

Unearthing fault lines and tracing shifts: Two typological Christian responses to COVID-19 measures in South Africa¹

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Abstract

This article examines how Christian responses to COVID-19 mitigation measures in South Africa unveiled political and theological fault lines within two constituent Christian groups. Through an analysis of typological examples, including the Christian Revival Church (CRC) and the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), known for oppositional stances towards state measures and scientific veracity, and the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which offered mixed support for state measures and endorsed scientific findings, we explore the intricate interplay between religion and politics. The study reveals diverse worldviews shaping responses, from Western scientific perspectives to African indigenous beliefs and American Evangelical influences. We uncover varying pastoral concerns, with poorer communities prioritizing survival and affluent communities focusing on emotional well-being. Moreover, political theologies reflect entrenched convictions, from racism and xenophobia to relatively uncritical support for the state. This study underscores the significance of public theological reflection and the enduring impact of religion on societal norms, political ideologies, and moral values in South Africa.

Keywords

COVID-19; South Africa; public theology; political theology; typological analysis

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Introduction

This article offers a reflection on some of the ways in which Christian responses to COVID-19 mitigation measures in South Africa unearthed political and theological “fault lines” in two constituent Christian groups. We will see, that to some extent at least, the responses of Christian leaders, and the Christian communities to which they relate, were largely informed by their political identities, social class, and the characteristics of their predominant theological traditions.

We will consider two typological examples of Christian responses to the South African government’s COVID-19 mitigation measures during the pandemic of 2020-2021. Three bodies constitute the two typological positions. First, there are the responses of two non-affiliated evangelical Christian groups, the Christian Revival Church (CRC)² and the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP),³ who took oppositional stances to the South African state and its COVID-19 mitigation measures, also questioning the scientific veracity of COVID-19 research, epidemiology, and vaccination. Second, there is the response of South Africa’s primary ecumenical Christian body, the South African Council of Churches (SACC)⁴ which offered mixed support for the South African state and its COVID-19 mitigation measures while showing support for scientific research findings related to epidemiology and vaccination.

By studying these typological responses, we aim to understand the mutual interaction between religion and politics in South Africa. We aim to understand how religious beliefs shape political convictions, and how political convictions shape religious beliefs. The study of differing “typological”⁵ Christian reactions to the South African government’s

2 “Christian Revival Church,” CRC church. [Online]. Available: <https://crcchurch.com>. [Accessed: January 19, 2023].

3 “THE ACDP – Unite. Build. Grow.” [Online]. Available: <https://www.acdp.org.za/> [Accessed: January 19, 2023].

4 “South African Council of Churches.” [Online]. Available: <https://sacc.org.za/>. [Accessed: January 19, 2023].

5 For a discussion of “typologies” of theology see: David F. Ford, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005); Nico Koopman, “Some Contours for Public Theology in South Africa.” *International Journal*

COVID-19 measures allow for reasonable historical and thematic demarcation to ensure relative reliability, and reasonable defensibility, of the analysis and findings about “typological” examples of the mutual interaction of religion and politics among some South African Christian groupings. The study fits within the broader field of “public theology”⁶ which seeks to understand the intersections of faith and the public.

Some background on COVID-19 measures in South Africa

The highly infectious SARS-CoV-2 virus, believed to have originated from a market in Wuhan, China, became a global pandemic declared by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020.⁷ South Africa’s first lockdown was announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa on March 23, 2020, with citizens confined to their homes from midnight on March 26, 2020. Only essential services such as medical care, policing, and food supplies were permitted, with all non-essential activities, including religious gatherings, curtailed. This initial lockdown, lasting 21 days, aimed to prepare disaster response officials for the virus spread and alleviate strain on the healthcare system.⁸ Subsequent lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 followed the principle of responsible containment, categorized into levels from 5 (most severe) to 1 (least severe), allowing for gradually increasing social functions while maintaining safety restrictions. As vaccines became available later in the pandemic, there was considerable pressure for eligible citizens to receive

of Practical Theology 14, no. 1 (April 2010):123–38; Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

- 6 Dion A. Forster, “African Public Theology? A Conceptual Engagement to Keep the Conversation Alive.” In *Die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi*, 56, no. 1 (July 22, 2022):9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v56i1.2849>; Dion A. Forster, “The Nature of Public Theology,” in *African Public Theology*, Sunday Bobai Agang, H. Jurgens Hendriks, and Dion A. Forster (eds.). (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Partnership: Hippo Books, 2020), 15–26.
- 7 Lea M. De Backer, “COVID-19 Lockdown in South Africa: Addiction, Christian Spirituality and Mental Health.” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 42, no. 1 (January 2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2135>.
- 8 L. Kiewit et al., “Ramaphosa Announces 21-Day Lockdown to Curb Covid-19,” *Mail & Guardian*, 2020.

vaccinations, although it was not mandated by legislation.⁹ The government measures will be discussed under three headings below.

Curtailing the freedom of gathering, and its implication for religious communities

Throughout much of 2020 and 2021, South Africa primarily operated at Level 3 lockdown, following the more severe initial lockdowns (Levels 5 and 4), which were found to have significantly adverse effects on social well-being and the economy.¹⁰ While Level 3 permitted some commercial and social interaction, religious gatherings remained largely restricted. Regulation 37(1) of the Disaster Management Act delineates the impact of the regulations on religious communities:

“Religious gatherings [are] allowed under lockdown level 3 but with certain restrictions to combat the spread of COVID-19 as of 01 June 2020.

- Maximum 50 congregants within the appropriate venue
- Plans and protocols to ensure health, hygiene and social distancing are observed
- Wearing of cloth masks, no physical contact, accurate register with contact details, screening to be done, no elderly people over 60 years of age
- COVID-19 committees to be established in every congregation.”¹¹

9 “COVID-19 Vaccination Messaging Guideline | Government Communication and Information System (GCIS).” [Online]. [Accessed: January 26, 2023]. Available: <https://www.gcis.gov.za/vaccine-guideline>.

