



# The voice of God and the voice of the State: The ambivalence of obedience

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.517>

## Abstract

When the government in South Africa announced restrictions on the number of people that could meet in the wake of COVID-19, churches started implementing those measures in order to comply. This happened during the build-up to Easter celebrations. Even over the radio, Christians started to pronounce measures that would address such restrictions during Easter celebrations. Those pronouncements carried with them insinuations on how even the government should not encroach on the churches' mandate to hold these celebrations. As it turned out, the restrictions were short-lived as they were immediately followed by lockdown. The rhetoric of criticising the government's encroachment to the territory that belonged to the church was replaced by silent obedience. Faceless meetings erupted as congregants were organised into virtual groups complete with leaders and followers. At the same time, the criticism that had been placed on congregants who attended church on television ceased as many graduated from that tendency into attending church on their mobile phones. But this came with mixed responses as not all congregants had the necessary internet connectivity. This paper interrogates the tension between obeying the voice of God and the voice of the State. This is looked through two congregations: one in the ultra-urban uMhlanga area in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal Province and the other in the town of Empangeni in KwaZulu-Natal. The methodology employed in the paper is ethnography where the two churches are presented in the tradition of ethnographic thick description.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, church meetings, virtual meetings, church obedience, state

## Introduction

In isiZulu, the saying *Kuvalwe ngehlaha* (a green branch closing the gate) has history behind it. It sprang from the time when the Nguni tribes were still beyond the Zambezi River. In those times, the tribes were afflicted by a plague similar to the corona virus disease of 2019 (abbreviated as COVID-19). The plague presented itself with excruciating fatal headaches. Similar measures such as closing borders so that people from infected areas could not cross were implemented. Special warriors called 'Dedicates' were dispatched into the infected areas with the sole mandate of burning the kraals (traditional African village of huts, typically enclosed by a fence) of the infected and making sure that families with the infected were destroyed. "In other parts, if a man finds a wife or a child struck by the plague, he was to immediately tie a large branch with green leaves across the entrance to his kraal to warn passers-by to keep clear and to attract the attention of the 'Dedicates'" (Mutwa, 1998: 465). History seems to have repeated itself in COVID-19.

COVID-19 unexpectedly took the world by storm. For many, because it was the first kind of such a global scourge in recent times, it appeared overwhelmingly disastrous. However, plagues are not new and there are various ways in which people have responded to them. The Roman Empire,

for instance, experienced great plagues in 165 CE and 251 CE (Piper, 2020). What is interesting in these two great plagues is the manner in which Christians responded. Piper (2020) states that in the world of the Roman Empire which was ruled by gods, there was a prevalent belief that gods were not interested in the affairs of human beings, and so there was no religious or cultural foundation that represented mercy and sacrifice outside Christianity. During the plagues therefore, people were left to die as it was believed that it was unjust to render them any unearned relief (Piper, 2020). Christians however, when the physicians fled from those who were diseased, ministered to the dying and the dead across the boundaries of family and faith ties, extending to all afflicted humanity. These sacrificial acts of mercy won the hearts of the people long after the plagues (Piper, 2020). COVID-19 regulations of fighting the spread of the disease, however, emphasised social distancing which seemed to counter the foundational ethos of Christianity.

Furthermore, even though COVID-19 devastated lives across the globe, it was not unprecedented. Piper (2020), for example, reports that the global influenza epidemic of 1918 is said to have killed about fifty million people globally, and five hundred thousand of those were from the United States of America. Measures to curb the spread of the disease, similar to the COVID-19 ones were instituted. Such measures included the closure of schools and public gatherings. The situation was so catastrophic that ministers spoke of Armageddon (Piper, 2020). In one particular unfortunate incident, a man was gunned down for failure to wear a mask (Piper, 2020). This was obviously too drastic compared to the arrest of Pastor Myeni of Clones of Fire Ministries for conducting a church service during lockdown in Ngwelezane on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020 (Zincume, 2020).

