

Theology in lockdown

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Introduction

When Karl Barth's students asked him what they should do in 1933 upon Hitler's becoming Chancellor, he advised them to carry on as if nothing had happened.¹ I have often thought of this in recent months. The dangers of offering comment on the current crisis are manifold. Is our craving to be noticed itself a sign of weakness in the academy or wider society? Is it borne of a compulsion to appear relevant? Have the humanities felt marginalised as the scientists take central stage? May we be confusing the role of the theologian with that of the preacher whose task it is to speak a word in season? Has contemporary theology now become so instrumentalized that it must always be adapting itself to the interests of some party or faction? And might it be the case that the theologian's best contribution is to carry on with the primary tasks of her calling, confident that the right word will eventually come at the right moment? Barth, of course, did not say nothing – when did he ever? His point was that by applying ourselves to the core business of theology, we will find a response that is properly grounded in the Word of God. Without that orientation, there is nothing distinctive to be said.

My father-in-law tells me that he is wearied of professors appearing on his TV screen to offer their expert advice. He may have a point. Every *bien pensant* feels obliged to have an insight, though I have to say that I'm impressed by the capacity of some of our scientific colleagues to communicate effectively with wider audiences – those of us in the humanities might learn something from them. There is also the danger of converting our longstanding prejudices into prognostications of the future.

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These might be about localism, international cooperation, sustainability, social equality, constitutional arrangements, health care funding, the mission and governance of the church or whatever. The newspapers and social media are rife with such speculation. I've even succumbed to the temptation myself in an interview with *Life & Work*. Not all of this is wrong of course, and we need to envision the future. But our hopes should not masquerade as predictions. We did not foresee this crisis, nor do we know how it will end. The experiences of the last year have chastened us and many of our earlier certainties have now been eroded or even abandoned. Given so many variables, we should admit our lack of prescience. The collateral damage to health, education, jobs, and standards of living, especially in the global south, is increasingly evident with each that day passes. This may result in our speaking about some very different subjects and outcomes in the years ahead. This is a time for hard thinking, careful listening and free debate. The occasional comments of Professor Venki Ramakrishnan, President of the Royal Society, have provided a model of calm and measured reasoning. By contrast, we should be suspicious of rhetorically amplified claims to know exactly what's happening and what we should do, as if contrary voices were selfish or seditious. Adam Smith has some wise words from the eighteenth century. 'The frequent, and often wonderful, success of the most ignorant quacks and imposters, both civil and religious, sufficiently demonstrate how easily the multitude are imposed upon by the most extravagant and groundless pretensions.'²

For Barth, quietism was never an option. His plea was for renewed concentration on the theological task. By 1934, just one year after advising students to carry on as if nothing had changed, his own theology had become the dominant influence on the Barmen Declaration which he drafted with his Lutheran colleagues Breit and Asmussen. At a time of crisis, theologians should recognise the need to hazard an initial contribution when our churches, universities, and seminaries are facing uncertain times and seeking some wisdom. On balance, it seems better to run the risk of saying too much than nothing at all. I recall someone once saying that Jürgen Moltmann had made such a significant impact on a wider public because he was unafraid of being wrong – perhaps, he made mistakes and cut some corners, yet he succeeded in making a difference. To invert Wittgenstein's aphorism at the end of the *Tractatus*, we might say 'whereof one cannot remain silent, thereof one must speak'. Perhaps



this is the perennial burden of the theologian. I'm neither Barth nor Moltmann of course, but here is my tuppence worth under three doctrinal heads.



