



Religion in the Age of Coronavirus

By Damaris Parsitau



Our world, as we know it, has been turned upside down by the coronavirus (COVID-19). The virus has not just exposed our fragility as human beings, but has also raised our awareness of our interconnectedness as people sharing one planet with viruses and microbes.

First identified in China in November 2019, COVID-19 has since spread to more than 100 countries worldwide, including Italy, the USA, UK, Germany and 24 African countries so far.

The magnitude of this pandemic, as well as its fast geographical spread, has not only paralysed both rich and poor nations, but also caused global panic, creating gripping fear for our lives. On March 11, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 a pandemic. At the time of writing this article, the pandemic had killed 8,000 people and infected 200,000.

The virus, which experts says is most certainly passed from animals, in this case the bat, has already infected seven people in Kenya, if the government reports are anything to go by. Other African countries that have reported its presence include South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, Tanzania and Ethiopia. For many Kenyans, it was not a matter of if, but when the virus would strike. The country is a major travel hub in East and Central Africa, with nearly every major global airlines stopping at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport (JKIA) in Nairobi.

After seemingly dilly-dallying for some time, President Uhuru Kenyatta, finally, on March 15, ordered schools and institutions of higher learning to close. He also banned political rallies and

religious gatherings.

However, despite the ban, on Sunday, March 15, Kenyan churches were packed to capacity with throngs of people, apparently oblivious of the coronavirus pandemic and the risk of spreading the disease. They (the churches) dulled the congregants' fears and cried to God for protection. My neighbours even held a prayer fellowship in my neighbourhood to pray against the demonic virus as many have christened it, except that COVID-19 is not a demon.

In a country whose easy dalliance with the supernatural is legendary, this is not surprising. In moments of political, social and ecological crises, Kenyans turn to God, supposedly for guidance. Such challenges are seen through the prism of religion. In a country with a highly educated and exposed population, pandemics like COVID-19 and HIV/AIDs are still said to be caused by the devil and other dark forces. Even when science is very clear on the genesis of the viruses, the majority of Kenyans and other people elsewhere will still interpret them as the invention of the devil. Not surprising in a country where nearly 85 per cent of the population is Christian.

Kenya, in particular, is a highly religious country with diverse religious groups with high levels of religious participation across various religious traditions. Belonging and participating in various religious activities is essentially important to many people across the country. A 2015 study showed that for 95 per cent of Kenyans, faith informs how they conduct their daily lives.

Given the important role of religion in the lives of millions of people, it is important that we change how we practise our faiths in the face of this global pandemic that has already heavily impacted all of us. Already, the virus has killed 19 priests in Italy, which sadly means that no one is immune from the virus, not even our religious leaders.

Similarly, no amount of prayers and faith healing could cure this virus. African Christians have been praying for a cure for AIDS/HIV and Ebola for decades not but not a single person has certainly been cured of these dangerous viruses. The same logic should apply to COVID-19.

This is not to say that prayers and faith don't work. Neither does it mean they have no significance in the lives of people. Faith is the glue that holds people together in moments of crisis like this. It is also a purveyor of hope in moments of immense anxieties and fears. Yet, in times of global pandemics like the coronavirus, science and medicine would seem the more reliable solution. After all, it is science that has continually sought cures for these epidemics. The antiretroviral drugs and the Ebola vaccine (not prayers and demon-bashing) have given a new lease of life to millions of people around the world. It is also science that will come up with a cure for COVID-19, not miracles and faith healing.

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Yet, science and religion are not enemies, neither are they in competition with each other. There is nothing wrong with people praying and casting out the demons of disease if that is how they understand it, even as they wash hands, self-isolate, self-quarantine and maintain social distance, as advised by science and medical practitioners. Faith and science should not be in contradiction with each other. Each plays important and significant roles in our lives. Faith and prayers hold us together in hope and community while science tackles the virus in scientific and practical ways.

Yet, the easy resort to religion and prayers as the only solution during times of crisis like this is not only problematic but is also risky and reckless. It takes away our focus from holding our negligent

governments accountable. The Kenyan healthcare system has been struggling for decades, but the ruling elite does not care because it can afford to seek the best medical care abroad. Our blind religious faith does not allow us to question the massive inequality in our healthcare system, in particular, and in Kenyan society in general. We also do not ask why the poor lack sanitation and why they live in dehumanising conditions.

