiritual remedies such as prayer and miracles may have given Pentecostal followers a false sense of security, which might have affected their awareness of COVID-19.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Pentecostalism represents approximately 25 per cent of the Christian population (Jackson 2019). The term “Pentecostal” refers to churches or Christian movements that greatly emphasise the works of the Spirit (Gooren 2004). Harris (2020:31) posits that what sets Pentecostalism apart from other Christians such as Evangelicals, is a theology of “revelatory experience”, a claim that they receive “a direct revelation from God” which translates to new information. Another distinctive feature of Pentecostalism is its reliance on charismatic leaders, the “Men of God”, who pass on “God’s revelations” to mass congregations (Banda 2019). Other scholars such as Kgatle (2017) and Chai (2018) have branded this latter group as “neo-Pentecostals” who idolise healing through miracles.

Neo-Pentecostal church leaders, the “Men and Women of God”, greatly influence their followers and reinforce their belief in the “supernatural”. A study of Zimbabwean prophets by Gunda and Machingura (2013) reveals that neo-Pentecostal church followers believe in their leaders’ divinity and are attracted to them due to the performance of miraculous healing. The followers believe these “Men and Women of God” are never wrong no matter how unacceptable their behaviour might be. Dube (2019) believes that because of Africa’s numerous health problems, the neo-Pentecostal church leaders sometimes take advantage of some “distressed” followers “keen on miracles” by twisting the scriptures to suit their needs. This is done through the distribution of anointing oil or water as a form of spiritual protection against pestilences (Biri 2018; Magezi & Banda 2017). Resane (2017) argues that this has profound psychological and practical implications as the followers may lose their cognition and their balance, as they begin to view everything through the lenses of their leaders. So convincing are these “Men and Women of God” that they have encouraged their followers in South Africa to engage in bizarre acts such as spraying Doom insecticide, eating grass and drinking engine oil to cure various ailments (Kgatle 2017). However, few of them have professional training to deal with the effects of whipping up people’s emotions and changing their consciousness by linking the suffering of people with illnesses and diseases to the spirit world (Anderson 2018). Their influence on followers has implications for the adherence of the latter to epidemiological advice on COVID-19 prevention and consequently, it is important to pay attention to and analyse the content and meaning of their messages.

There is a strong belief among neo-Pentecostal Christians that adherence (or lack of) to norms and values is “rewarded” by a “supernatural” being (Ferngren 2016; Koenig 2018; Lauterbach 2019; Nyamnjoh & Carpenter 2018; White, Kelly, Shariff & Norenzayan 2019). This belief is also held by most world religions and other non-religious people who believe in karma (Yilmaz &

Bahçekapili 2016). Norenzayan and Hansen (2006) argue that the belief in the supernatural being is a central reaction to the social consciousness of disaster and death. A benign or bad experience in life corresponds to one's actions. According to White and Norenzayan (2019:3),

... these causal connections are etched into the fabric of the universe over long timescales, even when no physical connection is discernible between actions and experiences.

Life events that are regarded as bound to happen trigger a casual attribution to either God or Satan by Christians (Banda 2019). This reduces anxiety and concern for disease or death (Büssing & Poier 2017; Vai III, Arndt & Abdollahi 2012). Louw (2008) argues that the Old Testament links sin to illness and this might cause guilt and despair among those suffering from a disease. Likewise, Amanze, Nkomazana and Kealotswe (2007) maintain that the New Testament emphasises the influence of demonic powers and illness. This is supported by scriptures (Luke 13:16; Matthew 9:34), which regard illness as God's judgement over a sinful world. Neo-Pentecostal Christians base their beliefs mainly on the four gospels of the Bible and to them, it is never wrong and non-believers are bound to suffer either in this world or the next. This might be a challenge, especially in a pandemic situation where medical science is used to control the spread of diseases, *vis-à-vis* Christian belief and hope that the "supernatural" being will protect them.

