



The Crumbling Empire? Liberation Theological Investigation into the Impact of COVID-19 on South African Communities

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Abstract

The advent of the COVID-19 has generated a profound sense of uncertainty and insecurity among societies all over the world, and South Africa (SA) has not been spared. Within a short period of time, COVID-19 has triggered an unprecedented pandemonium in the world: the global systems have crumbled; socioeconomic systems have been halted; and the geopolitical environment itself cannot contain it. The long-time established empires of power and control are also on the verge of collapse. The language and *linguaging* have suddenly changed. The scenario shaped by the COVID-19 obliges to confirm that human beings have shortcomings. At the core of the advent of COVID-19 and its devastating impact to society, the following questions are being probed: What has happened? For some individuals, the advent of the COVID-19 has a biblical/theological elucidation. Does the COVID-19 have a divine cause, and that human sin has motivated the disease? Who are accountable for mesmerising it? Regardless of many questions that people might have regarding the emergence of COVID-19, the impact of the disease on humans does not permit a casual approach. What is critical at the moment is a robust approach towards combating the disease. The present study attempts to respond to the above questions from three angles, namely: (1) It is argued that the COVID-19 originated from China, and was transported to SA by the affluent, (2) The study is a liberation theological inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on the poor and the less-privileged communities of SA, and (3) The study is an invitation to the sacred institution to reinvigorate the theology of the Cross. The study proposes that the contemporary church should lend its voice to the voiceless.

Keywords: Crumbling empires, COVID-19, Coronavirus, (South) African communities, global systems, shortcomings, liberation theological investigation.

Introduction

The South African (SA) society is enduring the quarantine due to the emergence and severity of the COVID-19. Previous studies on Coronavirus suggest that the virus was not as severe as COVID-19 (e.g., Weiss & Navas-Martin, 2005). According to the report released by the World Health Organisation (WHO), a cluster of pneumonia cases was reported in Wuhan City, China, on 31 December 2019 (Anderson, 2020). It is generally perceived that the COVID-19 was brought by South African itinerants and bourgeoisies who could afford air travels and foreigners coming for business and holidays. When local people converse among themselves in their indigenous language using the phrase *Isifo sebanoyi* (meaning “aeroplane disease”) the depiction is that the Coronavirus was transported to SA by people who have the capacity to consummate a flight trip. When the disease came to SA the impact was never as severe as it



devastated societies in Europe and the West. Hence, SA, among other nations, has avowed a state of national disaster as a preventive measure towards combating COVID-19.

While on the one hand COVID-19 brought with it some devastating consequences, on the other hand, crime has also dropped as a result of the lockdown. According to Hlatshaneni (2020:6), a decline in crime rate was attributed to police and army presence among communities. Hlatshaneni (2020:6) also opined that experts have argued that reduced alcohol consumption was not the main contributor to the country's lower crime numbers. It has been established that 60% degeneration in violence statistics has been attributed to the lockdown (Hlatshaneni 2020:6). Nevertheless, the Coronavirus has affected numerous strata of human life: economy, politics, industry, business, transport, health, social, income, the job market, and many others. Besides the scars and trails of fatalities left behind by the COVID-19, business as a whole has suffered immense losses as a consequence of both the national and international travel ban. Of special note is the impact experienced by the Travel and Tourism (T&T) sector which to a large extent remains the major economic booster of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of numerous countries. The suffering of the people of SA, which is expected to continue for a while, has been exacerbated by the crumbling of the economic giants, including China, Germany, Italy and United States of America (USA). Larger economies (e.g., Britain, China, Italy, USA, etc.) have also suffered unfathomable setbacks while making efforts towards responding to and coping with humanitarian crises through researches on preventing the spread as well as remedying the disease through vaccines and other preventative measures such as social distancing and compulsory mask wearing.

