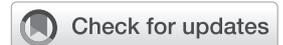


Kairos theology and church exclusion in Zimbabwe: COVID-19, suffering, and ecclesial agency



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This article critically examined the exclusion of the church from Zimbabwe's coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis management, focusing on the government's reliance on scientific and health expertise to the neglect of ecclesial contributions. Employing a liberative reconstruction methodology and guided by the Kairos liberation perspective, the study interrogated the implications of church marginalisation for public theology and social justice. The article broadens the theological discourse on suffering by engaging with the perspectives of Rudolf von Sinner and Zeferino on pandemic religion in Brazil, thereby positioning the Zimbabwean experience within a wider framework of contemporary theological reflection. The key findings reveal that government strategies reinforced the separation of church and state, weaponised the pandemic to silence religious critique and prompted the church to reassess its prophetic mission.

Contribution: This article critically explores ecclesial agency and theological responses to suffering during Zimbabwe's COVID-19 crisis, using the Kairos Liberation Perspective. It contributes to contextual theology by highlighting church exclusion and prophetic witness, aligning with the journal's focus on faith, justice, and the church's role in socio-political transformation.

Keywords: Kairos theology; church exclusion; COVID-19; liberation; suffering; Zimbabwe; pandemic religion; state-church relations.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic presented unprecedented challenges for governance, public health and religious communities worldwide. In Zimbabwe, the government's approach to pandemic management was marked by the systematic exclusion of the church as an institutional actor. This study interrogates the ramifications of such exclusion, drawing on the Kairos liberation perspective, a theological tradition rooted in resistance to apartheid and the mobilisation of faith communities for social justice (De Gruchy 1995). The research problem centres on the implications of church marginalisation for crisis management, responsible citizenship and the prophetic vocation of the church. By integrating insights from the Brazilian context (Von Sinner & Zeferino 2022), this article situates Zimbabwe's experience within a global theological framework, highlighting the enduring questions of suffering, agency and ecclesial responsibility in times of crisis.

Literature review

Kairos theology: Development and relevance

Kairos theology originated as a response to the crisis of apartheid in South Africa, articulated most prominently in the Kairos Document (1985), which called for prophetic resistance and theological engagement with systemic injustice (Kairos Theologians 1985; White 1987). Scholars such as Vellem and Paradza have extended this tradition, framing it as 'post-apartheid theology' and emphasising its applicability beyond South Africa (De Gruchy 1995; Vellem 2007). The Kairos perspective foregrounds the church's responsibility to advocate for human dignity, agency and social transformation during periods of crisis. In Zimbabwe, this theological lens is pertinent for analysing the church's role amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Liberation and reconstruction paradigms

African theology has evolved from a primary focus on liberation, addressing colonial and apartheid oppression, to reconstruction, which seeks to rebuild social, political and ecclesial life

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Kairos Document for Contemporary Crisis', under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Gift Tlharihani Baloyi and Prof. Eugene Baron.

in the aftermath of systemic violence (Gathogo 2007; Mugambi 1995). Reconstruction theology is seen as a continuation and expansion of liberation efforts, addressing contemporary challenges such as pandemics, economic crises and social fragmentation. Boff (1985) and Boesak (2015) emphasise the importance of 'theology from below', centring the experiences of the poor and marginalised as the locus of theological reflection. The COVID-19 pandemic, by exacerbating suffering and inequality, has renewed the relevance of liberative and reconstructive approaches.

Theology and suffering before COVID-19: Perspectives from Brazil and Zimbabwe

The question of suffering has been central to Christian theology, with theodicy seeking to reconcile belief in a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil and affliction (Dyrness 2008; Harper 1990). Prior to COVID-19, theological discourse on suffering in Brazil particularly during health crises such as the Zika virus and earlier pandemics emphasised the tension between temptation (to despair, to scapegoat) and responsibility (to act, to care) (Von Sinner & Zeferino 2022). Von Sinner and Zeferino identify two key tendencies: a retreat into fatalism or apocalypticism and an embrace of social solidarity and ethical responsibility. These patterns resonate with the Zimbabwean context, where theological responses to suffering have oscillated between resignation to adversity and prophetic critique of injustice (Chitando 2009).

In both Brazil and Zimbabwe, the church's engagement with suffering is shaped by historical and socio-political factors. In Brazil, Pentecostal and Catholic traditions have debated whether suffering is divine punishment, a test of faith or a call to communal action (Von Sinner & Zeferino 2022). Similarly, Zimbabwean churches have interpreted suffering through the lens of the Book of Job, theodicy and liberation theology, often linking personal or collective affliction to broader issues of governance, inequality and social sin (Chitando 2009; Hinson 1992). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these debates, challenging churches to respond not only spiritually but also practically and prophetically.

Research methods and design

This research employs a liberative reconstruction methodology, integrating liberation and reconstruction paradigms to analyse the exclusion of the church during the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach involves critical engagement with pastoral letters, communiques and public statements, as well as hermeneutical analysis of ecclesial responses. The study is situated within the broader framework of contextual theology, drawing on interdisciplinary sources and comparative perspectives.

The COVID-19 in Zimbabwe: Timeline and government measures

Zimbabwe confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 20 March 2020. Prior to this, the government announced a 21-day

lockdown commencing 30 March 2020, enforced through police roadblocks and statutory instruments that designated the coronavirus an infectious disease and formalised restrictions on movement (Chirisa 2022; Mutanda 2022). While essential services were exempted, these measures also curtailed fundamental rights, reflecting state uncertainty and an inclination towards securitisation (Mavhunga 2020). Religious gatherings were limited and, in practice, largely suspended, signalling the state's prioritisation of biomedical expertise over ecclesial participation.

