

Review essay

When the dancing turned to mourning: Theological responses to the pandemic

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Reviewed works:

John C. Lennox, *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?* (Epsom, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2020), pp. 64, ISBN 978-1784985691. £4.30

Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (London: SPCK: 2020), pp. 88, ISBN 978-0281085118. £7.99

Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2020), pp. 92, ISBN 978-1788932011. £4.99

Robert Keay, *Reframing Pandemic* (The Window of Christianity series; New York: Basiliad Publishing, 2020), pp. 127, ISBN 979-8697355558. £5.99

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Moments of crisis are often occasions for powerful challenges to prevailing political systems and currents of thought: one thinks of Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ But drawing general conclusions from atypical circumstances, let alone making concrete predictions, is fraught with danger: when people



When the dancing turned to mourning

are discussing the ‘end of history’ today it is for rather different reasons to those Fukuyama envisaged, not least climate change, mass extinction, and contagious disease. The volumes reviewed here are concerned with the latter, and for the most part they are written with commendable restraint, sensitive to the perpetual dangers of overestimating the magnitude of the present or reaching for explanations and projections which may grab the attention of readers now but will soon appear bereft of wisdom to anyone with a slither of historical perspective.

Four books, published within the first months of the pandemic, respond from Christian theological perspectives, with a combination of apologetic, pastoral, and programmatic reflections. Pope Francis’s *Let Us Dream* was published too recently to be reviewed here,² but it was written in the same spirit as his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, which was in preparation when the ‘pandemic unexpectedly erupted, exposing our false securities’.³ Francis’s reflections will be an additional point of reference in this essay, at a time when fraternal love ‘without borders’ can seem a rare commodity.⁴



The most hopeful worldview?

John Lennox, mathematician and philosopher of science, was the first to respond to the pandemic in book format: published less than three weeks into the UK’s first national lockdown, when the people of these islands were variously preoccupied with the challenges of home schooling, the charms and perils of baking sourdough (apparently), and the grim but compulsive spectacle of the Prime Minister, and First Minister, flanked by their chief scientific and medical advisors, announcing the daily death tolls from a disease that most people had never heard of three months previously. Lennox has written popular theological works since the 1990s, but found greater fame as a public intellectual relatively late in his career, proving an able critic of prominent atheists, and debating Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) in memorable transatlantic encounters.⁵ In contrast, *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?* is presented as a modest pastoral intervention: Lennox invites the reader to imagine themselves in a ‘coffee shop’ as he addresses the question posed by the title, ‘to convey some comfort, support, and hope’ (p. 5). Lennox is a genial companion, his prose spare, impeccably clear, and well-paced across the six chapters. The first confronts the fragility of earthly existence, recalling the many plagues of history which have wreaked



When the dancing turned to mourning

havoc on humanity; the second foregrounds the particular challenge of pandemics whereby places of worship, so often a focus for people in times of trial, are themselves inaccessible: the sense of the *Deus absconditus* intensified by separation of persons from the locus of worship.

When considering potential responses to the pandemic, Lennox follows James Sire (1933–2018) in proposing ‘essentially only three major families of worldviews’ (p. 20): theistic, atheistic, and pantheistic. This will read as overly simplistic to serious students of philosophy and religion, and it is methodologically unnecessary: pantheism is identified as a major worldview, but it is not subjected to sustained analysis. The position is cursorily rejected, for ‘It is hard to see how this worldview offers any hope at all to people suffering from coronavirus or any other disease’, given the imperative for its undifferentiated holders to ‘work off their karma’, and when ‘some Eastern philosophies see suffering as a mere illusion’ (p. 23). Lennox takes no serious account of how some Asian traditions, such as Buddhism, locate hope in the capacity of human beings to change their perception of those sufferings that are an inescapable part of the human condition. As demanding as this discipline is, it is scarcely a less plausible hope than the Second Coming of Christ. And in terms of practical responses to COVID-19, we now know that some nations where Buddhism forms the dominant religious tradition, such as Thailand, fared rather better in protecting their citizens from contracting the virus compared with those where Christianity is the traditional faith.⁶ In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis affirms the importance of ‘fruitful exchange and dialogue’ between cultures, and foregrounds the East’s ‘remedies for those spiritual and religious maladies that are caused by a prevailing materialism’; as constructive as this is intended to be, however, there is a danger of drifting into orientalism concerning the ‘spiritual’ East: the pandemic has shown us that the West can learn something from the ‘scientific, technical’ expertise of others, too.⁷

Atheism is given more space in the discussion, but Lennox falls into the trap (perhaps encouraged by his ‘new atheist’ opponents) of taking ‘atheism’ as a controlling worldview, and one with such a following that it can reasonably be named among the dominant three. But this seems to confuse people who identify with ‘no religion’ (a significant constituency) with atheism.⁸ No doubt atheism is a very important stance for many people, but it is also a relatively passive position in the makeup of others, whose worldviews are defined by other beliefs and values,⁹ from socialism



When the dancing turned to mourning

to transhumanism. It is, nevertheless, atheists who are most likely to cite the existence of evil and suffering as decisive evidence against the existence of God, so it is understandable that Lennox should want to engage them.

