

The End of the World and Science-led Religious Pedagogies Coronavirus as a Curtain-Raiser for Doomsday?¹

Tarcisius Mukuka

Mulungushi University, Great North Road, P.O. Box 80415, Kabwe10101, Central Province, Zambia

Abstract: This article aims to correct religious pedagogies that teach the end-of-the-world conspiracy theories to the effect that Coronavirus or any natural pandemic has anything to do with it as a sort of dress rehearsal for doomsday. The significance of the paper lies in contributing to Science-led Religious pedagogies in tertiary institutions being able to assure the learner or inculcate the notion that while Coronavirus or any pandemic may literally spell the end of the world for any of us in the blink of an eye and already has done so for some four million people worldwide, Science-led Religious Studies pedagogies should assure us that the planet's demise is literally billions of years away, notwithstanding the ravages of global warming and climate change or the warnings of some world Scriptures, especially of the Abrahamic religions. Due to the Covid-19 lockdown conditions in which research led to this article, the author used secondary research or desk research as a research method. This involved collecting and interpreting already existing data, especially on the internet and social media. Using hermeneutics of suspicion, the author was able to get beyond the surface of conspiracy theories surrounding the end of the world due to Covid-19. The article contributes to the body of knowledge on the end of the world by giving an alternative apocalyptic interpretation that sees apocalypse as a positive oral metaphor for cosmic renewal. The article concludes that rather than compute the minute, hour, day, month and year of the demise of planet earth due to Coronavirus or any pandemic, our efforts are best expended in striving to be our authentic selves, being our brothers' and sisters' keepers by taking good care of the common habitat we call earth and plugging ourselves to *whatever deity or deities we profess*.

Key words: Covid-19 pandemic; end of the world; apocalypse; doomsday; hermeneutics of suspicion

I. INTRODUCTION

On Sunday, 24 January 2021 as I was reflecting on the challenge that Coronavirus presents biblical exegetes like myself, I landed on the following headline from the UK *Express*, "End of the world: Coronavirus a 'rehearsal' for doomsday," followed by the strapline, "The Coronavirus pandemic is simply a 'rehearsal' for the end of the world, a conspiracy theorist has claimed."² This headline from the UK *Express* is not atypical on the internet and on social media. If there is any originality to be found in this article, it is not in the information or data being examined, as this is ubiquitous on the internet and social media, it is in proposing an alternative interpretation to fundamentalist apocalypticism

present in some mainline and not so mainline faith communities.

1. Aim of Research

This article is a re-working of my earlier research which aimed at examining Coronavirus pandemic-led end-of-the world conspiracy theories. This article summarises the findings of secondary research or desk research carried out during the coronavirus pandemic that has ravaged the world in the last two years. Coronavirus or any pandemic may spell the end of the world for any of us in the twinkling of an eye and has already done so for more than 4,274,254 people worldwide and still counting, but we are still a long way off from the 1918 influenza pandemic figures, which to date is the most severe pandemic in recent history. It was caused by an H1N1 virus with genes of avian origin. Although no universal consensus exists regarding the provenance of the virus, it spread globally during 1918–1919. A conservative estimate of about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population being infected with this virus is often given and the number of deaths estimated at 50 million worldwide. Without doubt, the Spanish flu must have generated conspiracy theories about the demise of the planet, only now to be rivalled by Covid-19 pandemic conspiracy theories.

2. Argument of Article

Having reviewed the end of the world views on the internet and social media, this article concludes that Science-led Religious Studies pedagogies should not worry about computing the time of the demise of the planet. Instead, they should assure us that the planet's demise is literally billions of billions of years away, notwithstanding the ravages of global warming and climate change. Our task as religious pedagogues, is to ask how religion can help us, not to return to business as usual but to return to a new normal with a recalibrated quadruple set of relationships with self, others, the cosmos and the supernatural. Rather than compute the day, month, year and time of the demise of our planet because of Coronavirus, our efforts are best expended in being authentic selves, being our brothers' and sisters' keepers, in looking after our common home known as the earth and plugging ourselves into whatever deity or deities we profess. In the light of recent ego-propelled trips into outer space by super-rich and bored billionaires, rather than seeking to colonise the

outer space, pandemics such as the Spanish flu or Covid-19 remind us to learn to live better on *terra firma*. The amount of money, some \$2 billion that it took Jeff Bezos to shoot himself into space in his phallic toy to experience weightlessness for a fleeting moment, would have been sufficient to end hunger for some 37 million inhabitants on planet earth.

