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Religious construction of disease: An exploratory appraisal of religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda

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This article presents empirical analysis of religious attitudes and interpretation of pandemics in Uganda. The study sought to analyze the religious explanatory models of pandemics offered by the three major religions of Uganda: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religious belief system. The COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the whole world, Uganda inclusive, was used as a case study. Based on a qualitative research process, the study relied on key informant interviews, media reports and online sources of information. It was established that pandemics have been part of human history. Pandemics provide an opportunity for human reflection on transcendent life since they are a challenge to science and human wisdom. Pandemics draw people closer to religion and the spiritual due to the fear, panic, and uncertainty with which they are associated. Religions are left with the responsibility of providing theological answers beyond what human beings can comprehend. The hope and trust that society has in religious institutions make them ultimate institutions to provide solace to millions of people affected with a pandemic for which scientists and politicians have no immediate answers. The study unravels the complementary role that religion and theological studies can make in understanding effective management and prevention of pandemics in society. It also adds to the continuous debate on the relationship between science and religion, arguing for the significance of religious ideas in making science effective enough to combat societal challenges like epidemics.

Key words: Pandemics, religion, religious, construction, disease, Tondism Faith, State, science, traditional healing, coronavirus, Covid-19.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that was first discovered towards the end of 2019 in the Chinese province of Hubei in Wuhan. It then spread to other countries across the globe (Shereen et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2020; Zu et al., 2020). Within the

first three months of 2020, the disease had ravaged the entire world, killing thousands of people, and leaving several others infected and bedridden (Shereen et al., 2020). The socio-economic lifestyle of the world was affected, with the most immediate intervention of 'social

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distancing' prescribed for all people as a way of curtailing the spread of the disease. The phrase 'stay at home' became commonplace as a strategy to limit people's exposure to the virus. Several economies all over the world went into a total shutdown. Curfews were imposed in many countries. However, to situate the global significance of Coronavirus disease, it is important to explain the concept of 'pandemic'.

For a pandemic to occur, there must be an epidemic. The term epidemic has been used since antiquity to mean any disease that kills many people quickly in an unpleasant and arbitrary way regardless of age, gender, religion, race, nationality and /or health status of the victims. When an epidemic is experienced in several parts of the world at a given time, it is then categorised as a pandemic (Cunningham, 2008). Therefore, a pandemic is defined as an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people (Kelly, 2011). The severity of a disease is not one of the defining elements of a pandemic, but the scale and geographical coverage of the disease (Kelly, 2011; Cunningham, 2008). By 11th March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic because it had spread to over 110 countries and territories around the world. Over 118,000 registered cases had been reported (Ducharme, 2020).

Whereas there exists numerous medical works on pandemics, composition of treatises about pandemics has, over the centuries, been a concern of religious scholars, interpreting the occurrence of diseases according to pious traditions, as well as guiding society on proper conduct during pandemics. Religious treatises on plagues serve as evidence of sustained concern by the religious elite about arguing both for and against the religious tenets regarding plagues (Dols, 1979). The sudden occurrence of pandemics has often been traumatizing for societies all over the globe with the initial search for answers more often associated to religion. This has been true of the major pandemics that the world has ever faced like the Black Death, Spanish flu and HIV/AIDS (Cunningham, 2008). Therefore, an inextricable relationship between religion and pandemics has existed for a long time. The occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic has yet again rejuvenated the debate about the positioning of religion and religious ideologies on pandemics.

The debate proves the significance of religious explanatory models in understanding disease, notwithstanding biomedical advancements. Although COVID-19 had become an international emergency, there was a poor understanding of the disease among health professionals and a great deal of disagreements among scientists regarding its cause and origin (Bhagavathula et al., 2020). With no antiviral drugs nor vaccines, and the presence of carriers without obvious symptoms, traditional public health intervention measures were significantly ineffective (Sun et al., 2020) thus making biomedical explanations of the disease dissatisfying. In the case of

Uganda, a significant percentage of health workers were found to have a poor attitude towards COVID-19 (Olum et al., 2020), thereby providing an avenue for religious explanatory models to take advantage in a space which would have been adequately filled by biomedical knowledge. Nonetheless, even with availability of biomedical explanations, religious ideologies have been developed to explain emerging social problems like diseases.

In Uganda, the religious sector became pivotal during the pandemic. The government of Uganda relied on the religious institutions and their leaders to enforce early phase responses to the pandemic. At the same time, the religious sector is such a thriving industry in the country that apart from over 98% of the population claiming to belong to a particular religion, religions and their institutions play a critical role in the socio-political dispensation of the country (UBOS, 2016). Religions have a strong bearing on society's political direction, including influencing policy preferences (Isiko, 2019a). Because of the undebatable significance of religion in Uganda, the first overt response to COVID-19 was government engagement with religious leaders. For Uganda's case, a successful fight against COVID-19 lay in how much the religious leaders and institutions cooperated with government to enable it roll out its preventive programmes. On 16th March, 2020, the President held a meeting with members of the inter-religious council of Uganda (IRCU) as well as prominent city Born-Again pastors. The government 'convinced' religious leaders to close all places of worship including churches and mosques. This was aimed at decongesting places of worship because they were easy targets of virus transmission. Whereas it is true that other places with high concentration of people like bars, schools, institutions of higher learning, markets and public transport were ordered to close; it was a fragile move when it came to closure of places of worship. This is against the backdrop that Uganda by all standards is a conservatively religious country.

This article, therefore, deals with three specific issues. The first is an analysis of the socio-political positioning of religion amidst state directives on the COVID-19 pandemic. The second is an examination of the theological explanations to COVID-19 with regard to its cause and solution. The third is an analysis of the practical interventions and coping mechanisms of religious institutions amidst the prevailing circumstances of the disease, knowing that religions are social havens for the afflicted. It is, however, important that a description of Uganda's religious landscape be made to understand the conditions which influence religious reactions to pandemics.

UGANDA'S RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Uganda's religious environment is not only pluralistic but

also fragile. Religious pluralism is manifested by the various religious faiths and denominations in the country. The constitution of the republic of Uganda provides for freedom of religion and worship. Therefore, any policies and measures that intend to curtail people's religious freedoms are likely to be resisted. Such a legal regime has led to unregulated multiplication of religious groups. The major religious traditions in the country include Christianity, Islam, and African traditional religious belief system. There also exist minority religious groups like Asian religions and cultic groups. According to the 2014 National Population and Housing Census, Christianity accounts for the biggest number of followers representing over 80% of the total population. This is followed by Islam with 13.7%. Traditionalists represent 1.7% of the population (UBOS, 2016; Isiko, 2019a). Other religious groups including Bahai, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and the like make 0.2% of the total population. Christianity has several denominations including Roman Catholic church (39.3%), Anglican church (32%), Seventh day Adventist church (1.7%), Greek Orthodox church (0.1%), and several other minor protestant affiliated churches like the Baptists and Lutheran churches, representing about 0.3% of the population. In addition, classical Pentecostal and numerous neo-Pentecostal churches, popularly called Born Again churches, represent 11.1% of the population. Uganda is, therefore, a very religious country with a minimal 0.2% of the total population claiming not to belong to any religion. The country's religiosity is reflected in its motto on the National emblem: "For God and my Country". With such religiosity, an alteration of religious practice could be interpreted as an attack on the entire population. How then would the religious sector react to the government's directives to close places of worship and ban public religious gatherings despite COVID-19?

The Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church had much political influence in post-independence Uganda. However, since the early 1990s to the present, neo Pentecostal churches' influence in the socio-political dispensation of Uganda is unquestionable because of their increasing population, and a unified response to government programmes (Isiko, 2019a). Born Again churches command a lot of appeal to the relatively young yet majority population of the country. For successful implementation of government health and education programmes, the Christian and Muslim population have been handy in ensuring their fruitfulness. On occasions when religious clerics have spoken ill about government programmes such as immunisation, elections and universal education, the response of the population has been negative as well.

African traditional belief system differs from one cultural society to another. There, however, exists some commonalities with respect to belief in a supreme being, referred to with different names, depending on the language of the cultural society. Nonetheless, traditional religious belief system is manifested in a belief in spirits,

diviners, traditional healers as well as cultural institutions that have been established under Ugandan law. Cultural institutions and kingdoms are looked at as the chief custodians of traditional religious belief systems. Traditional healing is a vibrant medical system used by over 60% of Ugandans in a country with inaccessible modern healthcare facilities (Isiko, 2019b, 2018; Abet, 2020). Therefore, when diseases like COVID-19 occur, it would be expected that traditional healers, trusted by the local people, would have an increased role to play. There is a lot of religious syncretism where most Ugandans who claim to be either Christians or Muslims continue to practice indigenous religious rituals, especially in times of crises like pandemics, largely explained by the failure of the Christian or Muslim God to rescue them from the sufferings. Asian religions that include Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Sikhism draw followers from non-Ugandans coming from Asian countries and Ugandans of Indian origin. There is minimal interaction between Asian religions with other religious traditions in the country. These hold negligible influence on the socio-political scene due to the insignificant number of adherents. Therefore, their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are difficult to assess and are not part of this study.

Government's engagement with religious clerics through the Inter-Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) in the fight against the HIV pandemic has been a success story. Ugandans believe in religious leaders so much that a lot more respect is attached to them than the political elites. State institutions are so dysfunctional that citizens trust religious leaders to be in position to communicate effectively to the state. Religious leaders are the newly found hope of the citizenry. Public trust in religious leaders has sometimes been abused by the religious clerics themselves. Religious clerics especially from the Born-Again churches and African traditional religious belief system take advantage of desperate and gullible Ugandans. The claim that they can heal all types of diseases and sicknesses, making some Ugandans abandon modern healthcare services in anticipation of miracles from religious clerics. Up to the present, some Born Again pastors claim to heal HIV/AIDS while traditional diviners and herbalists hold the claim to cure the same disease which science has proven to have no cure yet. These unproven claims by religious clerics accompanied by the gullibility of Ugandans prove a challenge to the fight against pandemics like HIV/AIDS and COVID-19.

