Framing a Theological Response to COVID-19 in the Presence of the Religious Other

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Abstract

The Christian faith has a long history of responding to pandemics. Its past practice bore witness to the desire to care for others: it furnished an exemplary model with some notable exceptions. The dilemma that COVID-19 presents is that the understanding of viral spread now lies within the preserve of a professionalized health system. The evident risk as a consequence is one of theological quietism and being “unavailing.” Now is not the time for simple hyper compliance at the expense of an enquiring confessional claim. The ecumenical witness in solidarity with other faiths/religions lends itself to a desire to consider how the present pandemic crisis might serve as an invitation for a theological enquiry into wider planetary issues.

Keywords

COVID-19, N. T. Wright, Martin Luther, Serving a Wounded World

For the Sake of All

The menace of a global pandemic immediately presents the problem of how to pursue the common good. The underlying assumption here is that the whole of humankind is vulnerable to a virus. Its consequences inform matters of economics, health, politics – indeed, the much-vaunted concept of the flourishing of all. From the vantage point of a public theology, it presents a kairos moment: What frame of meaning do faiths and religious traditions possess? How do they break the temptation to a theological quietism...
(in the case of the Christian faith) when faced with the introverting tendencies of lockdowns and social distancing?

For some time now, both the Christian faith and Islam have demonstrated a capacity to make use of this language of the common good. The default position has been to pursue that within the confines of one particular tradition rather than via dialogue with another faith/religion. This article was one of four presentations given in a Zoom-based programme featuring Muslim Christian Academics in Dialogue (MCAD), held under the auspices of an interreligious research centre for public and contextual theologies. It unfolded in the midst of Islamic discussions on hygiene, quranic sura, and Hadith sayings on epidemics, as well as a Christian reflection on how to use solitude and its role in crafting a healthy compassionate leadership. It proceeds upon the basis that an authentic dialogue requires a tradition to be willing to speak out of its own beliefs and practices in an empathetic manner.

**Coming to Terms with COVID-19**

The most immediate response of the Christian faith to the COVID-19 pandemic through its churches was practical. The virus had struck so suddenly. It did not respect borders. One moment it was “over there” – the timeline of statistics in *The Sydney Morning Herald* was running the equivalent of a league ladder indicating the number of deaths and infections in places like Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Then it was “here”: before us lay questions of its impact on lives, the capacity of the health system, the resilience and quality of civil society, the economy – immediate and long-term. It came “with an unavoidable immediacy and with little preparedness” in place.¹

The pressure on the liturgical and pastoral life of the Christian faith was immediate: the public health advisories cut into the season of Lent and the preparation for Easter. The burden of time and energy was directed toward the practice of being the church: was it possible to initiate a digital ecclesiology² that maintained the regular rhythm of worship online, pastoral care in a time of social distancing, the nurture of spiritual life, the sustaining of ministry in a season of lockdowns and closed doors. In addition to this there are matters to do with the practical governance of the church and the need to negotiate

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¹ World Council of Churches and Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action during COVID-19 and Beyond* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020), 8; https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/serving-a-wounded-world-in-interreligious-solidarity

² Heidi Campbell, “Introduction: Studying Digital Ecclesiology: How Churches Are Being Informed by Digital Media and Cultures,” *Ecclesial Practices* 7 (2020), 1–10.
the tension between being a citizen and a disciple. How should state or federal restrictions be managed?

These things are important. COVID-19 has not yet matched the deadly impact of past pandemics like the Black Death of the 14th century, but there are lessons to be learned from times when the church failed to meet the challenge of a surging wave of death. Joshua Mark and Philip Ziegler are among those who have noted how this plague exposed the failings of the medieval church. It was poorly organized to meet such a crisis: some of the most experienced and caring pastors were lost in the exercise of their duties, only to be replaced by poorly formed novitiates. Some clergy simply fled; others were able to exploit the lack of ministry and the decimation of the population for personal gain. It became easy to scapegoat and blame others for the pestilence – most notably the Jews. In the absence of experience and the provision of meaning, extreme forms of faith – like that of the flagellants – were able to take root.