The national day of prayer and other diversionary tactics

This is not a far-fetched assertion: Every time we are faced with a crisis as a country, the government, in collusion with religious leaders, call for prayers. Saturday, March 21, 2019 was slated as a national day of prayer by President Uhuru Kenyatta, who asked Kenyans to pray for forgiveness. Kenyans who have suffered years of neglect and broken healthcare systems must ask what we are repenting for. Who between Kenyans and the government should be repenting for the sins of the nation, for the inaction, corruption and bad governance that have seriously put our health at risk for decades?

It seems to me that the government wants to divert attention from its inept and tardy response to the pandemic, while religious leaders are seeking for relevance and respectability at a time when the virus has rendered them impotent. The national prayer day called by the government is meant to dull our anxieties. It is a diversionary tactic to manage the public's fears and soothe our anxieties as we are socialised not to squarely put the blame where it belongs: on the government.

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Across the world, religious leaders are making hard and painful decisions to close their worship sanctuaries. Because religious services, by their very nature, bring together large groups of people, houses of worship in Africa are potential hubs for virus transmission. In developed democracies, religious leaders are scrambling to understand the COVID-19, even as they find ways of protecting their congregations, while African clergy are either denying the virus or praying against the demons that cause the virus.

In Saudi Arabia, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca's holy sites have been substantially reduced. The Vatican is streaming mass on television. Rabbis in many parts of the world are discouraging their followers from hugging and shaking hands. These are hard and painful decisions, but practical and important measures to keep followers alive.

Secondly, there is evidence in South Korea that the virus spread quickly because of the social interactions of the worshippers. South Korea was the first country to report significant coronavirus infections outside of China. In New Rochelle in New York, a synagogue, as reported by Slate.com, was the centre of an outbreak of coronavirus that eventually led to the summoning of the National Guard.

In Houston in the US, the world-renowned Pastor Joel Osteen of Lakewood Church, which attracts upwards of 50,000 people, has closed his church. Similarly, the famous megachurch pastor T.D Jakes of Potters House suspended church services for his thousands of followers.

Church business as usual in Kenya

While there were only seven confirmed cases of coronavirus in Kenya, by the time of writing this article, there was general panic in the country, which suggest that everyone should avoid crowds. Yet, religious leaders across the country have yet to cancel church services. Only the All Saints Cathedral, Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Nairobi Chapel, Mavuno church and Jamia Mosque had suspended mass worship by the third week of March. Instead, many have provided water and soap for members to wash their hands at the entrances of the church compounds. While washing hands has been suggested as one of the ways to fight the virus, it does not cancel the benefits of social distancing. Are religious leaders feigning ignorance about the latter, or are they simply turning a blind eye to this important measure? I posit a number of theories to explain this lackadaisical behaviour.

First, church spaces in Kenya are not about people; they are about the church founders who use the tithes and offerings to enrich themselves and live a life of luxury. They are never about people-centred theologies or a gospel of social justice, but about personalities. This is the logic that underlies the majority of spiritual spaces, especially those that are prosperity gospel allied, where the church founder's main concern is not to build a community, but to make money.

Second, Kenyan churches are generally small and crowded in mostly poorly ventilated buildings and semi-structures. Except for mosques, and the more established mainstream churches, the majority are in bad condition. Many Pentecostal/evangelical church services, for example, are held in tents or shelters made of iron sheets and with poor sanitation. These are hotbeds for the spread of the disease.

Why are the majority of Kenya's popular churches in such dilapidated conditions? Why don't tithers demand for safe and healthy spaces of worship? Don't the poor tither have dignity? These are questions that the Kenyan religious population need to interrogate!

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The majority of Pentecostal clergy rarely invested in building decent churches because they don't think about the comfort and welfare of their members, but only about offering and tithes. Prophet Owuor of the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness, for example, hires school venues and tents, where his followers meet on Sundays. The reason he has given his followers for not building a permanent sanctuary is that Jesus Christ is coming back to rapture the church, hence there is no need for a physical church. However, he built himself a palatial home, complete with a bunker, where he can self-quarantine himself, while the millions of his followers who live a life of squalour can easily die from the coronavirus infection. Many other big and smaller churches have not invested in building decent spaces of worship yet their founders live in opulence and luxury. It is about them, not the people.