1. The providence of God

I begin with some historical observations. When the Lisbon earthquake struck on All Saints' Day in 1755, thousands lost their lives. Much of Europe then entered into discussion about what God might have intended by this event. For many, it was perceived as a work of punishment upon a wicked population. As an act of God, it must serve some particular divine intention. The catastrophic effects betokened judgment and retribution to some and a solemn warning to others. John Wesley warned his hearers that similar seismic events could be expected nearer home if they did not mend their ways and turn to God in repentance. If this was the dominant view amongst Europe's theologians and preachers, others adopted a more sceptical line, especially Voltaire, the French philosopher. The indiscriminate damage caused by the earthquake did not look like a precision attack on the ungodly. Those commemorating All Saints' Day in the churches suffered high casualties, while others in the city brothels survived unscathed. God's aim wasn't very good or so it seemed. And why on earth would God act in this way? What story can be told of divine benevolence or the best possible world when so many children died? Pombal, the Portuguese Prime Minister, was by all accounts a political operator. Yet he recognised the danger of the moment and responded by arranging for the burial of the dead, treatment of the injured, provision of emergency supplies, and protection of the stricken city from looters and pirates. For doing so he was chastised by some theologians for counteracting what God had surely intended. Yet today we would surely see Pombal and not the earthquake as the agent of God's providence. That much seems clear. But how and when did this theological shift come about? These questions are worth asking.

It seems that a paradigm change had been completed by the end of the Great War in 1918. Theologians had gradually abandoned the exercise of inscribing every event with a particular divine intentionality. Natural catastrophes and terrible accidents were to be explained by scientists and historians, rather than by theologians speculating as to what God had meant by this. When James Begg, a distinguished Scottish Free Church



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preacher of conservative disposition, suggested that the Tay Bridge disaster of 1879 was the result of trains carrying ungodly passengers on Sundays in a country rife with heterodox teachings, he was rightly derided in the national press. Insurance companies might retain the category of ‘acts of God’, but theologians had wisely yielded to others the task of explanation.

Nevertheless, the providential optimism of this era persisted until 1914. If God did not interpose the regularities of nature with occasional catastrophes or deliverances, nevertheless the general direction of historical forces was still believed to display a providential pattern that could readily be discerned. The discourse of providence was used frequently and with much confidence through the Victorian era. The growth of empire, the success of free trade, and the missionary expansion of the church: all these were viewed as evidence of a divine hand at work in the world. In discerning this benevolent force, we should be grateful, humbled, and invigorated in our best efforts to support these causes. So it was argued. Yet such confident and almost intuitive assumptions around divine providence were largely shattered by the experience of the Great War when European armies, each persuaded that God was on their side, fought battles of attrition resulting in millions of casualties. Affirmations of divine providence became subdued and sombre. Theologians would thereafter be more hesitant and cautious in where they located the hand of God. The evolutionary optimism of the late nineteenth century now belonged to another age. The war had problematized God’s providential actions. Attention turned now towards divine suffering, the crucified Christ, and the eschatological kingdom.

Given this apparent shift in worldview that had taken place by 1918, it is worth considering theological responses to the Spanish flu epidemic which spread just as the war was ending. Astonishingly, this resulted in far more fatalities than the war itself, though one wouldn’t guess this while visiting the graves of the fallen in Flanders or marking their sacrifice around countrywide memorials each November. Estimates of up to 100m deaths worldwide make the Spanish flu one of the most lethal catastrophes in recorded history. Yet the literature suggests that very few people attempted to see the pandemic as from the hand of God or as manifesting a special religious significance. Unlike the Lisbon earthquake, or the cholera outbreak of 1832, when a national fast day for repentance was held in the UK, attributions of divine causality at the time of the Spanish flu



were evident only on the margins of organised religion.³ Advancing in several waves, it was a heart-breaking sequel to the war. Unlike Covid-19, it carried away a disproportionate number of younger people. As we see today, there were to be sure some on the fringes who succumbed to the temptation to interpret this as a form of religious karma. But mainstream theological opinion mostly avoided false attributions of divine intentionality or bogus explanations.