Lennox quotes his old foe Dawkins on the ‘blind, pitiless indifference’ of the universe, where the famous zoologist doubts the existence of ‘good’ or ‘evil’ in nature (p. 27). In response, Lennox argues that a rejection of ‘good and evil implies that any talk of the coronavirus being bad or evil makes no sense’ (p. 27). But this does not follow. The atheistic utilitarian, say, would be perfectly sensible in asserting that the coronavirus is ‘bad’ in so far as they judge that the pain it causes outweighs whatever goods might arise from the pandemic. Just because some people locate values within the realm of human experience and judgement rather than a transcendent standard does not make those values meaningless: it shifts the realm of meaning to what Charles Taylor has called the ‘immanent frame’,¹⁰ which may be less metaphysically robust but is also more tangible. Lennox is at his best when he turns to his own response rather than criticising alternative ‘worldviews’.

Rather than existing as a terrible anomaly, there are billions of viruses on earth (an estimated 10^{30}), and they are crucial to the ecosystems for life on earth.¹¹ Only a tiny proportion of viruses are damaging to their hosts: according to microbiologist Marilyn Roossinck, no more than 1% are pathogenic (p. 43). This is no comfort to anyone who suffers from such a virus, but the observation speaks to a wider question: Is our physical world, with carbon-based life, possible without the existence of features which sometimes prove to be enormously destructive? Lennox cites evidence from the creative and sustaining role of plate tectonics, often associated with destructive forces, echoing the powerful arguments of Christopher Southgate in *The Groaning of Creation*.¹² It may be *conceivable* (thought of without formal contradiction) that a world otherwise like our own could exist without destructive features, but whether it is *possible* is quite another matter.¹³ God could have created another world, of course, but this would not be *our* world and *we* would not exist: as finite creatures ‘faced with the kind of mixed picture presented by a ruined cathedral’ (p. 42). Humanism, whether in Christian or secular form, affirms that it is good that *we* exist.

Our fragile world, in the traditional Christian account, is due to the creative agency of God, bringing forth an order that was not an extension of eternal perfection, but a world with creatures whose free agency comes



at the risk of estrangement from God. When Lennox turns to the hope provided by the narrative of God's entry into our fallen world, he elegantly moves the conversation away from speculative reasons why God might have authored a world capable of falling, and towards the potential for liberation and the restoration of God's cathedral of creation. For Lennox, the Christian is not one 'who has solved the problem of pain [...], but one who has come to love and trust a God who has himself suffered' (p. 44). He does not address the Christological devil in the detail here, in terms of whether the classically eternal and immutable God can suffer *qua* God, or God *qua* the human nature of the Second Person of the Trinity. On either interpretation, however, hope is warranted by the Resurrection of Christ, that 'first fruit' (1 Cor 15:20) in a 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:17).



What Christians ought not to say in a global crisis

With over eighty books on his resumé, N. T. Wright is a New Testament scholar and theologian with a prolific publishing record for each of the authorial names he writes under:¹⁴ by convention, 'Tom' indicates a less technical work aimed at a broader audience, and if there is an occasion to write with a broad audience in mind, a public health crisis simultaneously impacting every continent is surely it. In *God and the Pandemic* Wright seems less concerned than Lennox with the apologetic needs which can arise for the faithful when confronted by external critics. Not for the first time, Wright sees dangers closer to home, and moves to counter responses to this and similar tragedies that have tempted Christians, especially in the United States. The former Bishop of Durham is on fine form from the outset, with a darkly comic reworking of Martin Niemöller's 'First they came' reflections on the complacent attitude of many German intellectuals in the 1930s. Wright lays bare our tendency to rationalise the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis as a most unfortunate situation indeed – for *those other* countries. And then, of course, *we* were engulfed.

