



Meaning of life and death during COVID-19 pandemic: A cultural and religious narratives

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The sudden arrival of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in South Africa drastically changed the normal way of life in all sectors. It compelled everyone to look at the meaning of life and death differently and more painfully than before. This article investigates the cultural theories and religious narratives on the meaning of life and death, associated with the pervasiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus affected individuals, families and communities, some directly or indirectly, no one is or was immune to the virus. The article argues that due to COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, culture, religious practices and protocols have been upended. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged *inkcubeko nenkolo yabantu* [culture, people's religious belief systems and practices]. This article consists of in-depth qualitative interviews with four religious leaders from the Christian and Muslim faiths. Because of the interviews with persons, oral historians conduct open-ended interviews, as a form of social inquiry. Oral history narratives thus connect the individual and the social, drawing on cultural and religious expressions to tell one's story.

Contribution: The scholarly contribution of this article adds value and significance to oral history research, as a way of collecting and interpreting human memories and experiences on the meaning of life and death during the COVID-19 crisis. It discusses the dreadfulness of the COVID-19 scourge concerning religious and cultural effects, social sciences and people's narrative reflections.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; culture; religion; narratives; the meaning of life; death; qualitative interviews; oral history.

Introduction

The sudden advent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in South Africa urged many to make sense of COVID-19 'and its disturbing impact on "normal" human life' (Meylahn 2020:1). This global pandemic rapidly and fundamentally altered lives and changed many societal norms in various ways. Bard (2020:1) alerts to challenges it imposed, such as 'assault on life's values and meaning, individually, as well as in its societal context'. Hard lockdown restrictions, especially the implementation of levels five and six, challenged our normal social life, by being forced to stay home, no longer able to meet friends and family members, attend religious gatherings and visit places for leisure or social activities, especially mourning loved ones, let alone burying them. Coronavirus disease 2019 compelled everyone to re-assess the meaning of life and death, differently and painfully than before. This disruption caused many to scramble 'to fill this lack with new meaning, both religious and cultural, thereby wishing to repair the semblance' (Meylahn 2020:1). Coronavirus disease 2019 caused many people to live with unanswered questions as death continued to impact their lives. Additionally, religious, and cultural practices were greatly affected by the pandemic, which by nature are supposed to leverage people's faith and hope. This pandemic disrupted *inkcubeko nenkolo yabantu*¹ [culture, people's religious belief systems and practices]. The researcher observed and listened to various painful narratives from the Oral History Association of South Africa (OHASA), conference titled, *COVID-19 Narratives and Memories: Emerging Oral Histories and Methodologies in South Africa*.² According to NARSSA (2022):

While the numbers of those infected and those who lost their lives have since subsided in 2022 and increased hope for a world free of COVID-19, one indisputable fact is that life has changed. (p. 1)

1. *Inkcubeko nenkolo yabantu* – a Xhosa term referring to the holistic approach to cultures, traditions, practices and the belief system of the African people, particularly the social norms of daily practices and lifestyle.

2. The researcher presented this article as a paper at its developmental stage at the 19th Annual OHASA conference, hosted by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, Kuruman (Northern Cape Province) 10–14 October 2022.

This pandemic caused major disruptions and challenged South Africans and the whole world:

[T]o ask about the origin of the virus, the ways to avoid infection and treat it when infected, to question the efficacy of the scientific and traditional health systems, to be innovative in ways of mourning and burial. (OHASA 2022:1)

According to the respondents of a 'UK-based study, conducted on bereaved individuals during the pandemic' (Mashaphu et al. 2021:2), 'the benefits of after-death rituals, including funeral attendance, is a meaningful way for the bereaved to pay their last respects'. This propelled researchers:

[T]o a deeper understanding of how culture, spirituality and religion can be used to endure an outbreak of this magnitude and how the interruption of common practices impacted the coping skills of those who were affected by the pandemic. (Mashaphu et al. 2021:3)

This article aims to emphasise the importance of cultural and religious narratives of South Africans, in the interpretation of the meaning of life and death during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further aims to explore a deeper understanding of the role of customs, beliefs and values in building resilience during the pandemic's scourge of death. In this study, the focus is on oral history and narrative research. According to Oelofse and De Bruyn (2004:2), 'most societies have always recognised the worth of preserving, collecting oral stories and passing on some kind of knowledge of the past, protecting an accumulating heritage'.

