

# Law, Religion, Health and Healing in Africa



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## 26 “BEHOLD, THE END OF ALL THINGS IS NEAR”: AFRICAN THEOLOGIES AND BELIEFS ABOUT SIN AND DEATH IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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### INTRODUCTION

Since colonial times, Mozambique has experienced social distress that makes it fertile ground for religion. Moreover, its strategic location in the western Indian Ocean region and southern Africa, exposes Mozambique to various religious influences, from Islam to Hinduism to Christianity. In addition to these religions, a significant portion of the population adheres to syncretism of indigenous religious beliefs, characterised by a combination of traditional African practices and aspects of Christianity or Islam.<sup>3</sup> News outlets report the existence of more than a thousand registered religious denominations and a similar number of the unregistered.<sup>4</sup> This means that the government may not have the exact number of churches operating countrywide.<sup>5</sup> This religious landscape is in line with what Congolese Catholic Bishop Tharcisse Tshibangu Tshishiku has observed, namely that Africans are deeply religious. Thus, religion is not just a set of beliefs, but a way of life and the basis of culture, identity and moral values.<sup>6</sup> It is an essential part of the tradition that helps to promote social stability.<sup>7</sup> Considering that Mozambican society is embedded in such a cultural and religious context, this chapter sets its relevance

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3 United States Department of State. 2019. International Religious Freedom Report, Mozambique.

4 Da Silva R. 2019. “As igrejas viraram negócio em Moçambique? [Have churches become a business in Mozambique?”, *Deutsche Welle*, 20 July.

5 Projections from the 2017 population census provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estatísticas, (INE), indicate that 26.2% of citizens were Roman Catholic, 18.3% Muslim (mostly concentrated in the northern part of the country), 15.1% Zionist Christian, 14.7% Evangelical/Pentecostal, 1.6% Anglican and 4.7% Jews, Hindus and Baha’is. The remaining 13.4% of the population did not list a religious affiliation.

6 Tshibangu TT, Ajayi JFA and Sanneh L. 1993. “Religion and Social Evolution”, in Mazrui AA (ed). *General History of Africa*, vol VIII, 501.

7 Alfredsson U and Linha C. 2000. *Onde Deus Vive: introdução a um estudo das igrejas independentes em Maputo, Moçambique* [Where God Lives: Introduction to a Study of Independent Churches in Maputo, Mozambique]. Maputo: Instituto Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação, 9.

in the literature by analysing the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects changed the way that Mozambican people experience their faith.

Mozambique reported its first case of Covid-19 infection on 22 March 2020. Following that report, the government of Mozambique put in place several measures to stop the spread of the virus, including strict lockdown regulations. One of the preventive security measures adopted was the closure of social events, worshipping and religious ceremonies to minimise the transmission of the virus to the community. This decision affected people's spirituality and relationship with God in many ways. In fact, it brought to light questions about the theologies of sin and death.

This analysis focuses the discussion on Catholic, Pentecostal and Islamic denominations. One of the biggest differences between Catholicism and Protestantism is the concept of sufficiency and authority of Scripture. Pentecostal churches, many of which subscribe to the "prosperity gospel", claim to use the Bible to speak to real life situations by emphasising a theology of health and wealth. The Pentecostal churches believe that living in sin and non-fulfilment of tithing obligations favour evil to thrive.<sup>8</sup> Pentecostal churches are a string of the independent churches, which have experienced a dramatic proliferation over the last decade, mostly characterised by combining local religious knowledge with Pentecostal beliefs to mainly promote healing and financial stability. A common aspect among these churches is that they all have the Bible as their central scripture, they keep Sunday as the Day of the Lord and therefore perform crowded ceremonies on this day. Meanwhile, in the Catholic faith, the Bible, along with the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, such as prayers to the saints and veneration of Mary are considered possible ways of communicating with God.<sup>9</sup> Islam has the Quran as fundamental source of scripture, uses a calendar of its own and performs prayers in a very particular way, with women separated from men and very rigorous prayer schedules.

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged these frameworks of religious practice, and all religious denominations were forced to change their routines and alter the way that sermons and services were performed, including using online platforms to broadcast messages or for worship, since people were encouraged to pray at home, as public gatherings either banned or restricted. These diverse strategies were observed in Mozambican churches as they struggled to cope with the adversities caused by the pandemic. Overall, in the religious response to Covid-19 in Mozambique, some denominations raised awareness about the severity of the disease and complied with government guidelines to keep their members from being infected, while others were sceptical about the seriousness of the problem, leading to disobedience in following safety regulations. Considering this background, this chapter analyses the response of churches to the regulation of religious activities due to Covid-19.

8 Asamoah-Gyadu, J. 2021. "Pentecostalism and Coronavirus. Reframing the message of health and wealth in a pandemic era", *Spiritus* 6(1):160.

9 Reesink ML. 2005. "Para uma antropologia do milagre: Nossa Senhora, seus devotos e o regime do milagre [Towards an anthropology of the miracle: Our Lady, her devotees and the miracle regime]", *Caderno CRH* 18(44):18527.

It looks particularly at measures taken to maintain the faith of church members amidst social distancing. It also looks at the impact of Covid-19 on scriptural teachings, with emphasis on concepts of healing and beliefs about sin and death.

## THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE IN MOZAMBIQUE

Faith and beliefs were imbricated into the African social fabric long before European presence. Africans have a record of relying on faith and beliefs to deal with physical and social ills. Traditional rulers were endowed with sacred powers, including rainmaking and protection against evil forces. In sum, African societies had ritual experts who mediated between the visible and invisible worlds.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that Africans appropriated Christianity by incorporating elements of African traditional religions, such as spiritual possession and healing.<sup>11</sup> This shows that before European arrival, Africa experienced a vivid and functional religious foundation, which guided people's lives. This status quo was disturbed by the missionary actions, which downplayed African traditions. As is recorded in some missionary writings, African culture and social customs were depicted as the dark side of Africa by connecting them with the devil,<sup>12</sup> and thus indicating a clear disrespect and lack of understanding of African cultures. Following European conquest, Mozambique was colonised by Portugal, a country with a deep Christian tradition and belief in monotheism. Additionally, other independent churches, such as the Protestant, Pentecostal, and African Initiated Churches, were oriented towards healing – and practices of speaking in tongues, purification rites and taboos emerged.<sup>13</sup> The colonial government saw these churches as competitors to its Catholic missionaries, who were focused on converting Africans to Catholicism through a process of rejection of African religions. Moreover, religious proselytism was undertaken by Muslims and by Protestant churches, all of which endeavoured to evangelise Mozambique.<sup>14</sup> One thing to be noticed here is that regardless of the theological background these denominations brought, they overlapped local traditions and customs that existed a long time before the European expansion.

Many people were obliged to follow Christianity and other religions during the colonial period in Mozambique. Immediately after independence, religious organisations suffered interference from the newly installed Marxist-Leninist regime. Only after the Constitutions of 1990 and 2004 did religious organisations gain freedom to operate in the country. The easing of religious control created enabling conditions for

10 Ellis S and ter Haar G. 1998. "Religion and politics in Sub-saharan Africa", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36(2):187.

11 Ellis and ter Haar. 1998. "Religion and politics in Sub-saharan Africa", 199.

12 Ellis and ter Haar. 1998. "Religion and politics in Sub-saharan Africa", 197.

13 Alfredsson U and Linha C. 1990. "Where God lives. An introduction to a study of the independent churches in Maputo", *SEC Research Reports*, No. 20, April. Uppsala: SEC/ILU Uppsala University, 7.

14 Serapiao LB. 1993. "Mozambique Liberation Front in Mozambique (FRELIMO) and Religion in Mozambique, 1962-1988", *Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Orient*, 48(1):112.

churches to thrive; thus, African Independent Churches and Protestants expanded countrywide. However, the 2004 Constitution made it clear that in the case of declaration of state of war, siege or emergency, the government could interfere in ways that religions should behave.<sup>15</sup> As is discussed below, when the pandemic hit Mozambique, the government interfered in religious freedoms, imposing many restrictions aiming to reduce interpersonal contact and curb Coronavirus infections.

### SECURITY MEASURES IN MOZAMBIQUE DURING THE PANDEMIC

Following the diagnosis of the first Covid-19 case, the government of Mozambique declared a state of emergency on 30 March 2020. Thereafter, the president addressed the nation monthly to update the people on regulations concerning Covid-19 mitigation. After the expiration of the time stipulated by law to declare the state of emergency, the government declared a state of public calamity. The change from the state of emergency to state of public calamity meant a shift from partial commitment to a much more substantial one, because of the seriousness of the crisis and its direct effects on citizens. However, both policies focused on imposing strict social distancing measures. Table 26.1 provides a short chronology of main presidential decrees to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Mozambique.

**Table 26.1: Main presidential decrees to curb the spread of Covid-19**

| DECREE NO.          | CONTENT                                                                                                                                                                  | IMPACT ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES                                                                 |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 11/2020 of 30 March | The President declares a State of Emergency due to public calamity in all territory.                                                                                     | Interdicts public events, including religious cults; imposes lockdown for preventive measures. |
| 12/2020 of 2 April  | Approves the administrative enforcement measures for the prevention and containment of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic to be in force during the State of Emergency. | Suspends religious celebrations in all places of worship.                                      |
| 12/2020 of 29 April | Extends the State of Emergency, for reasons of public calamity, for another 30 days.                                                                                     | Suspends religious celebrations in all places of worship.                                      |
| 14/2020 of 28 May   | Extends the State of Emergency, for reasons of public calamity, for another 30 days.                                                                                     | Suspends religious celebrations in all places of worship.                                      |
| 21/2020 of 26 June  | Extends, for the third time, the State of Emergency.                                                                                                                     | Limits religious services.                                                                     |
| 51/2020 of 1 July   | Extends the State of Emergency.                                                                                                                                          | Suspends religious celebrations in all places of worship.                                      |

<sup>15</sup> US State Department, IRF Mozambique 2019.