Here then is the lesson. At a time of crisis, a refusal of some speculative questions may itself be the right response. Often denounced for their phoney solutions to his suffering, Job's three friends did at least rend their garments. Then they sat silently with him on the ground for seven days and nights. Our task is not to explain why God sent this pandemic or even to consider why it was permitted, as if its occurrence were the result of some particular divine cost-benefit analysis. A world of earthquakes, flood, fire, and disease is part of the creation, not yet perfect but still to be affirmed as the first of God's good works. To paraphrase an earlier defender of evolution, nature comes to us wholesale and not by retail. The troubling 'why' questions – why this? why now? why me? – may run deeper in the human psyche than we often admit. But if we do not resist their terms together the temptation to offer implausible and unhelpful solutions, we'll make some grievous theological mistakes.⁴ There is no 'one-on-one' causal relation between natural disaster and divine intentionality. History can instruct us here. Much better to locate God's providence in the work of those like Pombal, who seek to resist the disease and to mitigate its worst effects.

Several writers have commented on the difficulty in praying in the midst of the current crisis. Regular patterns of devotion and trusted books of prayer can suddenly seem out of place. Alison Joyce is minister of St Bride's Church, in Fleet Street, London. In a moving piece in *The Times*, she recalls her predecessor Richard Peirson elected to remain in post during the Great Plague of 1665, while others sought the safety of the countryside.⁵ At grave risk to his own life, he ministered to the dying and the bereaved. Parish records reveal that one day alone he buried 43 people. Several of those who assisted him in this work were carried away by the plague. Musing on all this, Joyce wonders what he might have prayed about during these calamitous times and what moved him to stay in post. Did he doubt his calling? Was he overtaken by guilt at his own survival as his co-workers perished? Was he conflicted in his loyalties to family and

church? Returning to the Psalms each day, I've been struck by how the lack of interest in speculative questions is matched by an intense awareness of God as present in the struggle. This is conveyed even when God seems inactive, hidden, or silent. Much is made of waiting and longing, as if God is there but has yet to speak or cannot be found.



2. On being human

When we turn from God to ourselves, there are some obvious lessons to be learned for theological anthropology. An excessive stress on individual autonomy is yielding again to a greater recognition of embodiedness, fragility, and relationality. I am drawn back to the underrated material in John Macmurray's Glasgow Gifford Lectures, *The Form of the Personal*, published in two volumes in 1957 and 1961. The basic unit of existence, Macmurray argues, is not the 'I' of the Cartesian ego, but the 'You and I' together. The self is an embodied agent whose identity is realised only in communion with other persons. In our patterns of learning and living together, we are shaped by our relations with others. An excessive focus on the mind and the autonomous self can obscure these more holistic truths. Determined by freedom and love, personhood becomes the measure for political, social and economic life. Society is to be organised for the welfare of our communities.⁶

The current lockdown has brought a realisation of how much the stimulus, enjoyment and motivation of our lives are dependent upon our multiple interactions with others. We have been left listless, frustrated, or even depressed at the loss of social exchanges. Simple pleasures like sharing a coffee or a beer, watching a dire football match, enjoying the gossip of the office, or singing a hymn have become poignant memories as if from a distant age. Video links may have provided a lifeline, but these cannot entirely replace the physical presence and proximity of the other. Meanwhile, the marked increase in the sale of puppies indicates that the interactions we need are not only with other people but with a variety of creatures.

One of the tragedies of our care home crisis is that people have had to die without the presence of their families. Elderly parents have made their final journey without the support of those closest to them. Luther once spoke of the importance of shouting in the ears of the dying. We have the responsibility and privilege of ministering to them, of reminding them that



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they are not alone, that they can breathe their last in the communion of saints. Yet quarantining restrictions have left many to die unaccompanied, except by health care workers who have been left heroically to assume this additional burden. Such isolation in extremis seems too high a price to pay – another way will need to be identified for any future pandemic.