In terms of the current response, what has been less to the fore was explicit biblical and theological reflection. That should not come as too much of a surprise. It takes time to do such work – theology is always a second-order reflection. It requires a degree of critical distance – the theology of pandemics has hardly been a key matter of interest for the past century or so. It is true that there have been theological responses to HIV/AIDS. For all the merits and importance of such responses, it has not been centre stage for the biblical and theological disciplines as a whole. The rise of the coronavirus has taken contemporary theology by surprise, though as the Lutheran social commentator Lyman

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3 The tension between being a citizen and a disciple during a time of COVID-19 is currently underexplored. The most obvious potential fault line lies between the need to observe health and safety precautions (being a good citizen) and the call to imitate Christ and love the wounded neighbour (in this instance, the virus-infected/vulnerable).

Writing in the *Church Times*, Angela Tilby examined this potential tension through a consideration of the practices put in place by the Church of England and the response of the first Christians to plagues and pestilence. Tilby argues that the contemporary church is “treading a narrow line of super-compliance.” It seems to have nothing to say about death “except how important it is to avoid it.” The received tradition of “the life to come has become an embarrassment.” It would seem as if the church is suffering itself from “the secularisation of resurrection faith”; the underlying assumption is that we are called to build the kingdom “as if it were ours to build” – “we look for the reduction of unnecessary deaths and the life of a fairer world order.” Angela Tilby, “Do We Believe in Life after Death?” *Church Times*, 3 April 2020.

The most extreme form of this tension can be observed in the responses of members of the Mount Roskill Evangelical Church in Auckland: worship services continued, the church failed to practise safe distancing and maintain a register of contacts, and it released the “message” that if someone were to fall ill, then they would likely be healed through prayer and miracle.

4 Joshua Mark, “Religious Responses to the Black Death,” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 16 April 2020; Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (Stroud: Sutton, 1990).
Stone has noted, the Christian faith has been dealing with pandemics for 2,000 years.\(^5\) What Stone’s comment infers is that theology does have a history upon which to draw. COVID-19 is not the same as SARS and AIDS, or the bubonic plague, or the Antonine Plague (165–180 CE)\(^6\) and the Plague of Cyprian (249–271 CE)\(^7\) – though these last two may indeed have been the first recorded accounts of a virus transferred from an animal host to humans. The societies that those much earlier plagues ravaged are not the same as those of today’s complex world. They also lacked the expert and professional medical capacity of current highly developed societies.\(^8\) They do, nevertheless, perform the function of an analogy, a foil for the theological work before us today. It is time for biblical scholars, theologians, and the church in general to acknowledge the importance of the role that professional church historians play.

**The Witness of History**

This backstory is both inspirational and colourful. It has been claimed that a quarter of the Roman empire was killed off during the Antonine Plague. One of the things that stood out in this period was the ethical example and conduct of early Christians. They stood for their care of the sick: they acted out an exemplary life whereby plagues were not to be seen as the work of angry and capricious gods. They were, rather, the consequence of a broken creation, an imperfect creation yet to be reconciled to a loving God.

This dimension of sacrificial care was more strongly evident in the Plague of Cyprian in the third century.\(^9\) Cyprian was the bishop of Carthage: of particular significance is his treatise *De Mortalitate* (On morality), where he lamented that “many of us are dying” from “this plague and pestilence”: his sermons and writings advised his hearers not to grieve for plague victims, because they were now in heaven. In this life, this disease was affecting “the just and the unjust”: for those who bear the name of Christ this mortality, this destruction, becomes a way of “gladly . . . seek[ing] martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death.” It is a time of testing whereby “the mind of the human race is

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\(^5\) Lyman Stone, “Christianity Has Been Handling Endemics for 2000 Years,” *Foreign Policy Magazine*, 13 March 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/13/christianity-epidemics-2000-years-should-i-still-go-to-church-coronavirus

\(^6\) William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1977), 80, 104, 165.