Meaning of life

Search for meaning in life has been debated by many philosophers, theologians, psychologists and scientists in different historic eras, the world's major epidemics and pandemics long before the COVID-19. In 1952, Paul Tillich (1886–1965) 'published a landmark text on existential meaning, "*The Courage to Be*", later being referred to as an "*indispensable*" text in the theological conversation on the meaning of life' (Tillich 2000:xii). He regards the search for meaning in life as 'that we are human only by understanding and shaping reality, both our world and ourselves, according to meanings and values' (p. 50). However, COVID-19 construed the understanding of meanings and values, as also in South African perspective, as Meylahn poses (2020):

The problem is not all the different meanings that are provided – religious, cultural, political, scientific or artistic – as that would be maybe the 'natural' human response. The problem is the belief and conviction that is invested in these differing meanings, which inevitably leads to antagonism. (p. 3)

Meylahn (2020:3) states that 'People's responses to the disturbance of normal life's routine are imaginable because the purpose and meaning of life have been upended'. O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) refer to:

Victor Frankl's 1946 book, '*Man's Search for Meaning*' that, meaning can be discovered by self-transcendence, by moving beyond concern for the self and focusing on other people, social and spiritual values. (p. 462)

Arguing that Frankl suggests that meaningful life is derived from and focused on significant relationships with others, while the pandemic limited human relationships. Referring to the *meaning of life*, Metz (2021:1) poses three substantive questions on the nature of meaningfulness and the meaning of life: 'What are you talking about? What is the meaning of life? Is life meaningful?'. German philosopher, Emmanuel Kant (1724–1804) added by framing all philosophical thought (Guyer & Wood 1998): 'What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?'

These questions raised concern during COVID-19 and remain unanswered. Today, some South Africans are still uncertain and seeking clarity. Even people who believed that God is, or would be central to their life's meaning, faith and hope were shattered. Meylahn (2020:1) provides some reasons, that 'religious institutions, which traditionally provide collective meaning to the people, can no longer gather in public places, and offer communal solace'. Amid the extraneous circumstances, 'culture and religion appear to play a paradoxical role in shaping the communal cognition ("Why it happened?") and responses ("What should we do about it?") toward COVID-19' (Ting et al. 2021:2).

Coronavirus disease 2019 might challenge our beliefs of what 'being human' means (Metz 2021:3). Meylahn (2020) states that 'processing the meaning of pandemics is a task that no generation has been able to complete' (p. 4).

Religious leaders and their followers, navigated through different stages, decoding the meaning of COVID-19, and African traditional religions, Christianity, Islam and other religions all offered different explanations of the pandemic. (Sibanda, Muyamba & Chitando 2022:23)

However diverse the differences of these faith groups may be, there are indeed similarities in their search 'to make COVID-19 intelligible and to enable individuals and communities to cope amidst its devastating impact' (Sibanda et al. 2022:23). According to Park (2005:708, see Barmania & Reiss 2021), 'religion is a meaningful system, which influences well-being, when an individual encounters stressful situations'. Congruently, Sibanda et al. (2022) add that:

[F]ollowers of different religions, fell back on their faith traditions, to extract meaning, in the case of Christians, the Bible, Moslems the Quran and the Hindu the Vedas were available for consultation. (p. 13)

The majority of people were, instead, 'interested in whether their lives as individuals, and their loved ones, were meaningful and how they could become more so' (Metz 2021:2). Individuals were, however, restricted from travelling, being confined in their homes. Shopping was allowed only for essential goods, wearing face masks; religious, cultural, and social gatherings were prohibited. Moreover, President Cyril Ramaphosa on 24 April 2020 announced that 'our approach has been based on the principles of social distancing, restriction of movement and stringent basic hygiene practices', as a measure of curbing the spread of the virus and reducing mortality.