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| DECREE NO.                       | CONTENT                                                                                                                                                   | IMPACT ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 23/2020 of 5 August              | Declares the State of Emergency due to public calamity in national territory.                                                                             | Limits religious services.                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 79/2020 of 4 September           | Declares the Situation of Public Calamity and activates the Red Alert.                                                                                    | Limits the number of participants in religious celebrations to 50% of the place of gathering as long as it does not exceed 150 people.                                                                        |
| Resolution 73/2020 of 29 October | Approves the Communication from the President of the Republic to the Assembly of the Republic about the Terms of the State of Emergency.                  | The National Parliament states that the duration of the State of Emergency respected Article 292 of the Constitution.                                                                                         |
| 102/2020 of 23 November          | Establishes measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation is in force.                                     | Limits religious gatherings in places of worship to 50% of the maximum capacity as long as it does not exceed 150 people. It recommends the dissemination of Covid-19 prevention messages in church services. |
| 110/2020 of 18 December          | Establishes measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation is in force and revokes 102/2020 of 23 November. | Limits gatherings for church services to 50% of the maximum capacity of the hall and imposes 2 metres social distancing.                                                                                      |
| 1/2021 of 13 January             | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation lasts, and repeals 110/2020 of 18 December.      | Limits gatherings for church services to 50% of the maximum capacity of the hall and imposes 2 metres social distancing.                                                                                      |
| 2/2021 of 4 February             | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation lasts, and repeals 1/2021 of 13 January.         | Closes places of worship in national territory for 30 days.                                                                                                                                                   |
| 7/2021 of 5 March                | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 2/2021 of 4 February lasts.          | Closes places of worship in national territory for 30 days.                                                                                                                                                   |
| 17/2021 of 6 April               | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 7/2021 of 5 March lasts.             | Closes places of worship in national territory for 21 days.                                                                                                                                                   |

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| DECREE NO.              | CONTENT                                                                                                                                                     | IMPACT ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 24/2021 of 26 April     | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 17/2021 of 6 April lasts.              |                                                                                                                                                                        |
| 30/2021 of 26 May       | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 24/2021 of 26 April lasts.             | The number of participants must not exceed 40% of the maximum capacity of each place and a maximum of 75 people in closed spaces and 150 people in open spaces.        |
| 42/2021 of 24 June      | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 30/2021 of 26 May lasts.               | The number of participants must not exceed 40% of the maximum capacity of each place and a maximum of 40 people in closed places and 80 people in open places.         |
| 50/2021 of 16 July      | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation lasts and repeals 42/2021 of 24 June.              | Closes places of worship in national territory for 30 days.                                                                                                            |
| 56/2021 of 13 August    | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 50/2021 of 16 July lasts.              | Places of worship, conferences and religious celebrations are closed for 30 days throughout the national territory.                                                    |
| 76/2021 of 24 September | Reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 62/2021 of 27 August lasts.            | Authorises the opening of places of worship nationwide for not more than 50 and 100 people in closed and open spaces respectively, not exceeding 30% of its capacity.  |
| 86/2021 of 25 October   | It reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 76/2021 of 24 September lasts.      | Authorises the opening of places of worship nationwide for not more than 100 and 250 people in closed and open spaces respectively, not exceeding 50% of its capacity. |
| 94/2021 of 20 December  | Reviews the measures for the propagation of Covid-19 Pandemic, while the situation of public calamity approved by Decree no.86/2021 of 25 October prevails. | Authorises the opening of places of worship nationwide for not more than 100 and 250 people in closed and open spaces respectively, not exceeding 50% of its capacity. |

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| DECREE NO.            | CONTENT                                                                                                                                               | IMPACT ON RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2/2022 of 19 January  | It reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 94/2021 of 20 December lasts. | Authorises the opening of places of worship nationwide for not more than 100 and 250 people in closed and open spaces respectively, not exceeding 50% of its capacity.   |
| 4/2022 of 18 February | It reviews the measures to contain the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, while the Public Calamity Situation approved by 2/2022 of 19 January lasts.   | Authorises the opening of places of worship nationwide for not more than 500 and 1 000 people in closed and open spaces respectively, not exceeding 50% of its capacity. |

This compilation of relevant legislation on the impact of Covid-19 on religious activities shows that in a period of two years, the government issued laws that closed the access to church facilities for ten months and imposed restrictions to the number of people that could assemble for fourteen months.

### THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK AND INTERPRETATIONS ABOUT ITS ORIGINS

The Covid-19 infections and deaths shook the world terribly and suddenly, and they conditioned people's lives and livelihoods in different ways. The pandemic affected church organisations in respect of the way they explained the origins of the virus to their brethren. As the infectious circle expanded, churches and their clergy endeavoured to provide responses to people's questions and fears about the disease. Fundamentally, preachers and church members shared a belief that the pandemic was God's punishment, a result of the misuse of natural resources and an indication of the end of times.<sup>16</sup> A similar approach is taken by Maria Frahm-Art, a scholar of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity, who points out that people's disobedience results in something going wrong in their lives, in this case, the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Stephen Lubari, an historian of missions, goes further, stating that Christians compared imposed restrictions amidst pandemic to the end of the world and were reminded of the time of Noah when the flood occurred and the time of Jesus's temptations.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Thembelani Jentile, a theologian, suggests that the pandemic molded people back to what they were supposed to be or to what they should have been.<sup>19</sup> These authors converge in seeing the pandemic as a propitious moment for people to come close to God and enhance their spirituality.

16 Lubari SE. 2020. "Covid-19 stories and experiences from South Sudan and Uganda", *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* (Special Issue: Mission During the Covid-19 pandemic) 37(4):319.

17 Frahm-Art M. 2021. "The practice of confessions and absolution as an agent of change in a prophetic Pentecostal church during Covid-19", *HTS Teologiese/Theological studies* 77(3):5.

18 Lubari, "Covid-19 stories and experiences", 321.

19 Jentile T. "ICawa ivaliwe: The church during the pandemic", *Pharos Journal of Theology* 101:6.

It is worth mentioning that until the beginning of March 2020, churches regulated their own activities, and the authorities did not interfere in this process at all. Even with the news about the propagation of the virus from China to the rest of the world, for some Mozambicans, these were just rumours and an invention of the modern world. When the first case was detected in Mozambique, churches registered divided opinions on how to administer preaching and how to act during this period. Nevertheless, there is a strong correlation among them regarding coronavirus connection to evil and actual sinful society.