When this study examines global issues pertaining to COVID-19 in view of the phrase "crumbling empire," reference is hereby made to established economies in which fatalities of the disease were more severe than in developing nations such as SA. In addition to that, like in any humanitarian crisis, the affected people always require alternative supportive systems to deal with both their emotional and physical needs, including food items. The present study argues that SA's alliance with the empires that are adversely affected by the COVID-19 as mentioned above impacts negatively on SA's economy. In my discussion of the COVID-19 and its impact on SA from a liberation theological perspective, I will delve into exploring the opinions of some theologians on the liberation of the poor, the less-privileged and the marginalised and on the theology of the Cross in view of the role played by the church to salvage the plight of those who remain on the margins. It is argued that although the impact of COVID-19 has affected SA as a nation, the poor, the less-privileged and the underside of our population are the worst affected in view of the pandemonium in the market economy. Currently, South Africa sits with alarming numbers of unemployed people and the challenge of social grants – thereby exacerbating the situation.

The Aims and Objectives

The present study comprises three (3) main aims and objectives submitted as follows:

- (1) To submit for the readership, the argument that the COVID-19 first emerged in Wuhan, China on 17 November 2019, but began to be known in SA in March 2020. Before that time, the disease was only a Chinese problem.
- (2) The phrase "crumbling empires" is discussed in view of the global economic giants and individuals in privileged positions of power who are battling to combat the COVID-19.
- (3) The study attempts to highlight the plight of the poor, the less-privileged and the marginalised as a consequence of COVID-19. It is not the aim of this research to



promote dependency syndrome. However, in times of a national crisis, there is need to assist such people.

Statement of the Problem

Three specific problems collectively comprise the main milieus dominating the present discourse:

- (1) COVID-19 is a recent development, and scholarly contributions on the virus are scarce. The present study becomes a resource for further research on the new findings about COVID-19 for both the general readership and the academic community.
- (2) The debate on the “crumbling empire” in view of COVID-19 has never been explored. The study attempts to problematise the notion that humans have their shortcomings. Even the established empires with every resource and modern technology at their disposal, have also succumbed to the devastating effects of COVID-19.
- (3) The idea enshrined in the phrase *Isifo sebanoyi* (“the disease of the aeroplane”) in relation to COVID-19 has not been investigated. The interpretation of the phrase mentioned above is that people of the Third World: the poor, the less-privileged, and the voiceless are implicated and devastated by the COVID-19 which appeared on the continent through people in positions of power.

Methodology

The present study utilised a desk research (also known as “secondary data analysis”), in which previous contributions on the themes covered in this discourse including Coronavirus were explored. These sources included: book chapters, journal articles, theses and dissertations. Some examples of previous scientific researches on the pandemic include: Krempf, Schultze and Herrler (1995:371-374); Bonavia et al. (2003:2530-2538); Weiss and Navas-Martin (2005: 635-664), among numerous others. The proponents of liberation theology comprise inter alia James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Jurgen Moltmann. One is also mindful of various other sources of information surrounding COVID-19, such as: theories/opinions, church/political rhetoric, newspaper articles, gossip, informal discussions, media/press release, and briefings, among other. These sources will be utilised in developing the present investigation. In the next section, this study commences by examining the crumbling empire.

The Crumbling Empire

The SA capitalist society comprises largely the beneficiaries of the former colonial system. Britain, China, France, Germany, Italy, and USA, among others, remain the strongest empires of the world in terms of both political stamina and economic stability (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012:46-54). Britain, France, Germany, Italy and UK were involved in the colonisation of Africa, except China and USA. Examples of African countries which were under colonial rule include: SA (Britain), Morocco (France), Rwanda (Germany), and Libya (Italy), to name a few (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012:46-54). It will not be reasonable for the previously colonised or oppressed societies to expect the former colonial master to reify pathways towards their emancipation, empowerment and efforts towards poverty reduction. Hence, James Cone pointed out that “...black people’s struggle for justice in a nation whose social, political, and economic structures are dominated by a white racist ideology” (1985:755). A fall in the market economy involving the aforementioned empires will affect the whole system on the global market economy and ultimately strike the hardest at the marginalised populations.