### **Face-to-face meetings in Christianity**

The Christian church from its inception has always been characterised by gatherings either in homes or in bigger meeting venues. Even in times where such gatherings were prohibited in repressive regimes, the underground church continued to meet sometimes in caves or other hidden venues (Wurmbrand, 2013). These meetings essentially mark the congregants as belonging to a different sect. Throughout church history, Christian churches have grown in various ways. This growth has been characterised by meeting venues that speak of the magnitude of congregants to such an extent that church has come to be identified with physical buildings than congregants.

Some have however criticised the ethos of big gatherings arguing that it does not reflect the actual practice when the church was formed (Viola, 2007). In fact, Viola (2007) further criticises such expressions as 'church service' and 'going to church' in favour of 'meetings', which he argues are "spontaneous, interactive, participatory, and Spirit-led". But even in this argument, the ethos is that of a face-to-face meeting.

Furthermore, Compolo (2020) argues that "humanness is created and maintained through face-to-face relationships which have spiritual dimensions to them". He further argues that the proliferation of such technologies as iPhones robs people of their humanising relationships. Such tendencies are similar to teenagers who no longer play games with each other but are kept transfixed to their computer games (Compolo, 2020). Thus, Compolo (2020) emphasises the importance of face-to-face encounters as the main means in which God encounters us. These encounters are referred to as 'I-Thou encounter' which, according to Compolo (2020), lifts us from the mundane to experience the essence of God that humanises us.

Even though Compolo (2020) is critical of virtual platforms that have replaced authentic face-to-face meetings, many have sought a platform in these spaces in different ways. Castellanos (2002: 227), for instance, argues that technologies such as internet, television, and radio are essential

in today's church in order to reach people with the gospel and for the sake of "multiplication of disciples and at the same time to keep personal contact with the people who are being guided".

### **Obedience in Christianity**

It goes without saying that the church is founded on the strong ethos of obedience. According to Douglas (1977: 904), the New Testament words used to refer to obedience have a connotation of "hearing that takes place *under* the authority or influence of the speaker, and that leads *into* compliance with his requests or orders" [emphasis in the original]. Although the fundamental obedience in Christian faith is directed to God, it is also extended to the family, the church, and the State, which are regarded as part of obedience to God (Douglas, 1977). In other words, obeying parents, the church leaders and the government are taken as obedience to God. The only proviso in this arrangement though, is that when these institutions claim something contrary to God, disobeying them becomes the only way of obeying God (Douglas, 1977).

There have been numerous debates on the extent at which the church must obey the State. These debates are driven by the willingness to remain obedient both to God and to the State without replacing the fear of God with the fear of the State. Baines (2020) argues that Paul's exhortation in Roman 13 does not necessarily prevent Christians from resisting a corrupt government, but suggests that everything should be done in love and not in anger. He goes on to quote various characters in the Bible who resisted those in authority including Israelites during their enslavement in Egypt, the three Hebrew boys who refused to bow to the idol that Nebuchadnezzar had made, and even Jesus who often criticised the Sanhedrin (Baines, 2020).

Stockton (2010) also argues along the lines of Paul's exhortation in Romans 13. He believes that the church is only obliged to obey the government which is ordained by God – such a government is the one that governs according to the Bible. The question, however, that this poses is the time at which such ordination occurs. Does God ordain the government before or after they start governing? The logic is that ordination should occur at the beginning so that when governance starts, it is legitimated upon that ordination. But this poses challenges for Stockton's (2010) reasoning because if ordination occurs at the beginning, then the government remains ordained throughout their governance. This means, the church is obliged to obey such a government regardless. To this, Stockton (2010) would argue that the failure of the government to govern according to the Bible is an indication that God's ordination is not there, which is logically a slippery slope.