3. Occam's razor, Hermeneutics of Suspicion and Covid-19

Covid-19 Pandemic lends itself easily to end-of-the world conspiracies. This is not new since biblical times. The best example of end-of-the world conspiracies is the biblical book of Revelation, which I mention below. Pandemics have a way of challenging hitherto relied on cosmologies and for faith communities it is a small step to postulate that the cosmic discombobulation is a harbinger of the end of the world. The only way to deal with such cosmologies is to apply Occam's razor and hermeneutics of suspicion. Scholastic philosopher William of Ockham expressed the theory that came to be known after his name as follows. "*pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate*" [plurality should not be posited without necessity]. This principle gives precedence to simplicity: that if there are two competing theories, the simpler explanation of an entity is to be preferred. There are at least two major competing theories regarding Covid-19 or any pandemic: that it is either an act of God (the religious view) or an act of nature (the scientific view). We have no way of demonstrating the former whereas the latter is demonstrable by science. In proposing a Science-led apocalypticism as an explanation for Covid-19, I am applying Occam's razor. While applying this epistemological principle, I am also taking into account Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics of suspicion [*l'herméneutique du soupçon*] which postulates that texts are not always what they seem on the surface if we dig deeper. Covid-19 pandemic theories about the end of the world are texts, both oral and scribal as I show below.

4. Covid-19 and its Global Effects and the End of the World

The digital and internet era we live in has made us painfully aware of the vulnerability of human civilisation and of our planet in real time. News that literally took weeks to cross from one end of the planet to the other now takes seconds. As Shahzaib Akber reminds us, "The pandemic has made us painfully aware of our common vulnerability to disease outbreaks. New communicable diseases originating in one part of the world can spread quickly and widely, underlining that health is a global concern. But this is old news."³ But for people of faith or none, it is a small step to invoke the end of the world. In fact the article just cited, "COVID-19 could be the end of 'global health' as we know it," could as easily have been written as, "COVID-19 could be the end of the world as we know it" by any fundamentalist Churches or faith communities.

The global effects of Covid-19 are well rehearsed and as Kimberly Chriscaden, writing for the World Health Organisation points out, "The COVID-19 pandemic has led to

a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year."⁴ The only challenge not mentioned is the challenge to faith in the future of our planet which is the concern of this article. I deal with this challenge in my forthcoming two-part article, "Oedipus complex and spiritual intelligence: Are men less religious or spiritual than women? Part I and Part II" (forthcoming). Kimberly Chriscaden's conclusion is worth citing here as it coheres with the conclusion of this article. "We must rethink the future of our environment and tackle climate change and environmental degradation with ambition and urgency. Only then can we protect the health, livelihoods, food security and nutrition of all people, and ensure that our 'new normal' is a better one."⁵

Let me now broach the relevance of orality and Scribality to our discussion as this impinges on our religious interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly, the influence of orality on conspiracy theories of the end of the world.

5. From Orality to Scribality⁶

In my doctoral thesis I examined the shift from orality to Scribality in the context of the evangelisation of *Bembaland*.⁷ In examining doomsday scenarios occasioned by the Coronavirus pandemic through apocalyptic imagery, I am mindful of the originally oral register (Niditch 1993; 1996 and 2003) of biblical apocalypticism such as that epitomised in the book of Daniel in the First Testament and the book of Revelation in the Second Testament. I am in partial agreement with Simon Dein who avers that the current Covid-19 pandemic has led to existential crises and that one way of finding meaning in this is through apocalyptic narratives (Dein 2021: 5) which are often oral. Although he distinguishes between religious and secular apocalypses, he erroneously ascribes eschatology to the former and radical political and economic change to the latter. I think what distinguishes the two is the agency and both address radical political and economic change; eschatology is not about the end of the planet but of business not as usual. In the case of biblical apocalypticism such as that of Isaiah 24–27 referenced below, what characterises biblical apocalypticism in contradistinction to secular apocalypticism is that *YHWH* is still in charge of the cosmos and of human life.