SA belongs to a group of five countries known as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China & SA). Chen (2019) espoused that the five countries in the BRICS are regarded as the fastest growing economies in the world. Leaders from the BRICS regularly attend summits together and often act in concert with each other's interests. For Eisenstadt (1986, cited in Lamberg-Karlovsky, 2009:3) it was not an oversight not to mention SA in discussing "Autonomous elites" emerging in the later axial age civilisations comprising Han China, ancient Greece, Israel, and Brahman India. Thus, SA was associated with ancient civilisations and ancient economic powerhouses when she became a member of BRICS in 2011. Nevertheless, O'Neill (2012) has argued that: "SA has too small an economy. There are not many similarities with the other four countries in terms of the numbers." With the advent of the COVID-19, the fragmentation and crumbling of BRICS is apparent due to the travel ban because it is not "business as usual." When the present study discusses the "crumbling empire" reference is made to examples such as BRICS and other countries that are traditionally known as economic powerhouses. Borrowing Fanon's (1963) concept of "the wretched earth," our postbiblical world is in chaos as a consequence of the COVID-19.

One would not intend to totally discredit SA's alliance with the international community; countries rely on foreign investment and inflows of foreign currency in a nation. However, one would also be skeptical about the interests of other overseas countries in both their socioeconomic and geopolitical relations with Africa in general and SA in particular. A *horse and a rider* scenario (see Hazvina, Zivengwa & Makocheke, 2010:81-102) continue to enslave African nations. Hence, when some European countries had proposed that the vaccine for COVID-19 be tested first in Africa, it did not receive a majority African consensus. When this study talks about crumbling empires, reference is made to nurturing "coloniality nostalgia among twenty-first century Africans" (Bissell, 2014:215-248).

The Impact of COVID-19 in SA

The impact of the COVID-19 in SA is explored first by briefly examining the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Department of Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs highlighted, among other things, that: "The COVID-19 crisis presents an unprecedented challenge, unmatched since the Spanish Flu of 1918 and the Great Depression of the period 1925-1936 (Albers & Uebele, 2015:1-95). Although the Great Depression hit many countries, its epicentre was in the USA (D'Apice & Ferri 2010:39-44; see also Romer, 1990: 597-624). Romer (2003) provides a summary of the impact of the Great Depression as follows:

- (1) The most obvious economic impact of the Great Depression was human suffering,
- (2) In a short period of time world output and standards of living dropped precipitously,
- (3) One fourth of the labour force in industrialised countries was unable to find work in the early 1930s.

According to Greene (2016: xviii) religious leaders of the conventional Christian denominations were reluctant to abandon long-held precepts about the causes of material distress and initially viewed the Great Depression as a sign of spiritual decline. According to the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) (2020) a team of researchers collected 585 environmental samples from the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China on 1 January and 12 January 2020. CDCP further reported that the researchers detected 33 samples containing SARS-CoV-2 and indicated that it originated from wild animals sold in the market. Anderson (2020) also reported that: "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus"



(SARS-CoV-2) was confirmed by WHO as the causative agent of what we now know as “Coronavirus disease 2019” (COVID-19). The virus has since spread to more than 100 countries, including SA. Weiss and Navas-Martin (2005:635) had previously confirmed that Coronaviruses infect many species of animals, including humans. The impact of COVID-19 on communities in SA is a major cause for concern. The reason why the government declared a state of national disaster by calling for a lockdown is an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus. The South African Government (SAGov.) (2020) in view of the Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002, announced the following:

- (1) From midnight on Thursday 26 March all South Africans will have to stay at home.
- (2) The categories of people who will be exempted from the lockdown are the following:
 - health workers in public and private sectors,
 - emergency personnel
 - security services: police, traffic officers, military medical personnel, soldiers
 - production, distribution and supply of basic foods,
 - essential banking services,
 - maintenance of power,
 - water and telecommunications services,
 - laboratory services
 - the provision of medical and hygiene products

Makgetla (31 March 2020, *Business Day*) opined that: “In SA, as in the rest of the world, the lockdown is often portrayed as an all-out war on COVID-19. That puts security personnel in the front line, amid calls for patriotic discipline.” According to Travis Richards (30 April 2020), a total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases stood at 5647. According to the *Business Insider SA* (25 April 2020) the new regulations of the lockdown level 4 state the following:

- Masks will be compulsory,
- National curfew will be enforced,
- Sale of non-essential items will be allowed,
- Sale of fast food will be allowed, and
- People will be allowed to buy clothes and cigarettes.