The organizational structure of religious faiths determines their level of engagement with the State on public programmes. Mainstream religious faiths have some level of unity under the 'Inter Religious Council of Uganda' (IRCU). Recently, two loose associations of Born-Again churches have been admitted to full membership of the IRCU. These include the Born-Again Faith (BAF) and National Fellowship of Born Again and Pentecostal Churches (NFBPC) (Isiko, 2019a). The government finds it

easy to reach out to the religious faiths through these umbrella organizations. Some of the government programmes like HIV/AIDS prevention and election monitoring implemented by IRCU have received government funding. It was, therefore, not surprising that when there was an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, government's first call went to these religious faiths. However, there is a challenge of non-institutionalisation of contemporary Born Again churches. Without formal organisational structures, it becomes difficult not only to regulate them but also have meaningful engagement with them. These numerous churches that stand on charismatic leaders have been known to sway the public away from public health programmes and education.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study that used an exploratory research design. This design is appropriate in dealing with such unexplained emergent social problems like COVID-19. Since the world and Uganda in particular had so many glorifications for science and medicine than any other, as the solution to COVID-19, the exploratory design provided an opportunity to make known the information about the religious dimension that the new disease had (Swedberg, 2018). This approach is recommended when little is known about a phenomenon, or one intends to describe it according to the subject's viewpoint. This applied to this study considering the belief that it is important to study phenomena from people's own perspective (Bousoo et al., 2010, 2011). The study used the life context and experiences of the respondents with the new disease in their communities. COVID-19 had just emerged with need for its urgent explanations in the society. Since no academic studies had yet been undertaken on the relationship between religion and COVID-19, the exploratory research design enabled the researcher to use the empirical situation existing at the time of the disease. The study employed two methods of data collection; in-depth interviews with key informants, and a review of secondary data which included media reports and online sources of information. Using the snowball technique, a total of twenty-six key informants were identified and interviewed, usually through telephone voice calls. The key informants were drawn from the three dominant religious traditions: Christianity, Islam and African traditional faiths in the country. Key informants from the Christian faith included five (5) lay Christians, five (5) pastors and five (5) clergy drawn from the three dominant Christian denominations of Born Again Faith, Anglican Church of Uganda and Roman Catholic Church. Five (5) Sheiks and Muslim scholars were identified from the Muslim community in Uganda. Six African traditional faith leaders were drawn from three Ugandan cultural societies of the Basoga, Baganda and Acholi, taking two from each society. The Christian religious tradition had the biggest number of keyinformants because it represents over 80% of the total population in the country thus making the remaining percentage to be shared by the rest of the religions (UBOS, 2016).

Secondary data were drawn from radio and television news and programmes about the COVID-19 in Uganda; newspapers both hard and online sources; social media sites especially Facebook and WhatsApp; and journal articles. Live broadcasts of Nation Television Uganda (NTV), Uganda Broadcasting Corporation (UBC) Television and Nile Broadcasting services (NBS) Television were followed. These three television stations are considered as 'national' because of their countrywide coverage, appeal, and largely broadcast in English, Uganda's official language. These television stations have news reporters from major towns of the country making it believable

that they present a true picture of what happens in the whole country. The study also relied on official government communications and reports passed over the media about the disease. In this case, a lot of messages were passed on to Ugandans through WhatsApp and Facebook. It was, however, a challenge to sieve factual information from fiction on social media outlets. Social media information was considered authentic if the same message was reported about in major media houses like the three television stations identified above and in major national newspapers of New Vision, The Independent and the Daily Monitor. Other seven Christian based television stations and one Islamic based television airing principally sermons during the COVID-19 pandemic were earnestly followed on a daily basis. The researcher viewed and listened to worship activities and sermons that were broadcast at different times on each of the media houses identified. Use of unconventional sources of information, like the ones enumerated above, has been applicable before in similar circumstances on pandemics. For example, due to the unusual circumstances during the Black Death, a more serious contagious disease of the 14th century, unpublished Turkish and Arabic sources became the backbone of supplying the needed information concerning the plague (Dols, 1979). This was therefore, the appropriate viable research approach available due to the countrywide lockdown. The challenge of lockdowns and quarantine for researchers on pandemics has been perennial, affecting the precision with which information about pandemics is reported. This was the case during the Black Death (Dols, 1979). In spite of the limited physical interaction with key informants, their views and opinions through any available means was more important than their physical contact with the researcher. Information presented in this article is based on empirical data collected up to the end of April 2020. Since this was neither a phenomenological nor a comparative study, but an exploration of the attitudes and interpretations of various religions to COVID-19, theological responses unique to specific religious traditions have been presented under each of the three studied religions.

RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC

In a preliminary study report entitled, 'In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic', it is highlighted that in times of crisis, religion becomes crucial in an attempt by humans to seek explanations and stress relief. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. The demand for religion has risen dramatically since the onset of the pandemic with political leaders and self-organised groups urging their fellow citizens to pray. The tendency for people to use religion to deal with crisis can be understood within the religious coping terminology. Religious coping means that people use religion as a means to deal with adversity and uncertainty. They pray, seek a closer relation to God, or explain the tragedy by reference to an Act of God. Empirical evidence suggests that people impacted by adverse life events such as cancer, heart problems, death in close family, divorce, or injury are more religious than others. Adversity, caused by natural disasters, instigates people across the globe to use their religion more intensively (Bentzen, 2020). From the analysis of both individual and institutional religious reactions, the following sub-sections answer the following questions: how are religions and religious institutions positioned in the socio-political interventions towards the COVID-19 pandemic?

What are the theological explanations behind the cause(s) of the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the religious reflections on what ought to be done to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Religious institutions' positioning amidst socio-political interventions

The COVID-19 pandemic became a yardstick for which citizens measured responsiveness of their political leaders. The politicians' responses to the pandemic were a determinant of their commitment to provide leadership. The disease, therefore, became a socio-political force all over the world. Among the measures adopted by governments in the world to prevent COVID-19 was to ban public gatherings and closure of places of worship (Bwire, 2020). Although members of IRCU and other notable Born-Again church pastors were invited by the State before a public declaration of the measures was made, it was only a principle of courtesy which did not call for their input. One of the Co-presidents of the IRCU was quoted saying:

We were able to see him (the President), and this is what was decided.....on 18th March 2020, between 3-5pm, he will go live on air and address the nation. He has decided to put the entire nation on lockdown. All schools are going to close effective 19-20 March. Prayer services are not going to be conducted at all places of worship (Male, 2020).

These measures were a test of the already fragile religion-state relations in Uganda. According to the state, the pandemic was indiscriminate of one's religious affiliation or even non-affiliation. Whereas the religious leaders tried to resist the immediate closure of places of worship with arguments that they needed some time to prepare the believers in the wake of the pandemic, the President disregarded their pleas as he followed the advice of the doctors and scientists (H. Buyondo, personal interview, 1st April, 2020). In the circumstances, science took precedence over religion. The religious entities were powerless in a country which prides itself in religious belief and constitutional guarantees to freedom of worship and association.

As a result, legal experts argued that constitutional guarantees should not be "suicide pacts" to thwart other fundamental rights. The continued exercise of freedom of worship and association in the time of COVID-19 pandemic would be detrimental to the lives of the worshippers, with high risk of infection (Turley, 2020). This demonstrated that in times of crises of such nature, politics, not religion, takes centre stage in guiding society. The closure of places of worship demonstrated the non-absoluteness of religious rights and freedoms in society. Freedom of worship and association can be restricted with

a sufficiently compelling purpose of State, and there cannot be anything more compelling than battling a pandemic; thus, limiting gathering was the most effective deterrent to the COVID-19 until a vaccine would be realized. Closure of places of worship falls within state jurisdiction of enforcing public order in times of mitigating public health risks like COVID-19 (Turley, 2020). It was during this pandemic that in the religious history of Uganda, all religions and their venerable leaders were brought to order by government indiscriminately (H. Buyondo, personal interview, April 1, 2020). This was based on the state's mandate to secure the "public good", that is a virus free community. In a rationalisation mode, religious elites acceded to the closure arguing that it was for the common good and wellbeing of everybody. They bowed to the coercive power of the state in fear of state reprisal. Religious clerics became conveyers of government directives on COVID-19, indicating a subsumed consensus among religious clerics. The directives were a manifestation of the superiority of the state over religion (G. Lubaale, personal interview, 1st April, 2020). However, non-contestation of the state decision could be viewed as conspiracy between the state and religious clerics to deny citizens their rights and freedoms.

Despite the state directives and sanctions, there appeared sections of unorganized Born-Again churches and pastors that attempted to defy. Unorganised Born-Again churches include those that do not belong to any Born-Again church umbrella organization, yet the state's engagement with religious institutions was with members of the IRCU [including the two major umbrella organizations of Born-Again churches, that is, Born-Again faith (BAF) and NAFBPC]. Among the defiant religious leaders was Pastor Augustine Yiga of the Revival Christian Church Kawaala (RCCK) and several other upcountry evangelical pastors. Ironically, Rev.Fr. Kiibi Deogratious Kateregga, a youthful Roman Catholic priest at St Joseph's Catholic Parish in Mpigi district, was among the defiant ones (Mbogo, 2020). Defiant religious leaders were influenced by ignorance and conspiracy theories about COVID-19. For example, the Daily Monitor newspaper reported the arrest of Pastor Augustine Yiga for uttering false information and spreading harmful propaganda in relation to the deadly COVID-19. Pastor Yiga in a televised interview had preached that there was no COVID-19 in Africa based on the argument that there had been no death recorded in Africa related to this virus. He further argued that COVID-19 was a mere flu which had existed in Africa since time immemorial (URN, 2020a). Unaffiliated churches like RCCK may have missed vital information from the President's address because of non-representation at the President's meeting with religious leaders. Defiance by upcountry pastors and the mainstream Roman Catholic priest may have been due to delayed receipt of information. There were also attempts by the Acholi cultural group to organize a traditional

healing ritual against COVID-19 contrary to government directives. The cultural leaders were threatened with arrests if they dared so. This was echoed in a televised presidential address when H.E Museveni said:

I have heard that the cultural leader of Acholi is organizing a ceremony called ryemo gemo, against the Coronavirus... these are to be arrested if they dare to do so but I don't want to arrest cultural leaders... I don't understand why some people would contest science. I advise the cultural and religious leaders to adhere to the Ministry of Health guidelines or else I will imprison them the way I did to Owobusobozi Bisaka (prophet) in Kibaale district, in the 1980s when he refused his followers from going to hospitals (President Yoweri Museveni, televised address on NBS TV, 2020, March 31 at 8:45pm).