Fantastical conspiracy theories abound where this virus is concerned. Some Christians have gravitated towards theories which emerged outside the faith, but some of the most pervasive fantasies are generated from within: among those who presume to know 'exactly what's gone wrong and what God is trying to say through it all'. Wright names some of his targets in the first of his five chapters: the 'End-Times industry' (p. 5), and specifically the tradition of popular pre-millenarianism, whether in the



When the dancing turned to mourning

form of the ‘prophetic’ dispensationalist writings of Hal Lindsey, or the more recent fiction of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.¹⁵ Then there are those who see the pandemic as a more constructive sign: an opportunity for evangelism. ‘Well,’ says Wright, ‘shame on us if it takes a pandemic to get us to that point’ (p. 52). Others are alleged to produce ‘a version of the ancient pagan theories’, of a kind which insist that ‘[w]hen bad things happen, it must be God’ (p. 6). The difficulty with the last of these responses is that these so called ‘pagan theories’ are to a large extent Bible-based, and in a much more transparent way than anything found in the Book of Revelation. Wright is sensitive to this and turns to some Old Testament texts which feed these responses.

One of the most striking features of Wright’s book is his moving emphasis on Christocentric lamentation, but before the Christ event, there is the Book of Lamentations itself to contend with, set against a historical and prophetic backdrop of the Babylonian exile, ‘the greatest disaster of all’ (p. 8). The poet reflects on the desolate city of Jerusalem, a vision which ‘haunts’ Wright as he cycles through the streets of Oxford, also deserted, albeit the enemy in spring 2020 was not a conquering army. The pattern of disobedience and judgement in Lamentations is not just an emotive reaction to ‘facts on the ground’ after the exile. The First Psalm tells us that ‘the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish’ (1:6). Returning to the theme, from the vantage point of age, the psalmist reflects, ‘I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or their children begging bread’ (37:25). The impression of mechanistic justice here calls forth ‘a sharp intake of breath’, says Wright, for ‘We have seen them. On our streets. On our screens.’ The Psalms, it is true, offer ‘a more rounded picture’ elsewhere, which explicitly reject the ‘good-brings-good, bad-brings-bad viewpoint’ (p. 10). And those more tragic psalms are only ‘the foothills’, already ‘gloomy and frightening’, to be sure, but ‘we sense a darker mountain looming up behind them’ (p. 12). Wright is thinking of the Book of Job, which does not support the view that the traumas of this world are the just punishment of the wicked, and yet the mystery of God’s justice (42:8) in a world of arbitrary horrors remains ‘unresolved’ (p. 13). So what stance should one adopt to the gratuitous suffering of self and other?

For Wright, ‘the Old Testament operates on at least two quite different levels’ (p. 13). There is the covenantal relationship between God and Israel: the people chosen as God’s route to humanity, which ebbs and



When the dancing turned to mourning

flows, with ‘blessings’ and ‘curses’ to the extent that they are corrupted by the ‘proto-virus called “idolatry and injustice”’ (p. 13). Then there is a ‘deeper story of the good creation and the dark power that from the start has tried to destroy God’s good handiwork’ (p. 14). Those two narrative strands come together in the person of Jesus and the wider New Testament witness: Jesus draws from the first narrative to explain what was unfolding in terms of Israel; he lived and died under the second. The error for anyone today reading the ‘signs of the times’, whether in relation to COVID-19 or any other threat, is the attempt to ‘deduce something about God while going behind Jesus’ back’ (p. 22).

What Jesus does, according to Wright, is reshape those Old Testament narratives around his life, death, and Resurrection, ‘the single, ultimate “sign”’ (p. 21). In particular he challenges prevailing concepts of divine sovereignty: ‘*This is what it looks like*’, Jesus demonstrates, ‘as he healed a leper’, forgave the penitent, associated with undesirables, judged the Temple system; ‘as he broke bread on the last night with his friends’, and ‘as he hung on the cross, with the words “King of the Jews” above his head’ (p. 20 f.). This counterintuitive manifestation of sovereignty is the definitive lesson for Christian encounters with suffering. There is, of course, the hope of resurrection, implanted in the faithful when Christ appeared ‘three days later to his astonished friends’ (p. 22). But we should weep for those lost to the coronavirus just as Jesus wept for his friend, Lazarus (John 11:35). The power to raise the latter to life did not annihilate the pain of loss, just as the knowledge that his Father could raise him did not annihilate the temporary fear of abandonment (Matt 12:46). When we are afflicted by the ‘gross injustices’ of this world ‘we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God’ (p. 14).

In his endorsement of Wright’s book, Archbishop Justin Welby praises the work for, among other things, being ‘utterly Bible based’. This is indeed the book’s strength, and arguably its weakness. The theme of lamentation discussed above, and Wright’s juxtaposition of the current situation and the position of the early church, ‘with tears; with locked doors; and with doubt’ (p. 59), and the Pauline-inspired injunction to ‘take our place humbly among the mourners’ (p. 3), are indicative of his well-cadenced interweaving of the historical experience and imperatives of the faithful from the first century to the present. Wright’s doctrine of God, however, is as intellectually and morally perverse as those he denounces.