According to the *Business Insider* (25 April) Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma announced that friends and relatives could not be visited during lockdown 4 which was implemented in May 2020. Lockdown became a kind of “self-imposed” exile. Hence, Adele Berlin argues that “exile is not only a geographical place; it is a religious state of mind” (2005:65).

Nevertheless, it has been established that the interdependence of one nation on another has a potential of resulting in serious problems when the nation depended upon experiences a humanitarian crisis. For example, when the foundation of a building cracks as a result of the earthquake, the whole structure of the building will collapse. Oke Ayodeji supports the above view, by affirming that: “Building failure occurs when there is a defect in one or more elements of the building caused by inability of the material making up the components of such building elements to perform its original function effectively, which may finally lead to building collapse” (2011:38). The building may not necessarily collapse because the foundation has cracked; architects will sometimes attribute the collapse of the building due to human error (Porteous, 1992: ii). Much of Africa, including SA, depends, in terms of business and technology on western and developed nations such as China and USA. SA was not only affected by the emergence and impact of the COVID-19 on communities. The economy of SA is expected to



suffer significantly because the empires depended upon have to an extent crumbled as a consequence of the COVID-19. Such a status quo conveys some devastating consequences on the majority poor, the less-privileged and the marginalised as a whole.

The majority of South Africans depend on part-time jobs while others make a living through selling various items on the black market. Business has been on hold for over a month owing to the lockdown. For the few who were employed, not all of them will be absorbed back by their employers when companies reopen. Like everywhere, SA has disbursed billions of Rand in an attempt to avert the spread of Coronavirus. Given the fact that the majority of the victims of COVID-19 are not poor people, it is not an overstatement to point out that finance expended on deterrence itself has had far more benefits to the already affluent and the bourgeoisies than it would have had on plummeting poverty. The question that remains to be answered is: *Where is the billions of Rand coming from which could not be availed in reducing unemployment and poverty in SA?* One would respond to the above question by speculating that as long as socioeconomic problems affecting society remain among the already poor, the marginalised, and the less-privileged, the condition cannot be defined and or categorised as a crisis; so it does not warrant an urgent national consideration. Hence, Webb's (1994: 120) study had already presupposed the following: "Poverty, unemployment, housing shortages, inadequate education and training, illiteracy, health needs and numerous other problems still stand in the way of progress and prosperity and improved quality of life." De Santa Ana (1979:76) defines poverty as:

The unfulfilment of the basic human needs required to adequately sustain life free from disease, misery, hunger, pain, suffering, hopelessness and fear, on the one hand, and the condition of defenceless people suffering from structural injustice on the other.

Hence, local indigenous people have been conferring among themselves about COVID-19 as *Isifo sebanoyi*. In other words, in my opinion, *Isifo sebanoyi* is a polite way of saying, "Why can't you deal with and finish the problem that you started."

Theology of the Cross

The article will particularly cascade into interpreting the theological discourse of the Cross (see for example, Wengenroth, 1982:267-275) and how the church can upsurge its contribution towards salvaging the plight of societies who remain on the margins: the poor, the less powerful, the voiceless and the downtrodden. Thus, one would not be unaware of John Goldingay's stance that: "Theocracy and socio-political equality go together" (1987:66), which Fitzgerald (1999: 260) prefers to describe as "the communitarian nature of the just economy as a precursor of the Kingdom". This investigation will explore the above concepts in view of the position of the church¹ in a situation of the COVID-19. The Christian faith exists of necessity for three main purposes: (1) speaking responsibly about God; the church's task is a human response to God's Word, (2) the church exists as a voice to the marginalised and the downtrodden. Hence, Victor Nakah was not persuasive in the following statement: and (3) the environment of which we are the custodians.

The church as an institution should not get involved in party politics but should be gentle and loving, while never compromising its

¹ By "church," reference is made to the sacred institution. However, in some cases, it may happen that some examples of specific church denominations will be cited in this conversation.



doctrines and this often means consistently being a prophetic voice, upholding God's standard of peace and justice, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. During the past centuries the church used to be identified with justice (2007:216).

