

## Guest editorial: Theology in a time of COVID-19

On 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020, *TIME* magazine published an article by well-known scholar and retired English bishop N. T. Wright entitled “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To”.<sup>1</sup> In this article, Wright sort to curb the temptation to make simplistic, self-righteous appeals to divine judgement in answer to why God would allow the manifold suffering that people across the globe have experienced as a result of this deadly virus. We cannot, and must not, draw straight transparent lines from events of suffering to divine judgements.

Even if we agree with Wright, it is not true to say that Christianity has *nothing* to say about coronavirus.<sup>2</sup> After all, explanations of suffering or justifications of God’s permittance of evil (theodicies) are not the only form of Christian reflection in times of hardship and crisis. Often the first response, like Job’s friends, must be one of silence, followed by the hard work of burying the dead, comforting the broken-hearted, and providing rest for the weary. Many pastors, deacons, nurses, carers, and others around the world have exemplified this sort of practical and pastoral response over the past 12 months. But as the number of victims continues to rise and we live through another strict lockdown, there is also a need for careful reflection on what we as individuals, as a nation, as a world, and as the people of God, have experienced (and continue to experience) in a time of COVID-19.

In the New Testament we do not have a straightforward answer to the question Why has God allowed suffering? Instead, we have a series of testimonies to the life of Jesus, snippets of sermons, songs, poems, and letters all reflecting on a different question: What is it that God has done in our midst, but which until the Spirit opened our eyes we did not see nor understand? Whilst each of the contributors to this issue offer their own theological reflections on living in this time of COVID-19, I might humbly

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<sup>1</sup> *TIME*, March 29, 2020, <https://time.com/5808495/coronavirus-christianity/>

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Wright himself goes on to commend the biblical practice of lament as the most appropriate Christian response to COVID-19.

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suggest that it is this question that comes most to the surface: What has God done in our midst, but which we have not seen and struggle to understand?

The articles in this special issue all originate from an online conference called *TheoCon: Theology in a Time of Crisis 2020* organised by Dr Tripp Fuller and Dr Sarah Lane Ritchie at the University of Edinburgh. I am grateful to Dr Fuller and Dr Lane Ritchie in allowing and aiding me to reproduce some of these talks and conversations in printed format. I will now give a brief overview of the papers in this issue.

Prof David Fergusson is a Scottish theologian, a minister in the Church of Scotland, and recently appointed Regius Chair of Theology at the University of Cambridge. Fergusson's article, "Theology in Lockdown" offers four points of reflection for the task of theology in an age of COVID-19. Fergusson's opening remarks draw us back to the question that I raised at the start of this editorial: How, and how quickly, should Christian theology respond to times of crisis? Noting Karl Barth's famous statement that we should 'carry on as if nothing has happened', Fergusson emphasises the need for humility and very careful thought. Yet, humility does not mean that we must remain silent. And so, Fergusson's first section turns to the question of God's providence. Comparing the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the First World War, and the Spanish flu of 1918, Ferguson explains how ideas about God's providence, and our ability to give meaning to calamitous events, has changed over time. The lesson from this history, Fergusson suggests, is that it is often better to see the hand of God in those who work to resist disease and mitigate its worse effects, rather than in the disease itself. Second, Fergusson turns to the lessons that this season of COVID-19 might have for what it means to be human. Drawing on the work of another Scottish theologian, John Macmurray, Fergusson suggests that COVID-19 has underlined for us both the embodied and the relational nature of human existence. We are creatures who flourish by being together physically, in life and in the process of dying. COVID-19 also reminds us how fragile we are, physically, mentally, and politically, how interconnected with the wider biological world, and how precious life truly is. These are all insights which ring out from the Psalter in a time of COVID-19. In his third section, "Christ and the Church", Fergusson turns to the theme of hope in the teaching and life of Jesus. Here, Fergusson calls upon the church to partner with other individuals and institutions to be an agent of hope in the world.

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Dr Rebekah Lamb, a lecturer in theology and the arts at the University of St Andrews, offers a theology of consolation that is framed by Isaiah 41:10 and focuses on the cross. “Christian Consolation and Theology’s Task Today” offers a cruciform consolation that does not seek to dismiss or minimize the reality of suffering. Instead, the centrality of the cross in Christian theology dignifies human experiences of suffering, frailty and even mortality, such as those that face us in a time of COVID-19. And yet, because the crucifixion births resurrection, Christian consolation can offer more than dignity and understanding, it also offers real hope and meaning in and through suffering. Lamb reminds us that the cross has been a symbol of hope throughout the history of Christian art and that Jesus is our ‘wounded healer’. At least as important as vaccines and virtual calls, it is this consolation, this providence in the midst of pain, this ability to find meaning in experiences of confusion, that Christian theology can offer the world.

