



Christopher Southgate

Explorations of God and COVID-19

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This article explores a range of theological insights into the COVID-19 pandemic, as viewed from the perspective of the late fall of 2020. It considers different approaches to the compatibility of the virus with affirmations of the world as the good creation of a loving God. It explores different underlying narratives by which Christians respond to the pandemic, making reference in particular to Brueggemann's analysis of lament Psalms. It proposes a strategy of "three-lensed seeing," by which the same event may be contemplated from the perspective of old creation, Cross, and eschaton, and shows that hope may be derived from contemplation through each of the three lenses. Significant spiritual insights from prayer and poetry are introduced. Finally, the article proposes what may be the least-worst theodicy within which to respond to the pandemic.

This article responds to the lucid and helpful provocation of Luke Janssen in his essay "Pandemics in Need of a Christian Response."¹ Janssen points out, importantly, that the effects of the virus are not confined to the respiratory symptoms that have been the principal cause of deaths from COVID-19: the damage to the circulatory system and, hence, to the brain, heart, and kidneys, plus other possible long-term harms to general mental and physical health, have yet to be fully understood. Beyond this, it is gradually coming to be realized what a huge loss of opportunity for human flourishing has been occasioned by the economic catastrophe of the pandemic.

At the time of writing this article, I feel, on the one hand, the urgent need for Christians to bring biblical and theological insights to this time which has been so baffling to the human heart. On the other hand, I feel that it is too early for a settled, systematic treatment of the subject. Therefore, this is more a set of linked reflections than any attempt at such a treatment.

Issues of Theodicy—First Exploration

In a podcast in mid-2020 for the organization BioLogos, the eminent New

Testament scholar N.T. (Tom) Wright and the Director of the National Institutes of Health Francis S. Collins, discuss the coronavirus.² They fight notably shy of pressing the question as to *why* a loving God would allow such a virus to ravage human populations as it is currently doing. Wright wants rather to ask, "not why, but *what* is God now going to do?" This is, indeed, an approach much more characteristic of the New Testament. However, three-quarters of the way through the podcast, they finally turn to the question of why there should be such a virus in a creation which God has pronounced to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

Wright gives an answer in terms of a "dark power that from the start has tried to destroy God's good handiwork."³ Not only are humans "out of sync" with the creation because of the Fall, but more than that, the text of Genesis hints at nonrational, incomprehensible elements that intrude into God's good processes, as instanced by the chaotic deep of Genesis 1:2 and the talking serpent of

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Genesis 3. This is not for us to understand; it is, by definition, beyond rational understanding. We know only that Jesus has vanquished these “anti-creation” forces on the Cross, and that the new creation is inaugurated at the Resurrection.

Collins, however, gives a very different answer. He is also at pains to emphasize the Cross, though more in terms of God’s fellow-suffering than the defeat of evil. He acknowledges (as we all must) that human folly may have been an element in the specific triggering of the COVID-19 pandemic. But Collins goes on to liken the pandemic to earthquakes and other natural disasters, and to hint at this answer: that, just as one cannot have a planet abundantly fruitful for life without tectonic plates that produce earthquakes, so also it may be that a creation that contains “all sorts of wonderful biological entities” will also necessarily contain pathogens. Viruses have their uses, as indeed seen in the design of some potential vaccines for COVID-19, and “nothing is all good or all evil in biology.”⁴

How are we to adjudicate between these very different types of explanation—the semi-dualistic understanding of the cosmos to which the New Testament gives ample support, and the “package deal” understanding of the natural world to which very many biologists are naturally attracted? That is the ultimate destination of this article.

Before attempting such an adjudication, it is worth making clear that both explanations have great weaknesses. The package deal understanding seems to imply that there were limits to God’s power to realize a good creation, one lacking in devastating forces of destruction. *Why* could God not have created an earthquake-free world? *Why* could God not have created an evil-free biology? What are these constraints on the power of God, whom Christians confess to be the reason why anything exists at all?⁵

It will at once occur to the reader, however, that a related criticism can be leveled at the “dark power” explanation. How does it happen that the dark power, this incomprehensible irrationality, is powerful enough to radically distort God’s very good creation? How can this power stand against the creator of everything out of nothing? How is it powerful enough to corrupt creation so that it contains pathogens, and how can that process of corruption be understood?

Many Christians, faced with these types of questions about natural evil, reach gratefully for the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, the great “get out of jail free” card of so much Christian discourse on the problem of evil. But as Luke Janssen’s lucid and helpful challenge-piece for this issue makes clear, the evolutionary origins of coronaviruses are likely to lie more than 50 million years ago, a time we now know to be long before anything resembling a human being walked on the earth.⁶ Pathogenicity long predated human decision making.

