

Demonology, eschatology and vaccinology in African independent Pentecostalism



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Public discourses on the reliability of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccines in dealing with the upsurge of virus cases and deaths are developing and ongoing in many different contexts, as countries around the world are doing their best to build high and lasting immunity. This article worked within the framework of Pentecostal faith and outlined the Pentecostal perspectives on COVID-19 vaccines. The article is a literature analysis on the eschatological view and the demonising of COVID-19 vaccines. In addition, the article analysed the social media utterances of Pentecostal pastors on COVID-19 vaccines. These utterances were obtained from different social media networks, including YouTube. Pentecostal faith has caused some independent Pentecostals in Africa to demonise COVID-19 vaccines and others to perceive them as signs of the end times. While these perceptions appeared as signs of faith in dealing with pandemics such as COVID-19, they have proven fruitless in some instances. Some Pentecostals in Africa have lost their lives due to their insistence on faith, instead of vaccinating against the virus and observing regulations and restrictions. This calls for scholars to revisit a Pentecostal faith in health issues by bringing the balance between works and faith.

Contribution: This article is an interdisciplinary study on demonology, eschatology, and vaccinology within African Independent Pentecostalism. The article problematised the demonisation of vaccines and perception of vaccines as signs of end times. The article proposes a Pentecostal faith that balances people's beliefs and the role of medicine in the provision of healing.

Keywords: demonology; eschatology; vaccinology; Pentecostalism; COVID-19; Pentecostal faith.

Introduction

Vaccinating most of the population against coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), is perceived as a way out of the virus in many African contexts (Dzinamarira et al. 2021:250; cf. Cooper, Van Rooyen & Wiysonge 2021). However, some Pentecostals in the African independent Pentecostal churches (Anderson 1992; 2002a; 2005; Mashau 2013; cf. Frahm-Arp 2010) perceive the COVID-19 vaccines as demons and the mark of the beast. The category, African Independent Pentecostal churches, is used to distinguish these pentecostal churches from classical pentecostalism. The category in this article, is inclusive of newer Pentecostal and charismatic churches as described by Anderson (2002a; 2005) and New Prophetic Churches (Kgatle 2019).

Although some Pentecostals have been doing this in proving their faith in God, this article argues through a Pentecostal faith framework, that these perceptions illustrate the limitation of this faith in dealing with pandemics. The purpose of this article is revisiting Pentecostal faith, in dealing with pandemics such as COVID-19, to find balance between works and faith. This will be achieved by firstly, framing the Pentecostal faith in the context of addressing challenges such as COVID-19 and others. Secondly, the article will look at some utterances on Pentecostal faith in demonising COVID-19 vaccines in different African contexts such as South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Similarly, the use of Pentecostal faith in perceiving COVID-19 vaccines as signs of the end times, shall be explored in detail. Data was collected by looking at the publications on Pentecostal faith and COVID-19 vaccines. In addition, scholarly works on COVID-19 in general have been helpful. Some of the information on the Pentecostal views on COVID-19 vaccines was collected by looking at media briefings on YouTube and other online sources.

Theoretical framework: Pentecostal faith

Pentecostals are people of faith, where there is an emphasis on believing God for the physical healing and health of individuals, regardless of the type of sickness or disease that a believer is suffering from (Makukula 2018:33). Pentecostal faith is founded on the belief in the supernatural

power of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit in dealing with any adversity (Adogame 2007). Asonzeh Ukah (2020) states:

The Pentecostal community, with its ritual and doctrinal emphases on physiological healing, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the use of spiritual gifts, and its modernist outlook, is adequately positioned to respond in innovative ways to the COVID-19 pandemic. (p. 430)

In Pentecostalism, the very faith that can lead a non-believer to salvation and a believer to sanctification, is believed to be able to heal those who are sick. Believers are always expected to act by faith, in receiving the word that has been preached to them for healing. Therefore, faith becomes a tool in the hand of a Pentecostal believer, to activate that which has already been achieved on the cross of calvary (Petts 1993). Put differently, receiving the word, and believing that God will intervene in their life situation, is seen as the sign of faith. But the word is not only received but also confessed, to claim healing in one's life (Anderson 2002b). According to Makukula (2018:242), Pentecostals believe that 'through renewed faith, positive thinking and action, one can trust God to confer health, wealth and victory in this temporal existence'.

