

## Theology Committee

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### **SPIRITUAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LIFE WITH THE CORONAVIRUS**

It will surprise no one that ICCJ's Theology Committee, being an international grouping, tends to meet virtually. At one level, then, the turmoil of all our human responses to the arrival of the Coronavirus might – with a large dose of good fortune - have had little impact upon our specific common work. But of course we are human beings before we are internet presences; we are embedded in communities, with creaturely concerns. Some of these are practical. How can we care for those in need around us, and on our hearts? How can we live out and even develop our religious traditions? What will be the longer-term consequences, both for ICCJ and for our roles in our own places?

As we as a Committee discussed such matters, it was immediately clear that the underlying question for the present and the future is: given dramatically changed circumstances, how might we live well? What now is the good life? This is always a spiritual (existential) question, as much as it is a practical one. And good theology serves the spiritual (existential). We each committed to present a reflection. It was not to be in academic register. It was to be an engagement with our own religious belonging. It was to be serious, and heart-felt and personal; heart-felt and personal, and serious.

In the course of our work on this, the Committee was blessed with the admission of a new member, Celia Deutsch, a Sister of Our Lady of Sion, from New York. Though not part of the formative discussion, she kindly undertook to write a reflection. The difference in timing is among the factors that makes her reflection one not limited to dealing with the virus; she brings in the clearly related theme of endemic racial distinctions and racism.

We thus offer five reflections, from the five members of the committee. They are different; they are contextualized; none offers a close reading of the others. Nevertheless, we hope and think that they are ultimately in dialogue with each other, and are in the spirit of the exploratory work of ICCJ. We have eschewed stylistic uniformity. Looking at how each of us refers to the Divine (as a far-from-random example) might be a useful task in its own right.

Dr Debbie Weissman is a modern Orthodox Jew writing in Israel. Dr Pavol Bargár is a Protestant writing in the Czech Republic. Rev'd Patrick Morrow is an Anglican writing in Britain. Rev'd Dr Michael Trainor, is a Roman Catholic writing in Australia. Dr Celia Deutsch is a Roman Catholic writing in the USA. We welcome feedback.

## THE NEW NORMAL

*Debbie Weissman*

In early March, a close friend sent me a WhatsApp message, in which she wrote, “It seems that life as we know it has just changed.” It will take time to assess what changes in our lives will be lasting and we won’t know that until we are “out of the woods.” But as Jews and Christians, we are people who have believed in eternal truths. What can we hold onto theologically, even as we realize that life around us is changing?

The first point is the constant need for balance, between self and other, individual and community, nation and humanity. In Hebrew, we have a phrase, “We lived through Pharaoh; we’ll live through this.” But will we come out at the other end with a balanced view of the world?

For Jews, this difficult period of time began with our festival of Purim. The biggest challenge, thus far, has been Pesach. I live alone, and the Pesach Seder was a very different kind of experience for me this year. I did it by myself. As many of you know, we are obliged to drink 4 cups of wine that evening, to celebrate the Israelites’ liberation from Egypt. By the second cup, it didn’t matter to me so much how many people were or weren’t at the table! I went through the traditional Haggadah, singing anything and everything for which I knew a melody, and, in some cases, more than one.

I have now, by mid-May, spent eight Shabbatot alone. That is very unusual for me, as Shabbat is generally a time of fellowship, when I have guests or am invited to others’ homes. I long to eat others’ cooking, and not just my own, and to enjoy conversations at the table. In the early 1950’s, Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog published a book that has become a classic on the culture of the shtetl—the Jewish village in Eastern Europe. The book is called *Life is with People*. Self-isolation and social distancing may be necessary temporarily for our survival, but they cannot become the new normal.

In mid-March, all synagogues and other houses of worship were shut down. My community gathers every Friday afternoon on Zoom to welcome the Shabbat together. Those sessions have been particularly moving and meaningful. In fact, many of us spend several hours each day on Zoom. In many parts of the world, including Israel, there has been a flourishing of Jewish learning and spirituality, using this and other technological tools. Even I feel personally that I’m no longer a technophobe.

Secondly, what we have seen in many societies is a re-affirmation of basic values of decency—“Love thy neighbor;” “the way to show love of God is by showing love to one’s fellow human being;” help, compassion, and devotion. As an older person, I have been the recipient of much help and kindness on the part of friends and members of my community, mainly in shopping and some other household chores. In fact, I felt so imbued with human kindness that I was doubly shocked, several weeks ago, when an interfaith program I was “attending” on Zoom, was “zoom bombed” by racists. I had forgotten about the negative side of social life. More worrisome, perhaps, is the phenomenon of family violence and abuse, which has been aggravated by problematic families having to spend long hours in close quarters. There have, of course, been examples of indifference and exploitation, lying and stealing. But overwhelmingly, we have seen dedication and self-sacrifice, cooperation and love.