10 Among the most significant problems that were identified were the suffering of the majority poor population (hunger, a lack of physical space for safe distancing, a lack of access to running water and sanitation), a significant increase in Gender Based Violence (GBV) as GBV victims were locked into homes with their abusers, and the stalling of the South African economy, see De Backer, “COVID-19 Lockdown in South Africa,” 3–5; Wessel Bentley and Vusi Vilakati, “‘Same Storm – Different Boats’: A Southern African Methodist Response to Socio-Economic Inequalities Exposed by the COVID-19 Storm,” *Theologia Viatorum* 45(1):1–11.

11 South African Government in Constance Nyika, Milena Ivanovic, and Kevin A. Griffin, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Independent African Churches (IACs) in Johannesburg, South Africa” 10, no. 1 (2022): 111, <https://doi.org/10.21427/AD3X-N065>.

Restrictions on unrestricted worship services, including regular and special gatherings such as funerals and weddings, were implemented to prioritize the safety of the population. Church gatherings were identified as high-risk events for COVID-19 transmission, exemplified by a notable super-spreader incident (including Kenneth Meshoe, leader of the ACDP and At Boshoff, senior Pastor of the CRC, and evangelist Angus Buchan) attended a prayer gathering at which several persons were infected with COVID-19 on the eve of the 26 March 2020 lockdown.¹² Large congregations, proximity, and vocal practices like singing and praying heightened the risk of infection.

Initially, stringent lockdown measures in 2020, coinciding with Easter, prohibited all gatherings. Subsequently, as the South African government gained insights on virus management from organizations like the World Health Organization, smaller gatherings were allowed under specific conditions: limited attendees, well-ventilated spaces, mask-wearing, contact tracing, temperature checks, and hand sanitation. President Ramaphosa highlighted funeral services and “after-tears” gatherings as high-risk environments requiring careful regulation.

These measures significantly affected congregational worship, leading to a sharp decline in church attendance¹³ and subsequent financial strain on churches reliant on member donations.¹⁴ Interviews with pastors and priests revealed substantial concern about the financial repercussions of suspended congregational meetings. We will demonstrate how these economic anxieties influenced the responses of certain churches and religious groups to COVID-19 measures.

The call for wide-scale vaccination

Once coronavirus vaccines became available in South Africa, priority was given to frontline workers followed by the general population, starting with the most vulnerable individuals such as the elderly and those with

12 Ferial Haffajee, “Free State Races to Curb Covid-19 Outbreak as Angus Buchan Tests Positive and Country Cases Rise to 927,” Retrieved March 30, 2020.

13 Nyika, Ivanovic, and Griffin, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Independent African Churches (IACs) in Johannesburg, South Africa,” 116–17.

14 *Ibid.*, 117.

underlying health conditions.¹⁵ However, at this stage, amidst Donald Trump’s controversial remarks questioning vaccination necessity,¹⁶ certain religious groups had already been influenced by political theology that distorted theological perspectives on science and health. This triggered debates on vaccine safety and efficacy, especially among Christian groups that perceived a conflict between faith and science. These groups broadly fall into three categories.

Firstly, those were influenced by Evangelicalism and the political and cultural conflicts between faith and science, exemplified by the ACDP and CRC.¹⁷ Secondly, some African Initiated or African Independent Christian movements harboured distrust toward Western ideas, including Western medicine.¹⁸ Lastly, ecumenical churches advocated for vaccination to protect both individuals and vulnerable populations unable to receive the vaccine, such as young children or those with certain medical conditions.¹⁹

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- 15 “COVID-19 Vaccination Messaging Guideline | Government Communication and Information System (GCIS).”
- 16 Dion A. Forster, “Trump Is out, but US Evangelicalism Remains Alive and Well in Africa.” *The Conversation*, January 20, 2021, Analysis edition, <http://theconversation.com/trump-is-out-but-us-evangelicalism-remains-alive-and-well-in-africa-151117>; Dion A Forster, “A Critical Consideration of the Relationship Between African Christianities and American Evangelicalism: A Cautionary Tale of Theo-Political Exceptionalism?” *The South African Baptist Theological Journal*, 30:199–245. (Theology in Context (October 15, 2021).
- 17 Sophie Mylan and Charlotte Hardman, “COVID-19, Cults, and the Anti-Vax Movement.” *The Lancet* 397(10280):1181. (March 27, 2021). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(21\)00443-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(21)00443-8); Forster, “A Critical Consideration of the Relationship Between African Christianities and American Evangelicalism: A Cautionary Tale of Theo-Political Exceptionalism?” 199–245.
- 18 See Nyawo in Fortune Sibanda, Tenson Muyambo, and Ezra Chitando, *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2022), 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003241096>; Tenson Muyambo, Nomatter Sande, and Jane Tendere, “‘Wash and Pray’: The Nexus of African Christianity and Science in the Context of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe.” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 52(3–4):384–373. (September 7, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700666-12340234>; Phillip Musoni and Ezra Chitando, “Spiritualization of the Causes of Illness: An Analysis of the Zimbabwean-Born White Garment Churches’ Theological Position on the Origin and Treatment of Covid-19.” *Exchange* 51(4):361–376. (December 22, 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543x-bja10020>.
- 19 “The South African Council of Churches Speaks on the Vaccine.” *CIHA Blog* (blog), February 20, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.cihablog.com/the-south-african-council-of-churches-speaks-on-the-vaccine/>.

Religion and responses to scientific research and policy formation

The next significant intersection between religious communities and COVID-19 mitigation policies involves their stance on scientific research.