Hamburger (2002) raises a question of whether there should be any separation between the church and the State. He traces this argument from its historical trajectory. He argues that there has been opposing views throughout history coming from within and without the church. Even those who appear to favour the separation of the church and State have an ambivalent stance in that they simultaneously expect the State to place equal recognition across all churches regardless of affiliation and doctrinal lineage (Hamburger, 2002). In this respect, it seems that the two entities must co-exist. This implies that there will be recognition of one by the other and that obedience would be reciprocal.

In a series of articles published almost fifty years ago, Kurland (1961) set out to prove how the courts in the USA interpreted the non-separation of the church and the State. For instance, in one case, the community had laid charges against religious schools who were receiving free school books from the State for the learners. The complainants argued that since the religious schools were not using the curriculum of the State which prohibited the teaching of religion or any other modern language but English, it was improper use of their taxes if these schools were receiving free textbooks intended for public schools. The courts concluded that the free textbooks were not

for the benefit of the religious schools or the denominations under which they were affiliated but for the learners who belonged to the State. Kurland (1961) implies that such indicates there was no separation between the State and the church.

The arguments regarding the relationship between the State and the church are based on various historical experiences. During the colonial expansion, the British Empire utilised three Cs: Christianise, commercialise, and civilise, in carrying out that agenda (Pakenham, 2014). This obviously means that the church was used as a state instrument in carrying out the colonial agenda. This is one of the reasons why even in Germany, the Lutheran Church was accused of complicity with the Nazi regime in exterminating the Jews because they had bought into Hitler's rhetoric that, according to Romans 13, the church must obey the government (Stockton, 2010). In South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church was also known as a state church that was responsible for apartheid's spiritual fibre (Luthuli, 2006).

At the same time, the church has worked for the emancipation of the oppressed throughout the ages. Starting from the Roman Empire, the church brought a different regime of ministering the works of mercy to the suffering (Singer, 2014; Piper, 2020). In South Africa, the church has played a significant role in representing the oppressed; for instance, the Anglican Church through reverends such as Rev. Stubbs who assisted Steve Biko's brother and other youths who were incarcerated for belonging to POQO, the military wing of the then banned Pan Africanist Congress (Biko, 2009), and the Bishop of Johannesburg who arranged for the defense of Treason Trialists (Luthuli, 2014). These were not working with the State. In fact, they were doing what was contrary to the voice of the State. They therefore represented the side of the church that did not dance to the music of the State. The big question therefore is who is adhering to the voice of God among these different churches? Those whose lineage is with the government in all respects would easily associate churches that do not question the government with absolute obedience and therefore the ideal ones. However, those whose lineage is with the people in their various experiences would quickly associate churches that respond to the plight of the people with absolute obedience to the voice of God.

It is now fitting to turn the focus to the two churches in KwaZulu-Natal who found themselves having to respond to the COVID-19 with all its regulations as pronounced by the government. These churches are presented in the tradition of an ethnographic thick description in order to trace the persuasions that underscore their response to COVID-19. Suffice it to mention that the employed ethnography is characterized by "a focus on a discrete location, event(s) or setting ... and with the full range of social behaviour in that location, event(s) or setting" (Scott & Morrison, 2007: 90).

### **The case of two churches in KwaZulu-Natal**

The first church is located in the town of Empangeni in the northern area of KwaZulu-Natal. It is relatively medium-sized hosting approximately 200 members per Sunday service. Although the membership has mixed races, it is predominantly white, with a sizable number of senior citizens. Many of the church members are business owners in various sectors ranging from farming and healthcare to finance and construction.

The news of COVID-19 as it spread across the globe was received with a suspicion of exaggeration. Many congregants including the pastoral felt that there was too much attention paid to the virus which was diluting focus to the message of faith. There was a feeling that too much credit was given to the virus instead of elevating the work of Christ who is above every visible and invisible being. There was therefore an air of resistance to the credibility of the power of the virus. This happened largely before there were any cases of infected people in the country. This

however did not dampen the reality of the happenings as those with infected relatives overseas began to raise prayer requests for their relatives' healing.