Moreover, there is a sense in which the God who is the origin of everything that exists must necessarily be responsible for whatever causes suffering.⁷ The instinct that where the people suffer, God should, must, be cried out to in sorrow and protest is very strong in the Old Testament (and informs the New Testament more than we might at first imagine⁸). Wright himself lays much stress on this in his recent book, as does Walter Brueggemann, the other major biblical scholar to have offered us an “instant book” on the pandemic.⁹

That reflection takes me to a place very different from the booklined academic studies from which a pair of Christian intellectuals of great distinction pronounced to BioLogos on the COVID-19 pandemic. The Jewish scholar Elie Wiesel, who survived Auschwitz, recalled that one night in the camp three rabbis put God on trial for the unimaginably terrible sufferings occasioned to the People. Movingly, the rabbis went from the trial to the saying of prayers. Wiesel made this story the subject of a play, *The Trial of God*,¹⁰ which he set in the Ukraine during the seventeenth-century pogroms, in which whole populations of Jewish villages were massacred. The play is extraordinary, and contains much humor despite the bleakness of the subject. What is significant for our enquiry in this article is that toward the end of the play a character appears to defend God. The one survivor of a previous pogrom rails at God for the unimaginable brutality he was forced to witness. Here are some of the defender’s replies:

God is just, and His ways are just. Now and forever ... Our task is to glorify Him, to praise Him, to love Him—in spite of ourselves ... Faith in God must be as boundless as God Himself.¹¹

The final, terrible twist of Wiesel’s play is the revelation that these words are spoken by Satan. The play thus arrives at the same conclusion that is threaded

through the Book of Job: that efforts to shift the ultimate blame for suffering away from God are misplaced, and that only God can mount God's defense. God does this, not by submitting to the charge, but by emphasizing the sheer Godness, the sheer transcendent otherness, of God (Job 38–41).

Narrative Shapes

The great Christian temptation is to counter the despair of this time with the proclamation of resurrection. Bleak as the experience of the pandemic has been, the hymns and sermons of Easter sing out that death is not the end, rather a joy awaits believers which is utterly beyond all the sufferings of the present time (Rom. 8:18). But, in an important critique of too blithe a recourse to this proclamation, Shelly Rambo, writing in the context of trauma, goes so far as to say that "the language of resurrection is, in many senses, the language of the oppressor."¹² She means that a gospel that finds no place to express past pain and disillusionment, endurance through suffering, cannot speak to real human experience. One can gain a flavor for this stance by imagining an Easter service in April 2020 that made no mention of the ongoing fear, anxiety, and suffering occasioned by COVID-19.

There is a danger, however, of going too far in the opposite direction. It is possible for Christian congregations to default to a narrative that is so purged of hope of redemption that it resembles rather the contours of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Human life knows cycles—times to weep and times to laugh, times to mourn and times to dance (cf. Eccles. 3:4). We all lose our breath and die, humans and other animals alike (Eccles. 3:19). To seek a more directional metanarrative, to identify saving deliverance from these cycles, is "vanity." A genre of congregational story lacking in supernatural hope is identified by James Hopewell, drawing on the literary analysis of Northrop Frye, as "ironic" in genre.¹³ This genre is brilliantly evoked in the twentieth century by such authors as Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka. As Hopewell characterizes this genre, "Miracles do not happen; patterns lose their design; life is unjust, not justified by transcendent forces."¹⁴ Godot never comes; no system of justice ever emerges in *The Trial*. Hope placed in leaders, in the end, disappoints. This genre is adept at accommodating paradox, as in Beckett's famous "I can't go on. I'll go on."¹⁵

This, then, is religion from which the hope of God's redemptive initiatives has been stripped away. It serves as an antidote to what might be termed "magical Christianity," in which God finds believers their every last parking space. For that reason alone, it is important that Ecclesiastes continues to be read, "performed," and preached within Christian communities. Collins's conclusion, noted above, that there is nothing all good or all evil in biology, could inform such an underlying narrative. The world is just the package deal that it is. Let us then eat, drink, and be as merry as social distancing permits, for tomorrow we die.

I have a theory that Christianity practiced without hope of redemption, either personal or cosmic, is much more common than church leaders might be willing to admit. It is resilient to disappointment, and that must be very attractive as the COVID-19 crisis deepens and stretches out. But it does not seem to me that such a spirituality is faithful to that great longing in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Hope, expressed privately and publicly as that great yearning for a Godward reorientation of the world, is an inescapable part of a whole Christian faith.