The concept of death

Death is one of the painful truths that most struggle to accept or understand, a phenomenon worsened by COVID-19. Historically, 'South Africans, faced various contagious diseases, such as the plague (influenza), HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis (TB) and now COVID-19' (Ting et al. 2021:2). When faced with death (Bavel & Baicker 2020:461), 'people naturally, demand and seek explanations, as a response to their vulnerabilities'. According to Barmania and Reiss (2020:1), religion can contribute greatly to their quest for answers, 'including introducing perspectives on life's meaning and on death that can differ from those held by many without religious faith'. During this time, being banned from attending religious gatherings, mourning their loved ones, let alone having a decent burial caused more anger and distress. Reflecting on his research Wessels (2010) in 'Narrative Reflections on a Life that Matters', one interviewee says:

Not sure, I struggled for a few years now to find out what purpose is. What is the purpose of living? Having been through a lot of tragic events, my sister died, and I was extremely devastated. I lived for 3 years so close to the feeling of death, that my purpose became absolute. I was only functional not purposeful. But finding purpose is vital. I didn't find any meaning in my sister dying at the age of 27 – still today. I know that some people's death can mean something to other people, and can even be a turning point in their lives but for me, her death was meaningless and me trying to find the meaning in her death for the last 4 years only had me feeling miserable. I realise that God's plan will determine the outcome, who am I to question Him because doubting this event and the fact that it had to happen will make me doubt whether God is really in control or not. (p. 201)

Before COVID-19, death was a matter of involving the community such as family, neighbours, colleagues, community societies, religions and service providers. Coronavirus disease 2019, level 5, however, changed this and burials became a matter of a funeral parlour and limited to immediate family. Only the spiritual leaders in the community were privileged to be part of the funeral arrangements, being mandated to ensure COVID-19 protocols and working together with the families. Apart from the numbers limited to 50, some community members themselves were also scared for their lives; others were busy preparing for their loved one's funerals, while others were in quarantine. Duties usually performed by the community members in the rural villages, such as digging the grave to show unity and solidarity were taken over by Tractor Loader Backerhoe (TLB) machinery. The:

COVID-19 deaths have been perceived by many as cold and inhumane, forcing frontline workers to make quick decisions about end-of-life care, while shielding vulnerable family members from getting the disease. (Mashaphu et al. 2021:2)

Healthcare researchers analysed data from Hospital Surveillance for COVID-19 (DATCOV) (Baleta 2022), on COVID-19 admissions and deaths in South Africa between March 2020 and January 2022, 'the active national COVID-19 surveillance programme that stated a total of 386 171 admissions and 91 180 deaths were reported from 646 hospitals in South Africa'. As of 07 June 2021, 'a total of

57063 COVID-19-related casualties and 1581540 recoveries were registered in South Africa, 'Western Cape registered 11 881 casualties and 279 984 recoveries in total, closely followed by Eastern Cape with only 208 casualties less and 185 995' recoveries' (STATSSA 2021), see Table 1.

Inkubeko nenkolo yabantu

In the postmodern era:

[C]ulture is no longer defined by ethnicity, geography, nationality, or any skin colour group, but by the unique resources available for humans to make sense of their world or the adaptive ecosystem. (Tucker 2013:145)

Inkubeko nenkolo yabantu [culture, people's religious belief systems and practices] are not immune to changes that are taking place due to socio-economics and illnesses. 'Different cultural systems have differing sets of illness perceptions activated during a pandemic crisis, leading to varying stress coping mechanisms' (Ting et al. 2021:2). However:

[D]ue to the nature of COVID-19 transmission pathways and the need for the religious faithful to congregate, global religious communities experienced infection in the early phase of the pandemic, leading to a polarized view between 'religion as a cure vs. religion as a curse' (STATSSA 2021:1).