This issue, while like the previous point, emphasizes the differing religious perspectives on faith and science. Broadly, there are two views: those who question the validity of scientific findings concerning COVID-19, and those who perceive a conflict between faith in God and faith in science.²⁰

For instance, a sermon by CRC Pastor At Boshoff exemplifies the latter perspective:

People talk about #COVID19, we talk about Psalms 91! God watches over His Word to perform it over our lives! We are going to declare the Word of God over our lives! Do the possible and God will do the rest! #COVID_19 #PSALM91.²¹

Boshoff asserts that denying science demonstrates greater faith in God, emphasizing trust in divine intervention despite some acknowledgement of scientific evidence regarding the virus. This perspective underscores a prioritization of faith over scientific understanding.

Navigating such nuanced views on the interplay between science and belief posed challenges for religious leaders and followers alike, especially as they witnessed the impact of COVID-19 on their communities. In response, some religious figures released video series and messages advocating for

20 Nyika, Ivanovic, and Griffin, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Independent African Churches (IACs) in Johannesburg, South Africa”; Estelle Ellis, “WHEN ANTI-VAXXING MET POLITICS: ACDP Asks Pretoria High Court to Help Stop Roll-out of Covid-19 Pfizer Vaccine to Children,” *Daily Maverick*, October 31, 2021. (Online). Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-10-31-acdp-asks-pretoria-high-court-to-help-stop-roll-out-of-covid-19-pfizer-vaccine-to-children/>; Mylan and Hardman, “COVID-19, Cults, and the Anti-Vax Movement.”

21 “At Boshoff on Instagram: ‘People Talk about #COVID19, We Talk about Psalms 91! God Watches over His Word to Perform It over Our Lives! We Are Going to Declare the Word of God over Our Lives! Do the Possible and God Will Do the Rest! #COVID_19 #PSALM91,’” Instagram. [Online]. [Accessed January 18, 2023]. Available: https://www.instagram.com/p/B9wc_LeJmC/.

vaccination, symbolizing trust in both science and faith through their own vaccination experiences.²²

The diverse engagement of South Africa’s population and religious leaders with the relationship between faith and COVID-19 will be explored further in the following sections.

A brief discussion on religion and diversity in South Africa

South Africa, like numerous other African countries, retains strong religious adherence. According to the latest census data from 2022, 85.3% of South Africans self-identify as Christian, marking a 2% rise from the 2015 survey and a 7% increase from the 2001 census.²³

This upward trend reflects a growing religiosity within the population.

Table 1: Census 2022: Percentage distribution of population by religious affiliation/belief²⁴

Religion (names as stipulated in the survey)	Percentage
Christian	85.3%
Muslim	1.6%
Ancestral, tribal, animist or other traditional African religions	7.8%
Hindu	1.1%
Jewish	0.1%
Other religion	0.2%
Nothing in particular	3.9%
Refused or do not know	0.0%
Total	100.0%

22 “South African Council of Churches - SACC Leaders Receive the Vaccine,” [Online]. [Accessed: January 26]. 2023. [Available: <https://sacc.org.za/sacc-leaders-receive-covid-19-vaccination/>].

23 StatsSA, Risenga Maluleke, “Census 2022 – South Africa,” Statistics South Africa (Pretoria, South Africa: Statistics South Africa, June 2023), 24–25. [Online]. Available: <https://www.thepresidency.gov.za/download/file/fid/2889>.

24 StatsSA, Ibid.

According to a Pew report, 74% of South Africans emphasize the significance of religion in their lives.²⁵ Additionally, the World Values Survey indicates that South Africans exhibit the highest levels of trust in religious organizations compared to the private sector or the state.²⁶ Hennie Kotzé, the lead researcher on the WVS for South Africa, notes that “Religion in general, and churches in particular, play an important political socialization role [for South Africans].”²⁷

Table 2: Denominational Christian population in South Africa²⁸

Denomination or Christian tradition	Number	Percentage
African Independent (multiple groups)	14 598 922	40,82%
^Other Christian (multiple groups)	4 275 942	11,96%
*Methodist (single denomination)	3 305 404	9,24%
*Reformed (multiple denominations)	3 232 194	9,04%
*Roman Catholic (single denomination)	3 181 336	8,90%
^Pentecostal / Charismatic (multiple denominations)	2 625 830	7,34%
*Anglican (single denomination)	1 722 076	4,82%
*Presbyterian and Baptist (multiple denominations)	1 687 668	4,72%
*Lutheran (single denomination)	1 130 986	3,86%
Total Christian	35 760 358	100.0%

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- 25 Luis Lugo and Alan Cooperman, “Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa,” Washington, DC, Pew Research Centre, 2010, 3–4.
- 26 Winter, Susanne Winter and Lars Thomas Burchert, “Value Change in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” VERANSTALTUNGSBEITRAG (South Africa: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., May 2015), 1. [Online]. Available: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_41566-1522-2-30.pdf?150609093459.
- 27 Kotzé, Hennie Kotzé, “Shared Values in South Africa? A Selection of Value Orientations in the Field of Personal Ethics,” *Scriptura* 75 (2016): 437–48; Hennie Kotzé and Carlos Garcia-Rivero, “Institutions, Crises, and Political Confidence in Seven Contemporary Democracies. An Elite–Mass Analysis,” *Journal of Public Affairs*, 17(1):1–17.
- 28 J Hendriks and Johannes Erasmus, “Religion in South Africa: 2001 Population Census Data.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 121 (2005):88–111; Willem J. Schoeman, “South African Religious Demography: The 2013 General Household Survey.” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 73(2):1–7. (February 16, 2017). [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i2.3837>.

SACC member Churches indicated with *, constitute a significant portion of South African Christians, comprising 31.65% of the population. Charismatic, Pentecostal, and Other Christian groups, marked with ^, represent an equally important demographic constituency, totalling 19.3%. However, the perspectives of African Independent Churches (AICs), which account for 40.82% of the population, are not included in this research as coherent typological responses.