When the first cases of infections in the country were reported, the government announced restrictions on gatherings, social distance and hand hygiene. This was undoubtedly going to disturb the culture of church gathering. Every Sunday meeting consists of a number of individuals who stand at the entrance greeting those arriving by either shaking their hands or hugging them. In order to comply with the new government regulations, hand sanitisers were placed in places where greeters used to stand and next to them, a smiley emoticon representing the greeting of the absent greeters. Furthermore, the sitting arrangement was changed such that there were spaces in-between and chairs were limited to what the space could accommodate. A separate sitting at a café area usually used for social fellowship was arranged to make up for a total of a hundred congregants. Congregants were given an option to stay at home and watch the service online. As it turned out, many congregants opted to watch the service online as the extra sitting in the café area remained empty.

Before the church could enter the second service in this manner, the government announced lockdown for the whole country. This immediately stopped physical gatherings of any nature and every meeting was plunged into an online abyss. This church immediately organised congregants into WhatsApp groups under a leader who kept every member updated on every church activity. At the same time, a prayer point for each day was shared which was to last for the duration of lockdown. All other activities including prayer meetings and Sunday services were held in various online platforms including live streaming through YouTube and Zoom.

By this time, the attitude about COVID-19 had taken a very serious tone as some congregants started to report close relatives who had become infected. It took an even serious tone when a well-known church leader reported to have contracted the virus. But the spirit of believing that Christ was above all did not subside. Even the term 'lockdown' was changed to 'incubation' to highlight the point that this period was part of God's plan to prepare the church for the birth of something important.

This church responded to every government pronouncement with a complete sense of compliance. The government was seen as working for the good of the nation and the leaders were often prayed for in order to continue directing the country into the right direction especially during this period.

The second church is situated in the ultra-urban suburb of uMhlanga Ridge in the Durban area of KwaZulu-Natal Province. The church services a mixed-race congregation. Most congregants are middle-aged with a growing youth membership. Many business owners around the area attend this church. The church has a close relationship with other members across the globe.

When COVID-19 broke out around the world, the church was preparing for an annual international conference, which was going to be addressed by speakers from the USA. As travel restrictions in other parts of the world were instated, the conference had to be cancelled. This was immediately followed by the government's announcement about restrictions in meetings, social distance and hand hygiene.

The church responded by announcing that greeters in church would no longer impose handshakes and hugs but would only exchange smiles to show their welcome. In addition, sanitisers were placed in various sections of the building for congregants, who were also encouraged to wash hands regularly. Moreover, those congregants who felt uncomfortable to attend church during this period were given an option to join the online service. When all these

measures were taken, the leaders of the church emphasised that this was not done out of fear but rather out of wisdom. In other words, the response was not meant to communicate any fear for the virus but wisdom in curbing the spread of the virus.

When the country went into lockdown, the church went totally online. The Sunday services were streamed live on Facebook and YouTube. These services were attended by people from as far away as the UK, Australia and the USA. Even pastoral care went online for those who needed it. The annual Easter celebrations fell within lockdown period and had to go online totally. The church went on to establish a relief fund in order to respond to those affected by COVID-19. Also, a group of business owners was established in order to equip each other and share business relief information. Furthermore, the church organised for the relief of the vulnerable by volunteering to do grocery and medicine deliveries for those who were in need.

As church activities had completely gone online, various activities were posted including activities for fun for both children and adults, activities that promoted physical exercise, spiritual resources in the form of sermons, prayer requests and articles. Furthermore, the church organised giving to be done online through EFT and Zapper.

This church responded to the government pronouncements about COVID-19 in total compliance explaining their stance as an act of marrying faith with wisdom.

## **Discussion**

COVID-19 destabilised many operations at global level including education, business, entertainment etc. The church was not left out. The biggest challenge with COVID-19 is that it did not give anybody time to plan for an appropriate response to it. Various sectors found themselves having to rely on directions given by the government. It was not anticipated that the fundamental ethos of various sectors will be shaken to the core. The church, having its mandate derived from God, would have found it difficult to adhere to regulations that threatened its fundamental practice of meeting together. COVID-19 nonetheless was to prove that it is no respecter of any. This is underscored by how the two churches responded to the government's regulations.