But Christianity as practiced in affluent sections of the West also suffers from the converse problem—an overcomplacent trust that the resurrection and the personal salvation of individuals solve all deep questions.¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann has been an important voice critiquing this type of practice. He writes:

Much Christian piety and spirituality is romantic and unreal in its positiveness. As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory.¹⁷

Shades of Rambo's critique of the oppressiveness of unrefracted resurrection faith. Brueggemann continues, "... such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our experience."¹⁸ His tripartite analysis of the Psalms in terms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation¹⁹ seems profoundly important as we stumble within a time of what, for certain parts of the affluent First World, is a time of disorientation unparalleled since the last world war. As Brueggemann notes, the first phase, orientation, implies a consensus on theodicy among the privileged, a consensus that is shattered by

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disorientation.²⁰ That surely reflects something of the state of the world in late 2020. Brueggemann draws from Claus Westermann three strategies he sees the people of God adopt in disorientation:

1. Yearning for retaliation against the enemy whose injustice has caused the disorientation,
2. Assaults on Yahweh as the legitimator of the system that has allowed this trauma, and
3. Yearning for return to orientation and acceptance of fault.²¹

The attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, perhaps the last great shattering of assumptions in the affluent West, led at first to a mixture of (1) and (3), from which, sadly, aspects of (3) became lost in the oversimplifications of (1). With COVID-19 it seems to me we are very much in the territory of (2) and (3), but too blithe a language of “war” and “defeating” the “evil” of the virus again runs the risk of drifting back into response (1) and losing the importance of the second part of (3).

Brueggemann writes the following about disorienting situations and events:

The Jewish reality of exile, the Christian confession of crucifixion and cross, the honest recognition that there is an untamed darkness in our life that must be embraced – all of that is fundamental to the gift of new life.²²

There is some very interesting phrasing here. The “untamed darkness in our life” might at first remind us of Wright’s “dark power,” but Brueggemann insists that this is a darkness “that must be embraced,” the very reverse of Wright’s emphasis. Rather Brueggemann wants to insist that the witness of the Psalms is that God is, can be, must be found *within* the disorientation to which human lives are periodically subject. The bleakest Psalms refuse either to try and retreat to the old orientation or leap to some imagined resolution (Psalm 88 being the classic example). As in the Book of Job, faith resides in going on speaking to the Lord, even without answer, even when – in the radical formulation of David Blumenthal – God seems to be the abuser.²³

In the months of lockdown at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the old stabilities and opportunities so severely curtailed, and even parish churches in the United Kingdom locked up, the famous psalmic cry from Babylon, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps. 137:4), seemed to have a particular resonance. But the Psalm

insists that the foreign power is not the ultimate power, that the people’s vision and focus can remain on the Lord’s dwelling-place “above my highest joy” (v.6).

Three-Lensed Christian Contemplation and the Locus of Hope

The New Testament, in contrast, identifies the present phase of struggle as part of the eschatological phase of history, inaugurated at the Cross and Resurrection.²⁴ This enables the same event to be viewed through three lenses,²⁵ in a way that provides an important breadth of perspective. The first “reading” lens is that of the protological creation, which sets the “ground-rules” for creaturely existence; these ground-rules are characterized by a world governed by physical laws and the constraint of limited resources, and also by the emerging of freedom of choices within the unfolding of the biosphere. These hugely generative constraints on life established the conditions that ultimately made possible the Incarnation, just as the human drive to escape those constraints, by seizing at more than can be justly attained, set up the conditions for the rejection of the incarnate sign of God’s glory.

The second lens is that of Christ’s passion and death. Reality contemplated through this lens means that no abyss of suffering, no extent of impotence before the wicked and torturing powers of the world, is a place absent of the presence of Christ. He remains, through his Passion, the ultimate sign of God’s involvement even in conditions contrary to the divine nature, an involvement borne out of supreme love for God’s creatures.

The third lens is the eschatological perspective that characterizes the bulk of the New Testament. The Christian confession wants to claim that incarnate involvement in the world is not only compassion at its purest, but is also transformative. It is associated with the power of the resurrection in a way that no other powers, however evil, however cynically brutal, can subvert. In addition, it inaugurates a process that must lead to that condition of creatures in which there is no more crying or pain (Rev. 21:4), for God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

How, though, are these three lenses of seeing the same event to be linked? How are they to be held together without one dominating? There is the risk, noted above, that the protological lens leads to a kind

of hope-free fatalism, whereas the eschatological lens might lead to an unreal piety that does not attend to the depth of the suffering and loss that is being experienced. Too-intense a focus through the lens of the Passion has run the risk, throughout Christian history, of glorifying suffering at the expense of human flourishing.