As a result, I have not distinguished between religious and secular apocalypticism and in keeping with the oral register of the Hebrew Bible, I have decided to make this as an oral presentation rather than a textual presentation. Having said that, I am equally aware, willy-nilly, how textual this presentation is, complete with endnotes and references to boot. Let me begin by unmasking the Coronavirus doomsday conspiracy theory, sadly ubiquitous globally. Once this is out of the way we can get on with the small matter of what I am

referring to as doomsday conspiracy theories around the Coronavirus pandemic by insisting that whatever religious pedagogies do in the post-Covid 19 era, they must not be antithetical to science.

Let me just tarry a little more on the oral register that characterises apocalypses and pandemics can be described as such as social media is showing us being what Walter Ong referred to as secondary orality in *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology*.⁸ In a 1996 monograph *Oral World and Written Word* Susan Niditch concludes that Israelite literature was set in an oral context. “Israelite literacy, in form and function is not to be confused with modern literacy and that ancient Israelite literacy has to be understood in the context of an oral-traditional culture. Literacy and orality are part of an ongoing continuum even in the latest biblical period” (Niditch 1996: 88, 99). Predominant Western biblical hermeneutics has generally ignored this insight. For instance, many biblical scholars would point to the שמע ישראל [Shema Yisrael] as an example. Dt. 6.8–9 commands the Israelite: “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” It is assumed by these scholars that the average Israelite, quite early on, is literate. This view ignores the earlier injunctions: “Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Dt. 6.7). Hence, the שמע ישראל is to be spoken about, talked about and passed on to future generations than to be read. What about the writing mentioned in verse 9? Susan Niditch explains that “the doorway writing or the body writing is metonymic and symbolic, a means of reminding one who sees or wears the writing of God’s larger demands, the essentials of Israelite religion” (Niditch 1996: 100). Clearly the תפילין (phylacteries) and מזוזה (*Mezuzah*) were not meant to be receptacles for people to read the שמע ישראל from but rather to be reminded of its demands. Apocalypses, such as Isaiah 24–27, which we examine below, were supposed to be received in like manner as symbols to help us access our deepest selves.

Let me now occupy myself with the urgent task of unmasking the Coronavirus conspiracy theory that a pandemic such as Covid-19 is only a dress rehearsal for an eschatological showdown in which the creator unleashes his wrath and everything goes boom. As we shall see, this runs counter to the purpose of biblical Apocalypses such as Isaiah 24–27 as we see below and as noted above.

6. Unmasking the Coronavirus Doomsday Conspiracy Theory

Since the doomsday conspiracy theory appears to be of a Christian hue, I give here the biblical passage usually wheeled in to support its claims. One such text comes from the prophet Isaiah, a text over which we shall tarry in the course of this presentation.

²⁰ *Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while*

until his wrath has passed by. ²¹ See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins. The earth will disclose the blood shed on it; the earth will conceal its slain no longer (Isaiah 26. 20–21 NIV)

Does that sound familiar? And there we were thinking that we had invented lock-down or social distancing. Isaiah was already suggesting it about 2,200 years ago, never mind the punitive undertones for now. The first thing I suggest we do is to read the above micro-text within the macro-text and ask ourselves whether the author was obsessing about doomsday. Here is a summary of such an approach.