Below are some examples of prayers to eradicate the Covid-19 pandemic:

We, men here on earth, must confess that we are indeed sinners. We depart from your commandments to serve Satan and the sins he teaches. And so, sin took over the world. That is why we are suffering from so many evils of body and soul. As the shadow does not come out of the sun, neither do these evils come out of You: these are the consequences of your sins of the sin of the World increasingly distant from You, our CREATOR AND LEGISLATOR. Help us to repent of our sins, so that we can be forgiven in the Soul and healed in the body. We always want to follow Your Laws to improve the world. Afflicted, we ask for mercy. Drive away this coronavirus epidemic and all spiritual epidemics. They are what make us run away from You and hate each other. Mercy, our GREAT GOD. Amen.<sup>20</sup>

We pray that restrictions will be lifted, so that the mass evangelism we planned for November together with the Malawian Fellowship of Youth can go ahead.<sup>21</sup>

In Luke 10-19, Jesus said, behold, I give you power to tread on serpents and scorpions and every force of evil. At this moment we are going to pray so that all the demons and diseases behind the Covid-19 are paralysed, neutralised and all people infected by the virus are cured in the name of Jesus. I fight all demons behind coronavirus right now and paralyze them in the name of Jesus. Release humanity in the name of Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

Lord Jesus, father of heaven, we have just ended this time that you have given us to interact with your people. Thank you so much for this privilege of being here in this place and we ask that lord Jesus at this moment extend your mighty hand on all those who are currently suffering from infirmities. Particularly in Mozambique, we hear that there are ten people sick with this epidemic of coronavirus, but I declare in the name of Jesus that the hand of God reaches upon these people and they are discharged to return to the family. I cry out for fire to break this curse in the name of Jesus and

20 Nossa Senhora de Fatima Cathedral. n.d. "Prayer to drive away coronavirus". Retrieved from the church 13 February 2022.

21 Zambezi Mission, York Baptist Church. 2021. "In Prayer", May-July, 3. Online at: <https://zambesimission.org/wp-content/uploads/In-Prayer-May-July-2021-Print-Friendly.pdf>

22 Igreja Ministerial Nações para Cristo. 2020. "Onório Cutane: Oração e Jejum contra Covid-19 por Moçambique e pelas Nações do Mundo [Prayer and Fasting against Covid-19 for Mozambique and the Nations of the World]", *Facebook*, 26 March.

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once again my beloved brethren believe only in Jesus, give your testimony so that the name of Jesus may be glorified.<sup>23</sup>

My God will answer all things, we must stand firm for what is to come. Let us trust God completely. This is not the time to play in sin. It is the moment to walk in holiness so that our lives may be spared in the name of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

Allah sends the storm to make us humble. The pandemic descends when sins are practised. The pandemic is a punishment that Allah sends to his people. Allah, push away this difficult situation that we are living, Allah helps us. Let's teach our children, our wives, brothers to do Istiftah (praise Allah) at least 500 times a day so that Allah has mercy on us and changes our situation, opens the madrassa and our masjids (mosques). We ask Allah that this pandemic will end in every corner of the world.<sup>25</sup>

These prayers were collected from websites from different churches and mosques in various provinces of Mozambique. They demonstrate how churches and mosques consistently explained issues provoked by the pandemic as a payback for people's sins. Furthermore, in what appears to be blaming of evil and demons, religious organisations also provided specific instructions to believers on how to halt the spread of the virus, which will be analysed below.

### LOCKDOWNS AND SPIRITUALITY IN MOZAMBIQUE'S CHURCHES

Church leaders and members interpreted Covid-19 outbreak in varied ways. The main response was to point to sin, negligence and behaviour that was not approved in Christianity or other religions as being the roots of the problem. An analysis of the way the pandemic affected people's spirituality must be done, since for certain periods religious believers in Mozambique did not have access to physical worship places. This had effects not just on religion and religious organisations, but on spirituality more broadly.

It is important to this discussion to acknowledge the conceptual differences between religiosity and spirituality as a way of displaying the nuances that were verified during this period. Although sometimes difficult to distinguish, it can be said that the main difference between religiosity and spirituality has to do with the way faith is lived. According to American physician and medical professor Dale Matthews and fellow researchers, religiosity is "the involvement in, or endorsement of, practices, prayers, beliefs, attitudes, or sentiments that are associated with an

23 A hora dos Pastores|Em directo|Ministerio Divina Esperança [The Hour of the Shepherds|Live|Ministerio Divina Esperança], *Ebenezer TV*, 8 April 2020.

24 Igreja Ministerio de Deus com a Humanidade. 2020. *Facebook*, 23 March.

25 Sheik Takdir Abdula. 2020. "Palestra sobre a Pandemia [Lecture on the Pandemic]", *Facebook*, 21 March.

organised community of faith”.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, “spirituality seeks to facilitate communication between the transcendent and the believer” and “empowers individual introspection and provides hope”.<sup>27</sup> Although religion and spirituality seem to function separately, there is an intrinsic relation between the two. For instance, a physical place of worship does not define people’s spiritually; however, the whole environment can contribute to a deeper and intimate interaction with one’s deity.