Religion has an:

[I]ntrinsic duo-character concerning contagious diseases, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be an essential vehicle for the spread of the disease, but also an important instrument for the prevention of the same. (Sibanda et al. 2022:119)

In South Africa, some of the first cases of infection were among a Christian group of:

[F]ive travellers – two from Texas, two from Israel and one from France entered the country between March 9 and 11, 2020 to participate in a Church gathering, they subsequently developed symptoms and were thereafter quarantined in their rooms and tested positive. (Masweneng 2020:1)

Health minister, Zweli Mkhize said, 'The Church had hosted a 4-day event this month attended by about 300 people' (Shange 2020:1). In defence, the Church stated that the guests who tested positive 'did not present sick

TABLE 1: Number of COVID-19 deaths and recoveries in South Africa from 26 March 2020 to 07 June 2021.

Provinces	Deaths	Recoveries
Western Cape	11 881	279 984
Eastern Cape	11 673	185 995
Gauteng	11 436	443 378
KwaZulu-Natal	10 535	325 296
Free State	4475	90 622
Limpopo	2489	62 749
North West	1949	70 077
Mpumalanga	1459	80 809
Northern Cape	1166	42 630
Total	57 063	1 581 540

Source: Galal, S., 2022, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) death and recovery numbers in South Africa 2021, by region*, viewed 16 June 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1127288/coronavirus-covid-19-deaths-and-recoveries-south-africa-by-region/>

symptoms on arrival in South Africa, they cleared the screening for signs of coronavirus at the entry port to South Africa' (STATSSA 2021). In Hinduism religion, Prof. Gita Ramjee is the first Indian native of South Africa to lose her life from the COVID-19 pandemic. Ramjee was in London to deliver a lecture at the London School of Hygiene on 17 March 2020 (Wikipedia n.d.). On her return to South Africa, she felt unwell and was hospitalised and died on 31 March 2020 from complications relating to COVID-19 infection. According to the *Economic Times* (2020):

[A] Muslim cleric attended the March 1–15 Tablighi Jamaat congregation in the Nizmuddin area, which emerged as the epicentre for the spread of the coronavirus in different parts of India and on his return to South Africa, he died on Tuesday 31 March 2020. (p. 1)

The Islamic Burial Council (IBC), Chairperson Salim Kazi said, 'small adjustments were made for Muslim burials to ensure compliance with the government guidelines during the 21-day nationwide lockdown ...' (The Economic Times 2020:1).

Research design and methodology

This study followed a 'oral history, narrative and qualitative interviewing' approach. By involving oral history:

[M]emories are constructed and shared through a narrative, when we study people and how they live, which reflects their traditions, ideas, and ways of life, we are studying them from a cultural perspective. (Federer 2015:39)

The narratives, 'historians and qualitative researchers, in general, are involved in describing and explaining someone's memory of events and activities' (Janesick 2007:113). Significant in this study is listening to the stories concerning COVID-19 on the meaning of life and death from the local community religious leaders. 'Religious leaders are important gatekeepers to their communities and can therefore play a vital role in policy implementation, even when that policy makes no overt reference to religion' (Barmania & Reiss 2021:1).

- *The co-researchers*³: This study proposed four co-researchers who are religious leaders from two different religions in South Africa: Christianity and Islamic faith. Participants are selected due to their intense involvement with the people in counselling, spiritual guidance and motivation during the COVID-19 period in South Africa. Co-researchers come from different races, cultures, classes, genders and geographical positions within the country, aged between 27 and 65 years.
- *The selection of the co-researchers*: The co-researchers were selected through snowball and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to 'non-probability sampling most effective when one needs to study a certain cultural

domain with experts within the phenomena under investigation' (Ilker, Sulaiman & Rukaya 2016:3). All co-researchers are highly educated, ordained clerics, who are influential, known as rich sources of spiritual knowledge and community empowerment. All speak and write English fluently and correspondence was conducted in English.

- *Data collection*: Semi-structured interviews were conducted using email correspondence with the co-researchers. 'Collecting the oral histories, listening to the narratives, reading and coding the transcripts, display the importance of helping others, share and interpret their narratives' (Walker 2006:34). In collecting data, oral history narratives, 'seek out human perspective, record it, and interpret it for deeper meaning and preservation' (Federer 2015:58).
- *Consent and confidentiality*: 'Conducting ethical research is identified, as a key criterion of quality in qualitative research' (Creswell 2007:87; Tracy 2019:37). Before data collection commenced, the researcher secured approval from the University of Pretoria's research ethics committee. Ethical considerations regarding 'transparency and honesty, permission to conduct the research informed consent and nature of participation, and anonymity and pseudonyms' were adhered to (eds. Thomas & Hersen 2011:133).