\(^7\) Gary D. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 115–33.

\(^8\) Ferngren takes issue with those who argued that the early Christians ignored the best medicine of their day and preferred to see the plague as being caused by demons.

\(^9\) Kyle Harper, “Pandemics and Passages to Late Antiquity: Rethinking the Plague of c. 249-70 Described by Cyprian,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 28 (2015), 223–60.
examined”: the just care for the sick, the relatives care for their kin, the masters show compassion for their ailing slaves.10

Dionysius was the bishop of Alexandria: Rodney Stark observed that maybe two-thirds of the city’s population died from this disaster, “more frightening” than anything before, which Dionysius described in his Easter message as “coming out of the blue.” And yet it should not be seen “as a time of distress.” The bishop reflected on how Christians, “heedless of danger . . . took charge of the sick, attending to their every need.” They did so in a way that marked them out as different. In subsequent centuries, the pagan Emperor Julian observed how “the impious Galileans” would care for even non-Christian sick people: “their benevolence to strangers and their care of the graves of the dead” stood out in exemplary fashion. The church historian Pontianus likewise noted how Christians ensured that “good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.”11

This sacrificial response was not isolated to this period in time. The transition to our present period can be made through Martin Luther. The bubonic plague struck Wittenberg in 1527: Luther refused calls to leave the city: that refusal would cost him his daughter, Elizabeth. What comes down to us now is his tract from the time: Whether Christians Should Flee the Plague.12 It has not attracted the same kind of attention as Luther’s great treatises, which sparked a Reformation, but it stands as a clear presentation of a Christian response to an epidemic. It was written in response to Johann Hess, the pastor at Breslau, who was seeking advice.

There is a distinction to be made, first, between those who hold office and those who do not. With reference to the former, Stone summarizes: We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations.13 The end result may have been the same, but at times Luther explained these injunctions with a little more delicacy. Those who were charged with a spiritual ministry – preachers and pastors, for instance – “must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death.”14 This counsel was then supported by reference to a biblical text like the good shepherd laying down his life for

10 Cyprian, De Mortalitate (On Mortality), chapters 15–20.
11 Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 77.
12 Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” in Mary Jane Haerning (ed), The Annotated Luther: Pastoral Writings – Pastoral Writings 4, with an introduction by Anna Marie Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 48–74.
13 Stone, “Christianity Has Been Handling Endemics For 2000 Years.”
14 Luther, “Whether One May Flee,” 56.
the sheep (John 10:11). Toward the end of his letter, Luther would advise on the importance of the need for preaching in order to “learn through God’s Word how to live and how to die,” as well as the need for the pastoral care of the dying and administering the sacrament.  

15 Those who held public office – like mayors and judges – were “under obligation to remain,” and to do so, likewise, on biblical grounds. In this instance Luther would cite Romans 13:4: “The governing authorities are God’s ministers for your own good.”  

16 Paid public servants – that is, city physicians, city clerks, and constables – were not to flee “unless they furnish capable substitutes who are acceptable to their employees.”

What is evident from “these instructions” is Luther’s appreciation of the need to maintain a degree of public order. His recommendation that key public officials and citizens remain was consistent with the need to maintain municipal homes and ensure hospitals were adequately staffed to care for the sick. Such institutions should be sustained by pious legacies.  

18 Luther also sought out sound policy with regard to burials and clarification as to whether cemeteries should be inside or outside the town; he himself declared that he did not know whether “vapours and mists arise out of the graves to pollute the air.” In the face of such calamity, Luther aspired after a cemetery as a place of reverence and respect, where the grieving might pray and consider the resurrection.  

19 For the sake of the living, Luther saw the need for homes and places of assembly to be fumigated and the air purified.

With regard to those who did not hold public office, Luther’s response relied on the deep-seated conviction that emphasized how a people are “mutually bound together”; “we cannot desert one another or flee from one another”; “whoever wants to serve Christ in person would surely serve his neighbour as well.” Luther further argued that no one should dare leave their neighbour unless there are others who will take care of the sick in their stead and nurse them – that is the test. “If someone is weak and fearful, let him flee in God’s name as long as he does not neglect his duty toward his neighbour but has made adequate provision for others to provide nursing care.”

