

Prophetic Witness in Cyberspace during Pandemics

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Abstract

Prophetic witness has been around since Biblical times, when prophets spoke truth to power on behalf of God. In the South African context, prophetic witness saw the church speaking out against the injustices of colonialism and apartheid using various forms of protest. In post-1994 democratic South Africa, prophetic witness had to be reimagined in the public square, a process which appropriated various modes of prophetic witness. Cyberspace encompasses information technologies which manifest into a “virtual” world, and social media is one of the platforms of cyberspace. Theological and religious scholars have argued that the Internet is an essential space for religion, and this article further argues that cyberspace can also be regarded as a public space for prophetic witness. The role of social media users during pandemics, such as COVID-19, has the implications of spreading information, misinformation, and misconceptions at a rapid pace. Many churches used the virtual space to provide spiritual and emotional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. This article argues that the church also has a prophetic role to play, especially in the social media space, regarding the dissemination of information during a pandemic. Therefore, the main task of this article is to utilise Nico Koopman’s five modes of prophetic witness, namely visionary, critics, storytellers, technical analysts, and policymakers in cyberspace in the recent COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics.

Keywords: Prophetic witness; Prophetic theology; Cyberspace; Social media; COVID-19; Internet; Infodemic

Introduction

The emergence of the Internet occurred in the 1960s during the Cold War in response to the fear of looming devastation by the advent of nuclear technology. It was created to sustain communication amid catastrophe and transfer information from one computer network to another (Campbell 2004). The term “cyberspace” was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* (Whittaker 2004). William Gibson was inspired by the developing technologies (personal computers, the Internet, computer graphics, and virtual reality) and breakthroughs that revolutionised our perspective in the 1980s and 1990s (Whittaker 2004). According to Campbell (2004), the development and expansion of the Internet in the 1980s and 1990s was deemed as positive progress with regard to advocacy for universal rights to access and promotion of freedom of information.

Cyberspace is a "virtual" environment made up of connections between computers, Internet-enabled devices, and Internet infrastructure components (Whittaker 2004). The 1990s popular culture describes cyberspace as the “location” in which people do

activities online, such as playing online games, communicating in chat rooms and instant messages. The “location” in which this happens is “cyberspace” (Bussel 2013). Cyberspace is built not only on the Internet but also on previous telecommunications such as telephones and televisions. The rise of the Internet has created more opportunities for endless possibilities within cyberspace. Cyberspace is not one homogenous space but is complex and constantly evolving. It consists of a virtual world that is borderless and free from the confines of a nation state. It is important to keep in mind that cyberspace not only represents space but also reconstructs particular conceptions of space. Cyberspace, in other words, does not just represent the real world; it also creates links between intermediaries and users in the physical world (Whittaker 2004). Contrary to popular belief, social media comprises all services that promote the development, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content, not just social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter (Taprial and Kanwar 2012).

Relevance of Theology and cyberspace: Virtual as contextual

The connection between cyberspace and Religion or Theology has been a subject of study since the 1990s. This is reflected in the works of Jay Kinney’s *New worth?: Religion, Cyberspace, and the Future* (1995); David Lochhead’s *Shifting Realities: Information Technology and the Church* (1997); Stephen O’Leary’s *Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks* (1996); and Jeff Zaleski’s *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (1997). However, there are other scholars that have published in the 1990s and are not limited to the list provided. Scholars have thus recognised that the Internet has been a phenomenon worth studying from a religious and theological perspective. Cloete (2015:3) attests that cyberspace should be understood as varying online communities serving different purposes. Some use it for entertainment and others use it for seeking faith related content as well as fellowshiping online.