Earlier I criticized hope-free narratives as sub-Christian, so it is important to press a major question confronting Christians in this time of pandemic: where is hope to be found? Where, in particular, can Christian faith and thought contribute hope to a situation remarkable (at the moment of writing) both for its severity for the whole world and its uncertain duration? Perhaps surprisingly, I propose that hope can be derived from all three of our lenses.

The protological lens seems to provide the least obvious locus of hope. It reveals that God's "very good" creation (Gen. 1:31) is nevertheless an ambiguous place, where no biological entity (to return to Collins's analysis) is altogether good or evil, but pathogens can occasion profound loss of both life and flourishing. How can this be a source of hope? Both because in the classic Christian confession, God is the source of all creaturely existents, and therefore a God of unimaginable power and resourcefulness. (It is noteworthy that that great voice out of exile, Deutero-Isaiah, infers God's saving and delivering power from God's status as sole creator, including "of weal and woe alike" [Isa. 45:7].) But also because the creation attests to God's faithfulness. Reflection on the rationality and consistency of the processes of the universe suggests that God is very far from being a God of whim or caprice. Rather, God is faithful to the laws and processes by which the universe has unfolded, bringing forth extraordinary varieties of life as well as a species in which the divine Son could take flesh and reveal his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father (John 1:18). This means, of course, that God is faithful to the processes by which viruses function and the processes by which humans will analyze and understand COVID-19 and, ultimately, find both remedies for its effects and means to prevent its spread. That this world is not merely a world where there are times to weep and times to laugh, but also an intelligible and consistent world, is part of the hope that human ingenuity, judiciously exercised, will eventually overcome this current peril.

The easiest lens in which to articulate hope is the eschatological, with its conviction that the raising of Jesus from the dead begins the process by which all creatures will come into a struggle-free existence. But note the realism with which Paul writes of the creation still "groaning in travail" (Rom. 8:22): the birthing of liberation for the children of God may be assured, but it has labor-pains. Yet Paul's conviction at the end of that same chapter of Romans – that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv. 38–39)—is surely the ultimate expression of hope in this lens.

How then is hope to be articulated in the second lens, through which all creaturely suffering is to be seen in relation to Jesus of Nazareth voluntarily handed over to the powers of fear and oppression, and enduring even unto death the full burden of the Godforsaking of human sin? Here the cry of desolation uttered at the Cross (Mark 15:34) is our great clue. Jesus, in his agony, has recourse to the lament Psalms. This is, therefore, the ultimate validation of that body of poetry, which holds fearlessly to the conviction that out of whatever depths the sufferer faces, the sufferer can cry to God (cf. Ps. 130:1). That connection is always available, and can carry all the bitterness of human experience. Further, Anthony Harvey identifies Paul's "discovery," around the time of the writing of 2 Corinthians, that suffering can be understood as drawing the Christian into a new depth of identification with the Passion, and hence into a deeper relationship with Christ, as therefore making possible a new profundity of consolation.²⁶ More generally, meaning can be sustained through any human distress by the thought that God in Christ knows every contour of the abyss of suffering, for all has been experienced in the passion and death of the divine Son.²⁷

It will at once be clear that our three lenses have much in common with Brueggemann's phases of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. I would say that three-lens vision stretches each one of Brueggemann's phases. The stable old orientation, more deeply examined, contains all the natural evil and associated suffering that seems to have been intrinsic to the creation from the origin of sentience onwards. The disorientation finds new extremes in Christ's journey through death. The new orientation

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is part of a journey to the full liberty of creaturely glory, beyond all tears.

Prayer with a Larger Heart

Two years ago, knowing nothing of coronaviruses, I wrote this prayer, in the voice of a Christian community afflicted by a great natural disaster:

You, God, made the great forces that have destroyed our homes, our livelihoods, and taken from us those we held dear. You did not warn us of disaster; you did not have regard to all our prayers and worship. We know of your loving-kindness from both Testaments of our Scriptures, but we have not felt it. Though we sought to bless you, our lives are broken.