This presents Pentecostal faith as having a deeper meaning and expression, in dealing with challenges of life among Pentecostals, more than other Christian traditions (Makukula 2018:100). In addition, those who can use their faith and access their healing, are perceived as having this high form of faith. However, those who cannot achieve healing, are at times perceived as lacking in faith, or living a sinful and prayerless life. For many Pentecostals, the exercise of faith should be able to produce results in one way or the other (Stålsett 2003:206). In addition, according to Makukula (2018:228), 'Pressure is typically exerted to always expect healing as a demonstration of personal faith'. Therefore, lack of results in one's life is perceived negatively in some Pentecostal settings.

In Africa, Pentecostal faith is not only used to believe in God for healing, but it is also used to confront the spirit world, which is believed to be the source of evil (Anderson 2018:6). Given this type of faith among Pentecostals, any form of adversity including sickness and disease, is perceived as evil and contrary to what God is doing in their lives (Anderson & Otwang 1993). The prayer of deliverance in faith is used for the very same purpose, of defeating the opposing powers of the enemy. This kind of prayer is also seen as what Poloma (2009:47) calls, 'verbalisation of faith' that affords believers to be active in exercising their faith. Tang (2005:467) in Makukula (2018:109) adds, 'Pentecostals take the vocalisation of faith to heart and "yell" or shout – a radical form of public expression – to reach the realm of the Word to the realm of the Spirit'. Therefore, in Africa any form of sickness and disease is confronted in this loud prayer to effect healing upon the sick.

COVID-19 is not different. Pentecostals have approached the virus and its upsurge through faith, with the hope that it will diminish by calling the supernatural through the Holy Spirit.

Dealing with the virus among some Pentecostals, does not only involve the use of medicine; the sick person is required to believe God for total healing, by daily confessing healing. In addition, the virus has been confronted in similar ways as other demonic forces, as it is perceived by some as having been caused by the spiritual world or realm. In simple terms, they perceive it as coming from the devil. Unfortunately, this kind of faith has come at the expense of ignoring health protocols, demonising COVID-19 and perceiving it as the mark of the beast, as recorded in the Book of Revelation. These aspects of the Pentecostal faith, specifically as it relates to COVID-19 vaccines, are discussed below.

Pentecostal faith in demonising COVID-19 vaccines

Some of the Pentecostals in the Africa independent Pentecostal churches, perceive the COVID-19 vaccines as coming from the devil, and containing ingredients of the devil. In Nigeria, according to Gonee (2020:1), the late 'Prophet Temitope Balogun Joshua, the founder of [the] Synagogue Church of all Nations was among Pentecostal Pastors who saw the restrictions on religious practices as satanic and uncalled for'. Asamoah-Gyadu (2021) adds that, within African independent Pentecostalism:

[T]he coronavirus was 'cursed' as demonic, and as an agent of the devil, is out to destroy God's people and this was particularly on account of the fact that it disrupted the nature of church. (p. 164)

Asamoah Gyadu (2021:164) continues to say, that a well-known Pentecostal pastor, 'Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams claimed that the virus was a demonic attack from satanic and demonic wombs and incubators'. Thus, there has been constant spiritualisation and demonisation of the virus in different African independent Pentecostal contexts. This is fallacy, because COVID-19 remains a physical and biological virus threatening the lives and livelihoods of millions of people worldwide. Therefore, to name and shame it as a spiritual force coming from the devil, unlike other challenges, has not helped Pentecostals in any way. Rather it has created other challenges, that will be discussed later in the article.