Since its inception, starting with Jesus, Christianity transmitted certain social values (Schor, 2009:478, cited in Dreyer, 2012) for an example fellowship, care for one another etc. According to Schor, these "values, like charity, mutual support, self-control and others drew people to Christianity" (2009:478). In my view, these values as Schor posits, form the core of the church's response to COVID-19. Thus, Christians are depicted as having "a God-given responsibility to engage any power, whether an individual or an institution, that acts contrary to the principles of the Kingdom of God and the Gospel of Christ. Every believer is to be a prophet, listening for the will of God in society and living to see that will be enacted" (Bentley & Forster, 2012:173). One would not refute some claims that the church is neglecting its traditional role and trademark of being "my brother's keeper" (see Walker, 1983:867). However, the features that characterise the church are captured in Acts 2:44-35 (NKV) as follows:

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their Possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, breaking bread from house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those were being saved.

It is a traditional practice for various church denominations and clergies to engrave or print an insignia of the crucifix resembling the Cross on which Jesus was crucified either on the church outfit, on the church banner or on official documents of the church. For example, Wengenroth (1982:268) observed that Pope John Paul II uses a bishop's staff fitted with a crucifix on his missionary and pastoral journeys. An insignia of the crucifix made of either wooden material or valuable minerals such as gold, silver or bronze is also found in homes or vehicles of Christians. A church is usually identified with the insignia of the crucifix. For example, one can notice a church building from a distance because of the outstanding insignia of the crucifix usually placed on the front of the church building. In view of the above examples, is that the true representation of the theology of Cross? What did Jesus mean by His teachings in the following statement: *Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up the cross and follow me* (Matthew 16 :24; Mark 8: 34; Luke 9:23; NIV)? Matthew L. Skinner reads Mark 8: 27-38 as "one of those passages that sharply prod us to consider where we are going and to be reminded that the gospel claims every aspect of one's life and being" (2003:322). Furthermore, Skinner (2003:322) r pens that: "This circularity, however, emphasises the central elements (self-denial and cross-bearing) as constitutive of what it means to follow Jesus." Wengenroth (1982:268) supported the concept of the theology of the Cross by making reference to Paul's preaching in 1 Corinthians 1:18 where it reads: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

In view of the COVID-19, this study borrows a stance taken by Victor Nakah (2007) when he asserted that: "The prevailing situation is a wake-up call to the church." Although Nakah was referring to a different scenario, the prevailing devastation due to the Coronavirus on our communities calls for the church to play a proactive role. Nakah's follow-up statement is equally informative with regards to the concept of the theology of the Cross:



We cannot blame it all on the politicians and the unfair economic policies of the World Bank and the rich nations. At the end of the day, if we have ‘failed institutions’, ‘failed homes’, or ‘failed nations’, it is largely because the church has also failed in her prophetic role - to be a sharp eye, beholding the good and the evil and an eye that does not trivialise evil; a voice that calls good, good and evil, evil; the ear that hears and articulates the cry of the poor and powerless (2007:208).

Woe to the contemporary church for not raising her voice for the cause of the oppressed poor and the marginalised of our society. Simon Maimela had become unpopular among sympathisers of the colonial system when he challenged the Lutheran Church in SA for what he defined as the “theological justification of the glaring unequal distribution of socio-economic and political rights and privileges between classes” (Gibellini, 1994: 190). It is evident, for example in Maimela’s case, that when one commits oneself to actively “carry the Cross,” it is usually a lone journey. Not many believers are prepared to becoming a “sacrificial lamb” (see for example, Annus, 2010:52). The church should continue conceptualising the understanding that God will always use humans to deal with contemporary and community matters. Clifford and Anatolios (2005:741) captured the above ethos by noting that in the “prophetic” model of salvation in the Old Testament, God initiates a process within history to rectify an unjust situation and employs human instruments to do so. Meanwhile, it is unfortunate that allegations which have become viral are that today’s church focuses on enriching herself and a few administrative individuals. In view of the COVID-19, it would be appropriate for the role of the church to remain the one that focuses on the theology of the Cross and that embraces, for example, “a theology of ARVs” (Togarasei, 2010:430). Thus, Byrne (2001, cited in Clifford & Anatolios, 2005:758) communicates that the real essence of the Cross is captured in “Pauline atonement theology in which Christ takes upon himself God’s judgment on human sinfulness” (227-241).