In one of his ‘Quarantine Quatrains’, Malcolm Guite has written,

We used to stroll together on the green
Who now divide the squares upon the screen,
The faces of our friends, so far apart
Tease us with tenderness that might have been.⁷

Though not reducible to material forces, our personhood also reposes upon the physical and biological constitution of our bodies. This too reminds us of the interconnectedness of parts in the material world, the whole becoming more than the sum. This goes all the way down to the microscopic levels where balance and integration are vital. Our way of life is determined to a very large extent by the capacity of our bodies successfully to resist the effects of harmful viruses. Though not directly aware of these microbial forces constantly at work, we’ve become increasingly informed of the delicate structure of our bodies and our dependence on these complex biological forces.

Dependence and relatedness are essential features of being human. So also is fragility. A way of life that seemed secure and predictable has been shattered in the space of a few weeks. Suddenly, the future is unclear, even frightening. This fragility is evident too in the imperfections inherent in political systems, and by our failure to comprehend fully the unintended consequences of lockdown and isolation. In the time ahead, we may find ourselves considering the consequences of a mental health epidemic that has emerged from the Covid-19 lockdown. At present, there is insufficient evidence to determine the rise in suicide rates during the pandemic, but a recent *BMJ* editorial suggests that this is likely owing to a deterioration in mental health during lockdown, reports of thoughts and behaviour of self-harm amongst those with Covid-19, problems accessing mental health services and the evidence from previous epidemics such as SARS (2003).⁸

The need to gather more detailed findings about the spread and differential effects of Covid-19 illustrates the limitations of our knowledge. This is compounded by the (understandable) incapacity of



politicians always to get it right. When the precedents are few, when scientific opinion is shifting, and when time is of the essence it is impossible to avoid mistakes. The discharge of infected patients from hospitals to care homes has obviously had disastrous consequences, though these were never intended. Somehow, we have to balance critical scrutiny of policy with understanding and support of those placed in demanding and unprecedented circumstances. We should make some allowances and provide a safe space for our leaders to admit their mistakes, especially in these critical times. This places upon them a responsibility to consult and confer, while avoiding pretensions always to know best. It may place upon others a responsibility neither to lavish excessive praise nor heap relentless blame. Critical reflection should find a path between these.

Amidst all this, our human vulnerability has been on full display. First-hand reports from Covid-19 wards reveal the incapacities and terrors wrought by the more acute effects of the disease. Health care workers know all about these, but the wider population has become more conscious of the physical indignities of serious illness. (At times, dramatic TV coverage has given the impression that no-one ever died before in a hospital ward.) We are also learning to live with risk and death, though of course we have always had to do so, as did our forebears to a greater extent. But openly acknowledging risk and the possibility of death, and factoring these into our daily activities, makes more vivid our awareness of human fragility. And this heightened consciousness of our precarious hold on life – a further feature of the Psalter – can awaken us to a sense of God and the preciousness of our life in this world. I often return to a moving passage from John Updike’s novel, *Toward the End of Time*. The ageing narrator is making a slow and painful recovery in springtime from cancer surgery. He is struck by the rhapsody of colours he sees from his bedroom window in the trees, shrubs and landscape outside. Updike writes:

I see now too late that I have not paid the world enough attention – not given it enough credit. The radio, between the weather and the stock report, releases a strain from Schubert’s *Drei Klavierstücke*, a melody that keeps repeating, caressing itself in sheer serene joy, and I think of him and Mozart, dying young and yet each pouring out masterpieces to the last, rising higher and higher as their lives fall from them, blessing with their angelic ease the world that has



reduced them to misery, to poverty, to the filth and fever and the final bed. My eyes cannot help watering, a sure of sign of senility.