The following section will explain why the two chosen typological examples, the SACC Churches and Evangelical Independent Christian groups (CRC and ACDP), were selected for this research.

On the choice of the typological examples

The African Independent Churches (AICs), despite being the largest numerical grouping in religious statistics, were not selected as a typological example for this study. AICs encompass a diverse range of religious communities with varying beliefs, from African Traditional Religious practices with some connection to Christianity to those with little or no association with historical “Western” Christianity.²⁹ While Statistics South Africa categorizes them together, they lack significant social or theological commonality. Consequently, they do not form a cohesive theological group with shared political structures, and their responses to COVID-19 were heterogeneous rather than typological.³⁰

For instance, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), one of the largest AICs, demonstrated a responsible approach to COVID-19 by implementing strict mitigation policies such as limiting gatherings and maintaining hygiene and social distancing protocols for nearly two years.³¹ In contrast, other

29 Nokuzula Mndende, “African Traditional Religion and Freedom of Religion in South Africa,” in *Freedom of Religion at Stake: Competing Claims among Faith Traditions, Sates and Persons*, ed. Dion A. Forster, Göran Gunner, and Elisabeth Gerle (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2019), 157–58.

30 Nyika, Ivanovic, and Griffin, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Independent African Churches (IACs) in Johannesburg, South Africa,” 107–22.

31 Sunday Standard Reporter, “ZCC Demonstrating Most Enlightened Approach to Dealing with Covid-19 | Sunday Standard,” July 6, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.sundaystandard.info/zcc-demonstrating-most-enlightened-approach-to-dealing-with-covid-19/>.

AICs like the Johane Masowe and Johane Marange churches reportedly labelled COVID-19 as a European or ‘white’ sickness, denying the need for mitigation measures such as masks, social distancing, hand washing, and vaccines.³² Instead, they favoured spiritual warfare over scientific and medical responses to the pandemic.³³ A member of one such church (R7) expressed this viewpoint during an interview:

We are used to casting out demons in a physical congregation and not on Zoom we can’t even “speak in tongues”; we as apostolic people like to do our things in private that way, we show reverence for the Lord (R7).³⁴

In large measure, such views are based on a mix of Christian apocalypticism with African cosmology which sees all forms of evil (including diseases) as having spiritual antecedents. These evils need to be combatted in “spiritual warfare” (as seen in the quote above), or by appeasing the ancestors or other spirits (as is more common in groups that have a stronger African Indigenous religious belief system). Bompani writes of Independent Apostolic Churches (IACs),

IACs take the negative forces within African cosmology seriously by responding to real problems as perceived ... namely witchcraft, sorcery, and evil spirits, understanding it is acceptable to interpret socio-economic hardships and deprivation in contemporary society within the context of adverse cosmic forces. IACs are considered experts in granting people protection and fortification against the powers of evil accounting to a large degree for their popularity and growth.³⁵

32 Nicola Daniels, “Church Cautions Constituency Not to Be Misled by Fake News over Covid-19 Vaccine,” January 15, 2021, <https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/church-cautions-constituency-not-to-be-misled-by-fake-news-over-covid-19-vaccine-8ffb04f6-6cf6-4044-b7c0-26e00e435082>.

33 Nyika, Ivanovic, and Griffin, “The Effect of COVID-19 on Independent African Churches (IACs) in Johannesburg, South Africa.” 116.

34 In *ibid.*

35 Barbara Bompani, “Religion and Development from below: Independent Christianity in South Africa,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 40, no. 3 (2010): 309.

The SACC, CRC, and ACDP represent distinct social communities with a Christian identity and exert political influence to guide their members' responses in aligning their faith convictions with public and religious life. These groups have prominent spokespersons who shape collective responses to COVID-19 mitigation measures, making them typologically cohesive.³⁶ They issued formal statements on COVID-19 measures, either through press releases or social media. The data sample informing this study adhered to the following criteria:

- The selected groups reflect the racial diversity of South Africa,³⁷ encompassing black, white, and so-called coloured constituencies. The membership composition of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) closely mirrors the overall demographic makeup of the country. Conversely, the Christian Revival Church (CRC) and the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) predominantly consist of white members. Although led by a black South African, Rev Kenneth Meshoe, the ACDP's membership comprises primarily white evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal Christians, with some black and so-called coloured members. Thus, the CRC and ACDP membership profiles deviate somewhat from the general demographic distribution of the South African population compared to the SACC.
- The selected groups reflect the diverse landscape of Christian religious affiliations in South Africa, encompassing various denominations

36 See descriptions of this kind of political categorization in, Jenny Mbaye and Cecilia Dinardi, "Ins and Outs of the Cultural Polis: Informality, Culture and Governance in the Global South," *Urban Studies*, 56(3):578–593. (February 1, 2019). [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098017744168>; Donatella Porta, "Making The Polis: Social Forums and Democracy in The Global Justice Movement." *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 10(1):7394. (February 21, 2006). [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.10.1.vg717358676hh1q6>.

37 Schoeman, "South African Religious Demography"; "General Household Survey 2015," Statistical Information, General Household Survey (Pretoria, South Africa: Statistics South Africa, May 2017). [Online]. Available: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182015.pdf>; Dion A Forster and Kurt A. April, "Religion and Diversity Management in the Southern African Context," in *Managing Diversity in the South African Workplace*, ed. N.M.H Carrim and L Moolman (Cape Town: Van Schaik, 2020), 94–114; Dion A Forster, "Religious Diversity and Social Cohesion: The Importance of Mediated Inter-Group Contact in the Workplace in South Africa," in *12 Lenses Into Diversity in South Africa*, ed. Kurt A. April and Preeya Daya (Randburg, South Africa: KR Publishing, 2021), 177–94.ed. N.M.H Carrim and L Moolman (Cape Town: Van Schaik, 2020

such as mainline Christianity, as well as non-affiliated groups like charismatic, evangelical, Pentecostal, post-colonial, and African Initiated Christianities. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of these groups within the population: the South African Council of Churches (SACC) accounts for 31.65%, while the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) and Christian Revival Church (CRC) together represent approximately 19.3%. While acknowledging internal diversity within each group, the typological examples provided below offer insights into their overarching perspectives.

