17 Religion and COVID-19 in Southern Africa

Implications for the discourse on religion and development

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Introduction

The interface between religion and COVID-19 in Southern Africa (as indeed in other parts of the world), provides a valuable opportunity for gleaning insights for the discourse on religion and development. This is because the different religions' responses to COVID-19 are a useful pointer to how they respond to other development initiatives. Methodologically, the chapter is informed by the important role of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3, namely, "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." Thus, sound health (such as responding effectively to COVID-19) provides the platform for achieving all the other SDGs. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the quest to achieve the SDGs in Africa (Ekwebelem et al. 2021), hence the need to examine how chapters on religion and COVID-19 can be interpreted in the context of the SDGs.

Chapters in this volume contribute towards reflections on religion and development, as they confirm how faith communities have been responding to COVID-19. They show how religion responds to a pressing health emergency, thereby providing useful indications on how religion interacts with development, more broadly defined. This will contribute towards clarifying the critical relationship between religion and development. It is my conviction that the lessons learnt from religion's engagement with COVID-19 in Africa will be deployed more strategically to prepare for future emergencies and to strengthen other development initiatives on the continent.

The relationship between religion and development is attracting the attention of scholars in diverse disciplines, globally. This includes scholars in anthropology, religious studies, gender, security, economics, and others. Further, where development practitioners previously did not think that religion was a major factor in development, they have begun to pay more attention to the interface between religion and development. Thus, Katherine Marshall (2001), in an article, "Development and Religion: A Different Lens on Development Debates," writes as follows:

The world of religion has been an unacknowledged and often unseen force for many development practitioners in the past. Many reasons,

good and bad, explain this divorce; long traditions of separation of state and religion are deeply engrained and deliberately place a remove between development and faith issues. Institutions like the multilateral development banks which interact with governments as a matter of basic institutional structure may find limited vehicles to interact with a broad range of civil society institutions, religious institutions among them. The vocabulary and approach of spirituality seemed, often though not always, inimical to the technical, hard-nosed approach of development practice.

(Marshall 2001: 243)

If Marshall could refer to a “divorce,” between religion and development, it is now possible to refer to a “re-marriage” and, as the chapters in this volume confirm, a dynamic one at that! Indeed, there is a sense in which religion and development have gone from a rocky divorce into a blissful honeymoon period. Whereas only about a decade ago there were limited publications within the sub-field, the recent overviews by Ignatius Swart and Elsabè Nell (2016), Emma Tomalin (2018, 2021), Barbara Bompani (2019), and Chitando et al. (2020) have shown that there is growing interest in religion and development. This has effectively made it an expanding sub-field within the academic study of religion more broadly defined. What the interaction between religion and COVID-19 does is to avail an opportunity to review the religion and development discourse more closely, utilising a specific case study. However, before engaging in such an undertaking, it is helpful to provide an overview of how the religion and development “re-marriage” has come about. This will assist in placing the review of the chapters on religion and COVID-19 in parts of Africa into their proper historical and theoretical context.

Religion and development: summarising key issues in the “re-marriage”

The responses to COVID-19 by different religious actors confirm the complex role of religion in the face of different social challenges. Ascertaining how religion interfaces with these multiple social challenges constitutes the major focus of research within the sub-field of religion and development. One would be keen to ask the following question: “why is the interest in religion and development increasing?” A longer study is required to do justice to this theme, but I will draw attention to what I see as some of the major issues.

First, the limitations of the secularisation thesis have become apparent. The assumption that as modernity advanced, the status of religion would diminish, has been shown to be severely limited (see for example, Stark 1999; Clark 2012; Müller 2020). Writing from an African perspective, Mustafa H. Kurfi (2013) strenuously maintains that religion remains a major factor of life

and needs to be factored in development discourses in Africa. Religion has stubbornly persisted and remains vibrant across diverse contexts, including the so-called 'developed' countries where it was expected to become less influential. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated an increase in some religious activities, such as prayers (see for example, Boguszewski et al. 2020). This resilience of religion has generated or deepened scholarly interest in establishing whether and how it has a bearing on development.

Second, the increased visibility of religion in global affairs has led to growing interest in exploring its interface with development. Some scholars have highlighted how religion remains a significant force in international relations (see for example, Fox 2001; Haynes 2021). This role of religion in international relations remained clear during the COVID-19, with some faith-based organisations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) calling upon particularly governments in the global North to share vaccines with the Global South. Interest in the theme of religion in international relations has precipitated the focus on religion and development, including paying attention to how this would influence relations between Europe and Africa, for example (Ellis and Ter Haar 2006).