15 Ibid., 70.  
16 Ibid., 56.  
17 Ibid., 57.  
18 Ibid., 62.  
19 Ibid., 71.  
20 Ibid., 67.  
21 Ibid., 61.
In a manner that might anticipate anti-vaxxers and those who protest against masks and social distancing, Luther takes to task those who are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but light-heartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God’s punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health.\footnote{Ibid., 67.}

Luther suggests how those who have contracted the disease and now recovered should conduct themselves; he is particularly condemning of those who keep their infection a secret and in so doing contaminate and poison others: “the judge should take them by the ear and turn them over to Master Jack, the hangman, as outright and deliberate murderers.”\footnote{Ibid., 69.}

Stark has observed that faced with these kinds of threats, religions are faced with a crisis. The religion either is unable to furnish a “satisfactory understanding” of why the disaster has occurred, that is, it has failed to provide meaning, or it has shown itself to be “unavailing,” by which Stark means it has “failed” to be a source of help.\footnote{Stark, \textit{The Rise of Christianity}, 77–78.} What is striking about the Christian responses to these two early plagues is that they were found to be exemplary.

Cyprian and Luther may have both inhabited worlds where they understood a pandemic to be a divine punishment; at the same time, their responses were informed by the call to love the neighbour, the one in need, and to do so, in the case of Cyprian more overtly, with a view to participating in the sufferings of Christ.

Why Cyprian and Luther, at very different points in history, were able to furnish such advice was due to their belief in life beyond death. Cyprian was deeply informed by his conviction that “the storms and the whirlwinds of the world” had been predicted by Jesus during his ministry. These things had been foretold: the kingdom of God is at hand.\footnote{Cyprian, \textit{On Mortality}, chapter 2.} There was no need to fear death. In this world, Cyprian argued, “we are united with the human race with equality in the flesh” but “are separated in the spirit.” The
Christian lives in hope. Death is a “salutary departure.”\textsuperscript{26} It is not “the end, but a passage, and the journey of time being traversed, a crossing over to eternity.”\textsuperscript{27}

Luther’s pamphlet presupposed life beyond death. It was not so much to the fore as it was in the case of Cyprian’s writing on mortality. That difference of weighting was as much due to Luther’s intention to provide pastoral advice rather than to furnish the exhortation of a sermon. Luther did not play down the threat of the plague: he saw in it the hand of the devil and his “pestilential breath.” At the same time, he saw it as an expression of God’s punishment as well as a testing, a searching, an examining of faith and love. His practical advice was laced with biblical hooks and reference points – most tellingly to Matthew 25:40, 43 (“As you did to the least, you did to me” / “I was sick and you did not visit me”).\textsuperscript{28}

\section*{Serving a Wounded World}

What was evident in these historical responses was the way in which action, conduct, character was, at its best, bound up with ways of reading the Bible and theological claims. What you do is not separate from what you believe. So far, the level of formal biblical and theological reflection on COVID-19 has been relatively sparse. The tendency has been to look to the synod for advice on what we can do and what we can’t, and that is determined by the public health advisories of the state government. Into this relative vacuum can be set a handful of writings that address a number of theological symptoms provoked by the crisis: N. T. Wright, John Piper, and Walter Brueggemann have all published short books.\textsuperscript{29}

One of the most recent responses was a document sent to me by Sef Carroll in Geneva. It has been published by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). \textit{Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity} describes itself as a response to the question “What does it mean for Christians to love and serve our fellow human beings in a world in which the Covid-19 pandemic has inflicted widespread suffering?\textsuperscript{29,30} Framed in this way, it should come as no surprise that the text is shaped by a reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). This parable is set inside a context