This paper seeks to answer the crucial questions as they relate to spirituality, beliefs and COVID-19 healing. What are the neo-Pentecostal church leaders' messages on COVID-19? Given that the neo-Pentecostal church leaders have a substantial faithful following, what is the potential response to their messages and what are the implications of the efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19? What are the comparisons between the neo-Pentecostal church leaders' messaging and the views of medical scientists on the cause, spread and efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative paper relies on the analysis of YouTube video clips (n=11), four of which were uploaded by the church leaders' media outlets, Major 1 and ECG Church Fans TV (n=2), Emmanuel TV (n=2), and two which were uploaded by church leaders themselves (Alph Lukau and Paseka Motsoeneng), four were uploaded by SABC and two by eNCA. The researcher also reviewed online newspaper reports (n=18). The video clips and news reports under review were from between 2 March and 19 June 2020, and the reviews were based on several inclusion and exclusion criteria. To be included in this study, the video

clips and online reports had to contain messages on COVID-19 from neo-Pentecostal church leaders. Church leaders from Christian denominations other than neo-Pentecostals were excluded from the study.

The researcher viewed and listened to recorded video clips of news related to the church and COVID-19, as well as messages and online services from Pentecostal church leaders on COVID-19. The researcher watched recorded videos by Prophet Shepherd Bushiri of the Enlightened Christian Gathering, Prophet Alph Lukau of the Alleluia Ministries International, Pastor Paseka Motsoeneng of the Incredible Happenings Church and the late Prophet Temitope Balogun Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations (although based in Nigeria, he had a huge following in South Africa). The researcher analysed excerpts from interviews by Bishop Bheki Ngcobo of the South African Zionist Church, Bishop Mosa Sono of Grace Bible Church, Thabani Mkhize of Mount Zion Christian Church, and Reverend Ananias Ralekholela of the Gospel Fire International. The researcher also reviewed online news texts from registered newspapers, specifically Sunday Times, Mail and Guardian, The Mercury, Daily Maverick and News24.

The data obtained were analysed through thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). This involved the researcher listening to and transcribing the video clips and online texts and familiarising himself with them. The researcher then developed initial codes using a coding framework provided by Creswell and Poth (2016). Using this framework, particular statements were analysed and categorised into tentative themes that all related to Christian supernatural beliefs and church leaders' messages on COVID-19. This was followed by the inductive collation of the coded texts into substantive themes. These themes were then reviewed, some were discarded, and others merged.

3. CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Previous research has demonstrated that CDA focuses on the way that text and language enact, legitimise, or otherwise reinforce elite groups' or institutions' dominance (see Braun & Clarke 2006; Van Dijk 2001). Braun and Clarke (2006:78) argue that CDA studies “relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality.” In addition, Van Dijk (2001:357), stresses that CDA primarily studies “the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced ... in the social and political context.” In this manner, according to Richardson (2007), CDA connects with, examines, and criticises social power along with the way it is portrayed and perpetuated through media coverage, both overtly and implicitly. Thus, the common vocabulary by CDA scholars centres around dominance, hegemony and ideology. CDA has been

a useful analytical tool in this paper because it sought to understand the power and dominance wielded by neo-Pentecostal leaders as characterised by how their broadcasts influenced their followers. In addition, the study aimed to unpack the overarching discourses that permeated the messages and were used to legitimise them to the followers of neo-Pentecostal leaders at the social practices level, or either legitimise or delegitimise the same by newscasters at the discursive level. At the discursive level, the paper sought to ascertain how existing institutional and professional factors could have manifested in the construction of neo-Pentecostal leaders' messages in the mainstream media.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four main themes emerged from the data: neo-Pentecostal church leaders versus medical science – causes of COVID-19; protection from and cure for COVID-19; prayer; and adherence to social distancing. These are presented below with some verbatim quotes.

4.1 Neo-Pentecostal church leaders versus medical science – Causes of COVID-19

In many ways, the four neo-Pentecostal church leaders' messages which sought to attach "evil spirits" as the origin of COVID-19 differed from the epidemiologists' view of the SARS-CoV-2 virus originating from animals and passing to human beings. Thus, as previous studies reveal, upon noticing a phenomenon, the human mind may conclude that a so-called "invisible hand" had caused it (Bachrach 2016; Betchart 2019). The virus was given agentic status, as illustrated by Shepherd Bushiri's following message:

The Coronavirus is targeting certain people. It is a very demonic thing. When those people are being targeted are over, it will disappear. The question is are you among the people? (Major 1 & ECG Church Fans TV 2020)

Likewise, Paseka Motsoeneng claimed that he had foreseen the disaster in 2019 with "some little creepy moving creatures coming to infect people" (Bhengu 2020b). COVID-19 was also termed by T.B. Joshua as "the devil" which prevented people from travelling freely (Emmanuel TV 2020a), Bishop Bheki Ngcobo argued that "this thing" (COVID-19) was not only a blood issue but also spiritual warfare (SABC News 2020d).