Mozambique has registered a rise in the number of religious organisations in recent years. One of the things that makes them popular is the “gospel of prosperity”. One can hold the impression that people are always open to embrace a new religion when it promises to relieve social problems such as illnesses, spiritual problems and financial constraints. According to African religion and theology scholar Andreas Heuser, the feeling of financial unfulfilment and economic ambition can precipitate the search for solutions in churches of prosperity.<sup>28</sup> In 2011, a Protestant church and one the principal precursors of the prosperity gospel, the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD) (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), promoted an event called Dia da Decisão (Decision Day), a day that would grant a new life to whoever attended the event. On this day, people were invited to participate in the worship service irrespective of their religion, because that day would supposedly give a fresh start and resolve many problems. Reports show that there was an unprecedented peak in the number of attendants, which revealed how eager people were to resolve the problems they face in their daily lives.<sup>29</sup>

As the Covid-19 infections leaped ahead worldwide, nations did not stop in the search for a cure. Some believed in a scientific solution, and others saw salvation through repentance. Many people were affected by the pandemic, and in this context feelings of depression and desolation were recurrent. The updates on the number of deaths in Mozambique were provided daily, and many people saw the deaths of their relatives, friends and colleagues. In addition, companies shut down, leaving many families without sources of survival. While some lost their jobs, others were forced to work from home and also faced the closure of their churches, which could have been their haven, where they prayed for relief, understanding and comfort.<sup>30</sup> The reasons why people looked to prayer and why the search for

26 Matthews DA et al. 1998. “Religious commitment and health status: a review of research and implications for family practice”, *Archives of Family Medicine* 7(2):118-124.

27 Da Silva J and Da Silva L. 2014. “Relação entre religião, espiritualidade e sentido da vida [Relationship between religion, spirituality and meaning of life]”, *Revista da Associação brasileira de logoterapia e análise existencial [Journal of the Brazilian Association of Logotherapy and Existential Analysis]* 3(2):208.

28 Heuser A. 2016. “Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4):8.

29 “Dia da Decisão promovido pela igreja universal reúne cerca de 500 mil fiéis em Moçambique [Decision Day promoted by the Universal Church brings together around 500,000 faithful in Mozambique]”, *GospelPrime.com*, 28 September 2011.

30 Bentzen JS. 2021. “In crisis we pray: Religiosity and the Covid-19 pandemic”, *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 192:542.

prayer increased amidst Covid-19 pandemic may be because praying provided a certain way of consolation for those who were troubled.

Timothée Bationo, a priest and missionary, asserts that people who go through traumatic experiences find in sacramental homilies insights on how to cope with them.<sup>31</sup> There is no direct relation between religion and spirituality as demonstrated before; however, it appears that people's spiritual life is stronger when attending church. As researcher Realito Adamugy Momade has demonstrated, the levels of spirituality decreased due to suspension of religious activities and ineffectiveness of activities done outside the churches.<sup>32</sup> Activities such as prayers at home, home worship and individual evangelism were not effective because people lacked expertise to perform accordingly.<sup>33</sup> These arguments make sense in the case of many Mozambican churches, which are organised in a hierarchal structure that is applied even in religious ceremonies. Before Covid began, prayers were performed by a consecrated person, but when everyone was confined home, people were challenged to become their own evangelisers and assume the role of spiritual leaders. Therefore, restrictions imposed on churches to hinder the propagation of the virus "were seen as an attack on the freedom to religion".<sup>34</sup> In Mozambique, the state of calamity extended for almost two years, depriving people of communal worshipping and reducing their spirituality.

It is important to emphasise that not everyone felt spiritually unfavoured by the pandemic repercussions. Some claim to have become sufficiently independent to continue worshipping by themselves. As one of our survey respondents maintained, "No, I always read on my own. I never allow them to do the interpretation for me, unless it is content that God is not revealing to me. As far as I know, leaders of my church maintained their scriptural organisation, because Scriptures cannot be adapted to any situation."<sup>35</sup> As it has been highlighted by religion and economics scholar Jeanet Bentzen, people tend to use their religion more intensively when coming across adversities.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, searches for prayer texts, which rose dramatically during the pandemic proved to be connected to spirituality and to a much lesser extent related to religious worship.<sup>37</sup> According to Jerry Pillay, a South African theologian, "Covid-19 has shown that faith survives without pastors, priests

31 Bationo T. 2004. "Preaching as a prophetic symbolic action. A case study of Luke 4, 14-22. In view of healing of the Sena People of Mozambique". Thesis for Ecclesiastic Baccalaureate in Theology, Tangaza College: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 35.

32 Momade RAU. 2021. "The impacts of Covid-19 on the Spiritual Life of Believers: case of Assembly of God Evangelical Church, Mozambique Island, 2020", *Academia Letters*, art 3329, August, 5.

33 Momade RAU. 2021. "The impacts of Covid-19 on the Spiritual Life of Believers", 7.

34 Jentile, "ICawa ivaliwe: The church during the pandemic", 2.

35 Online survey responses to religious adaptation during the Covid-19 pandemic, February-April 2022.

36 Bentzen JS. 2019. "Acts of God? Religiosity and Natural Disasters Across Subnational World", *The Economic Journal* 129(622):30.

37 Bentzen, "In crisis we pray", 544.

and bishops and that closure of churches reinforced the idea of ‘priest’ in each home.”<sup>38</sup> As an illustration of this, one of the respondents to our survey reported that the pandemic was “serving to make some believers realise that it is not the beautiful church, spoken language or other aspects that guarantee faith.”<sup>39</sup> Even though religious people somehow found a space apart from their churches to build or enrich their relation of intimacy with their God, this banalisation of worship places seems rather exaggerated, because group gatherings play an important role in making people firm in their beliefs through interaction with other followers. So, it would be reasonable to consider worship places an asset or tool to improve or maintain believers’ commitment.