- The selected groups provide verifiable primary data for analysis, including published statements, sermon transcripts or recordings, news and media interviews, and other relevant publications by representative individuals or groups.

Having sketched the criteria that were used in the choosing of the typological examples, we will move on to present some of the responses to COVID-19 measures from these groups.

A presentation of the typological examples

In this section, we will discuss the responses of the chosen groups to the COVID-19 measures (presented in an earlier section). In each instance, we will discuss how the two typological groupings responded to specific COVID-19 mitigation measures.

Typology 1: Opposition to COVID-19 measures

The CRC

We'll start by examining a sermon titled "Covid will not change what God is doing in his Church!" delivered by Pastor At Boshoff, head of the CRC Churches. This sermon was part of a streamed 'Nationwide Revival' on June 17, 2021.³⁸ I will present excerpts from the sermon along with timestamps and analyse the theological and political assertions conveyed in each quote.

A

38 *COVID Will Not Change What God Is Doing In His Church!* 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cwlS99Eurs>.

“You know God is not a democrat ... *God does not need to be voted in as God.* He is God. God is God. He was and is and is to come. He doesn’t have to be ratified by any religious man, by any Bishop, by any government, by anyone. God is God. And I want to tell you before the return of Jesus God is going to show up powerfully, and *he is going to bring glory to his Church*” [00:38-00:54].

Pastor Boshoff contrasts God’s authority with that of political and ecclesiastical leaders, introducing the idea of the Church being ‘glorified.’ This concept serves as a counterpoint to the notion of the Church being “shamed” later. Essentially, Boshoff suggests that God will elevate the Church through divine power to resist unjust COVID-19 measures imposed by temporal political leaders and the state, which are perceived as disrespectful and oppressive toward the Church.

B

Pastor Boshoff starts reading from 1 Kings 18:21-39 (NKJV), “They took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it, and called it on the name of Baal from day to night saying ‘Oh Baal’... [then he begins to comment on the passage] *Almost I said a political party’s name ... I know the President is addressing the nation at 7 o’clock, and uh, that’s all I’m going to say ... “Hear us” ... I don’t know what you are crying to at this time, where your trust is, where deliverance for our world is going to come from. I’m not against the vaccine and I’m not for the vaccine. But, let me make it clear that your trust better be in God and not in anything else that comes from man because man will fail you, but God will never fail you, can you say Amen?*” [01:12-01:54].

In this quote, Pastor Boshoff presents a political theology that contrasts the authority of the Christian faith (and the Church) with temporal political power, which he describes as “that comes from man.” His criticism of the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), is evident, and he expresses unwavering trust in God’s agency in daily life. Boshoff equates the ANC with the worship of Baal and mentions the President’s national address, which coincided with his livestream. He urges his congregation to rely on God rather than placing trust in political figures, whom he predicts will disappoint them.

C

“When everybody goes on a strike, you should be working harder. You should be the difference. Two ‘hand claps’, that’s fine. Let’s see where your strike and your attitude get you.” [02:37-02:46].

In this segment of his sermon, Pastor Boshoff elaborates on his political perspectives. He highlights the societal division in South Africa between the predominantly black population, often resorting to protests to address basic needs and the privileged (largely white) middle and upper-middle classes who can afford private healthcare, education, transport, etc. Boshoff expresses disdain for protesters, suggesting that working harder during strikes is the solution. However, this overlooks the widespread unemployment issue in South Africa, particularly among young adults (up to 60% unemployment).³⁹ His remark, “Let’s see where your strike and your attitude gets you,” may imply moral inferiority attributed to those protesting.

D

“I want to tell you; *we don’t have to roll over to the spirit of the world.* We can be confident in God, and *we can be defiant of the spirit of this age,* and we can be bold towards heaven, and bold towards God and know that our God will not fail us, and our God will deliver us. Come on, our God is going to come through for us. Oh, come on, say Amen tonight.” [03:02-03:20].

In this quote, Pastor Boshoff introduces the concept of a conflict of beliefs, which he elaborates on in the subsequent quote. He suggests that there is a “spirit of the world” misleading individuals, and true believers resist this influence. Additionally, the “spirit of this world” is equated with South Africa’s political authorities, as seen in the next quotation. Throughout the pandemic, Boshoff’s Church has consistently defied COVID-19 regulations and policies, portraying them as evil and contrary to the will of God.⁴⁰

E

39 “South Africa Youth Unemployment Rate – 2022 Data – 2023 Forecast,” [Online]. [Accessed July 8, 2022]. Available: <https://tradingeconomics.com/south-africa/youth-unemployment-rate>.

40 *COVID Will Not Change What God Is Doing in His Church!*

“Then Elijah, said to all the people, verse 30, Come near to me ... Come to Church. [laughs], the place of sacrifice, the place of worship. Understand that the spirit of this age is anti-God, and the spirit of the anti-Christ operates in the guise of peace and safety. People talk to me all the time and they want to correct me. *And I am open to correction if it is biblical. But I am not open to your opinion. Because when I evaluate truth, I must evaluate truth in the context of the word, in the context of prophecy according to the Bible. Not in the context of what scientists are saying.*”

Here Pastor Boshoff questions the COVID-19 safety measures as supposedly operating under the “guise of peace and safety”, and he classifies them as being “anti-God” and “anti-Christ”. Then, he employs a Biblical literalist hermeneutic (in the bold section of the quotation) that appears to read the Bible as a book of eternal and final truth in every sphere of reality (including science), presenting the Bible (or at least his interpretation of texts from the Bible) over against the advice from scientists.