Isaiah 24–27, the so-called “Apocalypse of Isaiah,” appears to be *sui generis* in the book of Isaiah from the perspective of genre. From its opening portrayal of cosmic discombobulation, to the death of the ironically name *Mot*, to the summoning blast of the *shofar* or trumpet blast of eschatological hue, its feverish and heightened visions of “that day,” the day of *YHWH* or doomsday, are peppered with lyrical strophes ranging from jubilant praise to outright visceral lament. This distinctive mishmash in genre, tone and content, often without conjunctive discourse markers, contributes to a sense of discombobulation that has long befuddled exegetes. A contextual study of Isaiah 24–27, for instance, addresses the related problems of the text’s structure, coherence and contemporary meaning rather than end-time scenarios. It asks how Hebrew poetry and apocalypses such as Isaiah 24–27, produce meaning and what effect attending to this meaning has for understanding and appropriating Isaiah 24–27 in analogous contexts such as the Coronavirus pandemic. Use of apocalyptic symbolism had an added bonus. It had a cathartic effect as Adela Yarbro Collins has rightly noted (Collins 1984).

7. Apocalypse as a Cathartic Metaphor

My proposed approach to the text from Isaiah or any apocalyptic passage from the Bible for that matter, argues that Isaiah 24–27 is best understood as a series of cathartic metaphorical announcements about the rule of *YHWH*, each followed by a different emotional response leading to catharsis for the oral audience. Although there is a wide variety of imagery within the text, it all contributes to the dominant theme of the kingship of *YHWH*. “*YHWH* rules okay” despite the natural and social upheaval all around us, is the message. Although the imagery and unifying principles of Isaiah 24–27 are not consistent with the way we speak or write today, an awareness of the oral register of the Hebrew Bible nonetheless leads to a coherent meaning in its claim that *YHWH* rules the cosmos from his Headquarters on Mount Zion and will one day create the world anew as we note presently from the book of Revelation. This last point is crucial for biblical apocalyptic literature. It is not about the end of the world but about its renewal. After a description of the battle between the forces of good and evil known as Armageddon in Revelation 16, the Seer concludes his apocalyptic narrative with the following cathartic assurance.

¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; ⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also, he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' ⁶ Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. ⁷ Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. ⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and Sulphur, which is the second death' (Rev 21. 1–8 NRSV).

We could argue similarly that through the current natural and cosmic Covid-19 pandemic, nature, God or the gods are saying to us, if we would listen: "See, I am making all things new." In the language of the first oral listeners of the text, Koine Greek: "Καὶ εἶπεν ὁ καθηήμενος ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ, Ἰδοὺ καινὰ ποιῶ πάντα. Καὶ λέγει, Γράψον ὅτι οὗτοι οἱ λόγοι πιστοὶ καὶ ἀληθινοὶ εἰσιν" [and the one seated on the throne spoke: Behold, I am making all things new. And he said: Write because the words are trustworthy and authentic] (my translation). Let me now turn to the doomsday purveyors.

i. *Signposts of the Times Conspiracy Theory*

The following Doomsday blog *Signposts of the Times* is not unlike some religious pedagogies that may be found in doomsday-peddling higher institutions of learning who shall remain nameless lest I attract a religious *Fatwah*. Such institutions are comfortable to teach that the current COVID-19 pandemic or any pandemic for that matter is but a dress rehearsal for the end of the world. *Signposts of the Times* liken the current natural and health crisis to the text of Isaiah 26. 20–21 cited above and below. I provide a critique of their legless argument below. I show that this conspiracy theory, like all conspiracy theories, lacks any evidence and is above all deaf to the Science.

ii. *Signposts of the Times*

¹ On that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah: We have a strong city; God makes salvation its walls and ramparts. ² Open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps

faith. ³ You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you.

⁴ Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal. ⁵ He humbles those who dwell on high, he lays the lofty city low; he levels it to the ground and casts it down to the dust. ⁶ Feet trample it down — the feet of the oppressed, the footsteps of the poor. ⁷ The path of the righteous is level; you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth. ⁸ Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws, we wait for you; your name and renown are the desire of our hearts. ⁹ My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness. ¹⁰ But when grace is shown to. ¹¹ Lord, your hand is lifted high, but they do not see it. Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame; let the fire reserved for your enemies consume them. ¹² Lord, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us. ¹³ Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone do we honour. ¹⁴ They are now dead, they live no more; their spirits do not rise. You punished them and brought them to ruin; you wiped out all memory of them. ¹⁵ You have enlarged the nation, Lord; you have enlarged the nation. You have gained glory for yourself; you have extended all the borders of the land.