When the dancing turned to mourning

Wright rejects the pagan images of gods sending ‘thunderbolts’ (p. 34), and yet this is at least comparable to some of God’s dealings with the Israelites and their enemies. He ruminates over these texts, in earnest, but cannot bring himself to repudiate them as a history of God’s actual engagement with humanity. Wright’s Christocentrism parallels his theological anthropomorphism, and a God who is ‘shocked’ by the deeds of humans who have ‘grieved him to his heart’ (Gen 6:6), a literal and emotive rendering Wright insists on (p. 56): so much for God’s omniscience and immutability. Omnipotence, however, seems secure: ‘God can do whatever God wants’ (p. 41) Wright tells us, repeatedly. But this raises more uncomfortable questions than it answers. He is critical of responses to the ‘problem of evil’, which offer ‘an account of God’s good creation in which there is a “natural” slot for “evil”’ (p. 57), and in some cases one can see why: when it is suggested, for example, that God ‘allowed the Holocaust to create an opportunity for some people to develop the virtues of heroism, self-sacrifice and so on’, or ‘in order that the modern State of Israel would arise [...] If that’s your “god”, many of our contemporaries would rightly think, don’t expect us to want anything to do with him’. Indeed. But the principal offence for most, the real ‘recruiting agents for new forms of radical atheism’ (p. 58), has not been caused by the apologist offering reasons why God might allow such horrors. The real offence has been the seemingly inescapable conclusion that God does allow them. Whether one finds the apparent passivity of God in the face of modern suffering more or less disconcerting than God’s orchestration of it in the ancient world, will depend in part on one’s interpretative stance towards the relevant texts: whether, for example, Deuteronomy 20:16–17, or Wright’s uncritically accepted ‘paradox’ in Acts 2:23 (p. 57).

Many of Wright’s critical targets in this book are most likely found within certain forms of popular evangelical thought. If regular readers of Wright are wondering if his more intellectual *bêtes noires* make any appearances, I can confirm that the auld enemies Epicureanism and Platonism do feature, albeit briefly and superficially.¹⁶ Wright is so concerned with promoting this-worldly eschatology as a biblical corrective to popular Christian hopes for salvation in ‘heaven’ (p. 40) that he has created a caricature foil in the shape of a ‘Platonic rejection of the world’ (p. 60) which admits no subtlety or distinctions within this venerable philosophy. At one point he even warns that there is a ‘danger



When the dancing turned to mourning

with e-worship' (online church services) leading to 'P-worship, the Platonic vision of 'the flight of the alone to the alone' (p. 68). No reference is given for the latter, but it seems to allude to Andrew Louth's arresting translation of the closing words of Plotinus's *Enneads* (VI.9.11): φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνου.¹⁷ Louth certainly does not take this as normative for Christian Platonism, nor does Wright offer examples of anyone else doing so. Moreover, Wright's theological vision has more in common with aspects of classical Platonism than one might be led to believe. His eschatology appears to be one of divinised political utopianism, with God reigning 'through' human beings (p. 42): compare Plato's *Laws* 716c–d. And by implication, this reign would be in an everlasting created order, sustained not by the physical nature of the cosmos, but through divine activity (compare *Timaeus* 37d–e). It is true that Plato emphasises the immortality of the soul and reincarnation rather than resurrection (e.g. *Phaedo* 70e), but unless Wright is a mortalist he must hold an analogous position. And when we consider that billions of human beings have died in the last two thousand years alone, many of them painfully and through unconscionable wickedness, I am inclined to agree with another biblical scholar, discussed below, who wonders on behalf of the church, if 'Our talk of new creation might on occasion be a bit too facile in our buoyancy'.¹⁸

Of all the books reviewed here, Wright comes closest to criticising the church for what some regard as its capitulation to the government's directives during the pandemic: for the 'worship of the Triune God, in a public space', has always been '*a sign of new creation*' (p. 69). But writing once again, I suspect, with an American audience in mind, he is also sensitive to the danger of giving succour to the kind of dangerous superstitions concerning imaginary spiritual fortifications against the virus which 'gets Christian faith a bad name' (p. 70). Wright's ambivalence is frank, and his disappointment must run deep given that the clergy, however 'properly trained' and 'protectively clothed', were typically *not* 'allowed to attend the sick and the dying', as they 'must' be (p. 64). But after the service that many ministers have given during a time when their duties have been dominated by laying the dead to rest, they may feel emboldened to speak out on public policy, as Wright thinks appropriate, 'holding to account in the power of the Spirit' (p. 66). The modern 'gods' Wright holds to account, not least 'Mammon', are echoed and amplified in *Fratelli tutti*, where Francis offers nothing less than a root and branch