F

“Or what some backsliding preachers are saying that the Church will have a new order. God wrote one Bible, and there is one pattern and there is one Church that will be in existence until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Covid will not rewrite the pattern of our worship and will not rewrite the future of the Church.* Because Jesus Christ paid for the Church with his blood, and on the day of Pentecost he birthed the Church, thousands upon thousands in Jesus’ name. So, *the pattern is not going to change. You better get over it.*” [05:01-6:21].

This represents an attempt to portray a history of Christianity and the Church as an unchanging, divine institution, with Pastor Boshoff likening the worship practices of the New Testament era to contemporary gatherings in large auditoriums. He specifically refers to in-person worship in church buildings. According to him, the South African state, characterized as the “spirit of this age” and deemed “anti-God” and “anti-Christ,” must be resisted. Christian leaders who limit public in-person worship gatherings are labelled as “backsliding preachers,” indicating a departure from Christian truth.

G

“Stop running with everybody else that claims to be a prophet, but they have no clue about Biblical prophecy, and that it must be fulfilled. There is one pattern, there is one Bible. There is one thing that God is building, and it is not this political party called the ANC. So, I say this to politicians. Do not alienate the Church. Because you will number your days as the governing power. You treat the Church of Jesus Christ with disdain, your days are numbered. ... You will learn to acknowledge that there is one God who rules in the Kingdom of men. And it is not the elected president, it’s the living God. I said, it’s the living God, who gives power to man. Who holds your breath in your hand.” [6:24-7:35].

In this sermon section, Pastor Boshoff not only criticizes the governing political party, the ANC but also takes issue with misguided Christians, whom he labels as prophets lacking biblical insight. He establishes tension between the Church and the ANC, positioning the governing party as the “other.” This reflects a form of religious political populism,⁴¹ where Boshoff’s Church represents “the people” supported by God. He advocates for a political theology akin to theocracy or “Ecclesiocracy,”⁴² wherein God serves as the political authority and governance occurs through the Church, specifically his own.⁴³ The mention of “breath” in the final sentence alludes to both general life and the significance of breath during an infectious respiratory disease outbreak. In the accompanying video, the camera captures a woman wearing a mask, juxtaposed with two individuals nearby without masks.

I

“Then there was a king the Bible he was so arrogant in persecuting the Church, and he saw that public sentiment was so anti the Church, that he went on a ‘steroid’ persecution of the Church. And

41 Dion A Forster, “State Theology and Political Populism? A Kairos Critique of Religious Populism in South Africa.” *Oxford Journal of Church and State*, 62(2):316–333. (June 18, 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csz031>.

42 Ran Hirschl, *Constitutional Theocracy* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1–3, 103–4.

43 *Ibid.*, 103–4.

he killed Christian upon Christian, and he was an oppressive man. One of the most wicked people in history. It's in your Bible, in history. *And he sat on the throne, and he took the place of God, like the anti-Christ, and even the people began to cry out, 'he is a god, he is a god.'* And guess what happened? *New Testament, although we are living in a dispensation of grace, you better be careful when you mess with God's people, and you better be careful when you mess with the Church of Jesus Christ. And you better be careful when you oppose the work of God on planet earth.* Now I am not talking about the drug dealer ... *I am talking about those who are anti the Kingdom of God. Who are plotting and scheming wicked things planning the demise of Christianity behind closed doors.* And this man, as he arrayed in his royal garments, as he was sitting, in perfect health, the worms ate him ... he died from worms eating him in seconds.”

In this section, Pastor Boshoff's political stance becomes evident as he compares the South African government to Herod, particularly critiquing what he perceives as state encroachment on religious freedom, specifically Christians' rights to gather for worship. The highlighted portion of the quote reveals his distrust in the decision-making process of elected officials, which he views as a deliberate attempt to silence and dismantle the Church. Thus, beyond a political disagreement on safety measures implementation, there exists a profound distrust and accusation of malevolent intent directed towards politicians and the state.

J

“I appeal to our government, and I appeal to, people in authority all the time, uh, to treat the Church of Jesus with respect, and to acknowledge God in parliament. There are laws ... if laws are passed the Church can be suppressed. The law they want to pass now is to ensure what we can preach, and what we may say from our pulpits. And during this Covid crisis, they are just trying to slip it in parliament. Because everybody is afraid, we are told, to be afraid, be afraid, be afraid, and all the ungodly laws are being passed. One after the other. Church we better wake up... because we are not fighting for ourselves, we are fighting for our future generations, we

are fighting for your sons and daughters that are not even born yet. In Jesus' name." [7:35–9:57].

Here, Pastor Boshoff reinforces a political divide between what he perceives as the pure Church exercising its divine right to gather in person and the enactment of unjust laws in parliament. He suggests that these laws are stealthily passed due to widespread fear among the populace.

Additionally, the second highlighted portion of the quote presents an intriguing appeal. Observing the video, one notices Pastor Boshoff's frequent emphasis on courage and hyper-masculine presentation, characteristic of his appearance and speech. Being a muscular bodybuilder, he often invokes themes of courage, taking charge, and going to war, echoing aspects of Afrikaner male culture, especially among those white Afrikaner men who served in the military during apartheid.⁴⁴ His language parallels that used by military chaplains during South Africa's apartheid-era border conflicts, emphasizing fighting for the nation and future generations.⁴⁵

Analysis

In the CRC Church sermon, Pastor Boshoff exposes several fault lines. He defiantly opposes COVID-19 regulations, attributing them to political interference by what he portrays as a corrupt, ungodly government. Using derogatory terms like "toyi toyi" to refer to protest actions and reproachful language toward fellow citizens, other Churches, and the governing party in Afrikaans, he depicts those in power in the ANC as immoral, undisciplined, cowardly, deceitful, and evil. Boshoff's political theology is theocratic, advocating for an ecclesiocratic regime. He portrays the Church as persecuted and employs a populist style, creating a dichotomy between "the people" (his Church and constituency) and the corrupt elite. Additionally, his appearance, dress, and speech reveal a militaristic

44 Gary Baines, "Blame, Shame or Reaffirmation? White Conscripts Reassess the Meaning of the 'Border War' in Post- Apartheid South Africa," *Interculture* 5, no. 3 (2008): 214–27; Izette Bredenkamp and Andre Wessels, "A Historical Perspective on South African Military Chaplaincy and Cold War Ideologies during the Border War, 1966-1989." *Journal for Contemporary History*, 38(2):46–69. (December 2013). <https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC154154>.