Finally, we have seen a fascinating choice made in many (but not all!) nations between health and the economy. Overwhelmingly, the choice has been to slow down the economy in order to save lives. This is a theological statement. One can only hope that this approach will continue. I would add that in Point 11 of our Berlin Document, we called upon religious people from the various traditions “to enhance dialogue with political and economic bodies.” The last bullet point is “by initiating discussion with political and economic bodies around the urgent need for justice in the global community.” The aftermath of the Coronavirus may provide an opportune moment for that dialogue to happen.

## **BEING HUMAN IN THE TIME OF THE CORONAVIRUS: SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

*Pavol Bargár*

The current Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic certainly represents a milestone for many spheres of human thought and action. With its immediate and/or expected social, economic, political, cultural, and spiritual consequences, it makes for a topic that also deserves serious attention from theologians, regardless of their faith tradition and belonging. Some of the relevant pressing questions include: What impact does the Coronavirus have on one’s religious faith and practice? How can we live intra- and inter-religiously in a time of physical distancing? How, if at all, is our image of God/the divine readjusted in light of the pandemic? Many more questions and themes could be added. In this brief text written from the perspective of a (Protestant) Christian theologian, however, I would like to theologically reflect on the issue of what it means to be human in the time of the Coronavirus. In other words, in what sense does the current situation help us better understand our humanity? Three specific points will be explored, namely, humans as physical beings, the concept of an imagined body, and a sense of belonging to humankind.

Both Judaism and Christianity strongly emphasize that humans are created as bodily beings. We do not have bodies as a kind of repository for an immaterial soul; we are bodies. In the Hebrew Bible we read that humans were created from the dust of the earth that had been enlivened by God’s spirit. The New Testament, for its part, lays foundations for God living in/as flesh being one of the central claims of Christianity. For Apostle Paul, then, human bodily existence does not even end in death; people are believed to receive transformed bodies. From a Christian perspective, being human, therefore, means living a fleshly existence. It is through our bodies that we relate to others and the world. It even seems legitimate to assert that it is only through our bodies that we can relate to God.

This *modus vivendi* is seriously challenged by physical distancing we face due to the limitations connected to the Coronavirus pandemic. In the current situation we acutely realize that face-to-face encounters with others can hardly be adequately replaced with online technology, no matter how advanced it is.

This observation leads us to ask, whether there might be some concept that would complement our fleshly body without attempting to replace it. I would like to suggest that the answer is affirmative by introducing what I refer to as the imagined body. It might be helpful viewing the imagined body in terms of the relationship between the fleshly body, language, and experiencing. This insight benefits from the view that the human body is linked to language because speaking is a special case of bodily interaction. In addition, the human body also interacts with its environment, trying to make sense of and express our human experience of living in the world.

Importantly, the Scriptures reflect this intriguing meshwork of relationships regarding the human body as both fleshly and imagined. In the Hebrew Bible, Job represents a case in point as he argues with his friends about God and the human condition while sitting in ashes, his “social body” afflicted. Here, we can see that the imagined body has a very significant social dimension. Thus, the human body, in its fleshly and imagined components, is also a social body.

And finally, if we take human enfleshment seriously, being in social relations with others, or, we could also say, being in a community as a kind of imagined body, is of central importance for relating to the other/Other. It should, therefore, engender a sense of belonging to humankind. In biblical thought, the individual body is intrinsically linked to the collective body. There is a symbolic correspondence between the fleshly body and society. As outlined above, this connection makes for an important dimension of what I suggest referring to as the imagined body. Humanity can in plenitude be realized only when one is in communion with other humans. It means to exist in cultural-political communities that represent sites for building relationships and creating ongoing forms of life together. As the present Covid-19 Coronavirus situation shows us, these sites can be both physical and virtual (e.g. cyberspace-based). It is in the latter case especially when one realizes and appreciates one’s imagined body.

In light of the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic it can be, in conclusion, said from the Christian perspective that to be human means to have – and be – both the fleshly body and the imagined body that are inherently linked together, thus nurturing a sense of our belonging to a common humankind.