Although cyberspace is vast, timeless, and spaceless, there are various virtual communities serving different purposes, and the purpose is sometimes also defined by an individual. For instance, Facebook may be a community where one shares their day-to-day life experiences or interests with ‘friends’. Twitter may be a community where individuals share their interests or thoughts on ‘trending topics’. It is also a platform that has rigorous debates about socio-economic and political issues. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is a community where individuals share content related to their professional lives. It is also important to note that the purpose or use of a social media platform is entirely up to the user and not necessarily always based on the platforms’ intentions. Cloete (2015) takes it further that, “the [online] community that is formed is described as belonging to individuals rather than individuals belonging to a community.” Online communities can be argued to be contextual even when users within a community are in different geographical locations. Online communities transcend the “physical” world. Online communities provide different needs, such as emotional, self-esteem, and informational support (Baym 2010). Online communities may also provide entertainment, news, and even spiritual needs. Everyone fulfils a type of need in online communities.

Many churches opted for virtual services to fulfil the need for spiritual and emotional support during COVID-19 lockdowns, which is necessary. However, there is

less involvement in one of the crucial roles of the church, which is prophetic witness. Thus, the main task of this article is to appropriate the role of prophetic witness in cyberspace amid pandemics such as COVID-19. The approach of this paper is mainly literature based, and there is limited to no literature investigating social media and the interplay between public trust, misinformation, and engagement of the South African public (Marivate et al. 2020).

Firstly, a background of prophetic witness will be briefly discussed from a biblical perspective. Secondly, the perspective of prophetic witness will be deliberated from the South African context. Thirdly, the role of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic will be critically discussed. Lastly, the role of prophetic witness during pandemics, particularly on social media, will be deployed using Nico Koopman's five modes of prophetic witness, namely visionary, critics, storytellers, technical analysts, and policymakers, as a theological-ethical framework.

Background of prophetic witness: Biblical perspective

Prophets in the Old Testament directed their prophecies to the Israelites and their kings. De Villiers (2011a:164) attests that issues such as violations of God's law, idolatry, and oppression were therefore addressed largely to the Israelites and their leaders. The prophets' main responsibility was to urge the Israelites and their leaders to repent of their sins and change their ways. Kings would have to reform their oppressive ways of governing; the priests and the rich would have to reform their exploitation of the poor. The prophets spoke on behalf of God to the kings and religious leaders that were oppressing, marginalising and exploiting the people of God. Prophetic witness is an Old Testament concept found in the prophetic books. In defining prophetic witness, De Villiers (2011b:13) states that it is crucial to understand the roots of the word "prophet." The word derives from the Greek word *prophètēs*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *nābī*. In its original sense, it refers to a person who functions as the "mouthpiece of a god." It is therefore the one who speaks on behalf of God. The message in which the prophets relay God's message to the nation are called prophecies. Prophecies in the Old Testament were based on cause and effect. In other words, if one do not follow a particular law of God, it will lead to one's destruction, but if one does follow the law of God, one will prosper.

The prophet's role was also in relationship with the king, being a mediator between a god and the king. De Villiers (2011b:24) states that the role of a prophet was to ensure that the relationship between the gods and the people was a good one. Their duty was to monitor the health of that relationship and identify weaknesses that might threaten the whole community. These flaws can include injustice, marginalisation and systems that oppress people in a society.

In the New Testament, Van Eck (2011:48) argues that Jesus was a social prophet. The context of First-Century Palestine was that of the haves living at the cost of the have-nots, the wealthy abusing their power to oppress and subjugate the poor. Jesus challenged the aristocratic Roman Empire and introduced an alternative, the kingdom of God. Van Eck (2011:50) explains that the kingdom that Jesus was advocating for was not "futuristic-apocalyptic" but "ethical-eschatological" in essence. It was thus a kingdom that existed in the here and now. The Kingdom of God that Jesus Christ was advocating for stood in contrast to the earthly kingdom (i.e., Roman empire, Temple

priests) in First-Century Palestine. This is in part because the Roman Empire ruled politically and economically, on the one hand, and because the Jewish temple elites advocated religious exclusivism on the other hand. Jesus Christ was thus speaking against the injustices of the Roman empire and Temple priests. Bentley (2013:1) thus explains that Christianity embraced the view that the church has a divine right and obligation to speak out against anything that it perceives to be contrary to God's Will.