In addition, Pentecostal pastors in different African contexts have been assuring their members, that nothing will happen to them given the prayer of faith they have released on them (Taru, Chimbizikai & Kirby 2020). They assured their followers that, even if some of them could be affected by the virus, they would receive healing from their God, something related to Pentecostal faith. This is common among Pentecostals that, when facing common challenges in society, they create some form of exceptionalism in assuring their members that nothing will happen to them. Thus, in dealing with the virus, Pentecostals in Africa according to Taru et al. (2020:3), have been encouraged to 'pray it away'. Frahm-Arp (2020:158) asserts that some Pentecostal pastors have been assuring their members, that COVID-19 will not come near them. This is further illustrated by the kind of prayers that were prayed against the virus by Bushiri: 'I command every

evil that is about to enter your house, it must not enter, it must not locate your house, your job, your business, your finances, your marriage'. In making such utterances, Bushiri is including challenges brought by COVID-19, in 'every evil' as per his prayer. A prayer like this, demonstrates that Pentecostals are perceiving COVID-19 as a demonic force attacking their lives and finances. Bushiri was not alone in such prayers; other prophets and pastors also encouraged their members to embrace the presence of the Holy Spirit and pray against COVID-19 (Frahm-Arp 2020:158).

The prophets and pastors were not alone in perceiving COVID-19 as a demon. Some of the African leaders affiliated to Pentecostalism such as Tanzanian President John Pombe Magufuli, joined the chorus of perceiving the virus as coming from the evil one. The president according to Taru et al. (2020:3) said: 'Through it Satan seeks to "destroy" Tanzanian citizens'. Magufuli went on to say that 'churches or mosques would not be closed because this is where God and "true healing" (*uponyaji wa kweli*) are found'. In Kigali, Rwanda, it is Walker, Maple and Vearey (2021:1) that state it is 'within Evangelical and Pentecostal circles where conspiracy theories [are] linking the virus and vaccine to "Westerners" and as something [that is] created to harm Africans'. In South Africa, the former Chief Justice, a Pentecostal pastor, Mogoeng Mogoeng, prayed a special prayer in which he stated that if there was any vaccine that would have side-effects on the people, it should never see the light of day. Any vaccine that is deliberately intended to cause harm upon the lives of the people, must not survive. If there is any vaccine manufactured to perpetuate the agenda of Satan in the lives of the people, that vaccine must be destroyed in the name of Jesus. Mogoeng continued to say, that he does not have to be a scientist to say this, but only a prayer warrior to pray in faith against the vaccines, and he encouraged other prayer warriors to join him in that kind of prayer (News24 2020). In another prayer, Mogoeng stated categorically that any vaccine that is sent by the devil, should be judged and destroyed in the name of Jesus (eNCA 2020). In addition to his prayers, Mogoeng pointed out that vaccines should not be compulsory, and should not be imposed on the people in the context of the South African constitution, and as per the commitment by the President of South Africa, in not imposing COVID-19 vaccines on people. Rather, people should have a choice as to when they want to have the vaccine (SABC News 2020). Mogoeng further said, that he does not care if he loses his position in the Judicial Service Commission, but that he was adamant to defend his faith and pray against evil vaccines.

These views by some Pentecostal pastors, prophets, presidents and even the Chief Justice of South Africa, can be interpreted as perceptions of COVID-19 vaccines as coming from the devil. Although the chief justice specified that he is talking about the COVID-19 with side effects, and placed the condition on such vaccines, the public might not understand the difference and still perceive all vaccines as evil. Hence, a very aggressive tone and faith need to be adopted in dealing with both the virus and the vaccines, that are meant to cause