President Museveni's attitude relegated African science and undermined African ideologies of homegrown science in favour of western epistemologies. His reference to another Prophet who was against biomedicine some four decades before, seems to suggest his subscription to the notion that what is religious is anti-science, in the western sense of it. Nevertheless, the threat to imprison non-adherent religious and cultural leaders implies the coercive element of the state over religion and cultural institutions. Apparently, the cultural leadership of the Acholi had organized to gather people in an exorcism ceremony called "ryemo gemo". Whereas this ritual was aimed at exorcising the COVID-19 pandemic believed to be a bad spirit from Acholi land, the state interpreted it as undermining the presidential directive to "stay at home" and ban on public gatherings. The fear of government was that such a cultural ritual would fuel the spread of the COVID-19 as people would not take government precautions seriously (Oketch, 2020). Since cultural practices can frustrate or promote efforts for pandemic prevention, critical engagement with culture is the best alternative in the fight against pandemics. However, previous studies show that identification of crucial cultural parameters of the epidemic is vital to the development of an efficient control strategy (Guitelle and Saeed, 2019; Bohret, 2018). To some people, in all the defiant cases identified above, religious extremism and seeking cheap popularity were responsible for the friction between the State and religion during the dire need to combat the pandemic in Uganda (H. Buyondo, personal interview, April 1, 2020). Very often, the President decreed that the fight against COVID-19 was a "war" which required unconventional means of dealing with it. The use of emergency powers of the President including a suspension of religious activities could not be resisted under a warlike situation. The State's subsequent reaction to defiant religious leaders was a demonstration of its ultimate authority despite the legal guarantees to religious freedom and expression. For example, the Uganda Police spokesperson said:

Pastor Augustine Yiga's utterance undermines government's efforts in fighting the pandemic and exposes the public to dangers of laxity in observing the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Health on control and prevention... Yiga's action is considered a direct attack on the people of Uganda. We appeal to the public to desist from making false or alarming utterances over COVID-19 and disregard information not from authorised government structures (URN, 2020a).

The above statement alludes to evidence that Government's earlier step to meet religious leaders before a public declaration of closure of places of worship was only to harness their support on a decision that government could not backtrack. The state simply wanted a 'religious window dressing' on the closure of places of worship so that the state could be seen as having taken a decision in consultation with religious leaders. Secondly, the statement postulates that religious opinions on the pandemic were not only unwelcome but also posed a great danger to public health and, therefore, the need for religious restraint. Thirdly, the implication was that scientific knowledge, but not religious ideologies, was the key to combat the pandemic. Parsitau (2020), writing at the onset of the COVID-19 in Kenya, argued that in times of pandemics like this one, science and medicine seem the more reliable solution.

Religious opinions that were not in tandem with those of the state on the COVID-19 were for the first time in the history of Uganda interpreted as treasonous. Religious responses to the pandemic were regarded helpful only when they tallied with government's ideology on the pandemic. For example, the subsequent closure of places of worship was applauded by the President in several of his national addresses about the pandemic. This further indicates that religious leaders responded in panic and fear of government's reprisals. Otherwise, amiable religious consensus about government stance to close places of worship would have been followed with statements from umbrella organisations of religious institutions like the IRCU, Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC) as well as BAF and NFBPC (E. Mateeka, personal interview, 31st March, 2020). President Museveni cajoled religious clerics into submission to the lockdown using his rhetoric rendition of the bible (Wabyanga, 2017). He quoted and made interpretation of Isaiah 26:20 to underscore the theological significance of lockdown and closure of places of worship. However, resistance to the State's directives to outlaw religious gatherings in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood in an African perspective. Social cohesion and social gatherings are of great importance in African societies. Kaseje (2020) has articulated the vitality of public attendance of religious services as being the highest in Africa with about 82% of religious service attendees in Uganda. Therefore, it was not surprising that measures to enforce social and physical distancing would prove to be more challenging.

THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Analysis of variant theological explanations is made in relation to cause and what needs to be done to overcome the disease. This is against the backdrop that specific cultural and religious communities have their own understanding of occurrence of pandemics. The specific questions to be answered here are; why has the COVID-19 appeared at this time in the history of humankind? Who is responsible for sending the COVID-19 disease to humanity, God or Satan? Can the COVID-19 Pandemic be reversed, and if so, who holds the power to reverse it? What needs to be done to reverse the situation? Arguments in response to the above questions are restricted to the three religions of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religious belief system.

Christianity

The theology of eschatology and apocalypse has been dominantly used to explain the occurrence of the COVID-19 Pandemic in both Christianity and Islam. Eschatology deals with the theology and/or science of the final destiny of the soul and humankind. It is concerned with the study of the end times of the world. On the other hand, apocalypses are largely revelations of secrets of a spiritual nature. Eschatology and apocalypse have some association with future expectation (Collins, 1974). Apocalyptic eschatology is used to mean the theology of revelations about the end of the world and humankind. Christians, and Muslims alike, have interpreted the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the signs of the end times. It is a vivid sign communicating the impending end of the world. Some religious clerics argued that whereas there have been pandemics before as a result of sin, the unique thing about the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has been preceded by several signs (H. Buyondo, personal interview, April 1, 2020). Such end sign triggers in Uganda include: the persistent HIV/AIDS disease, the over twenty-year civil war in Northern Uganda, Cholera and Ebola outbreak, locusts' invasion and now COVID-19. The argument here is that COVID-19 pandemic does not come to end the world but is a preparation of what is going to happen not far from now. A transcendent God aids this apocalyptic eschatological outlook of COVID-19.

However, Niringiye (2020) argued that the human quest for meaning from transcendence, in the face of a monstrous and inexplicable natural disaster, catastrophe or plague, is a natural instinct. It is the way to cope or deal with the panic, fear and uncertainty created by the catastrophe; faith in the supernatural is an essential part of human arsenal to either fight or flight. People's quest for transcendence explains their faith in the ultimate spiritual authority in the face of the pandemic. Therefore, Christian theological explanations of the COVID-19 pandemic are

rooted into two major aspects: one is, apocalyptic end times devotion and rhetoric, supported with end time prophetic writings and invoking modern day doomsday prophets and second is, the plea to unwavering trust in God, who promised deliverance to his own, who turn to him. In the first aspect, some Christians think that the COVID-19 pandemic is caused by human sin, igniting God's anger upon humanity. One of the interviewees shared a personal experience with an elderly female clergy in the Anglican Church, about the pandemic. He said thus:

First of all, when she met me, she shook my hand and we walked closely separated by almost half an inch. And as she talked to me, she said the COVID-19 pandemic is God's wrath on people who have gone contrary to his will. Hoping that the situation will get better, she told me that God is angry about what has gone wrong in the world and she says he is more troubled with the western countries. She said, "most whites don't worship God, but their own things. Most evils such as homosexuality find deep root in Europe. No wonder, more whites are dying of the disease" (B. Niwamanya, personal interview, March 29, 2020).

The clergy's theological insights attribute the origin of the COVID-19 to God but not Satan. It is the "good" God who has brought the virus upon his disobedient people. He, therefore, uses the virus as a punishment upon the sinful. Moreover, because the religious cleric is sure of her righteousness, she is not afraid of the infection that comes from close physical contact with the infected individuals. That is why she gladly shakes the interviewee's hand as they move closely together. This theology denies the contagiousness nature of COVID-19 among the faithful. It also generates the belief that it is not meaningful for an obedient Christian to flee from the disease because it will not affect him/her. The pandemic is caused by God's anger due to the sinful nature of the world today. Among the specific causes are humankind's denial to worship God and condoning homosexuality. Christian ideology on the cause of pandemics has been consistent over the centuries pegging it to sinful acts, though these differ depending on the lifestyle and environment of the time. For example, whereas Stearns (2009) identified pride, lust, impiety, simony, indecent clothing and filial disobedience as responsible for the Black Death in the 14th century, homosexuality, corruption and refusal to worship God are identified as the sins in the circumstances of COVID-19.

These explanations were perfected with biblical text referencing. The most common texts shared by Ugandan priests and pastors during the COVID-19 are Numbers 16:1-35; 2 Chronicles 7:13-14; Jeremiah 17:14-18; Psalms 91:5-7; John 14:1 and Mathew 17:14. These specific biblical texts carry four messages. The first one is a portrayal of God as the source of disasters and pandemics. Secondly, pandemics are a result of human sin; thirdly, a call to humankind to repent through prayer. And fourthly, is a message of hope and encouragement to

those hit by the pandemic. Numbers 16:1-35 has received wide acknowledgement during the pandemic. This text provides a narrative of God's wrath upon the people of Israel for disobedience and contesting the power of God through Moses, the prophet. God was determined to kill the whole community because of the sins committed by the three families of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (vs.21), but in verse 22, Moses' intercession reversed God's anger, killing only members of the three sinful families. 2 Chronicles 7:13-14, indicates that God is responsible for sending natural disasters and epidemics like diseases upon His people, but is quick to acknowledge in verse 14 that through prayer and repentance, God can reverse the situation. In Jeremiah 17:14-18, the prophet invites God to cause disasters on the people of Judah for their sinfulness but at the same time he asks God to spare him amongst the community because he was sinless. Mathew 17:14 indicates that when one humbles self, God can bring total healing to the diseased. In this text, prayer is prescribed as the solution to disease. The texts of John 14:1 and Psalms 91:5-7 carry messages of encouragement to the distressed, including those who have been struck with plagues, like the COVID-19.

This theology vindicates the righteous but punishes the sinful. Proponents of this theology were convinced that this was the reason why countries like China and those in Europe and America had experienced a more devastating effect of COVID-19 than Africa because the former were more sinful than the latter. Apostle Dr. Joseph Serwadda, pastor of Victory Church, Ndeeba, supported this view when he said thus:

The pandemic is a harvest for our sinfulness. In Italy, in 2019 there was the biggest gay parade and some people think that this is the time for God to punish our sinfulness. However, people should not fear because God will spare them for they are not part of the sinful (Combating COVID-19. Dream TV, 2020, March 30 at 3:00 pm).