Liberation Theology

It is anticipated that the church stands to gain if she allows herself to be inspired by the courage and spirit of sacrifice of earlier Christians and theologians. Theology is regarded as a science. Gutierrez noted that from the twelfth century on, theology began to be a science (1970:244 see also Oliver 2016). According to Gutierrez (1973:157) God is a liberator and is also in charge of the environment (1973:157). Gutierrez (1970:244) had previously argued that the renewed stress on charity as center of the Christian life has brought us to see faith more biblically, as a commitment to God and neighbor. James Cone, who proudly brags about his blackness, says: “It is important for black people, therefore, to make the connection between the struggle against racism and other struggles for life” (2000:39). Rugwiji (2020) describes Cone as one of the outstanding proponents of the exodus liberation tradition. Cone is famous to his compatriots for arguing that: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (2000:43). Rugwiji (2020) writes that Cone, who is also enlisted among the supporters of Moltmann, opined that the election of Israel is inseparable from the event of the exodus (1990:2). James Cone has remarkably awakened his audience that:

While the rise and growth of independent black churches suggest that black people had a different perception of the gospel than whites, yet there was no formal theological tradition to which we could turn in order to justify our definition of Black Power as an expression of the Christian Gospel. Our intellectual ideas of God, Jesus, and the



Church were derived from white European theologians and their textbooks (1977: 148).

Jürgen Moltmann, who is also famous for appropriating biblical narratives in the contemporary context, also wrote that Yahweh is the God who leads His people out of the house of bondage (1968:53). David F. Ford and Rachel Muers talked of Moltmann as “one of the first theologians to seriously study Bonhoeffer’s work, from which, as well as from Wolf, he developed his concern for social ethics and the church’s involvement in secular society” (2005:147). Speaking of justice, José Fernando Castrillóna also acknowledged that:

Liberation theology was born as a theology that focuses on the situation of injustice and exclusion lived by the poor, claiming the necessity of praxis of transformation of the socio-economic and political capitalist structures that create poverty (2018:2).

Gutierrez (1974:36) sees liberation to have three levels of meaning, namely:

- (1) Liberation expresses aspirations of the poor and oppressed who struggles for freedom in the economic and political process.
- (2) The word liberation concentrates on establishing the material conditions necessary for subsistence and a dignified livelihood.
- (3) A deeper level liberation can be applied to an understanding of history. This understanding provides a dynamic context and broadens the horizons of the desired social change.

One is not unaware of the church currently facing many challenges which wait for a response on the part of all who bear the name of Christ. Bentley and Forster (2012:192) chronicled that there is no doubt that religious states and anti-religious states, have led to the rise of strong prophets who have spoken out against evil, corruption, and sin from a religious perspective. Some examples will suffice. Bentley and Forster (2012:192) reported about Oscar Romero of El Salvador as a well-known example of a brave Christian prophet who stood for the truth of the Christian faith in the face of the state’s injustice. In SA, Bentley and Forster (2012:192) cited Albert Luthuli, Desmond Tutu and Beyers Naude as prime examples. Tutu (1982:50) argued that a black person had no franchise while a white child of eighteen years could vote. The Archbishop was referring to the apartheid oppressive system which segregated South Africans on the basis of ethnicity, race, “blackness” and “whiteness.”

Hence, Corprew-Boyd (2008), Mansfield (2012) and Anderson (2017) talk of a “wounded” and or “hurting” church. Wounds are injuries that may take a diminutive brief or elongated period of time to heal. By “wounded” or “hurting” church one is not oblivious of individuals who are members of the church while at the same time experiencing life challenges in a real physical world. Thus, in view of the theology of the Cross, a church must carry *memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi* (a memory of suffering and resurrection of Jesus Christ) in the context of violent ruptures facing both individuals and communal lives (see Metz, 1977:97; Adiprasetya, 2016: 233-248). Anderson (2017: v) says the church is often seen as a place where people go to seek love, peace, and acceptance. Both Hudson-Allison’s (2000) and Rodriguez’ (2012:2) contributions have reverberated on the church’s critical role in the political sphere. For example, the church’s role in ending apartheid in SA was no mean achievement. Dube and Molise (2018:163) also echoed that various church leaders took part in the liberation struggle in SA. Burke (2020) writes that the 2019-2020 coronavirus pandemic has impacted religion in various ways, including the cancellation of the worship services of various faiths, the



closure of Sunday schools, as well as cancellation of pilgrimages surrounding observances and festivals. For Parke (2020) many churches, synagogues, mosques and temples, have offered worship through livestreaming amidst the pandemic. Adherents of many religions have gathered together to pray for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic, for those affected by it, as well as for wisdom for physicians and scientists to combat the disease (Sheva, 20020; Solovy, 2020).

