

The COVID-19 Discourse Analysis: Contemporary Religious Frameworks for Pandemics

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Abstract

Background: *The need for an analytical-theoretical framework for disasters from a religious perspective is more urgent today than before due to the emergency of new pandemics. Human life is a process of meaning-making where people try to interpret, understand, or make sense of significant events of loss, relationships, and the self. The struggle to unpack the purpose of life finds expression during times of disasters. One major conundrum faced by religious leaders, analysts, and academics, is coming up with a contemporary analytical framework or systematic approach to pandemics. The COVID 19 pandemic has demonstrated how the absence of such a contemporary religious framework for disaster risk management fuels conspiracy theories.*

Methodology: *Using a qualitative methodology comprising of published literature review, online resources, participant observation, and key informant interviews with religious leaders, this paper attempts to construct an analytical religious framework for disasters using the COVID 19 pandemic as a case study.*

Results: *Four contemporary religious analytical approaches to pandemics are identified from the COVID 19 experience: (1) Curse-centric approach that look at COVID 19 pandemic as a punishment for humanity's moral misconducts. Adherence of this approach attach some spiritual connotations to pandemics. This is common among adherents of Christianity, Islam, and the African Traditional Religion; (ii) Eschaton-centric approach -this approach is highly influenced by the Judeo-Christian traditions and adherence's views suggest that pandemics have a salvific significance. This group believes pandemics are part of God's plan for salvation of all; (iii) Eco-centric approach. This approach has some resemblance of curse-centric but is different. This approach is common among Westerners and partly ATR. It assumes that disasters are human-made, and pandemics are part of nature's reaction against the ecosystem abuse by human beings; and (iv) Plot-centric or conspiracy approaches that see in pandemics some schemes by certain sections of the world or spirits to annihilate other races or religious followers. This approach is most common among Africans and other third world countries.*

Conclusion: *Each approach to the pandemic is triggered by a different stimulus and its opinion about COVID 19 is dissimilar. Consequently, the study concludes that mitigation of COVID 19 pandemic depends on utilization of relevant response strategies in accordance with the religious orientations of each community. The study recommends the fusion of scientific methods with a cocktail of religious approaches for effective adoption of mitigatory measures against the pandemic.*

INTRODUCTION

The need for an analytical-theoretical framework for world disasters from a religious perspective is more urgent today than before due to the emergency of new pandemics. Human life is a process of meaning-making where people try to interpret, understand, or make sense of significant events of loss, relationships, and the self. The struggle to unpack the purpose of

life finds expression during times of disasters. One major conundrum faced by religious leaders, analysts, and academics, is coming up with a contemporary analytical framework or systematic approach to pandemics. The global experience of COVID-19 has resulted in subjective and distinct responses and reactions. It has demonstrated that human life is fragile, and that

technology is no panacea to human existence. While pandemics and disasters have existed from time immemorial, the impact of COVID-19 demonstrated the limits of science in preventing outbreaks. The whole world was humbled as the pandemic rendered human intelligence powerless. To understand and mitigate the severity of the disease, several approaches emerged which are presented here as religious frameworks for disasters risk reduction.

The thesis of this paper is that religious frameworks for disaster meaning-making and mitigation follows some form of a pattern. Understanding these patterns which are often rooted in religious beliefs has the potential to unpack some potential religious paths to knowledge on disaster risk management. The paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated how the absence of contemporary religious frameworks for disaster risk management fuels fatalism, conspiracy theories, and denialism. The paper is organized as follows; the first section looks at the relationship between religion and the reality of disasters with special focus on COVID 19 pandemic during the first two years of its outbreak from December 2019. The second section explains the methodology. In the third section presents the discussions of the findings in the form of religious frameworks for disaster management.