The next section discusses the contextual understanding of prophetic witness in South Africa historically and the modes of prophetic witness in a democratic South Africa. It has to be noted that the notion of “prophetic” in this article differs from that of Pentecostalism, which puts an emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, especially with regard to divine healing and miracles as it is not the focus of this study (Kgatle 2022).

Contextual prophetic witness: South African perspective

South Africa has a history of colonialism and apartheid, which dispossessed majority Africans, whose African spirituality and traditions were disregarded by European Christian missionaries. Even when many Africans were converted to Christianity, they were not allowed to lead congregations but were always under the supervision of the missionaries. In order to locate prophetic witness from the margins, Vellem (2010:3) argues that there are two streams of the prophetic discourse in the South African context, namely the “protest model” and the “confessing model.” The “protest model” was the era of the African Initiated Churches (AICs) that sought to restore their African identity and contest westernised Christianity while addressing the socio-political issues of the time. Vellem (2010:3) argues that the first criticism and struggle by Black Africans against colonisation were the first traces of Black theology of liberation in South Africa. The “confessing model” stems after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 with the Cottesloe Conference. The Cottesloe Declaration (1960) termed apartheid’s violence and institutional racism as sin against God and therefore offered a confessional criticism of it (Vellem 2010). The other confessional documents that were drafted in South Africa were the *Kairos Document* (1985) and *The Confession of Belhar* (1986). The churches in South Africa assumed a significant societal role to speak for the oppressed, beginning in the colonial times and continuing through the end of the apartheid era (Bentley 2013).

Many academics concur that as South Africa transitioned from apartheid to democracy, the church lost its social influence, causing it to become less prophetic (Mokoena 2017). Baron and Maponya (2020:2) state that some of the reasons, especially amongst congregants, is the understanding of their prophetic role. Congregants perceive the prophetic to be designated to a particular person, not themselves. Van Eck (2011:69) attests that being prophetic in the 21st Century is not designated only to theologians or church leaders (reverends or pastors) but also to anyone from any profession who proclaims social justice and equality. Vellem (2010:5) argues that there are various democratic systems in the world. However, if the democratic system in South Africa is to prosper, it must consider the worldviews of the Black majority, who have historically been marginalised and still live in poverty. South Africa still has challenges such as inequality, poverty, and unemployment in the constitutional democracy. That implies that the role of church to be prophetic cannot be

abandoned but must be appropriated in democracy. Bentley (2013:7), however, warns that although the constitution (in its current form) might share some similar principles with the church, it should not compromise its prophetic role for the interest of the powerful.

Modes of prophetic witness in democracy

The crucial question in this part is this: can Biblical prophecy be used as a mode for prophetic witness in democracy? De Villiers (2011a:165) states that it is important to remember that both mainline Christianity and Judaism acknowledge the end of full-blown Biblical prophecy during historic times. However, mainstream Christianity and Judaism's Biblical prophecy might serve as a model for believers in future centuries. Would then prophetic witness be appropriate in a democratic South Africa? De Villiers (2011a:170) admits that when the setting in which it must be applied is a modern democracy with a mainly liberal constitution like South Africa, we are instantly placed in a predicament. In one way or another, all modern democracies with liberal constitutions can be considered "secular" countries. In other words, these countries' constitutions support the separation of church and state to some extent.