Taken together, these excerpts reveal how neo-Pentecostal Christians associate any disaster (such as COVID-19) with "supernatural" occurrences. The results are strikingly similar to Ramantswana's (2019) findings in prophetic

ministries in South Africa where almost every disease was said to be associated with evil forces and the person afflicted needed spiritual “deliverance”. The results are also similar to studies by Koenig (2018), Lauterbach (2019) and Nyamnjoh and Carpenter (2018), which found that Christians believe bad behaviour is punished by “supernatural” beings.

4.2 Protection from and cure for COVID-19

Excerpts from three Pentecostal church leaders showed different views on how people were and/or should be protected from COVID-19 and how it would dissipate. Generally, their views reinforced the principle of predestination – a strong belief that all events happen due to God’s will. To this end, T.B. Joshua predicted COVID-19’s imminent end:

By the end of this month, whether we like it or not, no matter the medicine they might have produced to cure whatever, it will go away the way it came. It is not the medicine that brought this to the world, medicine cannot take it out. (Emmanuel TV 2020b)

In a live broadcast on 22 March 2020, Shepherd Bushiri claimed to have the power to protect his followers if they followed his instructions:

In the name of Jesus Christ, I speak that this demon, this virus, this pandemic will not come to you. The anointing of protection is coming into your household. The anointing will cover you and whatsoever you touch God will give you protection. (Major 1 & ECG Church Fans TV 2020)

Alph Lukau alluded to miracles by quoting the story of Biblical Elisha taking a ball of salt and throwing it into the source of bitter waters, thereby turning the entire river into sweet waters. He concluded that God was still in the business of healing lands. The implication of this is a prophecy of healing through the power of the “supernatural” being and the spiritual protection of believers (Lukau 2020).

This sense of security might have hurt social distancing and the adherence to other regulations by the followers. For example, a study in Johannesburg by Chimbidzikai (2020) revealed stories of people going to their market stalls to conduct open business without following social distancing guidelines, with some of them referring to the above prophecy as proof that COVID-19 was temporary, which was contrary to the available evidence of its spread. The results further suggest that somehow the church leaders protected their followers through spiritual anointing from contracting COVID-19. This was a paradox, considering the evidence that a church gathering in Mafikeng was a source of the spread of the coronavirus (Masweneng 2020; Smit 2020).

Evidence from other studies reveals that the use of “miracles” has been a source of wealth for neo-Pentecostal prophets rather than for genuine healing in such countries as Zimbabwe (Banda 2019; Magezi & Banda 2017) and Nigeria (Owusu 2019). This scepticism of “miracles” was also expressed in a study on South African churches which revealed that congregants were sprayed with Doom insecticide and made to eat grass (Resane 2017). “Miraculous healing” may lull believers into comfort in the hope of spiritual protection from COVID-19.

In contrast to the above-cited neo-Pentecostal leaders, it is also important to note that some Pentecostal church leaders supported the epidemiological approach to combating the spread of COVID-19. For example, Bishop Musa Sono and Reverend Molo supported the National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) (SABC News 2020b; 2020d).

This was a major contrast to long-held majority Christian beliefs of epidemics being a result of “sin” and contrary to the suggestions that human beings have never evolved beyond thinking that everything is due to an invisible force (Van Eyghen 2019). Inadvertently, contemporary biomedicine tends to moralise by bestowing an array of moral assertions about healthy ways of life and fighting disease by dieting, workout, abstaining from cigarettes as well as avoiding drug abuse (Coleman & White 2010). Thus, alcoholism, as well as tobacco usage, is labelled a symbol of a decadent lifestyle (Bielecki & Nieszporska 2017). In this sense, things that are abhorred by Christians such as alcohol and tobacco were also the same as what the epidemiologists were citing as increasing mortality in cases of users who were infected by coronavirus.