In spite of all this, we will pray for Your comfort and mercy. We will use the life, passion, and resurrection of Jesus as our clue to what life with You might ultimately be. We will believe in You because of Him, we will place our hope in You because of Him. Though His care could show partiality,²⁸ and His teaching an almost unbearable sternness,²⁹ yet because of His life and His Passion we will yearn for Him, groaning prayerfully within the greater groans of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ We will wait for the Christ's return, and we will anticipate the time when we will see You in His risen glory. We will love one another and seek even to love the enemy. We will seek to build Your Kingdom as He described it.³¹

I am almost shocked to find how relevant this prayer seems now: not just within contexts such as post-earthquake Haiti, but also for London and Paris and New York. I debated the prayer with a number of clergy groups during 2019. In one memorable session, one priest responded, "You can't say that. It might be true but you can't say that." Another priest, with a background in the developing world, countered that this was a prayer that *must* be said. The key movement of the prayer is in those five words, "In spite of all this," which derive from Blumenthal's memorable prayer at the end of his book on "the abusing God."³² (How close the phrase "in spite of all this," in Blumenthal's prayer and in my own, comes to Satan's "in spite of ourselves" in Wiesel's play quoted above, reveals what truly tricky territory this is—territory on which the theoretician must always give place and voice to the sufferer.)

Blumenthal himself advocates a strategy of "tackling."³³ By this he means advancing not wholly directly into the challenges of life, now prioritizing reason, now spiritual practice, now the insights of

the arts. "One tack in our lives is to confront what we would rather avoid, with as much courage as we can muster."³⁴

I have been very moved recently by reading Rebecca Ann Parker's reflection on her experience of abuse. Parker writes:

I did not defeat negative feelings of anguish and despair because I saw something more lovely and good. Rather I became able to feel more. My feeling broadened. Pain, sadness and despair were not eliminated or overcome. I embraced them with a larger heart.³⁵

This larger heart, larger imagination, which can be fed in particular by the radical poetry of the Psalms, might allow those immersed in struggle and suffering to "tack" toward a realistic, resilient, and faithful response, to see with Brueggemann that in the "conversation" with the world,

God assumes different roles ... At times God is the guarantor of the old equilibrium. At other times God is a harbinger of the new justice to be established. At times also God is in the disorientation, being sovereign in ways that do not strike us as adequate.³⁶

Three-lensed seeing endeavors to be more "synoptic" than a strategy involving tacking between blame, lament, and praise, or discerning God's different roles in "conversation" with the world. But, of necessity, particular lensings dominate in particular situations. Ultimately, always, God is disclosed to us only through God's own gracious will, so human beings are reliant on God's Spirit to "clean" the lenses and offer them to the praying eye. In a sense, the whole of liturgical worship is the people making themselves available for the three different sorts of seeing into the reality of God's ways with the world—focusing, in turn, on the creation, the Cross, and the eschaton—in order that the Spirit can hone the lenses and keep them in use so that, in turn, when they are most needed they come clear to the contemplating vision.

It seems to me that there is a link here with Rambo's intriguing concept of "the middle Spirit."³⁷ This is her way of involving the Spirit in an understanding that the journey of the Christian believer is through Good Friday and Holy Saturday, not simply inhabiting Easter Sunday. This is important for her in doing justice to the experience of sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), "lives that have death in them." Rambo's reasoning is not easy to follow,

but she writes helpfully, reflecting on the Farewell Discourses in the Fourth Gospel, that

Jesus frames love in relationship to the paraclete. This Spirit-figure will link his departure and return ... the territory that the disciples are entering is not the triumphant terrain of resurrection life but the complex territory following a death. And instead of declaring that this is a difficult space that they have to endure in order to reach the triumphant life enacted by the resurrection, Jesus initiates a whole new vocabulary: new commandments to love and to remain, and a description of their lives in terms of vines being pruned and mothers suffering the pains of childbirth.³⁸

Rambo summarizes her view by saying:

The middle Spirit cannot be fully explained as an animating life force; neither can Spirit be clearly identified as the Spirit of resurrection or Pentecost. In the aftermath of death, the Spirit is expressed in terms like “remaining” and “persisting.”³⁹

A God-breathed capacity to remain, to persist, to witness to the Jesus who commanded us to “remain in my love” (John 15:9) does seem profoundly important in this fraught pandemic. Also, I am attracted to the idea that the Spirit seeks to show us the different ways in which we can respond to God’s presence in events, whether we need to focus more on the character of the creation, on the cruciform nature of all suffering, or on God’s promise that the new creation, resurrection life, is coming on the world in a process that is ultimately irresistible. We may see the Spirit’s gift as showing us whether our particular role in a community is to help others accept what has happened, to remain with those traumatized in different ways by the virus, or to insist that hope must not be lost, but is rather grounded in the Kingdom we pray to come “on earth as it is in heaven.”