McCaulley (2020) picks up the statement of the Bible when he says: “When loving your neighbour means keeping your distance.” McCaulley refers to Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of Matthew 22: 39. Jesus had stated this “law” in response to the question of the Pharisees when they asked: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law” (Matthew 22: 36). Apparently, the Pharisees were not unaware of the teaching of Deuteronomy 6: 5. In Matthew 22: 37-38, Jesus had responded the Pharisees by saying: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with your entire mind. This is the great and first commandment.” Jesus had not finished with them. He went on to say: “And the second is like, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22: 39-40). In other words, Jesus’ response to the Pharisees was a statement of the unity of the two laws regarding love; breaking any one of the two, was actually breaking both. In our postbiblical world, loving God has always formed the nucleus of the church. One cannot love a neighbour if one does not love God first. Conversely, one cannot claim to be in love with God if he/she does not love their neighbour. For McCaulley (2020) love is a double-edged sword. In other words, the church that claims to love God and to be loved by Him, must abide by the rules of the game: *love your neighbour as yourself* (Matthew 22:39). McCaulley (2020) continues that despite the trauma exerted on the church from various angles, the church has remained a source of hope. In other words, as observed by McCaulley, even during this time of COVID-19, the church will remain a source of hope for the wounded. McCaulley (2020) writes that the marches and sits-in of the civil rights movement in USA were often preceded by worship services of the church. That is a presumptuous evidence of the solidarity and support of the church beyond the pulpit. With the novel Coronavirus spreading rapidly, this is simply a question for individual church members, remarked McCaulley (2020). McCaulley goes on to say that the pandemic forces the church as an institution to reconsider its role during a time of crisis – thereby giving a clear impression that these are changing times for the church.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has also clearly expressed its role in a crisis like the COVID-19. The WCC is a worldwide fellowship of churches with members in more than 110 countries (WCC 2020). The WCC (2020) remarked that in times like these, faith communities can do a lot to promote solidarity and accountability, wisdom and care, and can play an important role in providing accurate information, encouraging and supporting the sick and pastoral care to those affected by the virus. The WCC (2020) seeks to bring hope and light to how the churches are, and can be, contributing to constructive responses to Coronavirus and its consequences for people’s lives, physically as well as spiritually in countries around the world. For the WCC, carrying the Cross means helping others who, due to prevailing circumstances, cannot help themselves.

Kilonzo (2020) writes that people with disabilities may be even more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they have also shown resiliency and wisdom that can be shared across the world. Reports of exclusion and inclusion of persons with disabilities are widespread. According to Groce (2003), “Estimates suggest that there are between 180 and 220 million youth with disabilities worldwide and nearly 80% of them live in developing countries” (1401-1402). Roggero, Tarricone, Nicoli, and Mangiaterra (2005) picked up on Groce’s opinion by echoing that: “The unemployment rate of persons with disabilities is over 80% in some countries



across continents” (see also International Labour Organisation [ILO] 2002; Mitra, 2008: 480-492). In SA, up to 70% of the children of school-going age with disabilities are out of school (Donohue & Bornman, 2014:1). It is further stated that of those who do attend, most are still in separate, “special” schools for learners with disabilities (Donohue & Bornman, 2014:1). Okola (2020) also admitted that: “Persons with disabilities are exposed to the Coronavirus owing to the environments that they live in, lack of adequate information in accessible formats, or due to the pre-existing health conditions which in turn make them have a lower immunity.” One should conceptualise the theology of the Cross by recognising God as the crucified Christ. Unarguably, there is no church that has not suffered.