It is true that face-to-face meetings are the main characteristic of religious experience in the context of the church (Viola, 2007; Wurmbrand, 2013; Compolo, 2020). These meetings have persisted throughout history even when the church was faced with persecution – opting to meet underground. In fact, the mandate to hold these meetings is traceable from the first church where, among other scriptures, Hebrews 10:25 exhorts believers not to neglect meeting together. In the same scripture, the habit of not meeting together is associated with falling away. For this reason, therefore, anything that threatens to disrupt this fundamental practice is likely to be associated with war against God. It is therefore understandable that ministers, during the influenza epidemic of 1918, spoke of Armageddon (Piper, 2020), not only in the catastrophic destruction left by the epidemic but also because the prohibition to hold church meetings in order to curb the spread of influenza was taken as the battle against the spiritual establishment of the church. It is interesting to note, however, that the two churches in this paper do not seem to have read the regulations that prohibited meeting together to be encroaching the very essence of the church. There are possible explanations to such unquestionable compliance.

The first possible explanation to how these churches responded could come from their location. These churches are both located in the urban areas, which are characterised by modern amenities of the fourth and even fifth industrial revolutions. These churches already had an online presence long before COVID-19, even though it was not used for virtual meetings. Members of these churches as well had established online interactions based on their work portfolios as

business persons. Moving church meetings into a virtual platform therefore was not seen as contradicting the fundamental ethos of meeting together because their companies were also using similar platforms as well. Even the financial state of these churches did not seem to be affected as online giving had been established prior. But things were different for churches situated far away from modern amenities which could partly explain why Pastor Myeni of Clones of Fire Ministries broke lockdown regulations to hold a church meeting in Ngwelezane Township (Zincume, 2020). Pastor Myeni pastored a church in the peri-urban outskirts of Ngwelezane Township in Empangeni. His congregation consisted of only black Africans. He made headlines in local newspapers when he was reported to have held a church service during level five lockdown and was subsequently arrested.

The second explanation to such compliance could be traced on the interpretation of obedience. Both churches are very much aware that God's voice must be followed and faith in God must not be compromised. This is seen in how the first church reacts to the proliferation of COVID-19 news by insisting that focus should be on Christ and not on the virus. This was meant to communicate that the church will not tolerate anything that posed itself above Christ, implying in the process, that congregants must pay attention to the voice of Christ rather than the voice of the media. Even the second church couched its compliance response by stating that it was not just blind compliance rather the application of wisdom. This was to indicate that by complying with the government regulations, they were not disobeying God.

The absence of resistance to the prohibition of face-to-face meetings could also mean that these churches equated their obedience to the government as tantamount to obeying God. Such obedience is normally based on the application of Romans 13 (Stockton, 2010; Baines, 2020) where unquestioned obedience to the rulers is envisaged. It would therefore make sense for these two churches in this paper to obey the government regulations because they would be fulfilling their obedience to God. Furthermore, as Kurland's (1961) and Hamburger's (2006) arguments would attest, the two churches would have regarded the church and the State as two symbiotic entities bound together by the humanity they serve, where the church caters for spiritual needs whilst the State caters for physical needs. It would appear fruitless to oppose the institution to which you depend, i.e., the people of God equally belong to the State. In order to ensure that the State looks after its people, the church would have to walk alongside and not in the opposite direction – so would the two churches have reasoned.