One of the most important imaginative responses to the pandemic I have encountered, a fine example of embracing events with a larger heart, is Malcolm Guite’s poem “Easter 2020.”

Easter 2020

And where is Jesus, this strange Easter day?
Not lost in our locked churches, anymore
Than he was sealed in that dark sepulchre.
The locks are loosed; the stone is rolled away,
And he is up and risen, long before,
Alive, at large, and making his strong way
Into the world he gave his life to save,
No need to seek him in his empty grave.

He might have been a wafer in the hands
Of priests this day, or music from the lips
Of red-robed choristers, instead he slips
Away from church, shakes off our linen bands
To don his apron with a nurse: he grips
And lifts a stretcher, soothes with gentle hands
The frail flesh of the dying, gives them hope,
Breathes with the breathless, lends them strength
to cope.

On Thursday we applauded, for he came
And served us in a thousand names and faces
Mopping our sickroom floors and catching traces
Of that corona which was death to him:
Good Friday happened in a thousand places
Where Jesus held the helpless, died with them
That they might share his Easter in their need,
Now they are risen with him, risen indeed.⁴⁰

Here we see Guite moving agilely between lenses to communicate hope “in spite of all this.”

The Theodicy of COVID-19 Revisited

I promised at the beginning of this article to seek to adjudicate between the explanations of the underlying cause of the COVID-19 outbreak⁴¹ offered by Tom Wright and Francis Collins. The range of reflections above will perhaps persuade the reader that Wright is correct to point us to the human response to the crisis, and God’s part in that, rather than to the “why” question. Finding resources by which human beings can endure, console each other, and find authentic ways to hope and to pray, seems more to the point than exercises in theodicy. Perhaps, indeed, the strategies that I have suggested, which connect COVID-19 to the ancient experiences of the people of God, are the best theodical move one can make.

But the question of underlying causes will not go away. Nor will the contrast between the dark power explanation offered by Wright and the biological “package deal”—nothing wholly good or evil in biology—observation of Collins. In the podcast with Collins, Wright alluded to Genesis 1:2 and Genesis 3 as evidence of the incomprehensible “dark power” responsible for pathogenic viruses. Whether either of these passages reflects the operation of a dark power is highly questionable. For other readings on Genesis 1:2, see Catherine Keller;⁴² on the serpent in Genesis 3, see Anne Primavesi.⁴³ It is generally recognized that the Old Testament contains *Chaoskampf* passages, depicting the struggle of Yahweh with chaotic forces in nature. But the univocal conclusion

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of these passages is that Yahweh is unquestionably victorious over these forces.⁴⁴ Therefore, reflection on the Old Testament witness, let alone on the later Christian confession of God as the creator of all creaturely existents *ex nihilo*, places responsibility for the character of the creation squarely at the door of God. In previous writings, I have consistently warned both against explanations that dilute the awesome power of a creator who brought absolutely every created entity into existence from absolutely nothing, and also against explanations that seek to dissect the biological world into processes desired by God and those “sown by an enemy.”⁴⁵ Wright’s “dark power” theory seems to me to run into both of these difficulties.

Joshua Moritz has recently extended his previous theodical proposal, his “free creatures defense”⁴⁶—that animal suffering arises from creaturely choices—to include viruses.⁴⁷ His original proposal suffers from various difficulties. I always want to pose Moritz the question: are the supposed “choices” that constitute suffering-causing predatory behavior unambiguously evil? Are the supposed choices that led to the modern cheetah, the modern peregrine falcon, “evil” choices, or do the beauty and savagery of these creatures point to the way in which evolutionary values and disvalues are indissolubly intertwined in the ambiguous world God has made?

Setting that on one side, let us explore whether these “choices” in the nonhuman creation really are choices in a theologically meaningful sense. The Augustinian cosmology that provides Moritz with his basis for reasoning requires that a creature with freedom of will, a freedom that was part of God’s good gift to creatures, abuses that freedom such that life becomes turned in on itself, not directed outwards toward the creature’s true telos. So it requires that there be authentic creaturely freedom that was a God-given good, which was then abused. If God is to escape responsibility for this abuse, then that abuse must be a resistance to the divine will. Can we apply this conclusion to the strategies by which viruses became parasitic? Clearly, these are not conscious choices; indeed, Moritz is at pains to show that even certain human behavior that we call wicked can arise from processes not involving conscious choice. Still less can environment-sensing strategies in viral populations be equated with deliberate resistance to the divine will. But if there is no rebellion, no deliberate disobedience to God, it seems to me that

this theodicy begins to unravel. The reason is that the responsibility for the unfolding of evolutionary strategies—beautiful, ingenious, diverse, predatory, parasitic—devolves back to the creator of all.⁴⁸ Moritz can also be criticized for taking such a uniformly negative view of viruses. He calls them “liars” and “robbers.” But, as Mirjam Schilling shows, viruses (whether or not they date from the origins of pre-cellular life) make all sorts of helpful contributions to evolutionary development and diversity, and viral genes may even be essential for the formation of the human placenta.⁴⁹