By April 23, 2020, a world total of 2,667,527 confirmed COVID-19 cases had been recorded. China had 82,798 confirmed cases of COVID-19, United States with the highest at 849,094, Italy with third highest at 187,327 and Spain with second highest at 213,024. A combined total of only 26,870 confirmed cases was attributed to the African continent (Worldometers, 2020). The 93rd World Health Organization (WHO) situation report on COVID-19 indicated that by the third week of April, there were globally 2,471,136 confirmed COVID-19 cases; half of them from the European region and about 925,291 cases from the American region. This was against a total of only 16,115 cases from the African region (WHO, 2020).

There was a conspiracy ideology that pitted China against God for attempting to make an artificial moon. On the other hand, God was angered with Europe and America for legalizing homosexuality, prostitution and gambling to the extent of admitting homosexual persons to

the clerical order of the church. Nevertheless, this argument was challenged by the COVID-19 cases, however minimal, in African countries, including Uganda, yet they had put up a strong resistance against homosexuality. This was then attributed to an increasing number of people in Africa who have forsaken God, engaged in corruption and amassed ill-gotten wealth. According to this theology, these would be the likely victims of the COVID-19 in Africa. This African Christian thinking identified the Christian God with specific circumstances in and of Africa. According to this theology, COVID-19 was sent by God and when the wicked are consumed, it would disappear. Therefore, social distancing, shaking hands or washing hands was not so useful as long as one is not a sinner. The theology of transcendence, in the COVID-19 pandemic, has been glorified on account that despite the scientific advancement of countries like China, India, and those in Europe and America, the cure or vaccine to the disease remains elusive, thus the need to understand that God is over and above wisdom and science (J. Kyarikunda, personal interview, March 30, 2020).

To the Christian tradition, whereas the COVID-19 is caused by God, there are two things that could be done to change the situation. Firstly, prayer and repentance would make God reverse the situation. Secondly, Christians were to remain hopeful of God's intervention. Words of hope and encouragement would keep the afflicted until God responded to their prayers. These thoughts dominated sermons of Christian clerics, usually done in their homes. Again, biblical textual references of mainly Psalms 91:5-7 and John 14:1 were common. Specifically, Psalms 91:5-7 states thus; you need not fear any dangers at night or sudden attacks during the day or the plagues that strike in the dark. While John 14:1 says, do not be worried and upset. These texts illuminate God's power, presence, intentions and protection against fear of COVID-19. God is portrayed as the ultimate security of the people in the face of the pandemic. However, these texts do not allude to being protected from the infection but rather promises bodily deliverance from the pandemic. Whereas Christians could get infected with the pandemic, they were forbidden from worry and fears. This was against the background that even in perilous times like the COVID-19 times; Christians are reminded that God is their shelter, protector and deliverer (Riggleman, 2020).

Some Christians, however, contested the theology of "human sin and God's anger" as the cause of COVID-19. For example, Niringiye (2020) suggested that over reference to biblical texts during the pandemic reflected more of fear and panic caused by the disease than Christians' faith in God. For example, people were gripped with joblessness and lack of food and other basics due to the lockdown. There was uncertainty over closure of educational institutions. Ban on public transport made it difficult for citizens to access medical care facilities. There was panic buying of foodstuffs. In a society made of

extended family networks, people were cut off from caring for helpless distant relatives due to ban on travel and social gatherings.

Skepticisms were raised on the effectiveness of the overly referenced biblical texts of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and Psalms 91:5-7, as prescription for COVID-19. For example, in the first text, the prerequisites for the healing of the land is "humble yourselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways", often interpreted to mean calling for prayer vigils and assemblies and crying out to God in repentance. However, the requirement to turn from the wicked ways cannot be achieved through prayer assemblies. There is need for humility before engagement in prayer which is a rarity among the faithful. With glorification of science alone in the case of Uganda, there was a black-out on religious opinion of the pandemic. How then would God respond to Uganda's prayers alongside exaltation of science? Besides, the contextual meaning of the text demands for national repentance just like God required Ancient Israel to repent as a nation. God's promise to secure Israel's deliverance was only when there was national repentance (Hill, 2003). This is contrary to Christian attitude in Uganda which exalts the clergy, Born Again pastors and prophets as the only righteous, capable of achieving repentance on national behalf. In the second text, the idea is that in the time of plagues, God has a preferential treatment for those who trust in him. As is evident, just like "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45), so it is with COVID-19; it is killing both the righteous and the unrighteous. For example, the COVID-19 case of an eight months' baby from Iganga District of Uganda, along with its adult parents, is a contradiction to the notion of preferential treatment. The biblical text would find it difficult to account for the baby's infection, considered sinless. In the same vein, since African Christian thinkers postulated that the COVID-19 was a result of the sinfulness of western countries, then the good but angered God would not have allowed the disease to attack his obedient Christians in Africa. The indiscriminate nature of COVID-19 raises the question of theodicy, as it was with the Black Death. Some Christian scholars attribute the death of children and other innocent victims to pandemics for their failure to honour their parents, or conversely, by their death being a punishment for the sins of their parents (Stearns, 2009).

However, in Numbers 16:22, Moses and Aaron protested God's anger over the entire community for the sins committed by individuals. After the contestation, God restricted the punishment to only those who had committed sin. This further raises the question of intercession, as to why God reverses his anger upon the righteous only after petitions are made to him by those he trusts. In Uganda's context, it meant that the country needed to have a distinguished Moses and Aaron, upon whom God has breathed to intercede. In a society with

thousands of clergy and pastors, each claiming to have been 'called by God', yet engaged in charlatan acts, having that righteous person to intercede for the nation would be a challenge. What is important here, however, is neither God's action of reversal nor the righteousness of the petitioners but the prayers and petitions that enable the righteous to overcome the pandemic. In an interview with another Anglican priest, he said thus:

2 Chronicles 7:14 is being quoted and also Isaiah to say Coronavirus is as a result of sin and God's anger. I don't believe so. Yet the source of COVID-19 is an atheist country. I would call it a biological weapon but not the good God spanking through coronavirus (E. Mateeka, personal interview, March 31, 2020).

The statement above reveals that some Christians are persuaded by an ideology which is a mix of theology and conspiracy theories. The ideology that COVID-19 comes from the good God as a punishment upon „his people" is not comprehensible to those who believe in science. The disease emerged from the Chinese town of Wuhan; yet, China is known to be a non-Christian country. Therefore, the "Chinese people of Wuhan" cannot be a people of the Christian God. It would, therefore, be difficult to understand how the Christian God would bring punishment upon a people who do not have a relationship with him. However, to the proponents of the theology of "human sin and destruction", over time God uses "non-believers" to bring destruction upon those who have abandoned his ways. Two vivid examples come out here. First, is in 2 Kings 17:1-23, when the God of Israel caused the Assyrian Emperor to attack and conquer Samaria. As Israelites were then taken to Assyria as prisoners of war, Assyrians got resettled in the Israelites' vibrant city of Samaria. This was because the Israelites (God's people) had sinned against their God. The other is in 2 Kings 24:1 to 25:1-21, when God caused the "unbelieving" Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to destroy Jerusalem and eventually exiled the Israelites in Babylon for about seventy years. God brought this disaster upon Judah and Jerusalem because of the sinfulness of their king, Zedekiah.

The argument here is that whereas the COVID-19 might have begun from what the Christian tradition call an atheist country of China, God's target was the Christian countries of Europe, America and Africa who, by the fourth month of the pandemic, had registered worst records of the Corona virus at a time when China was steadily recovering. This would account for the bigger number of COVID-19 cases registered by the 24th April, 2020, in the largely Christian countries of: Spain (213,024), Italy (189,973), France (159,460), Germany (153,129), United Kingdom (139,246) and the United States (869,170), in comparison to China with 83,884 cases (Johns Hopkins University, 2020; Worldometers, 2020). This ideology, however, fails to account for an equally worse COVID-19 scenario in a largely Muslim dominated country of Iran with 87,026

cases (Johns Hopkins University, 2020). It, however, should be noted that whereas God used Assyria and Babylon to punish the Israelites for their sinfulness, he was neither at peace with the Assyrians nor Babylonians. This could account for the initial suffering of the Chinese from COVID-19 for their refusal to accept Christianity, yet he used them as a weapon against the Christian nations.

The above theology was strengthened by conspiracy theories ranging from a calculation of the distances between Wuhan, where COVID-19 began, and other cities that were ravaged by the virus. The belief that some populated cities within China were not very much affected by COVID-19 as countries thousands of kilometres away from Wuhan pointed to a calculated plan by China to produce a virus that would destroy much of Europe and America. In some circumstances, theological conspiracists denied the existence of COVID-19 as a natural disease caused by either God or Satan but a biological warfare between China and America. These theologians argued that whereas prayers were a necessity in times of disasters like the COVID-19, the call for prayers could be misdirected to a wrong enemy, the disease. What needed to be prayed for was an end of the biological war between China and America. For many Ugandans, COVID-19 was not a black man's disease but for the Asians and Whites. No wonder, early responses to the disease manifested in popular culture described it as a 'Chinese disease'. Yet others argued that COVID-19 was for the affluent and those who travelled most often to countries outside of Africa. Among the proponents of this theological conspiracy were Apostle Dr Joseph Serwadda, Rev. Emmanuel Mateeka and a Nigerian Born Again pastor, Apostle Suleiman Johnson of Omega Fire Ministries. In a televised programme, Apostle Dr. Joseph Serwadda argued:

The COVID-19 pandemic is not a disease but a chemical or biological warfare between China and America. This situation does not call for prayers against the disease but prayers against a war between the two countries for which Uganda is just an unintended casualty. People are praying for different things and leaving the real issue of warfare between America and China. This is because Beijing, despite its proximity to Wuhan, has lost very few people to the virus compared to countries thousands of miles away from China (Combating COVID-19. Dream TV, 2020, March 30 at 3:00pm).

Arguments by theological conspiracists were ingrained in the theory of the "new world order" which, according to them, takes people away from God since science is taking over the world. They reasoned that the COVID-19 was part of the new world order project championed by China to overtake and outcompete America in trade, politics, science and technology. The COVID-19 was an intentional creation of China as part of the anti-Christ. The measure to ban public gatherings, to reduce and contain the virus was

targeted at disrupting the believers from gathering to pray because they knew when believers gather together to pray, their plans and agenda would end up in futility. Theological conspiracists called for defiance to such measures as prayers of the saints would stop those mischievous plans.