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., chapter 15.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Ibid., chapter 22.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Luther, “Whether One May Flee,” 61.
\item \textsuperscript{29} N. T. Wright, \textit{God and the Pandemic} (London: SPCK & Zondervan, 2020); John Piper, \textit{Coronavirus and Christ} (Wheaton: Crossway 2020); Walter Brueggemann, \textit{Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief and Uncertainty} (Eugene: Cascade, 2020).
\item \textsuperscript{30} WCC/PCID, \textit{Serving a Wounded World}, 4.
\end{itemize}
of Jesus addressing the question “Who is my neighbour?” and anticipates the command to love one’s neighbour as oneself. The storyline of the parable revolves around the response of travellers to a wounded man who had been set upon on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. It so happens that members of the wounded man’s own faith hurry by without helping. The one who does stop is the Samaritan, who represents for us one who is “the other,” regarded with suspicion and, by extension, the one reckoned to be the least likely to assist. In due course in this document, the parable is bound up with a reading of Matthew 25: the one is who wounded becomes the representative of “all suffering” – Christ’s co-suffering with the world. Through this coming of texts, the document imagines that “we encounter the face of the suffering Christ.”

It is evident that through this use of the parable, the WCC and the Pontifical Council are emphasizing the importance of service, solidarity, and the desire to overcome religious prejudice and cultural biases to alleviate suffering and nurture the common good. The WCC and the PCID believe this strategy is necessary because “the whole of humanity is gravely wounded”; “our interdependence reminds us that no one can be saved on their own.” The two councils further assume that the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be separated from the “broader context of suffering of this planet.” They see this health crisis as “a harbinger of future crises relating to climate change and the assault on biodiversity.” It fits in here with the intention of A. J. P. Hampton’s anthology, Pandemic, Ecology, Theology: Perspectives on COVID-19. In some respects, it is a line of approach anticipated by Robert Wuthnow in his weaving together of acts of terror, environmental degradation, and pandemics.

The WCC and the PCID are inclined thus to set their response within an existing ecumenical agenda which goes back to earlier declarations of justice, peace, and the integrity of creation, as well as the subsequent concern for the poor and the marginalized of the world. These are admirable themes, but one wonders if there is an unacknowledged cost here: Is there sufficient engagement with the specificity of the virus and the menace it poses? There is a worrying lack of engagement with pandemic health experts.

31 Ibid., 12.
32 Ibid., 7.
33 Ibid., 6–7.
34 Ibid., 7.
35 Alexander J. P. Hampton, ed., Pandemic, Ecology, Theology: Perspectives on COVID-19 (London: Routledge, 2020).
36 Robert Wuthnow, Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation and Other Threats (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
The tendency of this document is to favour a set of values and guiding principles. Those that are named are humility and vulnerability (where witness becomes witness), respect for the individual, the intersection of community, compassion and the common good, the call for dialogue and mutual learning, repentance and renewal, gratitude and generosity, and the call to live out Christ’s love.

The theological foundations of these values are established initially in the Christian claim that all people are created in the image of God. This common dignity is sustained by hope. Serving a Wounded World interprets a Christian hope along the lines of “God’s promised kingdom in which the whole creation is reconciled and bound together in justice and peace.” It imagines that this hope can transform lives in the present and lead to service; it argues the case for “universal and shared ethic and spiritual values to inject a new hope in the pandemic-ravaged world.”

The dilemma raised by such familiar language is that it runs the risk of playing down the particularity of religious beliefs. Serving a Wounded World touches upon biblical and theological ideas in a rather light way. It bears the marks of belief in the triune God – the three-in-one – God confessed by the Christian faith; it refers to isolated texts like that of 1 Peter 2:4 – our trust and our hope is in Jesus Christ who heals by his wounds – but does it do enough?

**God and the Pandemic**

It is perhaps worth putting this ecumenical and well-intentioned document alongside the response of N. T. Wright, writing initially in an article in *Time* and then in due course a short book, *God and the Pandemic*. Wright is a noted evangelical writer: he is well aware of what kind of people those of us of Western background are. For that purpose, he draws upon a typology from the ancient world: “The Stoic declares that you can’t change things, thus you need to learn to fit in; the Epicurean would suggest that we should make ourselves as comfortable as we can [until it passes]; the Platonist thinks along the lines that we are destined for a different world – so . . . what’s the problem?” Wright reckons that most of us in the modern West are basically Epicureans. The pandemic is here: “Stuff happens, but we want to scramble for comfort, so settle down, self-isolate, plenty of Netflix. This too will pass.”