So we are forced back, it seems to me, to Collins’s conclusion that we must recognize the ambiguous character of the biological world that has evolved so amazingly over perhaps 3.8 billion years. Exactly why God created in this way, and how theodicians address what necessitated the co-evolution of values and disvalues, is beyond the scope of this article, but I call the reader’s attention to some very useful resources in this area, especially the recent monograph by Bethany Sollereder,⁵⁰ and a series of articles that appeared in the journal *Zygon* in September 2018. I continue to favor what has come to be known as the “only way” argument, the very controversial move that God *could not* have given rise to the values in the natural world except by a process that also contained the sorts of disvalue we experience in the world.⁵¹

I end with this brave statement by Diogenes Allen in his book *Theology for a Troubled Believer*:

For a Christian, nature operates because it is so created and presently sustained by God. In saying “Yes, Father” to the *unavoidable* effects of nature on us, we submit to nature’s might as something that obeys Another, and not to it merely as a senseless destructive force. Through this act believers claim that the gracious presence of God is known; it flows into oneself and gives a felicity that is beyond the calculation of the pluses and minuses of the pleasant and unpleasant things of this life. The goodness of God is not understood solely in terms of the health and well-being that is enjoyed, and then set over against the untoward things that have happened or may happen to us. God is good in Godself, a unique good, whose value cannot be compared to the creaturely goods and evils we know. And it is God’s own goodness, God’s Spirit, it is claimed, that comes more fully into a person, and comes precisely through the untowardness of material things and a person’s own response to their untowardness.⁵²

This returns us to several of the themes we have explored in this series of reflections. Allen would have us receive God's Spirit in new ways within the disorientations that being embodied physical creatures involve. That means that we must face up, beyond theodicies, to the facts of this ambiguous world.⁵³ But being able to see those facts through the lenses of creation, Cross, and eschaton, guided by a Spirit who knows what death and desolation are, seems to me to be a particular gift Christians can offer into this time.⁵⁴ ↔

Notes

- ¹Luke Janssen, "Pandemics in Need of a Christian Response," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 73, no. 1 (2021): 13–22.
- ²N. T. Wright and Francis Collins, "A Christian Response to Coronavirus," BioLogos Podcast, July 12, 2020, <https://biologos.org/podcast-episodes/n-t-wright-francis-collins-a-christian-response-to-coronavirus>.
- ³Tom Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (London, UK: SPCK, 2020), 14.
- ⁴Wright and Collins, "A Christian Response to Coronavirus."
- ⁵Various theodicies of natural evil have been proposed to engage with these difficulties. For a review of such approaches, see Christopher Southgate, "'Free-Process' and 'Only-Way' Arguments," in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Stanley Rosenberg, Michael Burdett, Michael Lloyd, and Benno van den Toren (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 234–43.
- ⁶The one contemporary account that seriously seeks to tackle the chronological problem of assigning violence in nature to human sin is William Dembski's *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), with his invocation of "retroactive causation." Dembski's ingenious proposal is briskly and tellingly demolished by Michael Lloyd. Lloyd points out the disanalogy between God's (retroactively effective) saving act on the Cross, and God's supposed retroactive punishment of nonhuman creation for human sin; he also asks Dembski "how is it redemptively coherent for the punishment to precede the crime and to be meted out on other creatures than the criminals?" (Michael Lloyd, "Theodicy, Fall, and Adam," in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin*, 197–210, at 207. It remains the case that later events can sometimes give new significance to previous ones, an observation that fuels Bethany Sollereder's theodicy of animal suffering in *God, Evolution and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall* (New York: Routledge, 2019).
- ⁷Cf. John R. Schneider, *Animal Suffering and the Darwinian Problem of Evil* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), treating a different aspect of natural evil, that of animal suffering in evolution.
- ⁸See, e.g., Channing L. Crisler, *Reading Romans as Lament: Paul's Use of Old Testament Lament in his Most Famous Letter* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