¹⁶ Lord, they came to you in their distress; when you disciplined them, they could barely whisper a prayer. ¹⁷ As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, Lord. ¹⁸ We were with child, we writhed in labour, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth, and the people of the world have not come to life. ¹⁹ But your dead will live, Lord; their bodies will rise — let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy — your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.

²⁰ Go, my people, enter your rooms and shut the doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by. ²¹ See, the Lord is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins. The earth will disclose the blood shed on it; the earth will conceal its slain no longer (Isaiah 26.1–20 NIV).

Now, you be the judge whether the macro-text you have just heard or read has any scintilla of connection with the end of the world. The only doomsday I read is that of the "the wicked" who "do not learn righteousness; even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil and do not regard the majesty of the Lord" (Isaiah 26.10). I am tempted to say that

purely from a contextual reading of the macro-text, *Signposts of the Times* do not have a leg to stand on.

Signposts of the Times point to the line “hide yourselves for a little while until his wrath has passed by” in reference to the current Covid-19 pandemic merely being a rehearsal for the end of days. They go on to conclude from those few words, taken out of context that “It seems there is a major fight going on in both the temporal and spiritual realms over this recent attempt at bringing about the final days of this current dispensation of time.”⁹ In support, they cite St Paul, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6.12 *NIV*). They misapply dear St Paul. *Signposts of the Times* roll out what they think are rhetorical questions with obvious answers. “Is this battle over a pandemic just a ‘dress rehearsal’ for ever more chaos and instability? It certainly seems we are headlong towards the time of Jacobs’ troubles, (tribulation), doesn’t it? There are more than a few prophecy watchers that are looking at the months ahead and wondering aloud if the Church age is at a close and the call of Jesus Christ for his Bride, the Church to be caught up with him in the air is very near.” They are right, “There are more than a few prophecy watchers that are looking at the months ahead and wondering aloud if the Church age is at a close and the call of Jesus Christ for his Bride, the Church to be caught up with him in the air is very near.” I advise them to read Isaiah 24–27 contextually for a bit of truth serum. Without that contextual reading I refer to as the world behind the text, the world in the text and the world in front of the text, it is at this point that they wheel in Isaiah 26. 20–21. They conclude, “We just keep on keeping on as we await that day knowing time is short. That is our blessed hope and that which keeps us on the straight and narrow path.”¹⁰

This article argues that ever since apocalyptic literature was invented in the Hebrew Scriptures about half a century before the Christian Scriptures were canonised, end-of-the-world scenarios have been proposed for centuries but thus far, none of these claims have come to fruition. Such purveyors never give up on their fundamentalist predictions, just in case next time they get it right. And so, with Coronavirus, the end of the world is near — again! But for centuries, doomsayers have prophesied end-time apocalypses without success. None of the end-of-world predictions ever come true. So, why should we believe them now? At this point I am wondering why the UK *Express* was giving the *Signposts of the Times* so much oxygen unless they shared their bizarre worldview. In true research mode, I was anxious to find out who the purveyors of Coronavirus doomsday were.

Applying the hermeneutics of suspicion, we discover that the blog I have examined above is run by a Christian fundamentalist Canadian Couple, Duane and Shelley Muir who describe themselves as follows. “We attend the Evangelical Free Church in Williams Lake, British Columbia, Canada. Our Biblical Prophecy prospective is from the Pre-

Tribulation view point. We believe the Bible says what it means and means what it says.”¹¹ At the time of my research, they had 73 followers. I decided to be “follower” number 74 — just to find out more about their claims. But their views are not uncommon and may be par for the course, even in our tertiary institutions. Like a voice crying in the wilderness, I am convinced that one of the aims of religious pedagogy, especially in third level institutes of learning, must be to debunk them and show them a better use of their time. I am also a harbinger of good news that the end of the world is not nigh, to which I now turn.