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37 WCC/PCID, *Serving a Wounded World*, 14.
38 Ibid., 11.
39 Ibid., 9.
40 Ibid.
41 Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, 2–3.
One of the first theological tasks Wright addressed was essentially negative. In a time of crisis, there is always a need to refute bad theology. It is an imperative, in this case, to take issue with conspiracy theories and assume that this deadly virus is the work of an angry God directed at particular groups of people. There have been numerous instances of this: the soft option is to “blame” others and be “distracted.” Wright is very sceptical of those who want to suggest that God is trying to say something through the pandemic (contrary to Piper 42) and that it should be seen as a result of God’s dislike of a specific set of people. Wright further is critical of those who might wish to say the virus is a sign of the impending end of the world.

In place of that talk of punishment, Wright reads the Hebrew Bible, where humankind inhabits a good creation: it is one in which there is a “dark power” that manifests itself in awkward circumstances: gross injustices, terrible plagues, innocents being accused of wicked things, and senseless suffering and sickness. Wright takes us into the world of the Psalms and the book of Job, as well as the prophetic literature. The witness of this First Testament is that we are to lament; we are to complain/protest; we are to state the case as it is; and we are to place these things in the care of God. Wright is imitating the pattern of John Roth’s protest theodicy. It is a line of approach that will carry on into his reading of Jesus, the New Testament, and “What do we do from here?”

Wright addresses themes not found in the document Serving the Wounded World; he draws upon biblical text after biblical text but does so in a way in which the appropriate Christian response is one of lament, groaning with creation, praying in the power of the Spirit and serving—especially serving the poor and defending their interests. The difficulty lies in how he plays down the more prophetic and apocalyptic traditions of the Bible. They are present but in a more subdued manner. It leaves his response in a form of quietism expressed in lament, prayer, and faithful service.

Wright’s reading of God and the pandemic does not follow the biblical script in the way in which those traditions also deal with the clash of nations and empires. Brueggemann is only too aware of how the biblical material to do with pestilence is inclined to be linked with “the sword,” famine, and captivity.43 Wright is liable to leave the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions languishing like abstractions. Does this leave his reading of the pandemic at a remove, then, from the multiple crises facing contemporary humanity and the planetary well-being? Is this where the strength and contribution of Serving a Wounded World lies?

42 Piper, Coronavirus and Christ, 55–99.
43 Brueggemann, Virus as a Summon to Faith, 3–4.
There is not a sense of judgment in Wright’s interpretation of God and the pandemic. And yet, maybe the pandemic represents a form of judgment different from that which Cyprian and Luther envisaged on a personal, subjective level. Is the pandemic one more symptom alongside a raft of other symptoms in the form of a wake-up call? Is there a risk that Wright keeps us in lockdown in private prayer? Should this virus be consigned to an isolation ward, only keeping company with past plagues and pandemics – or not?

In Conclusion

It should come as no surprise that the first response to COVID-19 was one of a practical digital ecclesiology marked by health and safety concerns. The past experience of the church, however, is that pandemics possess theological symptoms as well. They raise questions to do with how we talk about God, Christ, the gospel, problems of theodicy, and hope. In the past, faithful responses demonstrated personal care and a concern for public health and safety. What was also rather striking is how interpretations of the gospel furnished necessary frameworks of meaning and understanding for what was happening. It is a salutary question to ask how well that is happening today. The tension this pandemic raises also lies on an uncomfortable boundary line. This tension lies between the need to make some sort of meaning about the virus itself and if, and how, it should be seen in a much broader context of what is happening planetary-wise. Is it a purveyor of a more up-to-date rendering of a future judgment?