- ⁹Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).
- ¹⁰Elie Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (New York: Random House, 1979).
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 157.
- ¹²Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 129.
- ¹³James F. Hopewell, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1987).
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 61.
- ¹⁵Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London, UK: Faber, 2010 [1953]). This paragraph is based on a section of Christopher Southgate, "Trauma and the Narrative Life of Congregations," in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma*, ed. Megan Warner et al. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), 122–33, at 125–26.
- ¹⁶Wright critiques an over-emphasis on the individual going to heaven when he writes: "the inheritance here [to which we are heirs in Rom. 8] is not 'heaven,' as many Christians have imagined. The 'glory' has nothing to do with going to heaven and shining like angels. The 'inheritance' is the whole renewed creation," *God and the Pandemic*, 40.
- ¹⁷Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), 11.
- ¹⁸*Ibid.*
- ¹⁹Ps. 30:6–12 shows the pattern in miniature. See Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 127.
- ²⁰Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, chap. 5. There are fascinating parallels to be drawn between Brueggemann's work on disorientation and the psychologist Ronnie Janoff-Bulman's book *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- ²¹Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 174.
- ²²*Ibid.*, 12.
- ²³David Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).
- ²⁴David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*, 3rd ed. (London, UK: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 95–100.
- ²⁵Christopher Southgate, *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 14, 152–53.
- ²⁶Anthony Harvey, *Renewal through Suffering: A Study of 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1996), especially chap. 6.
- ²⁷Even the experience of Godforsakenness itself, as Jürgen Moltmann articulates in *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London, UK: SCM Press, 1974).
- ²⁸As in the story of the Syrophenician woman, Mark 7:24–30.
- ²⁹As, for example, in the teaching on faith dividing families, Matthew 10:35–36.
- ³⁰Romans 8:23–27.
- ³¹Christopher Southgate, "'In Spite of All This, We Will Yearn for You': Reflections on God's Involvement in Events Causing Great Suffering," in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations*, ed. Warner et al., 106–21, at 120.
- ³²Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God*.
- ³³*Ibid.*, chap. 5.
- ³⁴*Ibid.*, 54.
- ³⁵Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), 115.

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³⁶Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 176.

³⁷Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, chap. 4.

³⁸Ibid., 132.

³⁹Ibid., 140.

⁴⁰Malcolm Guite, unpublished poem, used with permission.

The reference to “Thursday” refers to the weekly nationwide applause for healthcare workers for which the UK Government called during the lockdown of spring 2020.

⁴¹I refer here to the pathogenicity of the virus once it crossed into the human. I acknowledge that many elements of human selfishness and folly contributed to the outbreak, and to its subsequent mismanagement in various countries. What is explored here is why the natural world contains the possibility of such harms to humans.

⁴²Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴³Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

⁴⁴Even Gregory A. Boyd, whose work focuses on this “warfare,” concedes that “in sharp contrast to the way chief gods are presented in ANE [Ancient Near Eastern] mythologies, biblical authors uniformly portray Yahweh as the sole Creator God who never had to fight for his supremacy and whose supremacy is therefore never threatened by anti-creation forces.” *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 1014. For a critique of Boyd’s use of the Bible in relation to natural evil, see Sollereeder, *God, Evolution and Animal Suffering*, 18–19.

⁴⁵See, e.g., Christopher Southgate, “Cosmic Evolution and Evil” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 147–64; ____, “‘Free-Process’ and ‘Only-Way Arguments’”; ____, “Response with a Select Bibliography,” *Zygon* 53, no. 3 (2018): 909–30.

⁴⁶Joshua M. Moritz, “Animal Suffering, Evolution, and the Origins of Evil: Towards a ‘Free Creatures’ Defense,” *Zygon* 49, no. 2 (2014): 348–80.

⁴⁷Joshua M. Moritz, “Are Viruses Evil?” *Theology and Science* 18, no. 4 (2020): 564–78.

⁴⁸See Schneider, *Animal Suffering*, 32–33 for the same conclusion.

⁴⁹Mirjam Schilling, “A Virocentric Perspective on Evil,” *Zygon*, online version before inclusion in an issue, December 16, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12669>.

⁵⁰Sollereeder, *God, Evolution and Animal Suffering*.

⁵¹Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

⁵²Diogenes Allen, *Theology for a Troubled Believer: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 79, italics in original.

⁵³Southgate, *Theology*, 3.

⁵⁴This research was generously funded through Grant TWCF-0185 from the Templeton World Charities Foundation Inc. The views expressed are those of the author and should not be taken to reflect those of the Foundation.

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