Churches implemented innovative methods to adapt to lockdown conditions and make believers self-reliant in matters of spirituality. For instance, some churches introduced the practice of introspection, which consisted of people reflecting upon their sins, then confessing to be absolved and forgiven by God.<sup>40</sup> Besides being exhorted to recognise their sins, people were alerted to avoid dual allegiance – the practice of mixing biblical principles with traditional rituals – because church leaders knew how people were desperate for immediate solutions. Since African traditions were never completely erased, this could be a propitious moment for a faith shift, and the pastors did not want to lose church members to private practice of traditional rituals at home.

Pillay, who is also a Reformed Church pastor and church leader, asserts that the Covid-19 experience drew people into a more appropriate understanding of Christian mission with the focus being not on the church but on the reign of God.<sup>41</sup> Up to a point, one can consider that the pandemic forced people to debunk or deconstruct their own faith and to build meaningful connection with their deities. However, in the view of church pastors, it was important to acknowledge that churches had an essential role, and they also paved the way of transformation during this period. This is also where interest in beliefs about sin and death revived, as church leaders and believers read and interpreted the scriptures to address the situation under Covid.

### MOST-READ SCRIPTURES AND INTERPRETATIONS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Mozambique is a multicultural country in which religious denominations have been on the rise. Although they do not share the same principles, almost all follow

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38 Pillay J. 2020. “Covid-19 shows the need to make church more flexible”, *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 37(4):272.

39 Online survey responses.

40 Frahm-Arp M. 2021. The practice of confession and absolution as an agent of change in a prophetic Pentecostal church during Covid-19”, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(3):art 6560, 2.

41 Pillay, “Covid-19 shows the need to make church more flexible”, 279.

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directives from a particular scriptural source, which might be the Bible, the Quran or another sacred instrument. In the context of the pandemic, Christians and Muslims, in particular, used a wide range of scriptures to instigate reflection, repentance and change of behaviour. These messages were transmitted via online sermons, phone calls and emails, since face-to-face interactions were suspended. According to Pillay, lockdown forced churches to close, and in the endeavour to keep contact with the faithful, they had to resort to creative ways of fulfilling their mission.<sup>42</sup> For instance, some religious denominations managed to create online services through Zoom meetings, virtual sermons and other events, in order to take the church to the people.<sup>43</sup>

In the time of Covid-19, churches followed two approaches, which can be regarded as anti- and pro-prevention. As reported by Jeff Levin, an epidemiologist, some religious organisations disseminated scripturally based messages contending that the virus was Satan's plan to eliminate Christians, and they dissuaded people from following public health recommendations and other crucial measures aimed at protecting people.<sup>44</sup> In this case, some churches remained open and performed services regardless of the dangerousness and disobedience to the government's rules. There were reports of imprisonment of church leaders in Manica Province, in central Mozambique, allegedly for assembling hundreds of people for prayers in violation of the presidential decree of the state of emergency.<sup>45</sup> This revealed certain scepticism towards Covid-19 restrictions, as these church leaders decided to keep performing service despite official prohibition. Other church leaders used their preaching and other means to influence believers' opinions to understand the importance of obeying the rules.<sup>46</sup> As one respondent to our survey noted, "Some religious denominations used scriptures to justify the emergence of Covid-19 and to encourage vaccination."<sup>47</sup> This was also in line with Article 16 of the Decree 102/2020 from the government, which suggested the use of worship place for dissemination of security measures.<sup>48</sup>

Theologians and faith leaders believe that scriptures will never be outdated; thus, one can find in them responses to actual problems that occur today. This would not be different with the pandemic. In theologian Edwin Odulio's assessment, the scriptures' stories are aimed at calling people back to Jesus Christ, advise repentance

42 Pillay, "Covid-19 shows the need to make church more flexible", 267.

43 Behera MN. 2020. "Mission during the Covid-19 pandemic", *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 37(4):318.

44 Levin J. 2020. "The Faith Community and the SARS-CoV-2 Outbreak: Part of the problem or part of the solution?", *Journal of Religion and Health* 59:2218.

45 Jequete B. 2020. "Covid-19: Líderes religiosos detidos em Manica por cultos ilegais [Covid-19: Religious detained in Manica for illegal cults]", *Deutsche Welle*, 22 April.

46 Williams J et al. 2021. "Prioritizing health: churches to the Covid-19 pandemic", *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community* 28 June, 5.

47 Online survey responses.

48 Boletim da República, Conselho de Ministros. Decreto no 102/2020 de 23 de Novembro, I Série, Número 224, art 16.

and inspire faith in the gospel.<sup>49</sup> Health and disease are seen and experienced in a religious perspective in Africa. In this context, people tormented with despair and fear resorted to all available means to cope with the pandemic. Researcher Jeanet Bentzen reports a massive rise of Google searches for prayers in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>50</sup> It was not clear who searched for prayers, whether it was churches' leaders or members, but it is reasonable to say that people sought and perhaps found relief in scriptures.