4.3 Prayer as a buffer against contracting COVID-19

Four neo-Pentecostal church leaders emphasised prayer as protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection. Shepherd Bushiri implied that he foresaw a miracle happening through prayer for his congregants, “so that God will protect and raise you as written in the scriptures.” The charismatic preacher invoked Jesus’ name so that “whenever this attack comes to your family, may it pass your house in the name of Jesus” (Major 1 & ECG Church Fans TV 2020). He also exhorted his followers to

pray with me as I am praying with you right away because of the power of protection, the power of Jesus is coming wherever you are (Major 1 & ECG Church Fans TV 2020).

Other church leaders urged for unity and prayer to defeat COVID-19. Alph Lukau encouraged his followers to pray. He added:

This is the time for you and me to arise and pray not only for us but for the people of this world be it that you are linked to them directly or indirectly, it is time for the Church of God to pray (Lukau, 2020).

Similarly, Bishop Bheki Ngcobo urged Christians to be in prayer about COVID-19 and to give encouragement to people who may be fearful (SABC News 2020b). In addition, such an agent (COVID-19) would be defeated by an attitude of prayer and those under the influence of prayer would be delivered from what T.B. Joshua termed “powers that have been holding you down” – a euphemism for supposed “evil” origins of the disease (Emmanuel TV, 2020b).

The results suggest that according to neo-Pentecostal Christians, prayer has a role in, and relevance to, the health of their societies. These results reflect those of Close (2002:36), who also found that prayer connects believers and provides them “with a sense of well-being and continued purpose”. Prayer is also a moral guideline to the day-to-day lives of Christians, in which certain utterances such as seeking protection from pestilences and thanking God for the gift of life are recited (Beekers 2018). Similarly, Zhang and Yang’s (2017) study in China found that real-life challenges provide an incentive for Christians to pray and attach to God. Thus, prayer can be used as a coping mechanism for stressful events such as COVID-19 due to attentional shifts and mediation processes.

The belief among neo-Pentecostal Christians is that it is better to have trials and tribulations so that they dispose of any hope in other-worldly things but God alone. These results match observations by Wimberly (2018) in her autobiography, in which she posits that hope institutes a dynamic way of living in a world that resists the lethargic and life-defying mindset of hopelessness. Hope is fortified by faith which is a Christian belief, and trust in God and a belief and undertaking to live positively and

courageously in the community after the model of Jesus in times of triumph and the midst of hard trials and tribulations (Wimberly & Farmer 2017:20).

Thus, the spreading of messages of hope during times of despair is important in helping Christians to avoid panic and to accept the inevitability of the COVID-19 situation.

4.4 Adherence to social distancing

Despite their insistence that COVID-19 would soon go away and that prayer would protect their followers from the pandemic, after the declaration of the State of National Disaster, all the church leaders, save for one (Bishop Bheki Ngcobo) urged their same followers to adhere to social distancing regulations.

Shepherd Bushiri urged his followers to maintain high standards of hygiene and maintain social distancing:

I am a responsible leader, and I would like to advise you, my followers, to stay away from any contamination that may spread the virus. The fact that God can protect you does not mean that you can go deliberately into lions' jungles or to a place where there are hyenas and say, 'I believe in God and I am going to walk in there'. You do not just play with things like that. (Major 1 and ECG Church Fans TV 2020)

Alph Lukau's Alleluia Ministries reiterated that they were following the government prohibition by cancelling all their programmes and like Bushiri, urged their followers to maintain hygiene and social distancing as well as praising the lockdown measures as "sacrifices are worth it, and for a good cause" (Lukau, 2020). However, they maintained their belief that "our God still heals" without elaborating on the specifics.

In an interview with SABC News on 15 March 2020, days before the lockdown, Thabani Mkhize specified the measures they had instituted to maintain social distancing. He said that the priest was the only one to take wine while the congregants took only the bread. The priests would stop washing their congregants' feet directly with water but would sprinkle them before taking communion.

Reverend Ananias Ralekholela pronounced that worshipping God in other ways was much more palatable than losing lives when conducting services in large groups. He argued that since the family was the smallest unit of the church it was better, due to the situation, to utilise this unit to worship. The church would, through its larger body, learn to reach its members through technology by bringing the community together without physical contact.

We will reach our people through WhatsApp so that they do not depend on fake news or misleading pastors or false understandings of God but find the best ways to worship God with clear information and connect although they are not in the same room (SABC News 2020c).