When the dancing turned to mourning

critique of the ‘normal times’ we have all (understandably) been longing for, and a call for spiritual renewal:

we fed ourselves on dreams of splendour and grandeur, and ended up consuming distraction, insularity and solitude. We gorged ourselves on networking, and lost the taste of fraternity. We looked for quick and safe results, only to find ourselves overwhelmed by impatience and anxiety. Prisoners of a virtual reality, we lost the taste and flavour of the truly real. [...] The [...] realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence.¹⁹

Wright would agree with much of this diagnosis and, with Francis, hope that ‘the sense of belonging to a single human family’ does not belong to an ‘outdated utopia’.²⁰ Wright offers a range of Gospel and Pauline examples of the Christian vocation as divine image bearers (but especially Romans 8). Francis’s model for fraternity is found in an extended meditation on the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). His exegesis is challenging but forgiving:²¹ For who can doubt that he or she has been in the place of *all* the key characters in that parable, before and during the pandemic?



Learning from the Israelites

Walter Brueggemann, Professor Emeritus at Columbia Theological Seminary, has been collecting awards for his scholarship since 1959.²² Another hugely prolific scholar, Brueggemann is a minister of the United Church of Christ. The latter is not a mere biographical footnote but a key to understanding his commitment to the art of preaching: three of the seven chapters in this book first appeared in the *Journal of Preachers*, and each chapter is followed by beautifully crafted prayers. The foreword, by Rabbi Nahum Ward-Lev, is a revealing tribute to Brueggemann’s accessibility as a scholar whose mission extends well beyond the academy. Their relationship is a microcosm of advances that have been made in Jewish-Christian dialogue over the last half-century.



When the dancing turned to mourning

Brueggemann is distinctive among the authors discussed here in that he not only begins with the Old Testament, he tends to stay there: his ‘biblical reflections’, in *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, are therefore more strictly indicative of Brueggemann’s disciplinary expertise. If the other books under review here are ‘big picture’ takes on our predicament, this is a deeper dive into Hebrew scriptures: exploring the wisdom they offer us in times when weddings and cèilidhs are cancelled, and we wait with Jeremiah “Until the Dancing Begins Again” (Chapter 3), in the meantime “Praying Amid the Virus” (Chapter 4 on 1 Kings 8:23–53). The opening chapter, “Reaping the Whirlwind”, is a good companion piece for Wright’s discussion of the Old Testament. It begins with a curious juxtaposition of quotations from Alfred Lord Tennyson and former US President Donald J. Trump. But fear not, dear reader, it gets better. Some of the same interpretive options that Wright suggests we ought to be steering away from are presented here as options rooted in faithful Christian preaching, but Brueggemann provides subtle interpretative lenses through which to understand the actions of God and extract any underlying moral.

The ‘*transactional* quid pro quo’ view, whereby we ‘reap what we sow in a world governed by the creator God’ (p. 18), is furnished lavishly from Deuteronomy, Leviticus, 2 Samuel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Psalms. In one of his rare excursions into the New Testament, Brueggemann affirms the continuity of a triadic principle of Hebrew scripture into Revelation 6:8: ‘From war there may come pestilence and from pestilence there may come famine’ (p. 3). Brueggemann gives a more sympathetic hearing to this than Wright without ever endorsing it: indeed, he acknowledges that the reader may find it ‘brutalizing and repulsive’. But this reading also speaks to the relatively uncontroversial idea that ‘God’s creation is ordered according to a reliable moral intention that is non-negotiable’ (p. 4). The underlying assumption of this picture, that there is a ‘line in the sand’, the crossing of which has far-reaching implications, is one that is familiar to us in everyday life (in our legal institutions, for example). In the Bible, however, this principle is expressed in a hyperbolic form which does ‘not yield to relativity or situational nuance’ (p. 5).

A less transactional but still hair-raising interpretation insists that we think of some of God’s actions in nature in terms of ‘*the purposeful mobilization of the negative forces of creation to perform the intention of the creator*’ (p. 18). Exodus is foregrounded, and specifically God’s dealings with the Egyptians, a stubborn obstacle to God’s purposes: the



When the dancing turned to mourning

plagues visited on the Egyptians are ‘propelled by intentional agency and aimed at a particular historical circumstance, namely, the emergence of [...] Israel’ (p. 7). This model has elements of the ‘wicked shall perish’ perspective and elements of the call to conversion, whereby ‘even Egypt may be heard and healed’ (Isa 19:22), after an ‘abrupt “turn to the Lord”’ (p. 10). There will, on this interpretation, be immense collateral damage incurred through the realisation of God’s will.