Unfortunately, the downside to such unquestioned obedience is that it makes the likes of Pastor Myeni and his Clones of Fire Ministries (Zincume, 2020) look like renegades whilst they would in fact be responding to the practical spiritual needs of congregants who do not have any virtual platform from which they could get this nourishment. Such disobedience as well could mean resistance to any system that seeks to establish itself above the dictates of God, in this case, by forbidding the habit of meeting together as instituted in the Bible. The total obedience of the two churches in this paper, however, might possibly make them regard Clones of Fire Ministries a disobedient sect. In fact, the most affluent churches, which the two churches could be said to represent, tend to be more receptive to the government whilst those that are closer to the people tend not to walk on the same lane with the government. This is true of the state sponsored churches such as the German Lutheran Church during Hitler's regime (Stockton, 2010) and the South African Dutch Reformed Church during apartheid (Luthuli, 2006). The challenge that the church would face therefore lies in balancing its obedience to God and the State.

The last explanation to the compliance of these two churches could be based on the natural flight response. These two churches found themselves having to respond to COVID-19 regulations that did not only apply to churches exclusively but to all forms of gatherings. At first, news of the ravages of COVID-19 across the globe was thought to be an exaggeration probably because it

was the first of its kind in recent history and also because God was believed to be greater than anything including COVID-19. The reality of deaths and infections none the less could have caused the churches not to think about the fundamentals of their religious practice but to get into a flight mode. In reality, however, COVID-19 pandemic being a medical condition logically called for strictly following the instructions of the medical experts. Perhaps if the restrictions were only targeted to the church, then resistance might have been mounted. Notwithstanding that, there are possibly many other churches like Clones of Fire Ministries that were prepared to look at death in the face and believe that their habit of meeting together as part of their obedience to God would thwart the effects of the virus.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to argue the motivations behind the church's response to COVID-19. It is clear that the two churches used in this paper represent the side that would unquestioningly obey the State. This obedience is understood in the immediate availability of alternatives in the fact that these two churches do not seem to struggle with taking their meetings to the virtual platform. The absence of such alternatives could explain the resistance mounted by such churches as Clones of Fire Ministries that went ahead and conducted church services contrary to the government's prohibition. The impact that this had for remote churches that did not have virtual platforms to hold meetings is incalculable. Unlike these two churches whose financial state would be less affected because giving had already been taken to the online platform prior to the pandemic, the churches in remote areas would obviously suffer both spiritual hunger and loss of revenue.

In addition to the immediate availability of virtual platforms for the typical urban church, the response to COVID-19 illustrates fundamental beliefs about the relationship between the church and the State. Whilst on the one hand the church wishes to appear obedient to the voice of God by either drawing congregants away from too much preoccupation with COVID-19 or preventing them from acting out of fear as if God has no authority over corona virus; on the other hand, the absence of resistance to the encroachment of the government on issues that are instituted by God such as meeting together indicates bias in favour of the voice of the State. Such bias would indicate that the church depends on the government and not the other way round. But resistance mounted by such churches as Clones of Fire Ministries indicates that this bias could be based in more affluent churches in urban settings. None the less, this resistance by churches in remote areas could not only be driven by fundamental allegiance to God's expectations but could also be driven by a quest for spiritual and physical survival in the reality that these churches could only make income through the physical presence of congregants.

The churches' response to COVID-19 may have also revealed the basic human response of flight in the wake of danger. The absence of questioning the government's pronouncement on the matter that is supposed to be fundamental in church existence could only mean the seriousness with which the church took COVID-19. It might also suggest subconscious fear of death as the other church tried to emphasise that their response was driven by the application of wisdom through faith and not fear. This fear would be enough to abandon any argument about creeds and observances.

Whether the response to COVID-19 as illustrated in the analysis of the two churches does indeed reduce congregants into mere human beings who must quickly escape the path of death even if it threatens the fundamentals of their belief systems, it remains to be answered whether such a response does not sell the church as not fundamentally devoted to the voice of God as it is generally thought to be. But again, it remains to be answered whether the State has not really stepped into the territory of God by not considering the tenets of what the church considers to be



the fibre of their being as shown in such actions as incarcerating Pastor Myeni for doing what is fundamental to his mandate as the leader of the church.

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