Third, the global religion and human security nexus, particularly the rise of militant versions of religion and their implications for development, has increased interest in the field of religion and development. It has become clear that religion is available for mobilisation and deployment by various political actors. This has led to studies on religion and violence (see for example, Munson 2005). However, to balance the scales, there have been publications on religion and peace building and development (Flanigan 2013). This close relationship between religion and security also features in reflections on radicalisation within religions and COVID-19 (Avis 2020).

Fourth, the contributions of faith-based organisations to community transformation, particularly as complementing the efforts of the state in the Global South, have attracted the attention of some scholars. Thus, for example, the prominent role of faith-based organisations in development efforts have justified the interest in religion and development (Cooper 2019). Further, global development efforts through the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030) have reinvigorated interest in the interface between religion and development (see for example, Tomalin et al. 2019).

Fifth, there is an effort by scholars of religion to shake off the critique that their discipline lacks practical relevance and only concentrates on abstract or theoretical issues. Focusing on religion and development offers them an opportunity to claim that they are engaged in a critical undertaking. There is justification in this claim, however. As chapters in this volume confirm, scholars of religion were needed to analyse the role of religion in the COVID-19 pandemic. There is an emerging appreciation that scholars in the scientific study of religion can assist with clarifying

how religion either promotes or impedes health (and other development) initiatives (Wildman et al. 2020).

These developments have given the sub-field of religion and development a new lease of life, with a number of scholars, particularly in Europe, providing valuable insights. On the other hand, scholarship on religion and development in Africa remains less studied, especially outside South Africa. Chitando et al. (2020) provide a detailed review of the growth of the sub-field in Africa. Chapters in this volume are making a valuable addition to this discussion in Africa by analysing how religion has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in parts of Southern (and East) Africa.

The central argument of this chapter

Having outlined the context in which research and publication on religion and development is being undertaken, in this section I outline the central argument of this chapter. This chapter contends that reviewing how religions have responded to COVID-19 in parts of Africa has definite implications to the discourse on religion and development, both in Africa and globally. Its central argument is that there is no single and simplistic interpretation of the role of religion in responding to COVID-19 (and, by extension, to development). The responses are dynamic and complex and may not be exhausted by using descriptive words such as “positive” or “negative.” As I argue below, scholars will probably need to coin potentially confusing labels such as, “positive-while-negative” when describing religion’s interface with COVID-19 (and development).

Whereas commentators on religion and development often proffer sharply divided perspectives, the chapters in this volume confirm the need to revise this trend. Often, the dominant argument is over whether religion facilitates or frustrates/threatens development. Thus, the suggestion is that religion does one thing or the other, but not both. This can be seen from the titles of some previous/earlier publications. For example, the volume co-edited by Gerrie ter Haar and James J. Bussutil (2005) has the title, “*Bridge or Barrier?*” The subtitle of Jeffrey Hayne’s (2007) book on religion and development is, “*Conflict or Cooperation?*” The volume edited by Kenneth Mtata is entitled, *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development?* (2013). All these titles suggest that religion can only be either positive or negative, but not both.

My central argument is that the responses by religions to COVID-19, as expressed by chapters in this volume, confirm that this “either or” approach to the interface between religion and development might not be the most effective or productive one. I am arguing that a “both and” perspective will give us a more rounded picture about the relationship between religion and development. I will argue that this position, which maintains that religion is both a positive and negative force in the quest for health (for example, in responding to COVID-19) and development, is more sustainable.

Positive responses by religion to COVID-19 in Southern Africa

The chapters in this volume provide clear evidence of the critical role of religion in responding to COVID-19 and promoting development in Southern Africa. In this section, I shall highlight some of the key themes that have emerged from the chapters. I must hasten to add that the analysis in this section is more indicative than exhaustive, due to space and thematic considerations.