Although it is usual for scholarly works to downplay conspiracy theories, such beliefs should not be ignored because they can have underlying implications during an epidemic, including undermining public trust in preventive measures (Smallman, 2015). There has been renewed interest in analysing consequences of such conspiracy theories with regard to COVID-19. For example, Bavel et al. (in press) have argued that belief in conspiracy theories has been linked to vaccine hesitancy, climate denial, extremist political views and prejudice. COVID-19 conspiracy theories may be similarly problematic. For instance, people who believe that alternative remedies can help them fight off the virus may be less likely to follow health officials' advice and instead opt for less effective (at best) or lethal (at worst) alternatives. Conspiracy beliefs may also fuel hostility towards groups seen as accessories to the virus. The attribution of the disease to Chinese produced a culture of stigma against the Chinese working majorly in the manufacturing and construction industry. They also produce complacency to the pandemic; especially, if the belief is propagated by religious clerics who are trusted by the population. Although combating conspiracy theories remains a challenge, some evidence suggests that giving people factual information prior to exposure to conspiracy theories can reduce conspiracy theory beliefs.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda rejuvenated the debate on prophecy, miracles and healing power. This argument was between Christian apologists on one hand and Christian skeptics and nominalists on the other. Days before Uganda registered the first COVID-19 case, Christian apologists had prophesied that Uganda was to be spared by God from this disease. Pastor Robert Kayanja had prophesied that this disease would never reach Uganda, just as God had restricted the locusts' invasion to some parts of the country (Bigeye, 2020). In a YouTube video, Prophet Isaiah Mbuga of Christ's Heart Ministries International claimed to have received a revelation a few years ago about COVID-19 pandemic that would put the whole world on tension (Mbuga, 2020). In another YouTube video, Prophet Elvis Mbonye of Zoe Ministries claimed to have been alerted by God that the COVID-19 would not spread to Uganda, but he hesitated to release the prophecy (Celebrity talk UG, 2020). Followers of Prophet Elvis Mbonye had earlier advised the COVID-19 hard hit country of China to bow at the feet of this prophet to have the disease wiped away. Christian apologists had convinced their followers that Born-Again Christians would be spared of the disease because of their faith in God. Both classical and neo- Pentecostal churches are popularly known for, among other things, their focus on

miracle performance in the name of Jesus. For these churches, miracle performance and prophecy are the yardsticks of a pastor's anointing. These two are a foundation of Pentecostal churches since they are a manifestation of God's presence through exercise of these spiritual gifts. Short of the ability to predict the future or perform miracles is a symptom of either lack of the Holy Spirit, or falsity.

However, the pre-COVID-19 prophetic utterances did not materialise hence creating a paradoxical experience. Barely two weeks after Pastor Robert Kayanja's prophecy, Uganda recorded its first COVID-19 case (The Independent, 2020). This relates to Jeremiah 23:16-17 which admonishes people not to listen to prophets who fill them with false hopes, telling them what they have imagined rather than what God has said. The prophetic claims of Elvis Mbonye to have been alerted by God a year earlier about the pandemic and his conspicuous silence was not in tandem with Israelite prophetic traditions for which Christians are heirs. A prophet's silence about God's word ignited wrath upon him. Prophet Jeremiah is such an example, and he makes it clear that God makes it impossible for his prophet to withhold his word. Jeremiah 20:9 says;

But if I say, "I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name," his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot (NIV).

Commentaries on this text put Prophet Elvis Mbonye's prophetic claim into contention. Guzik (2018) of the Enduring Word Bible Commentary holds the impossibility of denying God's call and that God's word is not only irreversible but also irrepensible. He also argues that from Jeremiah's experience, attempt to refuse to speak God's word brings a lot more suffering to the bearer of the message. Thus, to find release from suffering in silence was impossible for such silence became more intolerable than suffering. Adam Clarke Commentary complements the above interpretation stating that the strongly raging fire meant that Jeremiah was obliged to deliver God's message in order to get rid of the tortures which he felt from suppressing the solemn message God had given him (Clarke, 2020). It is dangerous to refuse to go when called as it is to run without a call (Adam, 2020). Jeremiah 20:9 cannot be read in isolation from verses 7 and 8. Verse 7 speaks of God deceiving Jeremiah; while in verse 8 he complains about speaking only violence and destruction. Albeit his dislike to proclaim doom, he is compelled to speak anyway (W. Kuloba, personal interview, April 19, 2020). The impossibility to withhold God's message is made clearer in Jeremiah 23:22, which says:

If they had known my secret thoughts, then they could have proclaimed my message to my people and could have made them give up the evil lives they live and the wicked things they do.

As recorded in Jeremiah 23:28, God says that the prophet who hears his message should proclaim that message faithfully. To some other people, it would be important to understand why Prophet Elvis Mbonye would withhold the word from God, given the circumstances at the time (W. Kuloba, personal interview, April 19, 2020). Granted that he received the COVID-19 prophecy, a message of destruction, the prophet could have intended avoiding disorienting his blossoming ministry of mainly young professional followers who were at the beginning of their careers. Therefore, since prophetic utterances carried an effect on both the carrier of the message and recipients but not God (the source), then withholding the message would be meant to please the audience and also have a safe haven for the prophet. It is also a possibility that Prophet Elvis Mbonye could have weighed the social impact that his utterance could enlist in the event that COVID-19 did not happen. His choice to keep quiet could have been influenced by non-fulfilment of prophetic utterances by a contemporary prophet, Pastor Robert Kayanja of the Miracle Centre Cathedral-Rubaga. On the run towards the 2006 Uganda Presidential elections, Pastor Robert Kayanja had prophesied that out of the five presidential candidates, one of them would die as two would pull out of the presidential race thereby having the winner at 61% votes (Wallis, 2006; Ruteikara, 2006; Nakagwa, 2006). There is also a possibility that claims by Prophet Elvis Mbonye aimed to create an impression that such a phenomenal disease could not have eluded his prophetic eye. The silence of Prophet Elvis Mbonye and his contemporaries raises questions about their own credibility as God's prophets.

Alternatively, non-fulfillment of pre COVID-19 prophecies led to an evolution of prophetic messages into messages of healing and deliverance. For example, Apostle Grace Lubega of Phaneroo ministries proclaimed miraculous healing upon COVID-19 victims in Uganda.

Referencing Acts 10:38; Isaiah 26:3, Apostle Grace Lubega believed that the world was going to hear supernatural healing of the Christian God (Sseruyigo, 2020). The COVID-19 ravage in the country put the belief in prophecy, miracles and healing into question. In the year 2017, in a YouTube preaching, Pastor Isaiah Mbuga had prophesied that the disease that would come by the end of 2019 or thereabout would devastate only the 'non-born-again' Christians (Mbuga, 2020). However, news of eleven members of Watoto Church, majority of whom children coming from a Christian ministry work in the United Kingdom and Canada, challenged the religious exclusiveness that postulated non-believers as the only victims to the virus (P. Sserubidde, personal interview, April 6, 2020). The unfulfilled prophecies about the COVID-19 provided an opportunity for skeptics of Born-Again pastors to question their authenticity. This exposed the religious charlatanism that was prevalent among Born Again pastors in the country.

Social critics and commentators challenged the

self-proclaimed miracle performing and healing pastors to move to the COVID-19 treatment hospitals of Entebbe and Mulago to heal the patients (URN, 2020b). At the same time, they questioned the conspicuous silence of maverick city pastors whose Christian based televisions broadcast followers who get „healed“ of HIV and cancer in their churches. The conduct and character exhibited, as well as the words spoken about COVID-19 by the Born-Again pastors mentioned above need to be analysed in line with Jeremiah 23:16-32. Jeremiah warned the people of Israel against prophets who provide false hope, proclaiming that all will be well with them despite the disasters and pandemics around them. These kinds of prophets claim to have God's message which they use to soothe the wicked, yet God's anger will surely fall upon them. These texts portray that Born-Again pastors who claimed to have heard God's word about COVID-19 before it struck could be a figment of their minds, and at best, personal dreams because God's word cannot be withheld from the intended recipients.

However, the panic and fear with which Christians responded to the pandemic may account for their silence. It is also true that government directives and restrictions put on the religious sector could have, in one way or the other, made these pastors impotent. There was fear for state reprisal to anyone who made statements contrary to the government pandemic response. This was witnessed in the arrest and imprisonment of Pastor Augustine Yiga of the Revival Christian church Kawaala when he boldly came out to contest the existence of the COVID-19 in Uganda. All these could have denied the pastors space to exercise their spiritual gift of prophecy and healing. None the less, the unfulfilled prophecies, the challenge to religious exclusiveness, exposure of religious charlatans in pastors, the total silence of healing prophets, and denial of space to the healing prophets amidst the COVID-19 pandemic could have indicated that the pandemic was not a spiritual problem worthy of a spiritual solution. God has created human beings with the capacity to find possible cure. It is a mistake to think that medicine is not God's healing power intended to heal the bodies of his sick people.

African traditional religious belief system

African Traditional theological attitude towards the COVID-19 is analyzed based on the responses of diviners, traditional healers and cultural institutions. These are the most visible institutions through which African traditional religiosity is manifested. Two African traditional belief systems were studied; one is Tondism faith from southern Uganda, predominantly practised by the Bantu societies of Buganda, Busoga, Bunyoro and Ankole-Kigezi, and another from the north, practised by the Acholi cultural society. However, unlike Christianity and Islam with unified codes of faith and doctrines, African traditional religious

belief systems differ from one society to another. Also, African traditional religious emphasis on ritual rather than doctrines translates into different ways and activities for different cultural societies. According to Tondism faith in Uganda, the supreme god named *Katonda* is responsible for sending the COVID-19 upon humanity. Pandemics have been the way of *Katonda* whenever he wishes to express his displeasure with actions of humankind. Pandemics are not new, only that each time *Katonda* decides to send one, it manifests in different forms (J. A. Lubowa, personal interview, April 21, 2020). Tondism faith disagrees with conspiracy theologians who believe that the COVID-19 is a manifestation of a biological warfare between China and the United States. Conspiracists were suggesting that COVID-19 could have been a human error. Tondism believes that COVID-19 is not connected to human science, though *Katonda* uses humans to have his will fulfilled. Whenever *Katonda* wants to punish humankind, he does so through his creation, including human beings, making it believable to be the work of human beings. This faith believes that COVID-19 is one of God's creations.