There are many theologies that utilise the aspect of "prophetic", such as prophetic theology (*Kairos Document*), black theology in South Africa, and public theology in South Africa. There are also contestations on the notion or approaches to the "prophetic", especially with public theology (Urbaniak 2018). On the one hand, Vellem (2010; 2012; 2016) has thoroughly emphasised the relation of black theology in South Africa with prophetic theology from the *Kairos Document*, as they emphasise liberation through a "protest model" and "confessing model." On the other hand, Tshaka (2022) argues that public theology, which has grown popular in South Africa, and the way it has become a more acceptable way of theologising is suspicious from a black theological perspective as it does not emphasise issues of race and the black lived experience in South Africa. Urbaniak (2018:343) argues that public theology has fallen prey to "elitist populism", which liberation theologies should challenge. However, Urbaniak mentions that black theology and public theology should engage in self-critique before engaging in a dialogue. Forster (2020:2) indicates that it should be regarded as "public theologies" in plural instead of the singular "public theology", as it varies among diverse theologians in different contexts. Forster (2020:29) indicates that there should not be a contention between public theology and contextual theologies (i.e., black, African, feminist, womanist etc.) but rather that we should draw from these contextual theologies to have better approaches to being prophetic. It should be emphasised that contextual theologies, such as black theology and African womanist theology, need to continue their liberative stance without being consumed by popular public theology. Black theology may dialogue and engage in interdisciplinary studies without losing its essence. Nico Koopman, in his article *In Search of a Transforming Public Theology: Drinking from the Wells of Black Theology* (2015), suggests an "ethic of hybridity" utilised in scientific discourses in the context of post-colonisation and globalisation in which black theologians have expressed the notion of the oppression of blacks with other oppressed and marginalised people. Koopman makes use of hybridity through the lens of intersectionality and outlines various facets of the "ethic of

hybridity” as well as ways in which it might advance processes for inclusion, reconciliation, and justice (Urbaniak 2018).

In this article, the virtual is understood as informed by the physical world and vice versa. This article argues that the virtual is contextual in a globalised way. Therefore, prophetic witness should stand with the oppressed, voiceless, powerless, marginalised, discriminated, and silenced in the cyberspace. Cyberspace mirrors the physical reality; bias, racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, exclusion, bullying, and so forth are also prominent online. The content in cyberspace can also motivate varying behaviours amongst individuals in the physical world, whether for good or for bad. It is not only social media users that should be held accountable but also the corporations behind the social media networks, as they can influence political polarisation (Kubin and Von Sikorski 2021).

The question would thus be this: how can prophetic witness be appropriated in cyberspace vis-à-vis the physical world? Although Vellem (2010) does not refer to cyberspace, he does provide a solution: changing the modality rather than the fundamental of prophetic theology is the right course to take. Vellem (2012:8) encourages Nico Koopman's interpretation of Gustafson's (1988) work, which aimed to broaden the scope of Prophetic Theology to incorporate additional modes of moral discourse. The motivation of utilising Koopman's model over and against others is the inclusion of policymaking in the prophetic discourse, which has been subject of his research focus (Bentley 2013). Koopman (2009:120) slightly adjusted Gustafson's typology of the prophetic modes to being visionaries, critics, storytellers, technical analysts and policymakers. Koopman uses these five modes of prophetic witness in the South African context. He asserts that these discourses might shed light on the public role churches should take up in the context of our democracy. Koopman (2009:121) states that although Gustafson does not recognise the narrative, ethical and policy discourses as components of prophetic discourse, he contends that they are essential for authentic prophetic speaking. Koopman links these three discourses even closer with the prophetic discourse by describing them as constituent elements of prophetic speaking. This is indeed a plausible way of utilising Gustafson's typology. It acknowledges, like Gustafson, the importance of all these elements for prophetic speaking. It acknowledges that these elements enrich and inform each other. This way of dealing with Gustafson's distinctions helps to develop a richer understanding of prophetic speaking, which is urgently required especially in modern democratic societies.

Koopman (2009:121) asserts that the adoption of Gustafson's models results in each of them being a constituent aspect of the prophetic calling rather than individual, albeit interconnected components. Koopman (2011:183) summarises how these five forms of prophetic speaking complement and supplement each other. A new society's ideals must be outlined if justice is not upheld (prophets as visionaries). Courageous criticism against injustices and oppression must be made if there is no justice (prophets as critics). The accounts of people who have been wronged and their tales of tenacity in the face of persecution must be made public if justice is not being served (prophets as storytellers). If we want to avoid becoming a society of injustice, we must engage in scientific and technical study of our difficulties and look for acceptable remedies (prophets as technical analysts). We need to participate prophetically in the advocacy