Yet the behaviour of the clergy in Kenya is hardly surprising. Rather, it mirrors class divisions in a country where religious elites, just like their political counterparts, have created heaven on earth for themselves, while ordinary Kenyans live in hell. The Kenyan clergy, just like our politicians, does not care for its members. It uses them to ascend to power (political and religious) and respectability. This is why the status of our churches mirrors the status of our public hospitals and schools and informal settlements. Many of our public facilities, just like many houses of worship, are in terrible

condition, with no running water and poor sanitation. Yet pastors rarely raise the issue of the sorry state of our broken healthcare systems, even though some churches have built a semblance of health clinics to provide some form of medicare.

More importantly, religious leaders do not want to call off church services because they will be rendered irrelevant. Many a clergy use the pulpit, not just to mint money, but also to prop up their egos and advance their social status. The clergy are in the business of making money. Many churches in Kenya, particularly those of Pentecostal and charismatic church inclinations, are run like business enterprises, so closing a church has serious financial implications. In Africa, the church is an enterprise, just like the stock market: and their owners are afraid that their business empires will crash like stock markets.

Third, there is a fear that COVID-19 will expose the clergy's dark underbelly and call to question Africa's faith-healing and miracle industry. For so long, religious leaders have trafficked in miracles and faith-healing. COVID-19 has rendered them incapable of healing the sick and incapable of praying away the coronavirus. In fact, the virus has rendered them impotent and fragile; they have no power to pray away the disease or perform dubious miracles.

Fourth, the clergy has been averse to scientific discoveries because science makes their miraculous shenanigans questionable. Prayers for healing have not calmed a shocked and scared populace. Many a clergy has frowned on science, medicine and theological education, instead spiritualising even non-spiritual matters as serious as the coronavirus pandemic. Science shakes the foundation of their spiritual teachings. After all, and in the case of this pandemic, science has proved to be more practical and reliable than faith.

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These fly-by-night pastors have also trafficked in guilt and false prophecies to shock people into a particular way of being religious. Self-proclaimed Prophet Owuor has trafficked in fear-mongering threats, and has even claimed that he had prophesied the pandemic. He also said it would kill people in Asia because the continent rejected his prophecy. In Kenya, a section of the public has cajoled him to unleash his "mighty prophetic powers" to fend off the virus. They have also called on him to pray it away.

Apostles James Maina Ng'ang'a's video on coronavirus - where he is unable to pronounce the word coronavirus - showed not just his sheer ignorance, but also how ill-equipped he and his ilk are when it comes to offering solutions to such complex 21st-century problems.

A Meru-based Pentecostal clergyman with a huge following angered many Kenyans when he said that coronavirus is a global hoax and that God has instructed him not to cancel church service because there is no coronavirus.

Fifth, many of the clergy have not built an infrastructure that would enable them to continue their ministry in times of crisis like this. While many pastors have invested in TV stations, radio frequencies, social media pages, YouTube and websites, the intention has always been to win souls and tithes that will make them more powerful. Investing in sound infrastructure that would have allowed them to go online or on radio or televised church services at times of crisis like this was never part of their plan because their short-sightedness does not allow them to rethink about ministry for 21st-century challenges, including climate change and its links to our health. The available infrastructure has been mainly directed at international audiences, not local congregations. It has also never been about their congregations but about how they can use such

platforms to minister to gain respectability, online audiences and donations.

The question is, where is that spiritual power to perform miracles and heal people of coronavirus when we really need it? Prophet Owuor, who claims to have caused the virus because the world has rejected his gospel of fear and threats, is impotent. A couple of Sundays ago, he preached without an interpreter, as many of his followers wore masks and kept a safe distance from each other for fear of catching a disease he supposedly brought to the nation for rejecting his message. His sermons have always been fear-inducing. He preachers about a dreadful God who kills people on a whim. It is interesting that a man who claims that the clouds clap for him and the glory of God descends on him while preaching cannot pray away a global pandemic that can infect him and his retinue of thousands of followers in Kenya and beyond.

More importantly is that religious leaders are no longer the voice of the voiceless, the conscience of the nation and defenders of social justice. It is about them and not the vulnerable. I have not seen any statement or press conference by the interreligious forum or the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCKK) or the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya or the Conference of Catholic Bishops to assure a nation in a moment of deep fear and frustrations.