Tondism faith attributes the cause of COVID-19 to humankind's disregard of nature and culture. Nature and culture are the epitomic manifestation of *Katonda's* being. Antagonism with nature and one's culture is a contestation of *Katonda's* being and his existence. On one hand, whenever people forsake "nature", also called *obutonde*, many problems arise. For example, the origin of COVID-19 is attributed to eating of wild game meat at a Wuhan market in China. Hunting wild animals for food amounts to destruction of nature. On the other hand, *Katonda* is displeased with humankind's attempt to forsake culture. This is manifested by abandonment of African traditional religious beliefs, while adopting Christianity and Islam; replacement of *Katonda* and African spirits and mediums with the Christian Jesus and Islam's Prophet Muhammad as divine intermediaries; denigrating African cultures in favour of western colonial cultures; and accepting western forms of education in disfavour of African cultural education.

According to this faith, China, Europe and USA are more affected with COVID-19 because they have done a lot of injustice to other races of the world. For example, through colonialism, they did away with African forms of worship and brought a politically inclined religion. They also removed the word "*Katonda*" and instituted it with the Christian god, Jesus. This is in addition to contesting *Katonda's* power. Despite the fact that *Katonda* created human beings differently, proving that each race and cultural society have a special way to worship him with different names for example; *Katonda* (Buganda), *Imana* (Rwanda), *Ruhanga* (Ankole-Kigezi), *Kibumba* (Busoga) interalia, the whites have taken African societies away from proper worship of their God. Therefore, the big punishments have to begin with the whites then Africans later. Through COVID-19, God *demonstrates* his anger

upon those who disorganise his plans for humanity in diversity. This theology implies that COVID-19 would then spare the African race. However, the fewer COVID-19 cases in Africa is a demonstration that neither Africans nor non-Africans have been righteous enough in the sight of *Katonda*. Africans have also strayed from their traditional faith and culture, following colonial religions undeservedly. Despite the anger of *Katonda*, Tondism faith prescribes prayer as the solution to COVID-19. The followers got engaged in prayers ever since the disease struck. The prayers were both at individual and institutional level. Ban on public gatherings made believers to establish prayer sites, also called *ebiyoto*, in their homes to plead for *Katonda's* mercy against the COVID-19. *Katonda* revealed to them his requirement of a sheep as a burnt offering. Since then, they held prayer vigils and sacrificial rituals of sheep and cows in all the most sacred places of the faith countrywide. The rituals started at Walusinsi, a prayer mountain in Luweero district (Bulemeezi in Kikyusa subcounty), but also believed to be the origin of all humanity. Similar rituals were made at Kireku and Milinze in Bulemeezi as well as at Nnyizze near Kalagala falls on River Nile (Kayunga district). Other places included Birunga in Rwanda (likely the Virunga mountain ranges also called Mountain Mufumbiro in Kisoro), at the source of River Kagera, Mabeere ga Nnyinamwiru in Fort Portal, and finally at Nakayima tree in Mubende district. The sacrificial rituals were intended to avert the anger of *Katonda*. Although anger reversal is gradual, it certainly comes to fruitfulness. The prayer sessions portrayed the *Katonda's* universal character, as these were held in different parts of the country. Most believers claimed that *Katonda* had already responded to their prayers. One of the leaders of this faith had this to say:

We have got a response from Katonda, saying that if we continue doing what he has instructed us to do, our people are not going to be destroyed by coronavirus. Katonda is ready to reduce on his anger upon humanity and for all humanity not only for Ugandans. Because when we pray, we are praying for the whole world not Uganda alone (Ssaabakabona (High Priest), personal interview, April 21, 2020).

The above claim by the *Ssaabakabona* (High Priest) demonstrates the agility of Tondism god in times of disasters. *Katonda* is quick to respond to the pleas of his believers, not allowing them to suffer any more, once they do his will. He is a responsive god to the plight of those who come in his sight. Secondly, *Katonda's* will is not restricted to those who worship him; as his forgiveness and eventual end of the disease benefits the whole world including the Chinese, Europeans and Americans, in spite of having a different theological orientation. It further portrays the universality of *Katonda's* healing powers. This theological thinking differs from the religious exclusiveness and uncertain response from the supreme being

common with monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam.

Tondism faith also attested to availability of a traditional medicine for COVID-19. *Katonda cannot* bring a disease without a cure. The argument is that *Katonda* gives human beings power to find cure for all diseases, including COVID-19. However, the availability of medicine does not replace the unceasing prayers to *Katonda*. The prayers facilitate *Katonda's* revelation of the medicine as human effort and wisdom do not account for the discovery of the medicine, but *Katonda* makes it readily available as he wishes. The medicine is part of the sacred knowledge that *Katonda* or his agents give to those he chooses. Therefore, the medicine is not a scientific discovery but of a divine revelation.

Apart from the Tondism faith prominently in Busoga, Buganda and western Uganda, there arose distinct responses from the Luo community of the Acholi in the north of the country. The Acholi cultural community invoked their longtime practice of *ryemo gemo*, that is, the chasing of evil spirits that cause pandemics. Literally, *ryemo* means exorcism and *gemo* means bad or evil spirit. Therefore, the Luo phrase '*ryemo gemo*' means 'exorcism of bad spirit'. *Ryemo gemo*, the chasing or exorcism of bad spirits that cause pandemics, is part of the religious belief system of the Acholi. The Acholi believe that *gemo*, or bad spirit, comes suddenly and causes a mysterious illness and death in many people within a very short period of time, typical of COVID-19 with neither cure nor vaccine. *Gemo* appears because of lack of respect to the gods. It is also believed that lack of respect for habitats of the gods like hills, mountains and water bodies could cause *gemo*. This belief translates into a practice that requires natives to make a communal loud voice before daybreak or in the late evening. This involves the banging of jerry cans, pots, pans, drums and any other object capable of producing noise in order to chase away the bad spirit (Mao, 2020)

To the Acholi, COVID-19 was the *gemo*, a bad spirit, which had invaded their community. Contrary to other religious faiths, the traditional belief system of the Acholi recognises bad spirit but not the good God as the source of COVID-19. COVID-19 could be eliminated by chasing this bad spirit (*gemo*) from the land through a ritual called *ryemo gemo*. This had to be done at night to get the bad spirit unawares. Communal loud noise would chase away COVID-19. This Acholi belief system demonstrates that dealing with COVID-19 was a communal task, involving everybody, but not selected technocrats as was being done by government. The Acholi community accomplished this ritual in a desperate attempt to scare away COVID-19 (Oketch, 2020). To the Acholi, there are no compromises with *gemo*, and therefore, no need to humble themselves, just like the Christians.

The appearance of *gemo* is not only a reminder about the unhappiness of the gods, but also the need for reconciliation with the spiritual after the COVID-19 has been exorcised from the community. Whereas there are no

pleadings and intercessions to the good god to have the evil spirit out of the land, a latent theology is ripe where the good god(s) of Acholi withdraws to let the bad spirit of COVID-19 ravage the community. Such is an expression of displeasure with the living. For both Tondism faith and *ryemo gemo* practice, disease is analysed as a result of profaning the gods, yet healing is constructed as a product of appeasement of the gods (Isiko, 2019b).

Ryemo gemo put the Acholi cultural leaders and politicians on a collision course with the State. The state objected to the practice arguing that it could promote complacency among the people, yet it was also in contradiction with science. The threat to have the cultural leaders arrested for allowing this practice did not deter the Acholi community from fulfilling the ritual (Oketch, 2020). However, some scholars have argued for the complementarity of science and religion. Science and religion are neither enemies nor 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 (Parsitau, 2020).

Despite the arguments against *ryemo gemo*, traditional healing traditions are rooted in medical anthropological studies and practices. Effective public health measures against pandemics require cultural considerations of communities in which they occur (Bohret, 2018). Using *ryemo gemo*, the Acholi had successfully treated sicknesses before the importation of western medicine. *Ryemo gemo* was based on profound scientific reasons not easily explained with modern science. The practice was thought to complement government's efforts of social distancing to curb the pandemic (Adong, 2020). Exorcism is a widespread religious practice, associated with Quranic healers, charismatic Born-Again Christians and traditional healers in Uganda. Carolyn Orbann, a health science professor at University of Missouri, argues that since humans are both biological and cultural beings, when a disease spreads through large parts of the world's population, human beings are likely to cope in both biological and cultural ways (How culture affects the spread of pandemics like COVID-19. fury.org). Disregarding *ryemo gemo* contradicted with World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines for handling pandemics of this nature. WHO dictates that special attention must be given to the actual perception of the outbreak by the community, and in particular, specific cultural elements and local beliefs must be taken into account to ensure proper messages, confidence, and close cooperation of the community (Hewlett and Amola, 2003). The negative attitude towards *ryemo gemo* amidst the pandemic unravels the continued struggle between African traditional healing systems and western science complicated by the colonial programming of African minds to think that what is

western is superior to African forms of science. None the less, the tradition of *ryemo gemo* ought to be studied by the state to see how it could complement government's response to the pandemic.

Islam

Islamic theological responses to COVID-19 in Uganda are rooted in the teachings of the Quran and traditions of Prophet Muhammad. Through the Quran, we get to know Islamic explanatory model of epidemics. Islamic explanatory model attempts to explain the occurrence, cause and preventive measures of epidemics. In this subsection, analysis of the cause(s) and treatments of COVID-19 is made, as well as the preventive measures prescribed according to the Islamic faith. To the Muslims, pandemics like the COVID-19 emanate from Allah (M. Katuramu, personal interview, April 09, 2020). God is responsible for sending disasters and epidemics to humankind. All the good and bad originate from God. Muslims are admonished to accept God's wishes for humankind (M. Katuramu, personal interview, April 09, 2020). According to Islam, the COVID-19 is not an accident but an incident which was predetermined by God, years before it struck humankind. There are three outstanding responses that explain God's expression of anger through epidemics; God's resolve to make humanity realize his supremacy over the world through natural calamities beyond human control; Allah's attempt to test the faith of humanity; and finally, pandemics as a punitive measure to the disobedient.