The Nexus Between Religion and Disasters

The question of whether religious interpretation of disasters can be classified as scientific is highly debatable. However, there is recognition that some aspects of religious culture like the Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) are gaining acceptance across the globe as scientific expertise (Sahai, 2013). In some religions like the African Traditional Religions, Indigenous Knowledge Systems emerge out of the inspiration and expertise of religious leaders and can be employed to predict disasters and in some instances mitigate their impacts (Mdanda, 2010). While this may not be sufficient to justify religious beliefs about disasters as scientific, it points towards the seriousness with which religions can be interrogated in search of solutions to disasters. It is posited that most religions were founded to provide meaning to complex situation like pandemics and disasters (Mathuna, 2020).

The African Traditional Religions makes a stronger connection between human beings, nature, and the spirits. In the African metaphysics, which is an intrinsic part of African philosophy, the spirits form an indispensable part of African ontology (Igbafen & Ikhianosime, 2018). The African Traditional religious belief in nature spirits bears testimony to the religious dimension of natural hazards. In traditional African religions, nature spirits are understood to refer to, “any religious belief or practice in which devotees consider nature to be the embodiment of divinity, sacredness, transcendence, spiritual power or whatever cognate term one wishes to use” (Beyer, 1998, p. 8). In this case, the spirits are understood to control both animate and inanimate beings. They inhabit in nature and control the sky, the rocks, the rivers, mountains, and trees (Nche, 2014). According to this view, any form of natural hazard, will of necessity get a religious interpretation. The view presupposes that religion is like a frame

that finds essence in nature and consequently, anything that affects nature, affects the religious beliefs of the people.

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization affirmed the role of religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities in saving lives and reducing illness related to victims of the pandemic (WHO, 2020). This follows the recognition that religious institutions and individuals are trusted sources of information. Again, in the context of disasters like the current COVID 10 pandemic, a general change was observed in attitude among people with strong recourse to religion in post-Christian European societies like Italy (Kowalczyk et al., 2020). This demonstrates how religion is always a source of meaning during periods of disasters. Religious spirituality was traditionally known as a powerful force in curtailing mental stress and adaptation to stressors.

The faith leaders were distinguished as key enablers in health awareness, prevention, and mitigation. According to UNICEF, faith leaders are critical partners in addressing many known barriers to the uptake of health and other essential services, including vaccines (UNICEF, 2021). This proved true as most religious leaders took the lead in getting vaccinated and urged their congregants to follow the practice.

While religion can help demystify disasters through meaning-making, it has the capacity to fuel religious conspiracy theories with lethal consequences. The challenge is not with religions, but forms of extremism that often result in what can be termed bad religions or false religions (Baum, 2008; Smith et al., 2018). When religious facts are fused with fiction, they result in fundamentalism (Baum, 2008). This was the case with COVID-19, where its essence was interpreted religiously, scientifically, and fictionally, just like most disasters.

Method

This paper used a qualitative research method comprising of secondary data obtained through review of related literature from published articles, books, encyclopaedias, and online news and reflections. It also encompasses data obtained through ethnographic research that included online media events and videos, audio sermon collections from religious leaders, and participant observations during religious services, funerals, and workshops. Using a thematic approach, data was collected and analysed, and coded thematically into what became different approaches to the problem disasters. This paper attempts to construct an analytical-religious framework for disasters with special focus on COVID-19 pandemic.

Religious Frameworks for Disasters Research and Analysis

The purpose of formulating theories is to provide an explanation, prediction, and understanding of a phenomenon which in most cases challenges or increases existing knowledge (Abend, 2008). A theoretical framework becomes the structure that provides meaning to a theory of a research study by introducing and describing why a problem under examination exists (Swanson, 2013). Its role is to connect the reader to existing knowledge and act as the basis for

formulating a hypothesis. Most significantly, frameworks address the 'why' and 'how' questions through a rational process of universalizing a phenomenon. This approach supports the observation by Adeney-Risakota that:

If the meaning of a disaster is determined by the questions we ask in the face of a tragedy, we should not be surprised that people of different gender, class, education, culture, religion, and socio-economic status will have different questions and different answers (Adeney-Risakota, 2009, p. 234).