The contribution of indigenous knowledge systems and African traditional religions to the COVID-19 response

One of the major challenges characterising the global discourse on religion and development is the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) (see for example, Noyoo 2007). Chapters in the first part of this volume highlight the extent to which individuals and communities utilised indigenous knowledge systems in their responses to COVID-19. Chapter 2 on Ubuntu (a widespread concept in diverse African contexts) by Beatrice Okyere-Manu and Stephen N. Morgan shows the potential of concepts from the long past to remain relevant in responding to contemporary challenges such as COVID-19. Similarly, Chapter 3 by Tenson Muyambo on indigenous systems relating to social distancing, and Macloud Sipeyiye on resources from Ndaou traditional religion, confirms the value of broadening coverage when debating religion and health (COVID-19), and development. Bernard P. Humbe's call for a more inclusive approach to the debate between science and religion (Chapter 5) can also be located in this scheme where African indigenous knowledge systems and religions are taken into account because they provide the spectacles that the majority of citizens use to frame their understanding of disasters or development initiatives.

Resilience by minority or marginalised religions

Linked to the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems and religions is the exclusion of minority religions such as Rastafari. Most scholarly publications on religion and development tend to focus on established missionary religions such as Christianity and Islam. These religions have had a longer presence on the continent and have become more established, thereby enabling them to own schools and health centres. However, younger religions such as Rastafari must be included in discourses on religion and development. Chapter 15 by Fortune Sibanda shows how Rastafari cultural identities such as music, Ital foodways, holistic natural herbalism and environmentalism as well as spiritual and physically balanced lives engender creative and unique parameters that promote public health and human flourishing.

This brings a radical dimension to the discourse on religion and COVID-19 (and development). Development should not only be approached from the perspective of initiating practical projects aimed at improving the welfare of people, or alleviating suffering. A broader perspective is required to appreciate that development is also related to deepening consciousness and expanding individual and communal sense of identity. Thus, the chapter by Sibanda on Rastafari and COVID-19 challenges us to look beyond the “usual suspects” (read Christianity and Islam) when reflecting on the impact of religion in Africa. More work is required to interrogate the contribution of new religious movements to identity and social cohesion in Africa.

Effective collaboration with public health and political authorities

Many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate the remarkable flexibility of the religions and their willingness to collaborate with public health and political authorities in response to COVID-19 in the region. Against the stereotype that religions are rigid systems that are characterised by a fundamentalist slant, many chapters confirm how religious leaders were quick to embrace and popularise public health messages. Thus, Chapter 8 by Paskas Wagana highlights the positive role of the churches in Tanzania, a country that had a difficult response to the pandemic due to the stance of its late former President, John Magufuli. Chapter 10 by Sonene Nyawo describes the positive role of the churches in responding to COVID-19 in Eswatini, while Nelly Mwale and Joseph Chita (Chapter 11) draw attention to the collaboration to respond to the pandemic by the main church umbrella bodies in Zambia. Tshenolo Madigele and James Amanze describe some of the positive responses by the churches in Botswana in Chapter 12, while Edmore Dube demonstrates the flexibility shown by Muslims in Zimbabwe in the face of the pandemic in Chapter 14. This dimension is important, as the Islamophobia propagated by some sections of the media (particularly in relation to the theme of religion and violence that I alluded to earlier) creates the impression that Islam is a rigid religion.

The dominant trend that emerges from the descriptions provided in the chapters referred to in the foregoing paragraph is that of religion acting to promote public health messages such as observing social distancing, sanitising and avoiding large gatherings. This was also the experience of religion in other parts of the world, albeit with some challenges (see, for example, Tan et al. 2021 in relation to Malaysia; and Osei-Tutu et al. 2021 in the context of Ghana). To a large extent, many religious leaders sought to echo the messages disseminated by public health officials and politicians to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to mitigate its impact. Although most of the chapters in this volume cover the period before the full-scale drive towards promoting COVID-19 vaccination, one could add that many religious leaders were also supportive of the move and some were keen to lead by example by being publicly vaccinated, while putting on their religious regalia.

Religions and COVID-19: flexibility, adaptability and rationality

Aligned to the foregoing descriptions of religion working systematically with public health officials and politicians, chapters in this volume also underscore the flexibility, adaptability and rationality of religion in the face of COVID-19. Chapter 7 by Lucia Ponde-Mutsvedu and Sophia Chirongoma confirms the shift from physical meetings to online services by different religious bodies. Although this shift has been uneven, with mostly Pentecostal churches that were already utilising online platforms enjoying an upper hand, it is fair to say that many religions were quick to adjust. Once again, this runs contrary to conventional wisdom that casts religions as intrinsically conservative systems that are unable to move quickly or adjust to changing realities.