In the first instance, God sends COVID-19 as a demonstration of his supremacy over the whole world. COVID-19 has made both the developing and powerful economies bow in defeat. Science has not helped, with no successful attempt to procure a vaccine. The disease has grossly affected countries of Europe, America and China, despite their sophisticated healthcare infrastructure. The superpowers have not succeeded in preventing the spread of an invisible coronavirus. The COVID-19 is a reminder to all human beings that they are weak. Regardless of humanity's social standing and financial position, all human beings are helpless (Koire, 2020). Weakness and helplessness of human beings amidst COVID-19 further demonstrate the unequivocal equality of humanity before God, the supreme leader, for the virus affects the rich and poor, the young and old, educated and the illiterate.

Apart from Allah's demonstration of his supremacy, pandemics are a test of human beings' faith in God. God planned to put humans in a state of fear, panic, famine, poverty, and incurable diseases to test their resilient faith (M. Katuramu, personal interview, April 9, 2020). In spite of the intentional yet undesirable incident Muslims are expected to return to Allah and his messenger for guidance. This is because for everything that happens in the life of a Muslim, Islam has a solution to it. Allah allows

trials and tribulations upon humanity to test whether humankind can stick or return to him as the ultimate guide. To explain this further, Koire (2020) quotes the Quran as follows:

“Do you think that you will enter paradise without such trials as came to those who passed away before you? They were afflicted with severe poverty and ailments and were so shaken that even the messenger and those who believed along with him said, „when will the help of Allah come? “ Yes! Certainly, the help of Allah is near!”

From the above assertions, the impression is that COVID-19 is part of the continuous trials that believing people undergo. Secondly, COVID-19 is just one of the several epidemics that God has been sending to humanity over the years. Thirdly, the saints in paradise experienced diseases of such a nature, but it was their endurance that made them able to have their way to paradise. Fourthly, panic experienced during pandemics like COVID-19 is a natural process which is experienced by humans, including those whom God has chosen. But above all, God's intervention is a matter of time. He surely comes to deliver those who have endured and trusted him during the pandemic. Therefore, Islam prescribes patience, endurance and unquestionable trust and faith in God, for these lure Allah to deliver one from pandemics.

Finally, pandemics are used as a punitive measure against the sinful. The sinful nature of humankind is responsible for epidemics like COVID-19 (A. Musoke, personal interview, 20th April, 2020). The sinful nature of China, the original epicentre of COVID-19, is demonstrated through murder of Muslims, with no democracy and freedom of worship. On the other hand, the United States, the second epicentre is accused of antagonising people all over the world, causing sufferings to millions of people in Muslim countries through unjustified wars. This is accompanied by the irreligiosity of European countries, who have abandoned God. This argument is based on the increasing numbers of COVID-19 victims in China, United States and Europe against the relatively smaller numbers of victims in African countries. However, when epidemics strike, they also affect the righteous, allowing a relatively small percentage of them to suffer along with the sinful so that the righteous do not take God for granted and lapse into sinfulness.

Despite the predetermined occurrence of COVID-19, Islamic theology provides for preventive measures against pandemics. Muslims are taught to take precautionary steps to ensure that they neither get infected nor infect others with COVID-19. Precautionary measures are drawn from the traditions of the Prophet. The unravelling of COVID-19 pandemic control practices like social distancing, self-isolation and the obsession with hygienic practices are inherent Islamic practices (Khan, 2020). Therefore, the directives of government and control measures of the Ministry of Health do not, in any way,

contradict with Islamic belief and practice. Khan has identified five major areas which Prophet Muhammad emphasized on how Muslims should conduct themselves when faced with infectious diseases like COVID-19. These are travel bans and quarantine, social distancing and isolation, observing hygiene, seeking medical treatment, and free medical treatment. With regard to observance of hygiene, Islam teaches that cleanliness is part of faith. Muslims wash their hands repeatedly five times a day, before any of the five obligatory daily prayers. The tradition of Jami'al-Tirmidh reports that when the Prophet would sneeze, he would cover his face and muffle the sneeze effectively containing the spread of airborne bacteria and viruses (Khan, 2020). Ministry of Health guidelines including; regular washing of hands, use of handkerchiefs to sneeze and immediate disposal, and wearing of face masks to control virus transmission are a true reflection of a practising Muslim.

Prophet Muhammad prescribed quarantine and travel bans as preventive measures some 1400 years ago. He gave instructions on what to do if there was an outbreak of an infectious disease. Abdal-Rahman Ibn Awf said: I heard the messenger of Allah (PBUH) say, “If you hear that the plague is in the land, do not go there, and if it breaks out in a land where you are, do not leave, fleeing from it.” This means that not proceeding into a land with an epidemic would secure one from likely infection. It would also ensure that the disease does not spread to other areas if one left under uncertainty of infection. This Islamic principle exactly refers to the modern quarantine being practised during the COVID-19. This however, means that the pandemic will certainly affect both the faithful and sinners since they would be in the same land affected by the infectious disease (H. Male, personal interview, March 15, 2020). Writing about the Black Death of the 14th century, Dols (1979) stated that the Islamic argument is that whereas pandemics affect both the faithful and infidels, the purposes for which God unleashes the pandemic to both are different. For the faithful, it was looked at as martyrdom but punishment for the infidels.

Social distancing is cited among the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. He distanced himself from a leprous man, granting his pledge and wishes without touching him. The prophet admonished his followers to keep a health community, by isolating sick persons from healthy ones (Khan, 2020). This teaching relates to the preventive measures of non-interaction to avoid chances of infection. The Ministry of Health has encouraged self-isolation of COVID-19 infected persons and their contacts. This is in addition to institutional quarantine and isolated centres for treatment of COVID-19 patients away from the rest of patients with other ailments. The prophet further encouraged Muslims to seek treatment alongside prayer. Abu Dawud teaches that the Prophet Muhammad said: “Make use of medical treatment, for Allah has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease, namely old age” (Rasool, 2020).

For all the three religious traditions, prayer was not only the denominator but also the ultimate psycho-social approach believed to be effective against COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda. The State organised national prayers that brought religious leaders from the major religious denominations in the country, including Muslims, Anglican Church of Uganda, Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church in Uganda, Seventh Adventist Church, as well as selected Born-Again pastors in Kampala. The Minister for Health proposed a combination of God and science to fight the disease. She emphasised that prayers, wisdom and science originate from God. She said the following words:

If all of us in Uganda could fall on our knees and ask for forgiveness, I am very sure that God will hear from heaven, forgive us and heal our land, and will be protected from COVID-19. So, for us in the Ministry of Health, we are combining both; we pray and we also have scientists to guide us on the response. In any case, the wisdom that the scientists are using is given to them by God so you cannot delink God from COVID-19 neither can you delink God from the response. He is the ultimate authority in this response. So, I appeal to Ugandans to continue praying (Jane Ruth Aceng, Minister for Health (Televised address on COVID-19. NBS Television, April 2, 2020. Kampala).

The national prayers signified the high level of religiosity within the socio-political dispensation of the country. The religious attitude of the Minister indicates the inextricable relationship between COVID-19 and the spiritual world. It also points to human weaknesses, omissions and commissions bringing displeasure to the spiritual, thereby allowing the disease to ravage humanity. It is therefore, the responsibility of humans to approach the spiritual in order to have a reversal of the situation to normalcy. In order to have, it will take the mercy of the spiritual to reveal a cure or vaccine of COVID-19 to humanity through science. This then makes the spiritual squarely linked to the source of the virus, yet its end cannot be realized without divine intervention.

Although Uganda has a significant percentage of 1.7% followers of African traditional religious beliefs, they were excluded from ecumenical prayers for national intercession against the pandemic. This was in addition to outright condemnation of *ryemo gemo*, a form of exorcism among the Acholi cultural community. Tondism faith leaders were only granted permission to perform their rituals away from public sight at their various ritual sites countrywide. This provides an idea about the nature of a supreme being that Ugandan politicians thought could avert the COVID-19 pandemic. It also indicates the unending colonial mentality towards African religiosity, as inferior to that of the outsiders. On one hand, it was argued that national prayers were a deliberate attempt by both the government and religious leaders to divert the already panicked population into a semblance of normalcy. Prayers would

help restore hope in a population that was scared of the capacity of government to handle the pandemic amidst an ailing healthcare infrastructure. On the other hand, religious leaders, who had made unfulfilled prophecies about COVID-19 and were also unable to deploy their miracle healing powers over COVID-19 patients could no longer convince an already desperate population that there was hope in believing in the supreme being.

Practical interventions of religious institutions

Prayers and divine interventions brought hope among the people. The pandemic, however, brought about practical needs at both individual and community levels which were to be met if the disease was to be defeated. Apart from the bodily harm of the disease, society had been affected economically and mentally, necessitating a holistic approach to the pandemic. The pandemic presented an opportunity for churches to fill the glaring gaps and practically serve the last and the least in a manner that reveals who a Christ like character. It was an opportunity for the church to put its egos aside and creatively heed Jesus' instructions to feed the flock. Places of worship were to be converted into temporary hospitals or food pantries where those in need could obtain treatment and essential goods. The church could use the funds of those who had faithfully donated to it over the years to buy ventilators and personal protective gears for the hospitals and health workers at the frontline. This could as well be an opportunity for the church to purchase hygiene products and distribute them to those who were in isolation and quarantine. In such a crisis, this was expected to be the mandate of the church (Niringiye, 2020). Islamic ideology emphasises free medical care and financial assistance during a pandemic as crucial elements in controlling the spread of the disease (Khan, 2020). Assured supply of essential goods enables citizens to abide by sanctions required to prevent the disease. For African traditional religiosity, generosity to the wider community and helping afflicted neighbours is a virtue. There was agreement among interviewed respondents that religious institutions needed to step up and attend to the practical needs of affected followers beyond supplications. In the New Vision editorial, it was written:

But in the trying moment, some of the faithful need much more than prayer since many families are not in position to put food on the table. There may be families of widows, orphans, beggars or just ordinary people in our parishes who depend on an active economy to raise the food. The government does not have the structures to deliver welfare. But the churches, because they are in the community, are better placed to step in (New Vision Editorial, March 31, 2020).