45 Bredenkamp and Wessels, "A Historical Perspective on South African Military Chaplaincy and Cold War Ideologies during the Border War, 1966-1989," 46–69.

hypermasculinity, emphasizing images of war, defiance, and sacrifice. This discourse reflects a specific religious hermeneutic, characterized by Biblical literalism, pre-millennialism, neo-prophetic and spiritual warfare theologies, as well as a distinct political stance encompassing opposition politics, libertarianism, religious populism, white superiority, and apartheid-era race and class distinctions.

The ACDP

The ACDP shares similar views with Pastor Boshoff, although being a political party, their communication tends to be more formal and directed towards addressing political and policy issues, primarily through press releases. Additionally, they pursue formal legal action to address their political discontent. However, their underlying theological convictions shaping their political stance are not markedly different from those of the CRC.

The ACDP opposed COVID-19 measures, including challenging the government in court for restricting religious freedom and Christians' right to assemble for worship.

The ACDP opposes this *communist-style dictatorship* which will allow the Minister of Health to have the power to declare a pandemic or force a lockdown and compel citizens to take a vaccine/medication at any time without any consensus from the border [sic] medical community.⁴⁶

The reference to communist-style dictatorship is not only a political reference to signal a kind of dictatorial oppression but also an anti-religious sentiment. This is expressed more clearly in this statement:

Moreover, we see the imagery of protecting children, distrust of science, and a need for Christian citizens to oppose an oppressive and immoral state, and not be driven by fear, in this quote from Rev Meshoe in a legal bid to stop children from being vaccinated, “in circumstances where *people are driven by fear and force of others and the vaccines are being tested on*

46 “PETITION AGAINST COVID-19 HEALTH REGULATIONS – THE ACDP,” [Online]. [Accessed: January 26, 2023]. Available: <https://www.acdp.org.za/health-act-amendment-petition/>.

the populace of the nation – something totally unheard of and otherwise inconceivable until now.⁴⁷ This quote also unearths Meshoe’s well-known anti-vax stance.⁴⁸

The ACDP also opposed the lockdown imposed by the SA government, launching one of the earliest appeals against the measures on 13 April 2020.⁴⁹ The leader of the ACDP also called the lockdown measures for level 3 (in which limited Church gatherings were permitted) a denial of religious freedom.⁵⁰ He retweeted conspiracy theories about successive COVID-19 waves, saying:

Whoever is scheduling these COVID-19 waves has a wicked agenda that must be exposed. How do they know that we will have the 4th wave in October? Are they self-made gods that are now in control of the future?⁵¹

Analysis:

The ACDP employs a more nuanced political approach in opposing COVID-19 regulations, framing their stance as a defence of citizens’ freedoms and rights. However, their views are underpinned by specific religious convictions infused with elements of science denialism, conspiracy theories, and an opposition party agenda, particularly evident in the leader’s less nuanced religious, political, and anti-scientific views.

47 Ellis, “WHEN ANTI-VAXXING MET POLITICS.”

48 Tammy Petersen and Jenni Evans, “ACDP Attempts to Spin Leader’s ‘anti-Vaxx’ Stance, SACC Backs Vaccines as ‘Best Hope to Save Lives’ | News24.” [Online]. [Accessed: January 26, 2023]. Available: <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/acdp-says-its-not-anti-vaxx-but-pro-choice-20210820>.

49 Africa News Agency, “ACDP Calls for ‘immediate’ Lifting of Lockdown Restrictions,” May 13, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/acdp-calls-for-immediate-lifting-of-lockdown-restrictions-47884988>.

50 Newzroom Afrika [@Newzroom405], “Kenneth Meshoe Opposes Level 3 Lockdown Regulations for Churches.,” Tweet, *Twitter*, May 27, 2020. [Online]. Available: <https://twitter.com/Newzroom405/status/1265508106232107009>.

51 Kenneth Meshoe [@RevMeshoe], “Whoever Is Scheduling These COVID-19 Waves Has a Wicked Agenda That Must Be Exposed. How Do They Know That We Will Have the 4th Wave in October? Are They Self-Made Gods That Are Now in Control of the Future?” Tweet, *Twitter*, July 1, 2021.6[Online]. Available: <https://twitter.com/RevMeshoe/status/1410505896283840513>.

Both the CRC and the ACDP share a coherent foundation for opposing COVID-19 mitigation measures, rooted in a political theology advocating for a form of theocracy where Christians receive special protection from God, politically and against disease. They position themselves as religious-political opposition, leveraging populist sentiments to portray the governing party and the State as corrupt, inept, and immoral elites involved in ‘evil’ activities. However, their approaches to addressing these concerns diverge, with the CRC advocating defiance and spiritual battle, while the ACDP seeks recourse through legal and political channels.