In this paper, four major religious approaches to the understanding of COVID-19 pandemic were observed. These include what this paper calls; curse-centric, eschaton-centric, eco-centric, and plot-centric. The first two frameworks are highly founded on religious attribution, defined as "the extent to which one perceives stressful events as caused by God's love or God's anger" (Chan et al., 2012, p 178). The remaining two are a blend of science and religious beliefs.

a) The Curse-centric approach to disasters

This approach which is very common among the Judeo-Christian traditions and African traditional religions sees disasters as punishment from God for sins committed or for transgression of divine precepts. Since the time of the Old Testament, the Jewish people learnt to cope with several pandemics, holocausts, and disasters. In each case, their response was based on sin retribution and restoration. They blamed their sins for every disaster, and they attributed the punishment to a God who judges the wicked and sinful (Chester & Duncan, 2010). God's justice in dealing with sinful humanity is demonstrated in the Bible through the episodes of the flood in Exodus (7:4), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:2), draught and locusts (2 Chronicles 7:13-14), and God's declarations that He will send disasters if people fail to heed His voice (Amos 3:6). While the Judeo-Christian God of the Old Testament punished offenders for their transgression of His precepts, He remains a loving Father ready to bless His people should they turn away from their sinful ways. This means the Judeo-Christian religion subscribes to the notion of monism in which evil and goodness originate from a single source. The same loving God who protects his people against all forms of evil is the same God who punishes offenders as a matter of justice. In other words, this approach sees pandemics as originating from God's justice. In this way, pandemics are viewed as 'Acts of God.'

The African traditional religions have divergent curse-centric approaches to disasters and pandemics. African traditional beliefs on pandemics use both dualism and monism, depending on the society under investigation and often these are used concurrently. The most common dualistic approach says pandemics or evil originates not from God, but from other divinities like evil spirits (Mbiti, 1969). This approach subscribes to the existence of two powerful realities which are sources of good and evil. It personifies evil and looks at pandemics as bad divinities in contradistinction to the God of love. However, not all adherents of this view believe in the equality of divine powers. Some communities believe that God does not punish but permits lesser deities to inflict evil on human beings for sins of commission or

omission (Wethmar, 2006). Human beings transgress against lesser beings like ancestors who represents God. It is then the ancestors who can curse human beings in the form of pandemics. Consequently, pandemics in African traditional religions are often regarded as signal that the ancestors are not conciliated. They are a call for an appeasement of the spirits.

The curse-centric approach exists also in the Islamic religion. Three outstanding visions of natural evils dominant among the Moslem include disasters as punishment of Allah for the unbelievers, disasters as warning for sinners, and disasters as test for believers (Akxa, 2020). The first two propositions belong to the curse-centric approach while the last proposition belongs to the eschaton-centric. In the Holy Quran, it is said: "And whatever of misfortune befalls you, it is because of what your hands have earned. And He pardons much". (Ash-Shura 42:30). In another passage, it is said, "Evil has appeared on land and sea because of what the hands of men have earned, that Allah may make them taste a part of that which they have done, in order that they may return. (Ar-Rum 30:41).

When Covid 19 started to claim several lives in most countries, some people's immediate response was recourse to God's mercy for sins committed (Pieterse & Landman, 2021). For example, Zimbabwean government Minister of Defense was quoted by ENCA online news claiming that "Coronavirus is the work of God punishing countries who have imposed sanctions on us..." (ENCA, 2020). While this statement has been described as political (Shumba, Nyamaruze, and Nyambuya, 2020), it is reflective of the deep-seated religious belief among some people in God as a vindictive judge who uses disasters to demonstrate His justice. Earlier on, an American Pastor, John Mc Ternan while commenting on the devastation of Hurricane Harvey, was quoted online saying, "God is systematically destroying America" out of anger over "the homosexual agenda." (Schmalz, 2017). These examples demonstrate how people often associate disasters with God's anger.