On the other hand, Bishop Bheki Ngcobo strongly opposed the government's decision to ban gatherings. In an interview with SABC News on 18 March 2020, he said:

We took a decision looking at the Bible because we are controlled by the prophets of the Bible. When we sat down as a structure, we declared that at the moment, the church must stand up in numbers to go and pray for all the challenges that are happening in the country. The country is not attacked by the diseases – of which this is an artificial one – it is attacked by so many issues that need God's intervention.

He argued that as people had survived apartheid, tsunamis, cholera, malaria, and earthquakes, they were going to survive COVID-19, and that the Christians should attend Easter services (although the government later banned such gatherings). He urged the government to provide the proper precautions or provide information on how to prevent the transfer of the disease, arguing that since the companies were allowed to operate and they were given the precautions, therefore the church could also be provided with similar guidelines.

Some churches defied lockdown regulations outright and gathered for prayers. For example, congregants of the Mmabatho Apostolic Church of Christ were arrested in Mafikeng on day 17 of the lockdown (12 April 2020), after assembling for Easter services (SABC News 2020d). News24 and the Daily Maverick reported on 23 March about several churches flouting lockdown regulations by having gatherings of more than 100 people (Tanda 2020; Simelane 2020).

By mid to end of May 2020, most neo-Pentecostal church leaders began advocating for the opening up of churches because, as they argued, churches were also an

essential service and some needed to get in touch with their spirituality and in any case ‘COVID-19 was not going away (Bhengu 2020a; Powell 2020; Pijoos 2020; Shange 2020).

The request was granted under level 3 of the lockdown, starting on 1 June 2020, with a limited number of 50 congregants (Nicolson 2020; Zeeman 2020). Reverend Bheki Ncogbo argued that the church had to demonstrate how to live and thrive under COVID-19 (Kirby, Taru & Chimbizikai 2020). The church leaders proposed that they would sterilise their churches and keep registers to make it easier for contact tracing (Bhengu 2020b; eNCA 2020; Pijoos 2020). Conversely, the Grace Bible Church cancelled all physical services on 17 June 2020, considering rising infections and in a bid to help save lives (The Mercury 2020).

The messages sent by most neo-Pentecostal church leaders most likely had an effect on their congregants, especially those following charismatic prophets. Evidence from previous studies demonstrated how followers performed some bizarre acts following prompting from their church leaders (Kgatle 2017). Furthermore, the insistence on continued gathering may be taken in the context of revenue collection by the church and their reliance on church members to sustain the lives of church leaders. There were news reports of church leaders exhorting the government to provide financial aid to

churches or lift the ban on social gatherings (Mvumvu, 2020). Thus, church leaders may have other pressures beyond the “spiritual” or the impetus for healing their congregants.

5. CONCLUSION

Religious constructions and understandings around disease and health are deeply embedded within society. Religious leaders in turn, such as neo-Pentecostal church leaders, have a huge influence on their followers’ behaviour in the context of perceiving and responding to disease or the imminent risk and danger in the context of pandemics such as COVID-19. Thus, the arguments on the cause and origins of COVID-19 have implications for remedial actions such as prevention and responses to government-initiated lockdowns and modified religious expression and behaviour. Neo-Pentecostal church leaders linked the “devil” to COVID-19, in turn imploring their followers simply to pray, and the “thing” would go away as it was meant for “evil” people. Some neo-Pentecostal church leaders, as the current paper has shown, argued that COVID-19 would miraculously disappear with prayer and “divine” help and not as a result of medicine. Despite this, some church leaders voiced their belief that God’s “supernatural” powers were manifested through the medical scientists’ ability to discover a cure for COVID-19. The findings also demonstrated that prayers are used as a coping mechanism for stressful situations and although they may not protect the Christians from COVID-19 *per se*, they may induce a sense of calmness and assurance. Paradoxically, despite a strong call for spiritual solutions to the “evil” disease, in the period leading to the declaration of the State of National Disaster, all church leaders, except for one (Bishop Bheki Ncogbo) urged their followers to adhere to government regulations on lockdown, although they later advocated for physical church gatherings possibly due to the need for revenue from church members. The recorded cases of physical church gatherings during the Easter period in contravention of lockdown regulations point to the church leaders’ power and influence over a substantial number of people, as demonstrated by their messaging on the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of efforts to curb the spread of pandemics in the future, this paper concludes that it is important to take into consideration direct and subtle messaging from church leaders, given their pervasive and potent influence on their followers.

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