Typology 2: Support of COVID-19 measures

The second category of Christian responses to COVID-19 measures involves the member Churches of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). This group generally supported COVID-19 mitigation measures. The sentiment is encapsulated in the following quote from the South African Faith Leaders Forum, as publicized by the World Council of Churches:

*“It is time for us all to pull together in unity once more, and act to protect and save lives in the war against COVID-19 ... The Religious Forum Against COVID-19 is made up of different religious organisations and faith traditions that have all been working independently to address the ravages of COVID-19 in the country and within their faith communities.”*⁵²

This statement shows three points of importance. First, a united stance among faith communities is necessary to curtail the spread of COVID-19 and avoid suffering and the loss of life. Second, this group believes that the COVID-19 measures initiated by the Government are in the best interests of their constituencies, and society at large. Third, the use of COVID-19 measures would save and protect lives.

*“The voices of religious leaders should be more vocal on this issue. If religion cannot contribute to the greater good of humanity, then is it fulfilling its duty to humanity?”*⁵³

52 “South African Religious Forum Issues Statement on COVID-19,” World Council of Churches, July 5, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.oikoumene.org/news/south-african-religious-forum-issues-statement-on-covid-19>.

53 Ibid.

In this quote, we can see that there is a pragmatic approach to the understanding of a part of the role that religion and religious communities play in society. Religion and religious communities are there to serve the “greater good of humanity”.

“At this stage, *the reality is in front of all of us. Let us put our debates aside and do the needful.* People are gravely ill, and we are losing our loved ones.”⁵⁴

Compare this quote to the sermon of Pastor Boshoff. This leader is seeking unity and cooperation in the face of “reality”. Whereas the sermon sought to pit religious leaders, religious communities, and members of society against one another based on competing truth claims and worldviews.

“If our elders do not vaccinate, they remain the most vulnerable. We call on all South Africans to help senior citizens register for the vaccine. Together we can help our elders live beyond the pandemic ... No one in South Africa will be safe until we have all been vaccinated and reach population immunity... Together, in unity, we can defeat COVID-19 through our efforts at staying safe and getting vaccinated.”⁵⁵

This quote expresses support for vaccination, assuming it as a safe method to reduce infection and the severity of COVID-19 illnesses. Additionally, there’s an appeal to Churches and Christians to assist in vaccine registration and administration. Finally, it emphasizes unity and adherence to safety measures such as social distancing, facemasks, and sanitation. The last statement unequivocally congratulates the President of South Africa and his Cabinet for their management of the nation during the pandemic.

“The South African Council of Churches (SACC) *congratulates President Cyril Ramaphosa and his various Cabinet Ministers,* for showing commendable leadership during this unprecedented time when the coronavirus pandemic is causing havoc globally and taking lives. *We are conscious of the inconveniences this will cause to worship life.* But, in recognition that the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

spreads mostly through human contact, the churches should not want their worshipping congregations to become channels of mass infection ...”⁵⁶

Compare the support of the SACC to the contestation offered by the CRC and the ACDP. Notably, the SACC recognised that a certain measure of curtailing the freedom to gather for worship was necessary to curtail the spread of the virus. In doing so, they draw up scientific reasoning (COVID-19 research and virology).

Analysis:

The SACC’s statements demonstrate their support for state efforts, reflecting both their embrace of science and their implicit political stance. They willingly complied with state lockdown regulations for Churches to safeguard their members and society through measures like smaller gatherings, facemask usage, contact tracing, sanitation, and vaccination promotion. Additionally, they collaborated with the state, offering Churches as healthcare and social development sites, including vaccination and welfare provisions.

This alignment isn’t surprising for several reasons. Firstly, the demographic represented by SACC Churches significantly overlaps with ANC supporters, comprising emerging middle-class South Africans often working with or for the state.⁵⁷ Many political leaders and government officials are SACC members, fostering direct communication with religious leaders, and vice versa.⁵⁸ The SACC’s longstanding relationship with the government allows for direct engagement on concerns and needs.

The theological orientation of SACC members likely exposes them to Western thought, given their affiliation with global Christian denominations like Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Methodism. While there’s a push for decolonization and Africanization, pragmatic issues like science, economics, and politics reflect Western influence tailored to South

56 Malusi Mpumlwana, “South African Council of Churches Statement on Covid-19 Lockdown.” [Online]. [Accessed: January 19, 2023]. Available: <https://sacc.org.za/sacc-statement-on-sa-coronavirus-lockdown/>.

57 Forster, “State Theology and Political Populism?” 316–17.

58 Forster, “State Theology and Political Populism?” 316–17.

African contexts. Consequently, discussions focus on socioeconomic disparities, travel restrictions, and vaccine equity, rather than conspiracy theories or spiritual interpretations of COVID-19 regulations.

Conclusions

This study revealed intriguing responses to COVID-19 measures among two distinct religious groupings in South Africa, exposing historical fault lines of political, hermeneutic, and religious nature.

Worldviews significantly influenced responses. Those with ties to mainstream Christianities often embraced Western scientific views, while African indigenous worldviews leaned towards “enchanted” solutions, expressing distrust in Western culture and medicine. Some groups, influenced by American Evangelicalism, exhibited anti-vaccine sentiments and libertarian views on individual liberties.

Diverse pastoral concerns emerged. Poorer communities broke rules for survival, prioritizing basic needs like food and medicine. Materialist and post-materialist communities, largely upper middle class, focused on emotional and spiritual care, grappling with fear, suffering, mortality, and injustice.

Political theologies reflected deeply ingrained convictions. Some groups exhibited racism, xenophobia, and Afro-pessimism, influenced by American Evangelical political ideologies. Others displayed uncritical support for the governing party and state, influenced by global ecumenical theological perspectives.

This study underscores the importance of public theological reflection, suggesting the need for further exploration. It highlights the enduring significance of religion in shaping social norms, political ideals, and moral values, warranting continued study and discussion. Finally, careful study can help us to understand *descriptively* where current beliefs and practices come from and evaluate in a more *normative* manner what some of the theological, ethical, and political challenges are of various beliefs and practices.

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