The curse-centric approach to pandemics provides a (false) moral ground for collective reflection on human conduct. Like the traditional moral narratives, it is now understood in the context of myths of morality whose goal is to provide answers to the question of natural evil. Myths by their nature are traditional resources for answering timeless questions like pandemic disasters. In this way, myths are useful explanation when confronted with events that are beyond the capacity of human beings to comprehend. While some myths are factual, several of them are beyond scientific substantiation. The belief that pandemics signify God's anger for human transgression are sometimes based on religious beliefs arising out of myths of creation. This begs the question; how then can curse-centric myths be useful in Disaster Risk Reduction like the current COVID-19 pandemic?

Mythology as sacred tales are relevant to today just as it was in ancient history. Just as traditional myths acted as moral compass for each generation, the belief in COVID-19 as punishment from God serves as warnings that our conduct as human beings have divine ramification. What ecologists and environmentalist may

consider as anthropogenic consequences of *human versus nature* interaction; religion calls them spiritual consequences understood as a 'curse'. The warning that God punishes bad behavior, is contrasted with a promise that God rewards good behavior. Hence, the curse-centric approach can be a useful method for enforcing COVID-19 health protocols like social distancing, washing of hands, and putting on masks. Observation of health protocols can be presented as morally good conduct while infection by the disease becomes a sign of transgression.

Another negative impact emanating from the belief that disasters are punishments from God is the development of religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism leads to a complete rejection of scientific methods of dealing with pandemics. It often rejects deviations from religious tenets and sees in the sinner, a potential cause for pandemics. Consequently, fundamentalists see themselves as protectors of their religion to the extent of shedding lives in support of religious tenets. They can become violent in defense of their religious beliefs and makes it difficult for such programs like COVID-19 vaccinations to be implemented among their adherents when they feel it is against their faith.

Contrary to western assumption that religion lacks the ability and competence to make a valuable contribution to pandemics (Yendell, Hidalgo & Hillenbrand, 2021), religious leaders have a special place in communities that use the curse-centric approach to pandemics through communicating detailed and correct health information that could form part of human conduct during disaster situations. Religious leaders command sacred roles and their communications are received as moral authority. This should be accompanied by reference to religious texts like the bible or Quran. The use of religious text in supporting positive behavioral conduct serves to reinforce the religious belief in a God who rewards good conduct. As part of Disaster Risk Reduction strategies, religious leaders can develop religious manuals for use during times of disasters or pandemic. Such manuals can include lessons on how pandemics as punishments can be avoided through recourse to the doctrines on the 'care of the earth'. They can also act as sources of wellness information since the relation between religion and diseases have been since established from time immemorial (Dorff, 2002).

b) The Eschaton-centric approach to disasters

The eschaton-centric approach derives its origins from the 'Acts of God' in the same way as the curse-centric approach. The difference between the two lies in the fact that in the curse-centric approach, God's act is considered as punishment while in the eschaton-centric, the same act is considered salvific. An Act of God is salvific when it is directed toward the course of human events so that salvation begins in time through the actual happenings wrought by God in humankind. It begins in time and is brought to completion within the historic processes of human activity (New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 2020). In other words, an act of God is salvific when it seeks to deliver humankind from such fundamentally negative or disabling conditions as suffering, evil, finitude, and death. Human beings have no capacity to stop or change the course of events in 'acts of God.' Foundationally, all religions of the world are rooted in the logic of proffering salvation

to their adherents despite differences in how that salvation is conceptualized.

From an eschaton-centric perspective, there is nothing called coincidence in relation to pandemics. The COVID-19 outbreak cannot be understood outside God's plan for the salvation of human beings (Gouw, 2020). As an 'act of God', the pandemic is understood as signifying a message from God. Rumahuru and Kakiy (2020) pointed out that there is more literature on disasters as curses than the view that they are symbols of God's power. In secular literature, acts of God are associated with natural phenomenon, which in religious terms are referred to as natural evils. Unlike the curse-centric approach where pandemics are interpreted as outcomes of moral evils, the eschaton-centric approach considers disasters as natural evils with salvific significance. Religiously interpreted, God in His goodness cannot 'will' the suffering of His people through natural evils. Disasters and pandemics are believed to be meaningful only in relation to their salvific purpose.