The third option is the most edifying but least transparent. The previous two models lack moral subtlety and offend many in the modern world, but the logic of God’s dealings with creation is terrifyingly clear: that, surely, is part of its appeal. This alternative approach is rooted in Job, a text which functions not merely to refute received wisdom about why we suffer but moves the reader to a faithful discernment of ‘the sheer holiness of God’: the font of all being who can ‘enact in utter freedom without reason, explanation, or accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all’ (p. 10). One thinks of the rhetorical questions God asks: ‘Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined the measurements—surely you know!’. Of course, Job does not know, and his ‘not knowing’ is inevitable. Within the ‘rhetoric of dismissive questions, God is exhibited as “wholly other”, as completely unlike Job and not at all subject to Job’s mode of knowledge or categories of explanation’ (p. 11). This concept of divine holiness is linked explicitly by Brueggemann to the thought of Rudolf Otto, where ‘the tremendum of God’s holiness is both fascinating and threatening’ (p. 12). One could also develop the picture along Barthian lines,²³ along apophatic lines,²⁴ and within the Thomist tradition.²⁵ In the latter, the ‘goodness’ of God is sometimes conceived metaphysically, not in terms of moral agency: moral agency is a virtue of some creatures, mature and functional human beings, but it is no more an obligation for their creator to make moral decisions than it is for a horticulturalist to bloom in the spring and shed their leaves in the autumn.

According to Brueggemann, none of these interpretive possibilities are viable in a ‘world of modern Enlightenment rationality’ (p. 18), but one is always justified in asking: Whose Enlightenment? Which rationality? Much of what Brueggemann proposes would not be offensive to the Enlightenment thought of, say, G. W. Leibniz or Joseph Priestley, whereas it almost certainly would be for Voltaire and Thomas Jefferson.²⁶ Moreover, the ‘fearful logic’ Brueggemann ascribes to the Enlightenment



provides low-hanging fruit for enemies of the church, especially when he favourably quotes Job's 'fear of the Lord' as the essence of 'wisdom' (p. 15). Perhaps awe at God's incomprehensible majesty is indeed a beatitude of the wise, but in the wrong hands it is a mandate for obscurantism and fatalism, which the Enlightenment (at its best) defied for all our benefit. The primacy Brueggemann gives elsewhere to science, medicine, and good political administration shows that he is anything but an obscurant or fatalist, but one who recognises that 'in the midst of our immediate preoccupation with our felt jeopardy and our hope for relief, our imagination does indeed range beyond the immediate to larger, deeper wonderments' (p. 16). Those wonderments include God's awesome holiness, demonstrated in Job, but that same book is also cited by the current Bishop of Rome as serving to ground our 'common rights' in the wonderment of our common creation.²⁷



A Christian lens and optimistic gaze

Robert Key is a New Testament scholar whose career has spanned the worlds of academia and pastoral ministry in Scotland, Northern Ireland and the US. The title of this book is well judged for the series it inaugurates, *The Window of Christianity*, with cover art drawn from an anonymous seventeenth-century painting: *The Plague of Rome*. One of the most refreshing things about this book is that the author has no theological axe to grind, or at least it is very well hidden if he does. Unapologetically Christian and biblical, the book is catholic in its capacity to speak to the church universal. Split into two main parts, the first tells the story from Alpha, a creation which is "Good but Not Safe" (Chapter 1), through to Omega, with "Creation Flourishing" (Chapter 3). These narrative poles, from Genesis to Revelation, are 'visionary and idealistic and lack the necessary concrete historical grounding' to offer the kind of 'realistic' optimism that we need (p. 2). The 'historical bridge' comes in part two, with four chapters on Jesus and his followers.

Key takes us on an even longer excursion into virology than Lennox (Chapter 2), complete with a brief history of the field, and an array of fascinating examples of the good, as well as harm, viruses do to our planet. Key integrates these observations with his discussion of stewardship, a virtue which is distinctive to his study in terms of the space and emphasis given. Our responsibility towards creation extends even to these

When the dancing turned to mourning

microorganisms, and it is a responsibility we are failing in: ‘it can be said that humans are at least indirectly responsible for the migration of the coronavirus to human hosts [...] the expected consequence of a natural order subjected to careless governors’ (p. 38). The alleged culpability of humanity might well be justified now given the sum of human knowledge and the risks we still take with our environment, but can we really say the same for all the other viruses that have terrorised humanity, from smallpox to the plague, ravaging populations in times of relative ignorance? Humans are relative newcomers to creation. Scientists debate the precise causes, but the Permian-Triassic extinction is thought by some to have eliminated up to 90% of species on earth.²⁸ Occurring as this did over 250 million years ago, we can confidently say this was not due to careless governance (which may explain its conspicuous absence in the BBC’s latest David Attenborough vehicle *A Perfect Planet*). It is all well and good to use insights from the natural sciences to rehabilitate the reputation of viruses, and to challenge humans to more responsible stewardship, but when we take into account all that we know, infectious disease and natural disasters are prior to and have (until relatively recently) operated independently of human agency, however we might want to ‘frame’ those facts today around an anthropometric narrative of creation and fall.