harm among the people. While these prayers and the positions of these leaders were criticised by many in government (Seleka 2021), there were some Pentecostals that defended and supported these views. One such sympathiser is Reverend Kelvin Harris, senior pastor of Bosmont Congregational Church, who stated according to SABC News (2020) that, 'he agrees with the sentiments expressed by Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng about what may be "evil" COVID-19 vaccines'. This means that this kind of resistance against COVID-19 and vaccines thereof is a popular view or position among many Pentecostals, as well as some ministers from other denominations in Africa. However, Pentecostals do not only perceive COVID-19 as a demon, but also as the mark of the beast as stipulated in the Book of Revelation. In the next section, I am going to discuss Pentecostal faith in eschatologising COVID-19 vaccines.

Pentecostal faith in eschatologising COVID-19 vaccines

Other Pentecostals perceive the COVID-19 vaccines as an end time event and the mark of the beast, as recorded in the Book of Revelation, chapter 13. This is referred to as eschatologising COVID-19 in this article (Asamoah-Gyadu 2021:167). Soyinka (2021) explains, that the COVID-19 vaccines have produced two types of sceptics. Firstly, the rational group of people who are asking questions about the side-effects of the vaccines. The second group of sceptics are some people of faith, who link COVID-19 'with the "mark of the beast" as described in the New Testament's Book of Revelation'. According to Afolabi and Olayinka (2021:3), 'These misconceptions could therefore hinder the promising successes which could be achieved through the prospective COVID-19 vaccine and the entire COVID-19 outbreak response'. In other words, as many people do not trust the COVID-19 vaccines, they will not vaccinate against COVID-19. Hence, Kamwendo (2021) opines:

Examining narratives that link the vaccine with the antichrist and the 'mark of the beast' will likely become an important part of understanding the level of willingness among factions of the Christian community to inoculate against the COVID-19 virus. (p. 1)

One of the narratives in this article is that Pentecostal faith cause people to easily dismiss vaccines, because their hope is in the Lord.

In Zimbabwe, an independent Pentecostal pastor Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, held similar views that the COVID-19 vaccines are a sign of the end times. Drawing Biblical allusions to the 'mark of the beast', he warned followers about 'microchip' implants. These, he predicts, will accompany future vaccination campaigns (Taru et al. 2020). Makandiwa's view was supported by other Pentecostal pastors in different African contexts. In South Africa the Chief Justice, Mogoeng Mogoeng, in the same prayer as quoted in the previous section, prayed against the COVID-19 vaccines as he perceived them as the mark of the beast.

According to Mogoeng, these are the end times and therefore, if there is any vaccine carrying the mark of the beast or 666, it must be destroyed in the name of Jesus (News24 2020). The chief justice continued to pray against any vaccine meant to change the DNA of people, simply because they contain 666 in them (News24 2020). As one of the influential leaders in South Africa, according to Letšosa (2021), the perceptions on vaccines:

... [R]eceived an endorsement in the prayer of Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng – who, in his prayer, surmised the possibility of a vaccine from the devil meant to infuse 666 and advance Satan’s agenda or contain something that could corrupt the DNA of the human being. (p. 1)

These views on the possibility of COVID-19 vaccines changing the DNA of people, were also admitted by Bill Gates (Letšosa 2021:2). Thus, the perceptions on COVID-19 are not only common in Africa, but also in other parts of the world including the United States of America. In other words, these utterances have potential to channel the thinking people regarding COVID-19 specifically, because they have been uttered by influential and well-known figures.