The messages spotlighted in the scriptures by religious denominations emphasised sin, repentance, hope, faith and healing. One of our survey respondents stated, "Scriptures were suited to the reality, thus there was emphasis on scriptures that teach about the need of repentance."<sup>51</sup> For example, the Catholic Church, besides advising on the need for compliance for security measures, highlighted sermons that included scriptures inspired by St. Paul's experience with the gospel, whereby he was convert from a persecutor of men to a hunter for souls.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, inspired by 1 John 4:8-16, Pope Francis preached on the necessity of leading people back to God based on a deeper relationship with Him.<sup>53</sup> This was a global directive shared from the Vatican that was also implemented locally. Catholic priest Henriques Bascones stated that in difficult times there are sacrifices that must be made for the common good. According to him, prevention was the fortune of all people, so everyone should follow the recommendations.<sup>54</sup>

Muslim religious leaders interpreted the outbreak in two different ways. One side, considered conservative, debated whether the pandemic was "divine punishment against nonbelievers", while the other side collaborated with authorities in providing practical advice on how to avoid contracting the virus.<sup>55</sup> In Mozambique, the Islamic Council disseminated messages of hope and solidarity to the worshippers through campaigns that also aimed to inform people about prevention methods.<sup>56</sup> This action was based on the *hadith*, "Make use of medical treatment, for Allah did not make a disease without indicating a remedy for it, with the exception of one

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49 Odulio EB. 2020. "Developments and challenges in the use and interpretation of Scriptures in the study and teaching of Christian moral life", *MST Review* 22(1):28.

50 Bentzen, "In crisis we pray", 559.

51 Online survey responses.

52 Tavares PD. 2021. "Cartas Paulinas: Um exemplo de ação evangelizadora, em tempos de pandemia? [Pauline Letters: An example of evangelising action in times of pandemic]". Online at: <https://repositorio.uninter.com/handle/1/704>

53 Cezar Costa P. 2020. "Pandemia e Pós-pandemia: Dez pontos para reflexão" [Pandemic and Post-pandemic: Ten points for reflection], *Vatican News*, 8 May.

54 Bascones H. 2020. "Igreja Catolica-Paroquia da Polana", *Facebook* [Accessed 1 April 2022].

55 Hanna A. 2020. "What Islamists are Doing and Saying on Covid-19 Crisis", *Wilson Center*, 14 May.

56 "Visão Mundial e Conselho Islâmico juntos na luta contra a Covid-19 [World Vision and Islamic Council together in the fight against Covid-19]", *Jornal Noticias*, 12 June 2020.

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disease: old age."<sup>57</sup> Muslim leaders strongly believed that the pandemic was God's punishment for people's sins. The message spread among Muslims on YouTube or Facebook was that the solution was obeying Allah's orders.<sup>58</sup>

Another clear usage of scriptures can be found in one of Pentecostal church Prophet Onório Cutane's sermons amidst the pandemic in which he exhorted believers to not be afraid, because fear could be worse than the virus itself. Beyond encouraging people to follow the instructions from the government he tells people to trust in God as the solution. Overall, Cutane's sermons rely on two principal scriptures. The first was Philemon 4:6 "Don't worry about anything! Present your concerns to God through prayer, supplication, and thanksgiving in all circumstances."<sup>59</sup> The prophet used this scripture to encourage worshippers to not give up praying and continue believing, so that that God does not abandon them.

The second was 2 Chronicles 7:13-14: "If I close the heavens, and there is no rain; or if the plague is ordered to consume the land; or if I send pestilence among my people; And if my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."<sup>60</sup> This scripture amplified the interpretation of the disease. The pestilence and plague mentioned above are depicted as evil diseases that can be sent to devastate humanity because of its sins and impurity. Prophet Onório compares the pestilence with the virus that killed thousands of people in short time. According to Prophet Onório, the plague was sent not to make people despair, but to trigger the faith inside them and inspire true Christianity.

Undoubtedly, the use of scriptures was accentuated during this period. Church leaders relied on a wide range of scriptures to trigger feelings of repentance and deliver sin. There were also abundant approaches about hope and healing, which would become a reality if people returned to their roots. Since not every church had the opportunity to conduct services in this period, due to the financial cost of creating and maintaining a virtual church, it can be said that this also defined how these churches interpreted the scriptures, sometimes to allay not only the peoples' fears, but the churches own concerns for institutional survival. As one survey response put it, "The message remained the same, the appeal for true belief, surrender to Jesus, end of times, hope. It was possible to notice some differences, especially in the type of message preached, the concern of some churches, the fear of failure of others, and the deviation of the focus."<sup>61</sup>

57 Soares P. 2020. "O islam, as pandemias, os conselhos do profeta e a medicina dos imames [Islam, pandemics, the prophet's advice and the medicine of the Imams]", *Carta Capital*, 21 April.

58 Yussuf Y. 2021. "Conselhos do Islam Compilacoes [Advice from Islam Compilations]", *YouTube*, 24 February.

59 Bible. Philippians 4.

60 Bible. 2 Chronicles 7:12-15.

61 Online survey responses.

## SURVEYING SCRIPTURAL MESSAGING IN THE PANDEMIC

To gain further understanding of how churches adapted and interpreted scriptures, we conducted an online survey to capture the religious experience of people during Covid-19 pandemic. Web surveys have the advantage of collecting large amounts of data efficiently and economically within relatively short time.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, people feel free to respond online because they do not have the pressure of having someone in front questioning them, thus it can be convenient for some.<sup>63</sup> We used the electronic survey to respond to the complexity of the issue within the context of social distancing and limited resources to conduct face-to-face interviews. The survey was conducted online and targeted all eleven provinces of Mozambique. It used closed questions and open-ended options to capture any information that might have been left out. The survey covered 156 respondents, varying in age from 20 to above 50 years old. Among the respondents, 52.6% were female, 44.2% male and 3.2% did not reveal their gender. In terms of level of education, 66.6% of respondents had a bachelor's degree, 18.6% had completed secondary education, while 13.5% had a master's degree. The survey participants were asked eleven key questions about their viewpoints regarding articulation of the message of God and most-read scriptures during the pandemic.