The Judeo-Christian God was always known as omnibenevolent. While some proponents of several religions interpret disasters as punishment by an all-loving God in His bid to create a new world order, other believers strongly subscribe to the view that an omnibenevolent God cannot be associated with evil. In some African Traditional Religions, God is not the source of evil. Natural evil is dispensed by lesser beings like spirits and ancestors for specific reasons (Mbiti, 1969). Hence, natural evil remains God's secret salvific instrument for the good of the human species. The Holy Qumran further points at disasters as a test for believers signifying the eschatological dimension of natural evils. This supports Karl Rahner's assertion that eschatology is a characteristic of all religions and does not presuppose Christology because is a fundamental quality of most religions (Rahner, 1982). In this sense, all religions that subscribe to the doctrine of eschatology presume that whatever God does, has significance for ultimate things, of the last or final days, of the world to come, of life after death.

Among the most difficult group of religious adherents to COVID-19 protocols, were those who subscribed to the eschaton-centric approach to disasters. Their belief suggests that human beings cannot change God's course of action for the future of humanity. While several Christian denominations accepted vaccination as the panacea to reducing COVID-19 menace, some eschaton-centric denominations with the history of declining immunizations remained defiant. They argued that no amount of human intervention can prevent God's plan for the future of humanity. Such denominations like Dutch Reformed Congregations, Faith healing denominations, Faith Tabernacle, Church of the First Born, Faith Assembly, End Time Ministries, and Church of Christ, Scientist presented a strong argument against pandemic mitigation through vaccinations in favour of accepting the pandemic as God's Will (Dascoulias, 2021).

The Eschaton-centric approach to pandemics have several important implications. The most significant and popular impact of eschaton-centric approach is the creation of a sense of fatalism among adherents. Fatalism is a resigned attitude to human action

and misfortune that manifest itself in placing responsibility on fate or God for extreme events (Littlewood & Dein, 2013). When human beings believe that they have no control over pandemics and that they can never comprehend God's mind about natural evils, they develop a sense of helplessness which is often described as fatalism. Fatalism leads to despondence on seeking medical help or taking necessary steps to prevent infections. During the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2021, some churches described the lockdowns as works of the devil who is trying to thwart religions. Central to the doctrine of eschatology is the belief that God uses any method to achieve His ultimate end. Pandemics under this perspective is God's means of bringing about His kingdom on earth.

Positively, the eschaton-centric approach brought awareness to the world that scientific advancement alone is not enough to curb pandemics and disasters. The human mind remains limited in understanding the time, purpose, and object of natural evils. This calls for more research into scientific and religious meanings of pandemics and ways to mitigate their impacts. The approach leads to an appreciation of scientific advancement like the development of vaccines for dangerous pandemics like COVID-19. Religions begin to appreciate how God uses science to mitigate pandemics in contradistinction to the spirit of fatalism. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that it is not in the interest of God for people to recline into the spirit of defeatism. Just as the world was handed over to Adam and Eve at creation to subdue it, science is part of human beings' vocation towards co-creation.

Therefore, we can ask the question; How can an eschaton-centric approach to disasters be used in Disaster Risk Reduction like the COVID-19 pandemic? This approach is most useful in curbing the fatalistic assumption of most religions. The vision that God has control of natural evil means every suffering point towards a victorious ending. It also helps to restraint false doctrines about the significance of scientific solutions to natural evil. The benevolent God uses pandemics to advance scientific solutions as part of human beings' mandate to 'conquer and subdue the world' (Genesis 1:28). Last, it can be useful in disaster preparedness by building community resilience grounded on the premise that Human beings neither know the hour nor the day that natural evil may strike. Hence, governments and communities should prepare social and economic structure capable of mitigating any outbreak of pandemic.