Narrative interviews

Narratives provide 'thick description, analysis, and interpretation of people's lives through probing the past to understand the present' (Federer 2015:62). Describing their experiences is enriched by the interpretations of the co-researchers. According to Walker (2006):

[T]he manner in which a story is told is based on the narrator's assumptions about who is listening, so that oral history narratives are always filtered through a web of social relationships. (p. 62)

Utilising oral history and narratives helps build a foundation of historical content for this research and to expand the limited number of collected stories about the meaning of life and death during COVID-19 across religions and cultures in South Africa. According to Federer (2015:6), 'the human experiences captured from the oral history interviews provide additional layers of understanding about phenomena, personal lived experiences, and leadership roles'. Bhebhe (2019:36) avers that, 'oral history has the potential to record and inscribe the views from community members in their natural settings'. Oral history focuses on community, serving 'as a tool for cultural development and for developing community awareness around social issues that affect their livelihoods' (2019). In embarking on qualitative interviews with the co-researchers, a number of questions were prepared. Anderson and Jack (2006) explored the importance of listening, reflection prior to and during the actual interview, suggesting that:

³Throughout this research, the researcher uses the term co-researcher(s). This is because, these people are not just study participants or 'subjects', but are co-investigators involved in co-designing the study and co-producing the knowledge arising from it.

The researcher should ask himself/herself a number of questions prior to the interview: What meaning and how does one construct meaning of their life experiences? What assumptions and attitudes does the researcher bring to the interview? Is it one of receptiveness to learning or trying to prove pre-existing ideas that were brought into the interview? (p. 134)

The research questions were as follows:

- Do you think your community of faith took special meaning from the COVID-19 pandemic? Please explain.
- Which changes regarding your faith's ritual practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic did you find difficult?
- Was your understanding of the meaning of life affected by COVID-19? Please explain.
- How have COVID-19 burial protocols affected your culture, faith meaning and understanding of death? Please explain.
- What kind of meanings have your faith community members shared with you about life and death?
- What have your fellow spiritual leaders shared with you on the meaning of life and death during COVID-19?

Interviews were transcribed and the themes that emerged were afterwards integrated with literature reviews conducted. Narratives on religious and cultural perspectives regarding the meaning of life and death during the COVID-19 in faith communities were as follows:

Christian narratives

Christian festivals

Coronavirus disease 2019 spread to South Africa around February 2020, when most congregations were preparing for Easter and some ministers gave preachers seven words said by Jesus on the cross. A year without celebrating Easter was unimaginable, being locked in houses at a time of commemorating Christ's death and resurrection. This reminded one of the wrath of God as God acted in different ways when Israel turned against his will. It was difficult for people to gather together and they developed new ways of fellowship like online services. Online services, however, were not easy for all; it was like playing church. It was also difficult to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Funerals

Funerals could not be conducted in normal ways and people were prevented from viewing the bodies of deceased family members, as is custom to some Xhosa families when the body arrived home. They would welcome the deceased at *enkundleni* (an open space near the Kraal) and speak to the deceased. Some Xhosa Christians strongly believe in this practice and support it by the scriptures, '*Efile nje usathetha*' (and by faith, Abel still speaks, even though he is dead) (Heb 11:4).

Clothing the corpse

Viewing the deceased is part of rituals in the black community, as some families believe in going to the mortuary and

viewing the body and at the time COVID-19 was aggressive, all that was not possible.

Time

People had to adapt to conducting a funeral for not more than 2 h; in some villages a funeral would start at 10:00 till 15:00, due to the fact that there are more speakers, for example, *isithethi sakomkhulu* (traditional chief to speak).