The findings of the present study suggest that most religious denominations customised their ceremonies and sermons to respond to the new reality the pandemic brought, so this chapter has focused on this significant matter. When asked whether they noticed any changes in the interpretation of the holy scriptures in the period of Covid-19, at least 57.6% (90 out of 156) respondents denoted changes in the way the scriptures were broadcast and interpreted during the pandemic. On the other hand, 42.3% (66 out of 156) indicated the maintenance of normal preaching instruments.

Overall, respondents indicated that sermons revolved around messages and scriptures about sin, repentance and faith in times of turmoil, healing and salvation. Study respondents, reported that pandemic sermons: (1) justified the emergence of the virus as a result of humans' sinful nature and also emphasised the importance of forgiveness, (2) that exhorted repentance for sins committed and the need for a fortified faith in God and (3) promised healing through faith and salvation for those who follow God's teachings. Asked for examples of the most-read scriptural passages at church or in public events, respondents provided examples of scriptures they heard or read in compliance with church instructions or which they found through individual searches. According to these worshippers, these messages bred determination, hope and encouragement to cope. As one congregant put it, "Yes, more messages of encouragement were preached so that the sheep do not get lost and do not lose their faith in Christ Jesus."<sup>64</sup>

62 Lefever S, Dal M and Matthíasdóttir A. 2007. "Online data collection in academic research: advantages limitations", *British Journal of Education Technology* 38(4):575.

63 Evans JR and Mathur A. 2005. "The value of online surveys", *Internet Research* 15(2):198.

64 Online survey responses.

The results show that religious organisations and believers reacted to Covid-19 in various ways, but they did not lose their faith. In fact, it appears that Covid-19 brought people much closer to their religiosity and spirituality. These findings are in line with studies conducted in other African countries, which emphasised that Covid-19 has increased the spirituality of believers in their engagement and encounter with God for divine intervention, healing, protection, and provision.<sup>65</sup> In Mozambique, as in other African nations, responses to Covid-19 included: (1) calls for prayer, deliverance healing; (2) preaching gospels of faith and hope, (3) demystification and democratisation of the Holy Communion and (4) the challenges of loyal membership that came with the shift to virtual congregations.<sup>66</sup> Despite Mozambique's limited internet coverage, this study complements findings about the swiftness of Christians' responses using social media and digital networks.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to access the experiences of religious leaders and religious laypeople concerning the Covid-19 pandemic that hit Mozambique from March 2020 onward, imposing severe restrictions on worship services. The results reveal that the closing of religious ceremonies affected the organisation of many religious denominations, forcing the innovation and significant changes in scriptures hermeneutics and performance of religious sermons. When the Mozambican government decreed the closure of worship places, the only way of coping was turning to virtual settings or shutting down for the period that the Covid-prevention rules prevailed. In fact, some religious congregations were forced to close for financial reasons or even for unpreparedness to deal with the situation because the pandemic challenged all religious institutions to be flexible and uncovered gaps in their structure. However, a substantial number of churches approached the "new normal" differently, and the use of scripture was a key part of it. As one congregant described the use of scripture messages, "They are used in a way that is appropriate to the moment. Through them, events were explained, and those who were afraid to lose their loved ones were comforted. In short, the scriptures have been perfected to meet current needs – the new normal."<sup>68</sup>

The Covid-19 context led to the adoption of innovative ways of broadcasting holy scriptures. At some point, religious leaders also began to interpret the scriptures

65 Plüss JD. 2020. "Covid-19, the church, and the challenge to ecumenism", *Transformation* 37(4); Asamoah-Gyadu JK. 2021. "Pentecostalism and Coronavirus. Reframing the message of Health-and-wealth in a pandemic era", *Spiritus* 6(1); White P. 2022. "Pentecostal spirituality in the context of faith and hope (prosperity preaching): African Pentecostal response to the Covid-19 pandemic", *Dialog* 61(2):148-155; Djube PA and Burge RP. 2020. "The prosperity gospel of coronavirus response", *Politics & Religion*, 16 April.

66 White, "Pentecostal spirituality in the context of faith and hope", 149.

67 Plüss, "Covid-19, the church, and the challenge to ecumenism", 294.

68 Online survey responses.

in a way that aligned with the pandemic phenomenon. For example, respondents indicated the intensification of messages of hope, repentance, self-reflexivity and end of times in church preaching, especially when infections reached alarming rates in the country. It is worth noting that Christian and Muslim congregations took different approaches in relation to liturgical practices. For instance, respondents indicated that some leaders challenged state lockdown regulations by encouraging their members to gather in groups for prayers. But, overall, the pandemic period showed that when the government and religious organisations come together, they effectively address unpredicted challenges.

What is unique about the study presented here of the theologies and beliefs about sin and death in the time of Covid-19 is its contextualisation in the historical development of religious institutions in Mozambique, a country that is relatively overlooked in African religious studies due to language barriers for most English and French speakers. The results are also interesting because, being a product of online survey, they captured the perceptions of educated people, a segment of the Mozambique population that is often portrayed as less prone to religiosity. The fact that most of the participants in the only survey revealed deep religiosity and spirituality shows that religion continues to play a major role for both spiritual and material well-being of many Mozambican people.