c) The Eco-centric approach to disasters

The eco-centric approach to disasters is a new phenomenon sparked by the recent developments around the world on environmental consciousness and climate change variability. The approach which is rooted in process theology combines religious beliefs in the sovereignty of God as the creator of all that exists with scientific knowledge of the role of human being in God's work of creation. The starting point of an eco-centric approach is that; (i) everything that God created is good (Genesis 1:31) (ii) when God created the world, He did not complete the process, (iii) human beings were given dominion as stewardship to complete the process of creation, (iv) pandemics and disasters reflect human beings' abuse of stewardship over creation. Hence, the eco-centric

approach will blame human actions as the cause of most disasters and pandemics (Pope Francis, 2015).

The logic of this method is premised on the understanding that most pandemics and other hazards are triggered by human disturbances of the ecosystem. Conservation of the ecosystem is not just a biblical vocation for human beings but also finds expression in African traditional religions (Gumo et al., 2012). Traditional Africa did not conceive of human beings independent of other animate and inanimate objects. Such objects are perceived in spiritual terms and a violation of their existence has spiritual ramifications. Among the immediate consequences of the violation of the ecosystem spirituality are the frequencies of hazards and pandemics. Human beings often violate the environment through insatiable consumption, waste, and environmental destruction at levels that are unsustainable. Most religions support the view that God created a balanced ecosystem capable of sustaining lives of animate beings. The current experiences of ecosystem imbalances that has triggered the rise in hydrometeorological hazards can only be attributed to human actions.

The eco-centric understanding of pandemics is a fusion of both scientific facts and religious beliefs. During the peak of COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021, some religious adherents rejected curse-centric, eschaton-centric, and plot-centric preferring to focus on how pandemics are products of human beings having failed to heed the God-given role of being good stewards. This came out when the COVID-19 pandemic was attribution to Chinese health consumption patterns that include eating animals like bats (Kunzmann, 2021). In Zimbabwe, such approaches were manifested during the cholera outbreak in 2008-9 which people attributed to poor hygiene practices among the urban poor (Cuneo et al., 2017). The eco-centric approach is becoming more prominent in understanding natural evils in the global 21st century due to the rise in environmental consciousness.

The major advantage of the eco-centric approach to disaster meaning-making is that it is scientific and religious and can appeal to all people irrespective of their orientations. Eco-centric spirituality can be promoted among all people of the world as the solution to environmental protection programs. It can be meaningfully understood by people of all nations since its impacts can be verified in every locality. It is empirical and does not appeal to abstract religious views. It is also ideal for disaster risk reduction programs since the approach fits well with mitigation efforts of most international and national organizations. However, the danger with eco-centric approach is that it can substitute God with ecosystem protection. The challenge comes with certain natural phenomena that cannot be explained in terms of anthropogenic perspectives. For examples, earthquakes might not be directly linked to human actions but have capacity for greater disasters. This means human beings remain limited in understanding God's relationship with natural evils. The experience of COVID-19 pandemic has also demonstrated that natural reason alone is inadequate during times of extreme events. The pandemic has confirmed that human beings when experiencing fear, suffering, or illness often experience a "spiritual renewal."

The eco-centric approach is best useful in disaster preparedness and mitigation programs. It can be used in religious communities as a way of bringing environmental awareness. It is also useful in dispelling false religiosity that attach evil spirits to every phenomenon through an understanding stewardship as a vocation. Pandemics under this approach will be reduced to a divine response to human abuse of the ecosystem. It should be noted that human beings are naturally believing animals despite the existence of atheism. Environmental preservation devoid of its spiritual significance may not be effective among faith communities. The use of an eco-centric approach ensures pandemics like COVID-19 are meaningfully understood and precautionary protocols are embraced as consequential solutions to the problem.

d) The Plot-centric approach to disasters

The plot-centric approach which could be substituted as conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic is a common phenomenon among all people during times of disasters or extreme negative events (Yendell et al., 2021). Conspiracy theories are products of ignorance or intentional misinformation about a phenomenon or an extreme event that can lead to fear of the unknown (Multi-Religious Faith-in-Action, 2020). They are generated by a belief that a covert but influential spirit, individual, or organization is responsible for an unexplained event. Fear gives birth to imaginary explanations which come in the form of conspiracy theories. Sometimes conspiracy theories by their nature are a false representation of facts. They may be a result of ignorance or deliberate manipulation of information for political, religious, or economic gain (Pieterse & Landman, 2021).