8. *The End of the World is not really that Nigh*

In the light of my discussion up to this point, and in invoking Occam's razor, only one conclusion is inevitable. The end of the world as a viable habitat for humanity is not nigh, with or without the Covid-19 pandemic. The unknown author of the biblical book known as *Qoheleth* or Ecclesiastes put it as follows many years ago:

⁹ *What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.* ¹⁰ *Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has already been, in the ages before us (Qoheleth 1.9-10 NRSV).*

מה-שְׁהִיָּהּ הוּא שְׁיִהְיָה וּמֵה-שְׁנַעֲשֶׂה הוּא שְׁיַעֲשֶׂה וְאֵין כָּל-חֵדֶשׁ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ. יֵשׁ דָּבָר שְׂאִימֵר רְאֶה-זֶה חֵדֶשׁ הוּא: כִּבְרָ הִיָּה לְעֹלָמִים אֲשֶׁר הִיָּה מִלְפָּנָיו.

My translation: “What has already been, that will be and what has happened in the past will also happen in the future and there is nothing new beneath the Sun. There is a popular saying which claims, ‘look! There is something new.’ [Don’t worry, that has already taken place in ages past.” Admittedly, that is a dynamic equivalent translation rather than a formal equivalent translation but I think it summarises the gist of the discussion. And could the author be any clearer? Let me use contemporary language to spell that out. Pandemics or plagues are nature’s way or divine way, if you will, to renew the planet which we ourselves have brought about but for that renewal to take place, humanity is being called to a new set of quadruple relationships. Relationships with the self, others, nature or the cosmos and God or the gods. This is the new pedagogy we ought to be concentrating on in our teaching of Religious Studies, not the computation of the end of the world of which we are told, those of us who read the Bible, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13.32-33 *NRSV*). The end of the world is really not that nigh. Not for another billion of billion years. Think of it, the universe is only around 13 billion years old now of which humans and their ancestors have been walking the planet for only 6 million years. *Homo sapiens*, who are the modern Avatars of human beings evolved 300,000 years ago from *Homo erectus*. Human civilisations started forming around 6,000 years ago in Mesopotamia [present-day Iraq] and Egypt. Civilisations first

appeared in Mesopotamia and later in Egypt. Later civilisations thrived in the Indus Valley by about 2500 BCE, in China by about 1500 BCE and in Central America (what is now Mexico) by about 1200 BCE. Civilisations ultimately developed on every continent except Antarctica. And are we now, to assume that whoever or whatever created this planet as a habitat for *Homo sapiens* is now tired of it and wants to be rid of it? To what end? I think not and Science concurs. Pandemics, I submit, are a call to a new normal inviting us to a new quadruple set of relationships which I now broach below.

9. *The New Normal as a New Quadruple Set of Relationships*

If there are any lessons from the Coronavirus Pandemic, it is the perennial lesson we ought to have learnt from any biblical plague since the ten plagues of Egypt, which I now remind the hearer or reader of.

The Plagues of Egypt in the story of the book of Exodus (Exodus 7.14–12.36), are ten disasters inflicted on Egypt by the God of Israel in order to convince the Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to depart from slavery, each of them confronting Pharaoh and one of his Egyptian gods; they serve as “signs and marvels” given by God to answer Pharaoh’s taunt that he does not know Yahweh: “The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.”

There is a lesson in this for the contemporary reader. Plagues or pandemics are part of the natural evolutionary history of the cosmos and its civilisations. These may include extra-terrestrial ones. Pandemics and plagues remind us that we are not in charge. Nature, God or the gods are in charge. They also remind us that the natural quadruple relationships with self, others, nature and God/gods have gone awry and that they need to be re-established if any semblance of return to normal is to be had.

10. *Science-led Religious Pedagogies Post Covid-19 Pandemic*

If the above quadruple relationships stand any chance of taking root, Science-led religious pedagogies need to change how they see pandemics. Not as punishment from God or the gods or curtain raisers to the end of the world but as reminders that humanity is not in charge. Nature, God or the gods are. This has certainly been brought home to us by the smallest of microbes known as Covid-19. These pandemics have been around since time immemorial. For the Coronavirus pandemic, the last time such a global natural phenomenon occurred is slightly more than one hundred years ago through the Spanish flu but humanity never learnt any lessons. It is possible we may never learn any lessons from the current pandemic if the conspiracy theories and the anti-vaccination campaigners are to be believed even in the developed West.