Life and death

Our perspective and definition of life, varies from person to person. I do not believe in an umbrella definition of life, and base my perspective on the book of Ecclesiastes 3:1-11:

There is time for everything, and a season for every activity under the sun, a time to be born and a time to die and a time to mourn and time to dance.

Coronavirus disease 2019 did not change this because life has seasons and some last longer than others. As a Christian, this has not changed and I still believe in life after death. However, COVID-19 affected us badly in many areas. In terms of the economy, in Genesis (3:19), God said to Adam 'By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground'. Many people lost their jobs, unable to feed their families. Instead, we had to be prisoners in our houses.

Death

Much respect is paid to our heroes, the pastors and preachers who died during COVID-19. Some ministers/preachers contracted COVID-19 while on duty burying their congregants. As a result, we lost brilliant and strong people. As mentioned, some perceive death during COVID-19 as God's wrath and others believe that it is a man-made disease to reduce the population. It particularly affected us in our church fellowship resulting in some members not returning since 2020, or worse feeling undermined, or see no need or importance in going to church. One might deduce that the distractions of daily life prevent many people from making decisions about the purpose of their lives. By preoccupying the mind with these distractions, the person avoids thinking critically about whether their lives are meaningful and what exactly gives them meaning. Thinking of life and death during COVID-19, it is considered that as life is a gift from God, we should value it and comprehend that it has a purpose that each must learn in order to fulfil. With the high fatality rate caused by COVID-19, as Christians, we draw a parallel to a period described in Deuteronomy 28:22, on God's warning of his punishment in the form of disease, fever, heat and drought, 'The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish'. Shocked at the number of deaths, at that moment we could not fully process the magnitude and think about the meaning of what happened. During COVID-19, priests were the ones who had to deal with broken homes, deaths in families and the loss of loved ones.

Muslim narratives

As with other religious groups, it can be assumed that the Muslim community in South Africa were just as sceptic, and anxious not knowing what COVID-19 is, and how they will deal with it. Others thought this is probably Government's plan to manipulate South Africans. Since the beginning of the hard lockdown in March 2020, Muslims found many regulations difficult to adapt to, as indicated in Table 2.

'Islam is the response to humanity's search for meaning, the purpose of creation for all men and women for all times has been one (Chapter 7:172), to know and worship God alone'. Quran teaches that every human being is born conscious of God:

(Remember) when your Lord extracted from the lions of Ādam's children their descendants and made them testify (saying): 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'Yes, we testify to it' (This was) in case you say on the Day of Judgement: 'We were unaware of this'. Or you say: 'It was our ancestors who worshipped others besides God and we are only their descendants. Will you then destroy us for what those liars said?' (Chapter 7:172–173)

Islam regards death as the termination of worldly life and the beginning of the afterlife. Death, is 'the separation of the soul from the body and its transfer from this world to the afterlife' (Chapter 7:173). Death is also seen as the vehicle to the Hereafter, and life in the grave is not eternal and all humans will be resurrected at appointed times, standing in the court of God questioning their deeds of this world. For many, COVID-19 deaths and funerals were cold and merciless, because no final goodbyes were allowed and no closure for families and relatives. The normal way of burials where family members congregate in mourning and supporting each other, has changed to families becoming isolated, all islands on their own. Muslim co-researchers agree that life is short and precious, and with COVID-19 people realise the importance of family ties, treating people with kindness and giving thanks to God for the life and health he gave us.

We know life in this world is not forever. Coronavirus disease 2019 reminds us that from God we came and unto him we will return, that life and death are in the hands of the Almighty

TABLE 2: Moslem co-researcher in comparing the Islamic practice norm before COVID-19 and the new norm during COVID-19 not the literature.