However, the popularity of these perceptions did not go unchallenged. Biblical and early Christian literature scholars have come up to reject the perception that COVID-19 vaccines are a mark of the beast. These scholars assert, that vaccinating is a form of obeying health protocols (Van Rensburg 2021). In addition, there is no genuine proof that links the COVID-19 vaccines to the mark of the beast. On the contrary, the links could be made between the mark of the beast and other events. One such scholar who refutes the theory of the mark of the beast, is Soyinka (2021) who states that perceiving vaccines as the mark of the beast is problematic for two reasons:

First, the COVID-19 vaccines are modern phenomena that the author of Revelation and his earliest readers would have no familiarity with. Second, there is another explanation for the beast and its number that makes far more sense historically [*such as*] a symbolic representation of first-century Roman emperors. (p. 1)

It is possible for biblical prophecy uttered some 1000 years ago, to be fulfilled in the 21st century, but such a prophecy could not have directly referred to COVID-19, as there is no prove that indeed they contain 666, or that they are a mark of the beast. However, even if scholars have challenged the perception of COVID-19 vaccines as being the mark of the beast, damage is still caused by the demonising and the eschatological view regarding the COVID-19 vaccines. I will discuss these challenges in the next section.

The challenges of demonising and the eschatological view regarding COVID-19 vaccines

Demonising and the eschatological view regarding COVID-19 vaccines in the name of Pentecostal faith, pose some challenges for Pentecostals in Africa. As perceptions are

raised that these vaccines contain 666 and come from the devil, the followers of Pentecostal pastors begin to have a negative perception on these vaccines. The main challenge is that these perceptions are also raised by prominent figures in society such as presidents and even a chief justice, and not only by Pentecostal pastors. Therefore, the probability of believing the perceptions, instead of believing the truth, is very high. These perceptions have the potential to increase fear and anxiety among Pentecostal followers, instead of building the faith of the Pentecostal believer. In addition, because of these perceptions Pentecostal believers are consequently caught in the middle: they cannot believe God for healing, because their faith is shaken, and they also cannot take vaccines. There are thus many people in Africa who have not yet decided whether they want to take the vaccine or not.

The demonising and the eschatological view regarding COVID-19 vaccines among Pentecostals, give rise to what is now known as ‘vaccine hesitancy’ – the reluctance to take vaccines even when they are readily available in a specific African country (Williams et al. 2021:17). The failure to vaccinate citizens in many African countries because of vaccine hesitancy, will ultimately result in the failure to build immunity. The success of the COVID-19 vaccination depends on the acceptability of these vaccines among the population, including the Pentecostals in Africa. As stated in the preceding sections, vaccines are a solution to the spread of the virus among human beings (Thinane 2021). Wariboko and Oliverio (2020:169) state: ‘Medical experts and governments hope for a vaccine to come to humanity’s rescue’. Although some have valid reasons for being reluctant to vaccinate, such as the side-effects and effectiveness of the vaccine, others are reluctant based purely on the demonising and the eschatological view regarding the vaccines. Other reasons are based on the perceptions of vaccines itself, potentially affecting people with the virus. However, Daniels (2021:11) states categorically, ‘Coronavirus vaccines do not contain live virus. Therefore, the vaccine itself cannot potentially infect people with the virus’.

Lastly, demonising and the eschatological view regarding COVID-19 vaccines have the potential to increase the mortality rate among Pentecostals as some of them refuse to be vaccinated. Independent Pentecostal churches have grown to large numbers in recent years and as many of their members get infected with the virus, it could lead to high numbers of mortality (Pavari 2021). There are many Pentecostal pastors who lost their lives to COVID-19 in the last 2 years. Some of these pastors have been cursing the COVID-19 vaccines and even labelling them as a sign of the end times. This alone shows that demonising and the eschatological view regarding COVID-19 in the name of believing God for healing is risky, because one can lose one’s life. Thus, there is a need for scholars interested in African Pentecostalism to revisit Pentecostal faith specifically as it relates to issues of healing and health. As many people continue to lose their lives to COVID-19, Pentecostals cannot continue with their gesture of undermining COVID-19 vaccines. This does not mean that COVID-19 vaccines are

perfect, but criticism levelled against them should not be based on ignorance.