Many chapters in this volume illustrate the flexibility, adaptability and rationality of religious actors in the face of COVID-19. Although there was what one might call, perhaps uncharitably, the extremist fringe (whose dimensions I discuss below), the majority of religious actors were willing to be guided by the health experts. They operated with an open theological or religious system that did not pit faith and science as being locked in mortal combat. Instead, they contended that all the knowledge that those working in the health sector had was from the same source that inspired religion. This confirms the position reached earlier by Stark et al. (1996) that the idea that religion is non-rational stems from bias against the phenomenon and is not borne by evidence. Thus, some religious people might take up fundamentalist and unreasonable positions. However, this does not imply that religion is non-rational, as the responses to COVID-19 in different contexts in Southern Africa confirm.

Negative responses by religion to COVID-19 in Southern Africa

Whereas there were many positive responses to COVID-19 by religions, as outlined above, it is also important to acknowledge that there were a number of negative responses. Once again, space considerations mean that I can only summarise these negative responses in this section. These related mostly to theological interpretations that either minimised the pandemic or deepened fear, resistance to public health messages and the marginalisation of specific groups such as people with disability and failure to act decisively to respond to increased violence against women.

Immobilising theological positions in relation to COVID-19

Some theological positions had the effect of immobilising individuals and communities in the face of COVID-19. In Chapter 9, Julius Gathogo reviews the challenges emerging from some 'prophecies' in Kenya in the face of the

pandemic. In Chapter 6, Helena Van Coller and Idowu A. Akinloye adopt a legal perspective and show how the state's lockdown measures could be justified in the face of some religious leaders who were absolutizing freedom of movement and worship (see also Tengtenga et al. 2021 with reference to Malawi). These examples highlight the capacity of religious actors to sometimes adopt positions that can present religion as unreasonable and extreme, particularly in the face of a major threat such as COVID-19.

Ponde-Mutsvedu and Chirongoma (Chapter 7) and Nyawo (Chapter 10) also bring out some problematic aspects of religion. Ponde-Mutsvedu and Chirongoma draw attention to the cyber bullying that characterised the lockdowns in Zimbabwe, while Nyawo highlights the problematic character of some interpretations of COVID-19 that characterised it as God's punishment for sin. Similarly, some indigenous knowledge systems that readily identified COVID-19 with earlier sicknesses ran (and still run) the risk of minimising its threat to health and well-being. It is this dimension of promoting a fatalistic worldview that has led some critics to challenge the positive rating of religion in discourses on development.

Cultural conservatism, resistance to science and COVID-19 prevention strategies

Across most chapters, the notion of religion struggling with the full implementation of COVID-19 prevention strategies runs through. While highlighting the flexibility of the Muslim approach to the pandemic, in Chapter 14 Dube shows how observing funeral rites was a challenge for many Zimbabwean Muslims. This aspect was also noted by Muyambo in Chapter 3 in the context of indigenous burial practices. This strategic rite of passage emerged as a contentious issue in the wake of COVID-19. Thus, it appeared the established mourning and burial patterns largely struggled to conform to the guidelines handed down by the health authorities. Perhaps this has to do with the finality associated with death and the need to avoid the consequences associated with angering the dead. Thus, while I noted the flexibility that religions demonstrated in responding to COVID-19, it is important to admit that there were limits to such flexibility.

Chapter 5 by Humbe shows how some religious positions seek to challenge science. Indeed, there are some fundamentalists in the different religions who seem determined to counter science and whose highest selling point is resistance to science. Such religious actors emerged as stumbling blocks in efforts to mobilise religious communities to counter COVID-19 and its negative effects. Other religious actors in different countries sought to project themselves as martyrs by refusing to accept the public health messages. They positioned themselves as more faithful than those who cooperated with the public health authorities. This position became more entrenched when some led resistance to the vaccination efforts, particularly in 2021 when vaccines became more widely available. Ideas relating to Africans

being used as guinea pigs (see for example, Samarasekera 2021) and theological ideas linking vaccination with having the mark of the beast (Letšosa 2021) promoted vaccine hesitancy and slowed down the vaccination drive by governments in the region (as it did in other parts of the world). The interface between religion and conspiracy theory (Dyrendal et al. 2019) emerged as a major negative force in efforts to respond effectively to COVID-19 in Africa, as in other parts of the world.