The norm before COVID-19	The new norm during COVID-19
Five daily prayers at the mosque are highly recommended on time	The daily prayers have become compulsory to perform at home
Attending funerals of loved ones who died of COVID-19,	Families were not able to say their final goodbyes as the deceased was taken from the hospital to a specific place where a special washing ceremony took place and the children and spouse (if the deceased is female) were asked to perform the last prayer, and burial takes place immediately after that
or without COVID-19	A small number of family members will attend the funeral and no after-tears can take place
Attending the voluntary night prayers at your communal mosque during the period of fasting	Voluntary prayers took the same ruling as the five daily prayers
Visiting family and friends and congratulating them on the <i>Eid</i> celebration	No visitation was allowed and best wishes were only conveyed via telephone

COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

and he decreed who lives and who dies, prescribed before we are born. Death was a reminder that it does not discriminate against age or health. Some with serious health issues survived COVID-19 and were given a second chance in life, whereas people with minor or no health issues succumbed. It shows that God is in control and no harm can affect a person if it is not prescribed by God. Furthermore, the lesson of 'make the best of the current moment because later is not guaranteed' as in the Qur'ān, 'And never say of anything, Indeed, I will do that tomorrow', *except [when adding]*, 'If God wills' became more relevant (Chapter 18:23–24).

Regarding prayer, some would feel, others felt not to attend mosque at all and others felt they must go to the Mosque, disregarding social distancing and other protocols. They had the mindset that everything is from God and God will take it away. Some found a balance, whereas it is compulsory to pray five times a day, they would attend mosque, for example, for Friday prayer practice social distancing and use separate entrances for entrance and exit.

Themes identified, integration of narrative interviews and literature reflection

In this section, a few themes that emerged from both the Christian and Muslim narratives will be highlighted as representing the most common responses while coming from different faiths, cultures and demographics in South Africa. Rubin and Rubin (1995:3) state that, 'qualitative research listens to people, as they describe how they understand the worlds in which they live and work'. Within the new stories, 'people live out new self-images, new possibilities for relationships and new futures' (Morgan 2000:15, see Freedman & Combs 1996:16). The following themes emerged:

The wrath of God

From the narratives shared, a common notion was that of God's anger towards the world. Christians reflected on the biblical narratives of the Old Testament that God was angry towards Israel when they deviated from his will and he punished them. There was a spiritual connotation that COVID-19 probably may be God's judgment and wrath. Based on Isaiah (26:20), 'Come, my people, enter your inner chambers, and shut your doors behind you, hide yourselves for a while until the wrath is past', is regarded as divine advice for self-quarantine. Some individuals believed that 'God would not harm them or visit them more than they could handle, whereas others believed God is trying to communicate something important through pain, punishment or desertion from God' (Park 2005:712). According to Pieterse and Landman (2022:9), 'the COVID-19 pandemic is also attributed to the wrath of God on his disobedient and sinful people and a call to confess and pray for forgiveness'. On the other hand, Islam states that 'Everything that occurs is from God, whether dutifulness or noncompliance, trust or disloyalty, ailment or well-being, riches or poverty' (Al-Gorany 2021:319). According to Islam (2021), 'significant illness and death are viewed as God's

will, reflecting one's devotion and trust in God'. Thus, 'death is regarded as a cleansing encounter, not a statement of God's anger' (Atiyeh et al. 2008:5). Moreover, Muslims considered adherence to 'Islamic teachings and to the Prophet Mohammed's recommendations as the only way to survive the pandemic' (Gabay & Tarabeih 2022:3).

Death and funerals

Both Christians and Muslims expressed common beliefs regarding death, although totally different burial rituals. They believe that death is a separation of the soul from the body and its transfer from this world to the afterlife. Islam teaches 'its followers to be patient, trust in Allah, offer regular prayers, and ask Allah for support during times of death' (Saleem & Saleem 2020:313). The Muslim co-researchers testified that Allah decreed who dies and who lives before birth.

When a Muslim is near death, frequently distracted by pain and discomfort, relatives around the dying person are called upon to recite verses from the Quran, provide physical comfort, and encourage the dying person to recite words of remembrance and prayer reminding them of God's mercy and forgiveness. (Gabay & Tarabeih 2022:5)

The Muslim co-researchers declared that, for many, COVID-19 deaths and funerals were cold and merciless. The co-researchers stated that during Islamic funerals, faces are turned towards Mecca and funeral prayers are recited. 'These burial practices were, however, banned during COVID-19. COVID protocols and restrictions also caused major challenges on African religious and cultural processes regarding their burial, mourning and grieving practices' (Khosha-Nkatini & White 2021:1).