and lobbying procedures that have an impact on the development of public policy as well as the policy-making processes if justice for all remains a goal (prophets as policy makers). The critique of utilising Koopman's model is that it was necessary during the transition to democracy in South Africa, but the church's role in society has been disregarded as being uneducated or too self-centred by the government (Bentley 2013). The church has also not been a good example in post-1994 South Africa, as it is faced with internal issues of patriarchy, sexual abuse of women and children, and dehumanising worship practises, amongst others (Kobo 2019). Bentley (2013) argues that the church needs to be the change it wants to see in the public square. The church therefore needs to self-correct and be an example of prophetic witness to regain respect as a vehicle for social change.

Although Koopman applies these five modes of prophetic witness in the public life contextually in democracy (Koopman 2014), human dignity and human rights (Koopman 2015), post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission process (Koopman 2020), and transformation in the university (Koopman 2021), he has not yet applied it to issues regarding cyberspace. Koopman's prophetic witness has been more grounded in the physical world (academy, church, and society) and has yet to expand into the virtual world. This article reiterates that cyberspace is also a public space where the five modes of prophetic witness can also be applied. Koopman (2022:936) reemphasises the prophetic model of visionary, critics, storytellers, technical analysts, and policymakers in his latest book chapter *The Prophetic, Priestly, and Servant Roles of Religion in Public Life in South Africa* in the book *Encyclopedia of Religious Ethics*, edited by Schweiker, et al. (2022).

The next section will discuss the role played by social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes the advantages and disadvantages of social media as well as the limitations of social media.

The role of social media during COVID-19

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO 2020) "the Coronavirus disease is the first pandemic in history in which technology and social media are being used on a massive scale to keep people safe, informed, productive and connected." Social media has positive and negative aspects to it, as dissemination of information is more rapid and interactive than traditional news media such as newspapers, radio, and television (Venegas-Vera, et al. 2020). Social media is thus an important source of information, and for most people, it is the primary source of information. Social media can assist government and the health sector to disseminate updates and debunk misleading information and assist people so that they can receive help when they are affected. González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco (2020) identified the advantages of the role of social media during the COVID-19 as (a) rapid dissemination of educational content, (b) faster dissemination of information regarding preventive measures, (c) the dissemination of scientific literature (publications) on social media platforms increases the number of downloads, queries, and citations of these articles, (d) possibility of arranging collaborative research projects, surveys, and multi-center studies, and (e) supporting continued medical education through online live and recorded webinars.

One of the major challenges of social media is the infodemic.

The WHO (2021) defines infodemic as:

“...too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them.”

Social media can cause a constant overflow of information, which makes it difficult to know which information is accurate and which information is misleading. Social media users have their own perspectives of COVID-19, which influences how people are informed about the pandemic. The amount of information that is circulated makes it very difficult to decide which to trust and which not to (Lima et al. 2020). According to Baron and Pali (2021:1), there are three conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 that were circulating in South Africa: (a) that politically, it was believed that the virus was a tool for eradicating the world's population, especially that of Africa, (b) economically, it was believed that the coronavirus was a Republic of China plan to undermine other nations' economies in order to strengthen its own and become the world's dominating economy, and (c) religiously, the coronavirus was perceived as Satan's war against the church or God's judgement against humanity for its sins. Venegas-Vera, et al. (2020:562) state that even though fact-checks demystify misinformation on social media, the reality is that not all information can be fact-checked, which leads to prioritising which misinformation to demystify due to limited resources. According to Lima, et al. (2020), social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube would redirect every post mentioning COVID-19 to the WHO website to curb misinformation.