To say that the church is not responding to the COVID-19 epidemic is an understatement. Some examples of church groupings and church-based organisations that are “carrying the Cross” in various ways will suffice. Valerio and Heugh (2020) of TearFund write that: “In times like these, when life as we know it has been turned upside down, it’s crucial that we have a good Bible-based theology. Theology is our understanding of the nature of God. This in turn influences the way we see and respond to the world.” Although Valerio and Heugh attribute COVID-19 to human error, they still believe that a collective effort is required to stop the spread as well as helping the affected. Earlier on in this study, I alluded to the fact that some individuals would have a biblical/theological elucidation to the emergence of the Coronavirus. Valerio and Heugh (2020) have concurred that:

The outbreak of COVID-19 is not a natural disaster. Rather, it is a disaster of our own making. Viruses jump species and get into humans, and environmental destruction makes this more likely to happen, and with greater frequency, as people are brought into closer contact with virus-carrying animals.

Valerio and Heugh further noted that: “To recognise this is not to say that ‘God caused this’ or ‘God willed it’ or that this is God’s judgment. Rather it is to recognise that the brokenness of creation, and systemic and personal sin, are contributing factors in the rise and spread of things that harm us all.” As Valerio and Heugh (2020) observed, in both the second and third centuries CE, terrible pandemics (probably measles or smallpox) swept through the known world. In these situations, it was the Christians who stayed and took care of the sick. Valerio and Heugh reaffirmed that when Ebola ravaged West Africa in 2014, it was local churches that helped lead the fightback. In Sierra Leone, Christians used video and radio broadcasts to spread vital health messages (Valerio & Heugh 2020). Presently, in the context of COVID-19, the church is rising to the occasion, a positive response to the call for implementing a theology of the Cross. Valerio and Heugh (2020) have confirmed that: “In many communities around the world, it is Christians who are coordinating local care, creating neighbourhood WhatsApp groups, dropping off food and toiletries to those who are self-isolating, and being there to provide emotional support.”

The following analysis by TearFund (2020:1-2) is helpful for the present study:

Healing was one of the key focus areas of the ministry of Jesus. This is understandable because of the context in which Jesus ministered. The structures and practices in the Roman empire during the time of Jesus were bad for people’s health and well-being. Some estimate that 70-90 per cent of people experienced varying degrees of poverty – from the very poorest to those who temporarily fell below survival levels. Understandings of hygiene were limited; social stresses were high; water quality was poor and food insecurity was rife. Such factors resulted in widespread diseases associated with poor nutrition



(blindness, muscle weakness etc) and a lack of immunity (diarrhoea, cholera etc). These kinds of diseases were a real threat in a world where survival depended on one's capacity for physical labour. Most people could not afford to pay for medical treatment. This context is not too different from that in many countries around the world, and especially during the present COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusions

The present study has explored on the impact of COVID-19 among the poor and the less-privileged of our society in SA. The investigation examined the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, which spread to some parts of the world. It was argued that the virus was transported to SA by the affluent and bourgeoisies who had the capacity of utilising an aircraft as their means of transport; the poor and the less-privileged cannot afford to take a flight.

The article critiqued the crumbling empires such as China, USA, and Italy, among others, of exacerbating the plight of the poor in SA especially due to the collapse of the economy in Europe and USA that adversely affects the other parts of the world, including SA. Until now, the US Dollar is internationally used in measuring the strength of the currencies of other countries. It was argued that the impact of COVID-19 on the majority poor will gradually be experienced by SA as a country owing to the huge expenditure towards preventing the spread of COVID-19. The billions of Rand could have been spent on job creation and/or poverty reduction.

The liberation theological investigation was explored in view of the theology of the Cross in which the role of the church and other faith-based organisations, and theological discourses were considered. The contribution of faith-based organisations and the church towards fighting COVID-19 included: provision of supplies for preventing the spread of the virus, food items, moral and spiritual support. Scholars such as James Cone, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Jürgen Moltmann, among others, were discussed as representative examples of proponents of liberation theology. On the local scene, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Simon Maimela, among others, were cited as being the beacons of a theology that liberates. Liberation from poverty and injustice was the main thrust in their discourses. Both initiatives were attempts to lend a voice to the voiceless so that God's will prevails.

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