John Bell is a minister in the church of Scotland, a teacher working for the Iona Community, and a poet whose stanzas and stories punctuate this essay. “Theology and the Arts: The Corona Crisis” opens with the claim that, important as consolation undoubtedly is, Christian theology has more to offer than words of comfort, or ‘palliative care’ theology. Bell suggests three additional ways forward for theological reflection during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. First, Bell calls for a rediscovery of the language of lament and cites the Psalms as an important resource for this (as do David Fergusson and Christopher Southgate in their essays). Second, Bell points beyond both ‘sin-sniffing’ and escapism towards a theological critique of the pandemic that invites us to reckon with the reality of our finitude and the relationship between humanity and the earth. Third, Bell calls on us to re-imagine the future. He points to the power of the arts and the imagination for this prophetic task.

Christopher Southgate is a published poet and the Professor of Christian Theodicy at the University of Exeter. His article entitled “Singing and Dancing in the Cruellest Month: A Reflection on Theology and Poetry in a Time of COVID”, explores what contribution poetry and the arts can make to the human experience in a time of pandemic. He argues that artistic productions can ‘enlarge the heart’ such that sorrow and anxiety are not removed or defeated but are, as in the biblical text, ‘woven [...] into a larger imaginative story.’ Southgate makes this argument through close examination of three poems in particular: T. S. Eliot’s “The



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Waste Land”, written in 1922 during the Spanish flu epidemic, “Quarantine” by Eavan Boland, set during the Irish Potato Famine of the 1840s, and finally, Malcolm Guite’s “Easter 2020”. What Southgate leaves us with is a form of singing and dancing to God that recognises the deeply ambiguous nature of God’s creation, one filled with death and life in almost equal measure, but which still dances the songs of the poets.

Prof Andrew Root is the Carries Olson Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at the Luther Seminary in the United States. Root’s article, “Time-Famine, Resource Obsession and the Good Life in a Pandemic”, brings the struggles of families and young people into focus for theological reflection. In particular, Root examines the experience of time during the pandemic, as plans are cancelled, schooling moves online, examination boards are in chaos and our children’s future seems in jeopardy. This crisis forces us to wrestle afresh with the age-old question; what does a ‘good life’ really look like? Does it look like busy diaries, technological innovation, and future prospects, or can it be found in quiet practices of tradition and community? Sensitive to class differences, Root discusses how different groups experience the ‘time-famine’ of living in a pandemic and the obsession this generates with hoarding resources and imagining possible futures. But, Root argues, this deferral of the good life always into an unattained future makes it a dream, and so we rob ourselves of ever living and experiencing a good life in the present moment. If we are always seeking to attain resources for our children’s (undefined) *future* ‘good life’, then we will not have the eyes to see God moving in their lives, their experiences of death and loss, today and in every present moment. The pandemic, which brought all our future planning to a crashing halt and forces us to live in the present in a way that can be deeply terrifying, may then give us a unique opportunity to rediscover what it means to live – and not only dream of – a good life.

Dr Jonathan C. P. Birch, a tutor in Christian theology at the University of Glasgow, completes this collection with a review essay of four books published by world-leading Christian authors in the first year of the pandemic: John Lennox’s *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*, Tom Wright’s *God and the Pandemic*, Walter Brueggemann’s *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, and Robert Keay’s *Reframing Pandemic*. Birch guides us through how each of these texts offers a timely Christian response to, and not explanation for, the challenges that we face: innumerable deaths, the inability to worship together, deserted streets and shut-up businesses,



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the place of viruses in the Earth's ecology, and the apparent absence of God as the innovations of modern science seem to be our only salvation. Many of the arguments overlap with those found in the other articles in this special issue. We hope, in the end, the range of theological responses displayed here leaves readers with a greater sense of confidence and hope for the task of Christian living that we are called to in a time of COVID-19.

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Guest Editor

### **Farewell and welcome**

In this issue we mark the retirement of Ian Maxwell as editor of the journal. He has held this post for the past twelve years and has thoughtfully and skilfully brought together a wide range of themes and articles in that time. In recent years he has worked closely with the Scottish Church Theology Society, and he has effectively promoted the Fraser Prize which has encouraged younger scholars into the world of theological publishing in Scotland. His concern for informed theological debate in the Church in Scotland is obvious to all. We are very much in his debt and wish him a happy retirement. We are delighted he has accepted an invitation to remain on the Editorial Board, so we will continue to benefit from his experience and expertise.

Taking over from Ian, our new editor is Rev Dr Lina Toth, a Lecturer in Practical Theology and Assistant Principal at the Scottish Baptist College. As we have a guest editor for this issue, Lina will introduce herself in the autumn issue.

*Dr Alison Jack*  
*Chair of the Editorial Board*