Revisiting Pentecostal faith in health issues

The theology of faith within the Pentecostal movement, that is believing God for supernatural healing through the work of the Holy Spirit, is something positive that other Christian traditions have envied for years. As Pentecostals preach faith among their believers, many of them receive courage to face difficult challenges in their lives. In Africa, this kind of faith is important as the continent is faced with challenges that existed prior to COVID-19. This kind of faith is also important during COVID-19, as many around the world have lost hope in the medical trials to bring lasting solutions to the spread of the virus. However, this kind of faith is problematic when it discourages believers from taking vaccines. This faith is problematic, when vaccines are labelled as the mark of the beast without proper theological analysis. Therefore, the Pentecostal faith in relation to healing and health, needs to be revisited. This should not only be for COVID-19, but also for other diseases and infections. The Pentecostal faith needs to be revisited, so that a balance can be found between faith and works regarding health issues.

Firstly, faith should be accompanied by works as well. In this context, works mean that people must go to be vaccinated, regardless of how strong their faith is. James in the biblical text, states that faith cannot go without works. There is a need to bring reality into the context of faith. James gives the example of someone lacking food and that faith should be practical and such person be given food. If someone does not have clothes, faith should be practical and such person should be given clothes (Ja 2). Almost in the same way, if countries around the world have been struggling with the challenge of the virus, and medical scientists come with the solution of vaccines, then faith should be practical in that people should be vaccinated. This brings us to the second point, the convergence of science and faith.

Secondly, science and faith should not work in direct opposition with one another but should work together in helping the sick person to receive total healing. The Pentecostal believer has a right to hospitalisation and access to the doctor, as much as they have a right to believe God for their healing. When one speaks of science, it is not limited to western science and medication, but should also include African Indigenous Knowledge. These knowledges should be brought together, in bringing solutions to pandemics such as COVID-19 in Africa and elsewhere in the world. It should be acknowledged, that the scientists have been given knowledge and understanding by the same God that Pentecostals serve. Besides, some of the scientists producing this knowledge, might be born again and might also belong to the Pentecostal tradition.

Thirdly, instead of opposing science, Pentecostal faith should be used to dismiss the fear of vaccinating, including the fear

of needles. The aggression that Pentecostal pastors have against COVID-19, should be converted and used in support of governments, in order to stop the spread of the virus. It is a possibility that some of the people who are negative about the vaccine, just fear the process of vaccination, or are in fear of inoculation. Thus, it is the responsibility of a Pentecostal pastor or leader to instil confidence in people, that nothing will happen to them when they are vaccinated.

Lastly, faith in the Pentecostal tradition should be accompanied by the testimonies of those people who have already been vaccinated with the COVID-19-vaccines. In other words, some Pentecostals with negative perceptions, might change their attitude as they hear more about people who benefitted from vaccines. The concept of giving testimony within the Pentecostal movement in Africa, is very common for people to prove that God's power is at work in a specific church. Similarly, this concept can be used to prove that vaccination is working, as opposed to all that the doubting Thomas is preaching. The testimony slots during COVID-19 can be used to encourage others to vaccinate against the virus. These testimonies should include the ones given by senior pastors, who have previously been vaccinated against the virus.

Conclusion

The Pentecostal faith has caused some Pentecostals in African independent Pentecostal churches to reject the use of vaccines. This rejection is informed by the demonising and the eschatological view regarding COVID-19 vaccines, as some have called the vaccine a demon, while others refer to it as the mark of the beast, as recorded in the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. While this rejection might demonstrate faith when it comes to dealing with pandemics such as COVID-19 on the one hand, it has led many to the loss of life on the other. This calls for revisiting of the Pentecostal faith when it comes to health issues in the African context. The proposal in this article, is a need to bring balance between works and faith, when looking for healing in challenges such as COVID-19. Faith should also be accompanied by works. Science and faith should not work in direct opposition to one another but should work together in helping the sick person to receive total healing. Faith in the Pentecostal tradition should be accompanied by testimonies of people who have already been vaccinated with the COVID-vaccines.

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The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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