Here, analysis is made of the contributions that were made by religious bodies to the fight against COVID-19. Strengths

and gaps in these practical interventions are identified. There were both early and later responses to the pandemic; by especially Christian and Islamic establishments. The early interventions included immediate reactions after the lockdown whereas the later responses involved actions of religious bodies, a month after lockdown. There was popular opinion that religious institutions had not done enough during the early response phase, with the exception of encouraging followers to live by the standard operating procedures of COVID-19. They failed to attend to practical needs of the most vulnerable during COVID-19 (L. Namatende, personal interview, March 30, 2020).

Early phase religious responses to COVID-19 did not meet public expectations. For example, whereas the Roman Catholic Church, Anglican Church and Muslim community in Uganda own some of the best hospitals in the country, none ever volunteered to provide isolation and treatment centres for COVID-19 patients although later, the Roman Catholic hospital of Lacor in Gulu expressed readiness to work with government to deal with the COVID-19. Instead, religious institutions were much more concerned with how religious ministers would survive during the lockdown. One of the interviewee was concerned with churches continued stance to provide mobile money numbers for their congregation to send tithes and offerings, oblivious that a great majority of the congregation were not working and instead needed their help (J. Namusoke, personal interview, March 30, 2020). These kinds of criticisms did not spare cultural institutions, especially the more powerful Kingdoms of Buganda, Busoga, Toro and Bunyoro. Public argument was that cultural institutions were very wealthy, capable enough to complement government response to the disease.

Therefore, in the initial stages of the lockdown, there was noticeable lip service from religious and cultural institutions. The church and Muslim community took a backstage, possibly, because of the unconventional mechanisms that had been taken by government to combat COVID-19. Religious institutions' attitude of passivity, inactivity, distance or mute indifference in the face of such a monumental catastrophe was driven by thinking that it was an absolute responsibility of the state. The same attitude had been exhibited by African religious leaders during the initial stages of the Aids pandemic (Oluduro, 2010). Religious leaders, tend to hold a latent ideology that it is a right for them to receive from the believers but not an obligation to share with the congregants. The thinking that religious faiths are just spiritual entities to be concerned with only the spiritual needs of the people is strong among African Christian and Islamic clerics. This passive early response is also attributed to the dependence syndrome of cultural, African Christian and Islamic institutions. Most churches in Uganda, especially the numerous neo-Pentecostal ones, survive on donations from powerful American churches. Most mosques in Uganda have been built by Muslim

philanthropists. African Christian pastoral activities are limited to visiting and praying for afflicted believers, but not meeting their practical needs. This religious passivity, notwithstanding poverty and dependence is not in tandem with the local financial church collections in terms of tithes and offertories. Some African scholars like Parsitau (2020) have argued against neo-Pentecostal churches' attitude stating how church spaces in Africa are not about people but church founders who use the tithes and offerings to enrich themselves for a luxurious lifestyle. Such churches do not subscribe to a people centred theology or a gospel of social justice.

Later, active religious response to COVID-19 pandemic was influenced by the President's call to companies and business people to donate to the State. The State was in dire need of finances to procure food for the vulnerable urban poor who had been taken away from work. The State also wanted vehicles to reach out to all COVID-19 patients and suspected cases in all corners of the country. The vehicles would also aid in the distribution of food to vulnerable Ugandans. Specific religious bodies heeded the President's call and began donating lots of money to the COVID-19 national response taskforce.

Some Christian ministries like the Robert Kayanja Ministries distributed food and other essentials to people in the slums, regardless of their religious affiliation. They used their influence to mobilise donations from believers. Food supplies and money was further received from House of Prayer Ministries International of Pastor Aloysius Busingo; Church of Uganda; Prophet Samuel Kakande of the Synagogue church of all nations Mulago; and Owobusobozi Bisaka, a cult leader from Kibaale district. Cultural institutions like Buganda, Busoga, and Bunyoro kingdoms donated food and money to the national response taskforce. Several individual Muslims, just like Christian business persons, donated generously to the taskforce. However, this later religious response attracted a lot of criticisms. Firstly, just a few of the numerous and thriving neo-Pentecostal churches in Kampala responded to the call to contribute. This is against the background that Born-Again churches in Kampala collect a lot of money on a daily basis from followers besides having several commercial enterprises that raise lots of profits.

The timing of the religious bodies' active response was suggestive that their contribution was populist having conceded to public pressure to help the needy. They also made donations at a time when there was a media highlight of companies that were donating, and therefore may have wanted public recognition. Moreover, it was a time when the President was making personal mention of individual contributions. The idea was not their deep concern for the suffering Ugandans, but a desire to reciprocate the government's tolerant stance for freedom of worship. Secondly, the churches did not get donations from what they had stocked over the years but appealed to well-wishers to donate for COVID-19 through the church. Some of the born-again churches that had been

accommodating believers for several months having prayer vigils chased them without any form of transport facilitation at the time when the government announced ban on public gatherings. This action did not tally with the same churches' gesture to donate for COVID-19 purposes. However, church leaders and Muslim clerics ably used the mass media to spread information about the COVID-19. The inter-religious council of Uganda (IRCU) helped in the interpretation of the COVID-19 guidelines in at least seven different local languages of Uganda so that the natives could understand them better.

Coping mechanisms by religious institutions against COVID-19

Places of worship have variant public programmes and rituals which call for public participation. In Uganda, religion is a public affair. Mainstream Christian denominations of Church of Uganda and Roman Catholic Church are so ritualistic that followers make it a point to attend Sunday congregational prayers, to pay tithe, offertory and partake in Holy Communion. Several born again churches hold daily overnight prayers with congregants camping at the churches for several days and sometimes months. The congregants are the major source of financial sustenance for these churches. Several of these religious institutions were taking care of vulnerable people like orphans and widows. Open air preaching especially among born again churches had become the order of the day with thousands of Christians gathered in one place. The closure of places of worship led to shortfalls in financial collections (G. Lubaale, personal interview, 1st April, 2020). Religious clerics could not find alternative sources of employment in such a short time to generate personal revenue. The lockdown led to loss of touch with parishioners. Some religious institutions were unable to meet their bills in addition to maintaining business entities like the radio and television stations. In a nutshell, religious institutions were challenged theologically and financially with much of their pastoral work coming to a standstill. The pandemic made it difficult for religious institutions to reach out to the flock. The religious voice was submerged in the wake of presidential directives to control COVID-19. In this subsection, an analysis of coping mechanisms adopted by religious institutions is made amidst the challenges identified above. The religious institutions adopted two coping mechanisms. These were; firstly, innovative ways of reaching out to the followers and secondly, adopting non-conventional ways of mobilizing financial resources from the flock.

The closure of places of worship and ban on congregational prayers made churches and mosques to use several media platforms like television to reach out to their congregations. Religious based media houses like Top Television, Top radio, Impact radio, Salt media and Salaam TV among others were more effectively used to

reach out to the believers. Some Born Again churches in Uganda own more than one radio station which made it easy for them to transmit the gospel to the followers during the shutdown. Churches without their own radio stations would buy telecasting time from established ones to allow them preaching time. It became usual for Muslim Jumah prayers to be performed and aired live on the major televisions of the country. Commercial media houses devoted much of Saturday and Sunday to provide telecasting space for Sabbath celebrations and Sunday services respectively for different churches in the city. Such services usually had less than ten people in the church audience, but believing that thousands were following the services on television. The concept of online church became rejuvenated in Uganda during the COVID-19 to a scale never seen before. The use of social media platforms alongside televisions and radios became very popular during the pandemic. Facebook live, YouTube and WhatsApp media became the most popularly used social media platforms for preaching. However, the village churches could not afford opportunities to conduct online churches due to lack of access to technology, internet and power supply. They were neither afforded chance to have their services on radio and television stations due to lack of financial resources to pay for telecast time. The village churches adopted the practice of family churches, involving prayers in the company of only family members.

To forestall the financial lapses caused by the shutdown, some religious leaders came up with innovative means of collecting tithe and offertory. Pastors and other religious clerics encouraged followers to use mobile money networks to send in their offering. The demand for offertory and tithes by the religious leaders was well crafted by all denominations that this occupied debate in the religious space during the initial response to the pandemic. Other religious clerics proposed to parishioners to use the traditional system of keeping tithe and offertories in a pot or box to be sent to the churches at the end of each month. Furthermore, others gave out their bank accounts for Christians to pay tithe and offertories through bank transfer. Others advised that though there was ban on public gatherings, Christians in their individual capacity could occasionally pass by the churches and pay their tithe and offertory.

Conclusion

Understanding the cultural and religious construction of disease is critical in designing effective preventive measures of pandemics. Religious ideologies and theologies determine community's response to pandemics. Religious pluralism in society calls for studying religious ideas of specific communities which demand modified approaches to control pandemics. Nonetheless, socio-political directives act as controls to religious extremism that proves detrimental to an effective pandemic control

programme. The COVID-19 fight in Uganda demonstrated that religion and its institutions are instrumental in mobilising citizens to abide by government programmes, especially public health programmes. The trust and hope that citizens have in religious clerics can be a blessing to society to control pandemics of this nature, yet if misused, it could be disastrous in a national fight against social and natural calamities. Therefore, whereas medical interventions are critical in the fight against disease, Uganda's scenario demonstrated that religion and its institutions can be the tranquillizer in the whole medical response to an epidemic. On the other hand, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic revolutionized the religious sector to a level never witnessed before. For example, the right to freedom of worship was determined and curtailed by a natural disaster rather than the State. COVID-19 pandemic challenged the relevance of some religious rituals and traditions. For example, the social distancing strategy employed to curb the spread of the virus meant that there would neither be hugging nor shaking of hands to wish brethren love and peace as it has always been customary during Anglican and Roman catholic church services. The theology behind communal prayers was challenged too, with a ban on Jumah and Sunday services. Extravagant church marriages could not be celebrated, with attendees restricted to less than ten people including the groom and the bride. The pandemic revolutionized worship in this country putting emphasis on online churches and social media preaching.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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