Meaning and understanding

Processing the meaning and understanding of pandemics is a task that no generation has ever been able to complete. According to Scott (2022:1), 'Religious leaders and their followers had to follow different stages trying to decipher what COVID-19 meant'. In times of 'Stress and anxiety religion acts as an important coping mechanism by offering hope and meaning to people affected by such problems' (Barmania & Reiss 2020:18). In Islam:

[A]ll conduct is governed by the precepts of the Quran and the Sunnah law, directing Muslims in all aspects of human life, decisions and commitments, including recommendations for responses to COVID-19. (Gabay & Tarabeih 2022:3)

For Christians, the Bible, which influences well-being is consulted in a quest for shared meaning.

The Church reached out to those who struggled to understand the meaning of life and questioning the existence of God to help them rediscover the meaning of their lives and gain hope. (Barmania & Reiss 2020:19)

For example, through Bible passages such as Matthew 8:23 and Galatians 6:9, 'the Church provided assurance to their faithful in ways that pointed to their attempts to stand

together in faith in the fight against the pandemic'. Meylahn (2020:3) refers to various 'online sermons on YouTube, and not just on the websites of various congregations, seems to be an indication of the church's design to provide meaning and sense'. The Christian co-researchers referred to the Book of Ecclesiastes (3:1) and described, 'the meaning of life as seasonal and nothing COVID-19 changed in his belief as it came as the season of the time'.

Spirituality

During COVID-19, 'the spirituality of Africans has been undoubtedly a prominent feature among the religious and non-religious personalities of various stripes, including politicians and public health practitioners' (Sibanda et al. 2022:3). John Magufuli, the late President of Tanzania referred to the virus as a '*devil's tool*' and encouraged people to 'continue visiting their places of worship at a time when other countries were stepping up measures to curb gatherings' (2022). Magufuli stated 'These Holy places are where God is, coronavirus cannot survive in the body of Christ, it will burn' (Taylor 2020:1). Some studies on Muslims and Christians (Mashaphu et al. 2021:2; Ting et al. 2021:3) highlighted that 'religiosity and spirituality, play a significant role in their thoughts, health beliefs and behaviours during the pandemic period'. Scott (2022:1) added that 'spirituality provides a framework of meaning for people in their daily lives, as well as during major life crises'. Social media assisted in sharing religious messages which 'sustained the spirituality of most people, as they continued to fellowship together, as families in their homes' (Meylahn 2020:3). All the co-researchers shared how, during the pandemic, they were responsible to deal with spiritual matters comforting their members with words of hope and burying their loved ones.

Conclusion

The religious groups tried by all means to make the meaning of life and death during the COVID-19 crisis through their cultural and spiritual intervention. The study addressed the impact of religious leaders on pandemic responses with religious groups, Muslims, and Christians. Throughout the narratives and literature review, it was revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected individuals, families, faith-based communities and their spiritual leaders and as a result cultural and religious practices have been compromised due to lockdown restrictions and protocols. Nevertheless, the study appreciates the role culture, spirituality and religion played in comforting people, who survived the outbreak and providing spiritual direction to the meaning of life and death when COVID-19 thrives. This article added value and significance to oral history research by collecting and interpreting human memories and experiences on the meaning of life and death during the COVID-19 crisis.

This appreciation should be directed to religious leaders who ensured that culture and religion can be used to endure an outbreak of this magnitude and how the interruption of

common practices can impact the coping skills of those who were affected. Globally, 'many religious communities remain highly active during the pandemic to provide solace and peace in times of uncertainty' (Ting et al. 2021:2). The interviews and themes identified, conveyed the meaning of life and understanding of death that the co-researchers intended to engage in the research. This study highlighted the importance of culture, spirituality, and religious narrative reflection in informing pandemic resilience in a critical time. The study acknowledged that the meaning of life and death has been upended due to the pervasiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Author's contributions

W.B. is the sole author of this research article.

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