Struggling to address increased violence against women and girls during the pandemic

Religions, having patriarchal foundations, have generally struggled to address violence against women. These patriarchal foundations inform religion's tacit (and active) support for men's violence against women (see for example, Johnson 2015) and to promote the general silence in the face of violence against women (Chitando and Chirongoma 2013). The COVID-19 induced lockdowns in the region resulted in increasing cases of violence against women and girls. In Chapter 16, Molly Manyonganise highlights religion's struggle to address the increase in violence against women in the wake of COVID-19. She draws attention to how religion needs to be more alert in responding to violence against women, including during emergencies.

In discourses on religion and development, religion's role in holding back women features prominently. Manyonganise's chapter is a reminder that religion needs to be more purposeful in addressing gender inequality, holding men to account and to promote justice. COVID-19 has exposed the high levels of sexual and gender-based violence that women experience, globally. Her chapter also underscores the fact that pandemics are gendered (Marindo 2017). Thus, religion needs to be more proactive in addressing violence against women if it is to become a valuable resource for social transformation.

Overlooking persons with disability

Religions have struggled to address the rights of persons with disability (see for example, Schumm and Stoltzfus 2011). In Chapter 13, Makomborero A. Bowa discusses the marginalisation of persons with disability by faith communities during COVID-19 in Southern Africa. Bowa contends that churches have struggled to read the Bible positively in relation to the rights of persons with disability. This has resulted in the systematic exclusion of persons with disability in churches and society. His chapter serves to draw attention to the interaction between religion and persons with disability in the face of pandemics.

Religion and COVID-19 in Southern Africa in the context of religion and development

The foregoing sections have drawn attention to the achievements and struggles of faith communities in parts of Africa in the context of COVID-19. In

this section, I seek to summarise some insights for the discourse on religion and development.

First, the analysis above shows that no single story is possible in relation to religion and COVID-19 in Southern Africa. The chapters confirm that the pattern is complex, with religion being a positive factor in some instances, and a challenge in others. For example, while it possible to regard religious leaders' acceptance of the lockdowns as positive, their failure to respond to violence against women is negative. Another example would be the religious leaders' flexibility in moving to online platforms being a positive development. However, some of the messages being proclaimed on the online platforms were negative. This generates the idea of being "positive-while-negative" that I referred to above.

Second, it is helpful to invest in researching into factors that shape a religion to be a positive, negative or "positive-and-negative" factor in responding to a pandemic or contributing to development in a specific context. Thus, contextual sensitivity must be prioritised in research works into religion and COVID-19 or development. Chapters in this volume have sought to uphold this dimension by emphasising the specific local, denominational, national or regional contexts in which religion sought to respond to COVID-19. This implies the need to privilege lived religion ahead of theoretical constructs of what a specific religion ought to be (see, for example, Knibbe and Kupari 2020).

Third, from the onset of COVID-19, religion has been visible on the frontlines in different African countries. Religious leaders have largely been encouraging their followers and the larger society to observe public health protocols, adjust rituals and observances and prevent the spread of COVID-19. This has exploded the myth that religions are intrinsically conservative and not flexible. African Traditional Religions and Rastafari, for example, promoted indigenous herbs in the face of the challenges facing biomedicine during COVID-19. Although debate will continue to rage over the efficacy of these herbs, what remains clear is that religion remains a highly significant social force in Africa (and elsewhere). Serious development practitioners must, therefore, be serious about religion!

Fourth, it is very strategic for research works into religion and development to include focusing on specific themes in order to generate more sustainable conclusions. Chapters in this volume have concentrated on religion's response to COVID-19 in Southern (and parts of East) Africa. Other studies could focus on key thematic areas such as religion and: gender equality, climate change, education, peace building, food security, sustainable consumption and other development goals, with special reference to Africa.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the world unawares. It instigated panic and affected lives in very profound ways. In the middle of this uncertainty, religion stepped up to respond. As chapters in this volume demonstrate,

some of these interventions were quite progressive and contributed towards mitigating the impact of the pandemic. However, the chapters also show that some of the interventions were counterproductive. Approaching the theme from the perspective of the discourse on religion and development, this chapter has sought to summarise the trends that are discernible in this volume. The chapter has illustrated how the interface between religion and COVID-19 in Southern Africa enriches the debate on religion and development in very clear ways. In conclusion, it is anticipated that when future generations will reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic (particularly in Africa), they will do well to integrate the story of religion's response in order for their narratives to be more comprehensive.

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