When Keay turns to first-century history, he gives an unflinching account of the dire public health conditions that were the norm in first-century Palestine, the world in which Jesus launched his career as a teacher and, crucially, healer. Jesus’ ministry, inaugurating the kingdom of God, offered a foretaste of that more comprehensive healing of creation, of which Revelation 21–22 is an imaginative depiction, embracing ‘Garden-City-Sanctuary-People’ (p. 48). The miraculous signs of Jesus retain their exceptional status, but there is symmetry in Keay’s analysis of the healing discipleship which followed Jesus and his analysis of creation: the ‘miracles’ here are those natural wonders which humanity is able to elicit from the created order, which was pregnant with potential bestowed by God. The importance of medicine, and the elevation of the doctor in ancient Christian and Jewish thought, is beautifully illustrated by the Wisdom of Ben Sira, ‘Make friends with the doctor’ (38:1), through Origen and the Cappadocian Fathers.

Along with Wright and Lennox, Keay draws on the work of Tom Holland, who has done a great service in (re)popularising the notion that Christianity has had an enormous influence on Western civilisation, and



not all of it for the worse. This includes the development of hospitals and an ethic of universal care rooted in an *imago Dei* anthropology. Christians should treasure and build on those achievements. But it is quite another matter to use this as background support for the concluding claim that ‘Christianity—the grand narrative from Genesis to Revelation—marches on, progressing towards its consummation, whether or not we are aware of it’ (p. 120). This may constitute the ‘optimism’ one might want to leave readers with, but less than eighty years since the liberation of the death camps, in the heart of Christian Europe, and with the world possibly on the brink of another mass extinction, this could be read as premature triumphalism. This is not to deny human progress, not least within Christian cultures, but much of it has been at a glacial pace, and is often part of a story of loss as well as gain. The moral ambivalence in the story of humanity would traditionally be accounted for by the persistence of ‘sin’, which (outside biblical passages) I do not recall a single reference to in this volume, something *Reframing Pandemic* has in common with *Fratelli tutti*, although it is implicit in the Pontiff’s denunciation of social phenomena from political ‘marketing’ to ‘mafias’,²⁹ just as is it is in Keay’s critique of our exploitation of the environment.



COVID-19 and the problem of evil: Just don’t mention the ‘T word’

There is, in truth, little in the suffering associated with the current pandemic that is not already experienced by millions, somewhere, every day: illness, death, grief, isolation, loss of liberty, and financial ruin. Lennox reminds us of this by recalling the words of C. S. Lewis when he considered one of the great questions of his day: ‘How are we to live in an atomic age?’ (p. 51). But like natural disasters, or acts of warfare (nuclear or otherwise), the scale of the suffering and its relentless coverage in modern media has a greater tendency to focus the mind on perhaps the most tenacious theological problem of all: traditionally called the problem of evil, but perhaps more accurately termed the problem of suffering. These gratuitous episodes foreground what philosophers call the ‘evidential’ argument from evil. This argument does not claim that there is an absolute logical contradiction between the existence of the God of classical monotheism and the existence of suffering, but that the extent and distribution of suffering means that the most reasonable stance towards such a God is scepticism. One of the most extraordinary recent attempts to



When the dancing turned to mourning

respond to this problem is Eleonore Stump's *Wandering in Darkness*.³⁰ A review of Stump's *magnum opus* is beyond the scope of this essay, but it combines the rigour of analytic philosophy, in the Thomist tradition, with sensitivity to concrete biblical narratives concerning Abraham, Job, Samson, and Mary of Bethany. The books reviewed here are not offered as theodicies: they are occasional pieces, promoted by concrete circumstances, and should be judged on those merits. But they also offer relevant insights for anyone who, when the darkness falls, has been challenged by self or other to 'give a defence [...] for the hope that is in you' (1 Peter 3:15).

Keay is explicit that his study is 'not a theodicy', and in formal terms that is true. Although when a book raises such questions as, 'How can we believe that God is good in the face of such suffering and death?' (p. 10), and the chapters contain an account of the goodness of creation, the origins of disorder in human rebellion, and God's salvific response to humanity's exile, it is covering much the same terrain as some classic theodicies. Wright gestures towards the significance of free will in his acknowledgment that God has 'delegated the running of many aspects of his world to human beings' (p. 58), but he is also clear that the "'problem of evil" cannot be "solved" except at the foot of the cross' (p. 57). Lennox, the most philosophical author under review, takes the same approach. Writing from an evangelical perspective, he has before him the full resources of a biblical narrative of creation, fall into sin and estrangement from God, with the hope of reunion made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Christian responses to the problem of evil which leave the latter out for fear of religious particularism may conform to the methods of academic philosophy of religion, but they lose the conceptual and narrative features of a religious tradition which has always held God and suffering in extraordinarily close proximity. Brueggemann, more than anyone discussed here, gives space to the possibility that there will be 'no new creation' (p. 67), 'no Giver behind the expected gift' (p. 66). The Giver and the gift are affirmed, but with a forceful reminder that there can be no 'Easter Sunday without Good Friday' (p. 67).