As a sixty-four-year-old African academic fully Covid-19 vaccinated, I struggle to convince my younger contemporaries, why they should be vaccinated. They would

rather believe conspiracy theories about vaccination as a conduit for population control or a means for Big Brother to track us when the gadgets we use already do that. The population control conspiracy theory runs contrary to evidence. Coronavirus is already controlling our world population naturally. Someone recently even claimed that all those hitherto vaccinated would die in two or three years. Science-led religious pedagogies in a post Covid-19 pandemic era need to be alert to the Science of pandemics as well as vaccines and not conspiratorial doomsday scenarios that have no basis in science.

II. CONCLUSION

My argument has been that whatever the Coronavirus pandemic portends, it is not about the end of the world. Therefore, all doomsday interpretations of Covid-19 as a curtain raiser for the end of the world have to be thrown out with the academic contempt that they deserve in our eschatological pedagogies post Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than spend our time computing the day, month, year and time of the demise of our beloved planet because of Coronavirus, our efforts are best expended in being authentic selves, being our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, looking after our common home and plugging ourselves to whatever deity we profess.

The demise of the planet has been predicted since time immemorial. It is time to give up on this enterprise and spend our time more profitably suggesting how we can take care of our planet and of one another. Although likely to kill many or all inhabitants on our planet, not even an enormous asteroid or comet would have the energy to destroy planet earth. Nor would the explosion of a powerful supernova within a few light-years. However, orbital instabilities in the Solar System may eventually lead to a catastrophic collision between earth and one of the other terrestrial planets Mercury, Venus or Mars. Yet the possibility of that happening is only about 1 per cent over the next five billion years or so.

The most likely scenario for the total annihilation of earth? Being engulfed into the Sun as it transforms into a ‘red giant’ star. As the Sun’s thermonuclear fuel, hydrogen, becomes depleted in its core, our star’s outer envelope will begin to expand. In this phase of its evolution, the Sun will lose a significant amount of mass, meaning earth’s orbit will also expand and this is not about to happen any time soon, even with another one hundred Coronavirus pandemics. But don’t worry, this scorching destruction of the earth is a long way off. It is only about 8 billion years in the future, according to some calculations.

Even if our planet somehow survives and remains in orbit around the bloated red giant Sun, the earth’s natural orbital decay means it would merge with the dead Sun’s remnant. Eventually, anyway, this fate would occur in about 100 billion billion years. Not bad considering the universe is only around 13 billion years old now. Regarding Coronavirus pandemic, the best-case scenario, Scientists assure us, is that the virus is here to stay like the common cold. The worst-case scenario is

that it will keep on mutating until, like polio or any other plague a hundred percent vaccine is found and the virus eradicated or may be never but the end of the planet will still be far from its demise. Whichever it turns out, a plausible blueprint for a post Coronavirus religious pedagogy worth its weight in gold needs to be alert to what I have described as a quadruple set of relationships with self, others, the cosmos and the supernatural.

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Endnotes

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² Sean Martin (14 August 2020), "End of the world: Coronavirus a 'rehearsal' for doomsday — Claim," *Express*, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/weird/1322602/end-of-the-world-coronavirus-doomsday-apocalypse-prediction> (Accessed on 24.01.2021)

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⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Due to space constraint, I am limiting myself to Orality and Scribality rather than extend the medium to include technauriture (cf. Kaschula and Mostert 2011).

⁷ Mukuka, Tarcisius (2014), *Orality as Casualty: Contextual and Postcolonial Analysis of Biblical Hermeneutics in Bembaland*, Surrey University: Guildford part of which was published in: Mukuka, Tarcisius (2016), *Spoken Voice/Written Text: Negotiating How We Hear/Read the Bible*, Lambert Academic Publishing: Saarbrücken

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¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Bible Prophecy — *Signposts of the Times* (24 January 2021), "Dystopia Now! — Surveillance Through Vaccine Certificates, Digital IDs, and Biometric Data," <http://signpostsofthetimes.blogspot.com/2021/01/dystopia-now-surveillance-through.html> (Accessed on 25.01.2021)