Yet, many leaders have the audacity to force members to go to church. Where is the voice of religious leaders in Kenya? Who will call out the government's bluff for putting the lives of Kenyans in extreme danger? Where is Prophet Owuor, Kenya's "spiritual president" who "resurrects the dead" and claims to have prophesied about COVID-19? Where are the miracle workers who claim to have the powers to delete HIV/AIDS, cancer, and diabetes? The refusal of many churches to cancel church services must be questioned by all. But even more importantly, the Kenyan religious community must defy their clergy and stay at home for their own health and that of their families and communities. I suggest that in light of this moment of great social anxieties, all religious activities must be cancelled to help contain the spread of the disease.

Exposing the sham

If there is anything we have learned from this experience, it is that the miracle and faith-healing industry is nothing but a sham. No religious leader has the power to heal you. Science is our only hope. Going to church right now is not just the height of spiritual carelessness, but also an act of foolishness. When the virus is under control, we can all troop back to our houses of worship.

In developed countries, pastors have been at the forefront of ministering to their congregations at home. Many have come up with innovative ways of being Christian in the age of the coronavirus. They have asked communities of faith to change not just their usual religious practices, but their worship as well. Parishioners are not only conducting mass online but offering online prayer support and educating congregations about the scientific ways of mitigating the virus.

More importantly, they have come up with spiritual resources to help their followers remain spiritually connected during such times. These clergy and churches are institutions that are congregation-centred, not individual-centred. They have invested in infrastructure for a coronavirus pandemic and 21st-century challenges. For such churches and congregations, God is not found in a physical church, but everywhere and God does not speak to the clergy alone.

There is need to deinstitutionalise the church and question our high dependence on the so-called men and women of God. We must re-evaluate their moral and intellectual standards, and we must critically debate the theological foundations of the church in Kenya.

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The Kenyan Christian needs to be socialised not to depend so much on the clergy. God does not live in church but is everywhere. No clergyman has the monopoly and direct line to God. God lives in our minds and hearts. We can have church with ourselves and our families. The pastor has no magic to ward off coronavirus. He is as afraid as you are. But he can be a voice of hope and reason.

Many churches and clergy have denied science and climate change. The evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which are the fastest growing churches in Africa, Latin America and Oceania, have always been at odds with science and climate change. One of the effects of climate change is the spread of pandemics like this. As human beings, we share the world with viruses and they attack us. Yet we have refused to be good stewards of the environment and we have denied climate change despite tremendous scientific evidence about its links to our human body.

The sheer magnitude and fast spread of the virus has paralysed the world and caused huge fear and confusion. For many religious people, it has caused an ecclesiological conundrum. Fear and confusion have taken over reason. Yet scientific data available calls us to do things differently; wash hands, minimise unnecessary travel, stay home while sick to reduce infecting others, keeping social distance, avoiding large crowds, such as church services, and maintaining social distance.

Different ways of being religious

What does it mean to be church in the age of coronavirus? How much should it matter that we continue to physically gather in spaces of worship in the midst of a pandemic that by its very nature is anti-crowding? Isn't it the wise thing to do that the clergy should call off all religious activities to save lives and avoid mass spread of the pandemic? Is it not a death sentence to encourage people to go to church at such a time as this? Does it make any sense at all for people to continue to troop to churches, and other spaces of worship for prayer, fellowship and community making, when such actions put people in serious danger? Why do pastors have such a hold on peoples' abilities to think? Is God only found in churches and mosques? Why are Kenyan churches clergy-centric and not people-centric? Can the African and Kenyan clergy spring to action and guide their congregations and provide the much-needed leadership in an era of crippling fear and uncertainties?

For many religious people, this time calls for many ways of being. It calls on us to deinstitutionalise faith and rethink innovative ways of being spiritual communities. It calls on us to decentralise the role of a clergy that does not think about us but about themselves. It calls on us to give science a chance, even as we continue to pray and hope and take care of each other. Taking care of each other is a spiritual exercise. This is the time to be good neighbours. This is the time for us to think about compassion and empathy, After all, science and faith are not in contradiction with each other.

Now is the time to ground ourselves in a gospel of social justice, not fake miracles and questionable cures.

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