3. Christ and the church

Kant famously said that there are three fundamental questions that confront human beings. What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for? In approaching that third question at the present time, we should ask ourselves if we have become too lacking in hope or too restrictive in the scope of our hopes. This may be a particular problem for those of us in the affluent West as Lesslie Newbigin claimed after his return from Chennai. But, even if localised in this way, it's worth enquiring about the direction and extent of our hopes. Werner Jeanrond's recent study *Reasons to Hope* appeared just before the outset of this crisis, but it offers some valuable lines for further exploration. What can or should the followers of Jesus hope for? That strikes me as a way of revisiting some fundamental issues in Christology, particularly with respect to the theme of the kingdom (or commonweal) of God which framed Jesus' teaching and practice. For too long, this has been associated with a low Christology that viewed Jesus as a religious teacher or moral exemplar, or perhaps as a concept that requires translation (or sublimation) into the presence of Christ in the life of the church. That seems to me a mistake insofar as it overlooks or diminishes the organizing concept of Jesus' ministry.

The images of the kingdom are expressed in parables and its characteristic signs are evident in healings, exorcisms, the feeding of hungry people, the sharing of meals, and the calming of storms. Theories of the person and work of Christ that abstract from this primary context risk losing not only a vital historical connection with Jesus but the proper integration of personal and social transformation in the Christian life. The reign of God is a reality that is broader than the church and is the focus of Christ's own hopes. While its finality is beyond this life, its presence is already here and now, though often hidden in ordinary and unnoticed places. As herald, agent, and living embodiment of the kingdom, Jesus is central to our understanding of it. Yet its trademark signs reveal that it is a reality broader than the church and that others too are its participants and actors. This works in two ways when we come to ecclesiology. First, those who are not against us may be for us. They are co-workers in the tasks of healing and restoration. We can salute and share their goals, making them



our own. But, second, the church's commitment to advancing the kingdom is essential to its identity as the body of Christ. This makes service a necessary ecclesial function. In this respect, the inclusion in our hopes of others near and far is a responsibility laid upon Christian people. These hopes are to be articulated in prayer and enacted in service. And, as Jeanron shows in his recent book, our hope is grounded not in optimistic predictions about the future but in the faith that the capacious love of God is our source and end, and therefore the measure of all things.

Amidst this crisis, the church may both rediscover itself while also finding new pathways of witness and service. Despite much gloom and uncertainty, there are reasons to hope and examples to celebrate. The rapid embracing of digital technology suggests new possibilities for worship, education, and more efficient governance. Many people may choose increasingly to connect with faith communities by digital means. We should be ready to seize that opportunity without diminishing the importance of being present together in the same place. In turning to our surrounding communities through distribution of food supplies, provision of listening services, and promotion of networks of friendship, we are finding that in quite mundane ways our churches provide valued support at times of real need. The primary form of the church is at the local level ministering to people in simple but effective ways. To paraphrase Barth, we do not really know Jesus if we do not know him as the partisan of the poor in body and in spirit.⁹

Of course, these are only comments *in via*. Everything may look quite different six months or one year from now. Such reflections must have a provisional character and a very limited shelf-life. But this is probably true of most of the theology we produce. Let John Henry Newman speak for us. 'I do not ask to see the distant scene – one step enough for me.'¹⁰

Notes

- ¹ *Theological Existence Today!: (A Plea for Theological Freedom)*, trans. R. Birch Hoyle (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), 9.
- ² *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, VI.iii.27.
- ³ I have drawn here from *The Providence of God* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 210 f.



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- ⁴ David Kelsey has recently written about the importance of a ‘stammering praise’ of God in the presence of anguish. See David H. Kelsey, *Human Anguish and God’s Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- ⁵ Alison Joyce, “Credo”, *The Times*, 18 April 2020.
- ⁶ These themes are also articulated in Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018).
- ⁷ Malcolm Guite, “Poet’s Corner”, *Church Times*, 15 May 2020, 32.
- ⁸ Ann John, Jane Pirkis, David Gunnell, Louis Appleby and Jacqui Morrissey, “Trends in Suicide During the Covid-19 Pandemic”, *British Medical Journal*, 12 November 2020. See *BMJ* 2020;371:m4352.
- ⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 180.
- ¹⁰ From his hymn, “Lead Kindly Light”.