In his final chapter, Lennox implores the reader to 'remember eternity', which might appear to be following John Hick's maxim that there can be 'no theodicy without eschatology'.³¹ But Lennox's own appeal to a 'New Jerusalem' is not an attempt to 'justify the ways of God to men', as John Milton frames his project in *Paradise Lost* (I.25–26). Projects of divine



When the dancing turned to mourning

justification can, as Wright contends, produce morally distasteful rationalisations of human misery. Nevertheless, the contrast between finite wretchedness and infinite perfection is of such metaphysical and epistemological magnitude that it is not unreasonable for the one who has faith in the latter to be confident of the transfiguration of the former: just as the risen and everlasting Christ still bears the marks of the fallen world (John 20:27), while no longer being susceptible to its evils: restored, to dance, in life of infinite abundance. And until then? The ‘existence of each and every individual is deeply tied to that of others: life is not simply time that passes; life is a time for interactions.’³² How fraternally we interact, at every level of life and society, throughout and beyond this pandemic, will be one important measure of success in any attempt we make to ‘rebuild our wounded world’.³³

Notes

- ¹ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- ² See Pope Francis, with Austen Ivereigh, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020).
- ³ See Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, 4 October 2020, § 7, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, §§ 3–8.
- ⁵ Lennox has his own website: <https://www.johnlennox.org/>
- ⁶ According to the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, at the time of writing, the seventeen countries with the worst mortality rates are all located in Europe, North and South America, accessed 28 January 2021, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>. On Thailand’s response to the first wave of the pandemic, see World Health Organization, *COVID-19: WHO’s Action in Countries*, September 2020: “Thailand: How a Strong Health System Fights a Pandemic”, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/country-case-studies/thailand-c19-case-study-20-september.pdf>
- ⁷ *Fratelli tutti*, § 136.



- ⁸ On the changing religious landscape of Europe, including the rise of the ‘nones’, see the study by the Pew Research Center, *Being Christian in Western Europe*, 29 May 2018: <https://www.pewforum.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2018/05/Being-Christian-in-Western-Europe-FOR-WEB1.pdf>
- ⁹ See John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).
- ¹⁰ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), ch. 15.
- ¹¹ See Katherine J. Wu, “There Are More Viruses Than Stars in the Universe. Why Do Only Some Infect Us?”, *National Geographic*, 15 April 2020: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/factors-allow-viruses-infect-humans-coronavirus>
- ¹² See Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008).
- ¹³ It is logically conceivable that water not have the chemical formula H₂O, but whether it is possible is open to question: see Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).
- ¹⁴ Wright has his own website: <https://ntwrightpage.com/>
- ¹⁵ For a critical assessment of this tradition see Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- ¹⁶ For a more substantial discussion, see N. T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (London: SPCK, 2019).
- ¹⁷ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 50.
- ¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, 67.
- ¹⁹ *Fratelli tutti*, § 33.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, § 30.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, §§ 56–86.
- ²² Brueggemann has his own website: <https://www.walterbrueggemann.com/>
- ²³ See John C. McDowell, “Much Ado About Nothing: Karl Barth’s Being Unable to Do Nothing About Nothingness”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4 (2003): 319–35.



When the dancing turned to mourning

- ²⁴ Joshua Matthan Brown, “An Apophatic Response to the Evidential Argument from Evil”, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 78 (2017): 485–97.
- ²⁵ See Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas on God and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ²⁶ I compare the theological approaches of Priestley and Jefferson specifically in Birch, *Jesus in an Age of Enlightenment: Radical Gospels from Thomas Hobbes to Thomas Jefferson* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), ch. 7.
- ²⁷ *Fratelli tutti*, § 58 on Job 31:15.
- ²⁸ See Michael J. Benton, *When Life Nearly Died: The Greatest Mass Extinction of All Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).
- ²⁹ *Fratelli tutti*, §§ 15, 28.
- ³⁰ See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2010.
- ³¹ John Hick, “D. Z. Phillips on God and Evil”, *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 433–41. (Also at *John Hick: The Official Website*: <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/index.php/articles-by-john-hick/17-d-z-phillips-on-god-and-evil>).
- ³² *Fratelli tutti*, § 66.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, § 67.