State-Church relations: Historical and contemporary dynamics

The relationship between church and state in Zimbabwe has been complex and dynamic. Historically, the church was instrumental in both supporting and resisting colonial authority, with missionary efforts intertwined with the Pioneer Column and the colonial state (Ganiel & Tarusarira 2014; Thomas 1985; Zvobgo 1996). Post-independence, the church initially withdrew from overt political engagement but re-entered the public sphere in response to state abuses such as Operation Murambatsvina (Manyonganise 2020; Paradza 2019). The state has responded by both co-opting and marginalising religious leaders, fostering ambivalence and caution among ecclesial actors (Chitando 2013).

Contemporary state-church relations are marked by mutual suspicion, strategic alliances and periodic confrontations. High-profile religious figures frequently interact with political leaders, blurring the boundaries between prophetic critique and political patronage (Dodge 2022; Maenzanise 2008). The COVID-19 crisis intensified these dynamics, with the government seeking to limit the church's influence in public life while leveraging select religious endorsements for legitimacy.

The Church's response: The Kairos moment

Despite formal exclusion, the church in Zimbabwe has a longstanding record of social engagement, including the provision of education, healthcare and humanitarian relief (Chitando 2013; Mavhunga 2020). The pandemic was interpreted by some as a 'Kairos moment' – an appointed time for prophetic action and public witness (Kairos Theologians 1985; White 1987). Ecclesial responses included pastoral letters, communiques and practical interventions, though these were constrained by state regulations and the risk of political reprisals (MCZ Communique 2020).

Mission hospitals and clinics, managed by the Zimbabwe Association of Church-Related Hospitals (ZACH), continued to provide critical healthcare services, particularly in rural areas. However, operational challenges and state-imposed restrictions limited the expansion and effectiveness of these efforts. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference's pastoral letter of August 2020 exemplifies the church's attempt to articulate a prophetic critique of government failures while advocating for social justice (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference 2020).

Theology and suffering: Engaging the problem of evil

The problem of suffering, especially in the context of pandemic, poverty and systemic injustice, remains a central concern of Christian theology. Theodicy seeks to reconcile faith in a benevolent God with the reality of suffering, drawing on scriptural narratives such as the Book of Job (Harper 1990; Hinson 1992; Walker 1992). In Zimbabwe, as in Brazil, ecclesial responses to suffering are shaped by both theological traditions and socio-political realities.

Von Sinner and Zeferino (2022) argue that religious responses to pandemics oscillate between temptation (to fatalism, scapegoating or denial) and responsibility (to solidarity, advocacy and ethical action). In Brazil, the pandemic revealed the limitations of simplistic theodicies and underscored the importance of communal care, lament and prophetic witness. Similarly, Zimbabwean churches have grappled with the temptation to retreat from public engagement or spiritualise suffering, versus the responsibility to address structural injustice and advocate for the marginalised (Chitando 2009; Waters 1997).

The biblical narrative of Job is often invoked to make sense of undeserved suffering, yet its lessons are ambiguous: while Job's faith is ultimately vindicated, not all who suffer experience restoration or justice (Hinson 1992). The pandemic has exposed the inadequacy of purely individualised or spiritual interpretations of suffering, calling for a theology that engages with systemic causes and advocates for social transformation (Carter 2016; Green 2000). The experience of pandemic religion in Brazil reinforces the need for a theology that balances lament with action, faith with responsibility and critique with hope (Von Sinner & Zeferino 2022).

Closure of worship and Church exclusion

Statutory Instruments 76 and 77 of 2020 formalised the status of COVID-19 as a public health emergency, limiting religious gatherings and, in effect, suspending church activities without substantive consultation with religious leaders (Chirisa 2022; MCZ Communique 2020). While some churches initially sought to comply with limiting attendance, the rapid escalation of the pandemic and state directives led to widespread closures. The legal and rhetorical exclusion of the church highlighted the government's instrumental approach to religion, privileging biomedical models and silencing dissent.

Governments frequently reacted with hostility or opposition when faced with criticism from the church. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops Conference's pastoral letter was met with denunciations from state officials, who accused church leaders of inciting division and undermining national unity (Manyonganise 2022). Such rhetoric reflects a broader pattern of delegitimising religious voices that challenge state authority, particularly during crises.

Post-COVID-19 Kairos theology: Liberative reconstruction and ecclesial agency

In the post-pandemic context, the Kairos liberation framework calls for a renewed commitment to liberative reconstruction. Vellem (2007) advocates for an approach that integrates liberation with societal rebuilding, emphasising the importance of addressing economic, political and ethical dimensions of social life. The biblical vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37 is invoked as a metaphor for national renewal, spiritually and materially.

The pandemic has exposed deep-seated vulnerabilities and inequalities, challenging ecclesial leaders to embrace new paradigms of advocacy and partnership. This includes advocating for equitable resource allocation, leveraging digital technologies to bridge the divide between urban and rural communities and fostering dialogue with business and civil society (Mugambi 1995; Vellem 2007). The shift towards digital inclusion presents both opportunities and challenges, requiring investment in infrastructure and training to ensure that the voices of the marginalised are heard.

Conclusion

The exclusion of the church from Zimbabwe's COVID-19 crisis management reflects longstanding tensions in state-church relations and raises critical questions about the role of religion in public life. The Kairos liberation perspective provides a robust theological framework for analysing ecclesial agency, suffering and social transformation. The integration of insights from the Brazilian context underscores the importance of balancing lament with responsibility, critique with action and faith with public advocacy. Moving forward, the church in Zimbabwe must reclaim its prophetic vocation, engage constructively with the state and civil society and champion the needs of the most vulnerable.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

B.C. contributed towards the conceptualisation, analysis and drafting of the initial draft. S.d.B. performed conceptualisation, editing and supervision.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

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