Social media also has its own limitations, as users do not see the same information but rather information based on the algorithm. González-Padilla and Tortolero-Blanco (2020) mention Eli Pariser's (2011) "filter bubble," which is a "personalised ecosystem" geared toward the user. These are algorithms which use data gathered from the same user to forecast their preferences and produce results that are thought to be comparable with their preferences. These bubbles or algorithms create a cycle of similar information that keeps the viewer from seeing alternative content that provides information from other perspectives. The implication of this is that when a user is bombarded or interacts with misinformation, that is what they will constantly see on their social media feed, with the result that a user may regard such information as true and reject any information to the contrary. Orłowski (2020), in the documentary film *The Social Dilemma*, highlights how algorithms in social media may manipulate our attention and interaction, as well as how everything we do online is tracked for nefarious or commercial purposes. However, social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, made measures to prevent misinformation, even though the critique has been that misinformation is still prominent in these sites (Bridgmann et al. 2020).

Apart from the coronavirus itself, social media users were also sharing their personal stories or life experiences during COVID-19. These stories may be referring to narratives of triumph, encouragement or helping the needy on the one hand, and

stories that are linked to socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, gender-based violence and police brutality on the other hand. Social media can convey a sense of unity by reaching many users and may also provide grounds for misinformation and discrimination (Hussain 2020). Venegas-Vera et al. (2020:563) argue that social media users have a responsibility in using their platforms to report misinformation and disseminate reliable information, especially in times of uncertainty, such as during a pandemic. The challenge remains in how social media users can know which information is accurate or false.

The next section provides a role the church can play on social media by utilising the modes of prophetic witness (visionaries, critics, storytellers, technical analysts and policymakers) as a tool for social media users on how to discern information as well as how to combat misinformation.

The role of prophetic witness during COVID-19 in cyberspace

This article argues that the five modes of prophetic witness are appropriate during pandemics in cyberspace and particularly in social media platforms. Prophets as visionaries would imply envisioning the dissemination of information on social media platforms to be credible, authentic, and reliable. It envisions the responsible use of social media to curb the spread of COVID-19 and helpful information to improve the health of people. It envisions free and easy access to COVID-19-related information compatible with all Internet-enabled devices (i.e., smartphones, laptops). It envisions for social media users to be well informed so that they can distinguish between information and misinformation. Prophets as critics would imply voicing out misinformation that could have the potential to cause harm. Voicing out in the social media perspective would be not to share misinformation, which prevents it from going viral. It would be to “report” the post in that social media platform of as misinformation. It is to counter misinformation with credible information. It is to refer social media users to authentic information. Prophets as storytellers would be to amplify socio-economic challenges faced by the marginalised and poor. The COVID-19 lockdowns have worsened the conditions of many who already struggle to make ends meet. Many have also lost their jobs and struggled to feed their families. Domestic violence also increased and affected especially women and children. There are also incidents of police brutality against the poor and vulnerable. Prophets as storytellers need to amplify these stories of those who are in need and voiceless. Another aspect of prophets as storytellers is to share stories of inspiration, motivation, resilience, and triumph during COVID-19. Prophets as technical analysts would imply understanding cyberspace and how social media works with regard to the dissemination of information. It is understanding the impact of information in our age and being aware of algorithms, such as the “personalised ecosystems”. Being technical analysts means being more than just being users of technology, also understanding the basic mechanisms behind it. Prophets as policymakers would imply advocating and lobbying for processes that would be effective in mitigating misinformation. Policy should be well informed, taking into consideration all the aspects or modes of prophetic witness in a democratic South Africa. Policy should also be able to mitigate misinformation without compromising freedom of speech and online rights.

Conclusion

This article has traced prophetic witness from Biblical times and the South African context of prophetic witness during colonialism and apartheid. The church has had to rethink its prophetic role in democratic South Africa and establish modes that should be appropriated without changing the essence of prophetic witness. This article has argued that cyberspace is indeed a public space and an important aspect of human society to engage theologically. Social media, within cyberspace, can disseminate information at a rapid rate which does not filter credible information and misinformation. This article argued that Nico Koopman's modes of prophetic witness, namely visionary, critic, storyteller, technical analysts, and policymaker are appropriate during COVID-19 in cyberspace and particularly in social media platforms. The churches' role of prophetic witness in cyberspace should be more visible for recent and future pandemics.

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