Conspiracy theories do not follow a single pattern. They COVID-19 pandemic ignited religious conspiracies, political conspiracies, and economic conspiracies. Notably, conspiracy theories are a psychological reaction for dealing with existential uncertainties and ambiguities (Butter 2018). They are based not on conscious manipulation of real, subjective convictions, which are enormously attractive, especially in the light of gaps in knowledge, uncertainties, fears, and perceived threats which are sometimes sensationalist (Yendell et al., 2021, p. 30). In other words, conspiracy theories compete with scientific facts during a pandemic situation.

During the peak periods of 2020 to 2021 COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy theories were being flouted in both print media, social media, and online resources. For example, one religious leader described COVID-19 as the Evil One fighting back against the rapid growth of the Church he founded that led to loss of lives among his followers (Wildman et al., 2020). In some instances, religious people regarded the disease as a sign of the end of the world. Others have described the epidemic as political motivated. They believed the COVID-19 was a Western ploy for eradicate the Africans. The impact of the COVID-19 conspiracy theories was enormous throughout the world.

Conspiracy theories as an approach to disaster risk reduction has both positive and negative consequences. Positively, conspiracy theories though devoid of truth provides a holistic analysis of a phenomenon from a social, political, religious, and economic

perspective. COVID-19 conspiracy theories were useful in identifying the systemic forces, logical connections, and social dynamics surrounding pandemics of such magnitude (Yendell et al., 2021). However, the fact that conspiracy theories are based on assumptions or imaginary explanations most of which are false, creates greater risks of barriers to pandemic control. False information can increase social stigma which has the effect of decreasing mitigatory efforts by governments of communities. Unlike other approaches, plot-centric method of disaster risk reduction does not lend itself to any positive context for its application.

Conclusion

Religion has a critical role to play in disaster risk reduction. Understanding religious approaches to disasters and pandemics provides the necessary frameworks for mobilizing support for their prevention, mitigation, and response. There is a dearth of literature on religious frameworks for a disaster. The increased prevalence of disasters is an urgent call for the development of a theology of disasters in the global world. Arbitrary responses to pandemics among the faith communities have often been met with resistance and in some instances which exacerbated the negative impacts of the pandemics. International organizations like the United Nations, the African Union, the European Union among others are beginning to appreciate the role of faith leaders in disaster management.

The four religious' approaches to disaster meaning-making discussed in this paper are not independent of each other. In some places during the COVID-19 pandemic, all the four approaches could be experienced simultaneously within same faith community. However, disasters like pandemics sometimes affect communities differently calling for approaches that respect the plurality that characterizes the different faith communities. At the national and sub-national levels, political leadership must understand the significance of involving religious leaders in disaster risk reduction programs. Of significance in this collaboration is the role of religious leaders in communicating the facts about the disaster or pandemic using appropriate approaches to reduce stigma and conspiracy theories.

The relationship between faith and reason must find accompany disaster risk reduction programs. Religious beliefs must not be divorced from scientific truths. Beliefs devoid of rationality often lead to irrational fideism and fundamentalism whose tenets have proved dangerous. However, science alone cannot provide answers to some fundamental events of life like pandemics which often go beyond the capacity of the human mind to comprehend. The eco-centric and plot-centric approaches provide an opportunity for knowledge sharing among the faith communities during periods of disaster preparedness or pandemic responses. Efforts must be made to create awareness programs on disasters among faith communities.

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