## LOVE (AND FAITH AND HOPE) IN A TIME OF CORONA

*Patrick Morrow*

*These things let me remember,  
and let me pour out my breath-self within me:  
oh, how I went along with the throng,  
how I’d process to the House of Gd,  
with the sound of ringing shouts and thanks,  
a crowd keeping the festival.  
Why are you cast down, my own breath-self,  
and in turmoil within me?  
Wait for Gd, for yet will I thank him,  
whose very gaze brings rescue.<sup>1</sup>*

Bultmann once said that all theology is “the anthropology”: we can at best attend only to the relationship between the human and the Divine. Rabbi Tony Bayfield has recently refined this point, in insisting that all authentic theology must start with autobiography.<sup>2</sup> A large part of the discernment process of “testing a vocation” to ordained ministry in the Church of England is repeated articulation of

<sup>1</sup> This is the writer’s own translation of Psalm 42.5-6 Heb.

<sup>2</sup> Bayfield, Tony, 2019, *Being Jewish Today: Confronting the Real Issues*, Bloomsbury Continuum, London, 7.

one's own story. I am in a time of flux, which involves me in telling that story at interviews. All in all, locating myself in the wider narrative of our days (warts and all, on all parties) should come easily enough to me. Yet here I am struggling.

Am I primarily a weak, fleshly human being, indeed one who himself almost certainly has had a very mild form of the virus, and so must self-isolate? Am I a witness-bearer and truth-teller in my neighborhood? (On some counts, half my parish is the epicenter of the epicenter – Newham – of the epicenter – London – of my country.) Am I one to be taken on as an emergency bank health care support worker, with very focused hopes and fears? Am I a Church of England minister, adjusting to a strict ban on all corporate worship, and learning to play my role in building up a “virtual church”, lamenting the loss and celebrating the surprising gains at once? Am I co-minister and friend of my priest-in-charge, who bears responsibility as chaplain to the staff of the principal emergency mortuary, in our parish? Am I a particular pastor, with very particular responsibilities: for D., M., A., V., etc; for those whose burden differently pains me daily: funeral directors, prison staff? Am I an unsettled citizen – or just maybe a struggling Christian prophet – reacting to what I can only see as evasions and the rewriting of history by powerful politicians? The UK government, after all, seems to be passing all responsibility – blame – to the people. Their literal command is: “Be alert; control the virus...”. We are encouraged to return to work, but mocked for entering crowded tube-trains. Am I one who prays to Gd (or intends to, who is more myself when I pray), who can most authentically comment on changes to my prayer life? Do I “find” Gd “here”?

Of course, the answer to these questions is consistently: Yes. So not so much a network of concerns, as a child's scribble-drawing, perhaps. Little wonder that I know not what to say. But then I note that I do speak. One of the first things I did, after the government banned public worship with the Church's full support and blessing (our Archbishops' strong guidance went further than the government's, I think with prudence), was draw people to the Psalms (Tehillim). I insisted (as many do) that all human life is here – joy, praise, naivety, contemplation, bewilderment, rage, hate, despair – and so here is the assurance that there will be ways to pray through this. I drew attention to Psalm 42/43 (treating them as one unit), because it is, *inter alia*, a psalm of lament, from one who clearly misses embodied and large-scale worship; who mourns that they no longer go “along with the throng”; who yet insists that waiting upon Gd (maybe with tears, or gritted teeth) is good, valid, timely, and possible. I wrote my own translation, seeking nothing polished or poetic, but just to see what a return to the Hebrew might throw up.

There is one other thing about this psalm-unit. Since a discussion with my spiritual director just before I was made priest (2006), it has been my custom, more often than not, to recite these psalms before I preside at the eucharist. So, more than a decade before this crisis, I was taking all the distress and lament and lostness of humankind in it as the raw material that is turned into thanksgiving (*eucharisto!*), through the encounter with Gd in it. This was in the first place because of the line (43.4a): *ve-avo'ah el-misbach elohim el el-simchat-gili* - “Oh let me go to the altar of Gd, to Gd, the joy of my rejoicing”. But, as soon as I started reciting it, I realised it was as much because of the opening (42.2 Heb): *ke-ayyal ta'araog al-afike-mayyim, ken nafshi ta'arog elekah, elohim*. “Just as a deer will pant for water channels, so it is my breath-self which pants for you, O Gd”.

Frightened and needy and desperate thirsting for Gd and Gd's help may well be norm for human beings. This is bearable. This is met with.

## REFLECTIONS IN A TIME OF ISOLATION: AN INVITATION TO METANOIA

*Michael Trainor*

The pandemic of the Coronavirus was not foreseen in early 2020. Its power stopped the world and all modes of human physical contact, transport and religious gatherings. It turned politics and economics upside down and disarmed our usual mode of living. The experience of ensuring healthy living and the search for meaningful life in the midst of the unusual, different and unexpected have brought with them deeply religious and theologically significant possibilities. Reflecting on this from a Catholic-Christian perspective, three come to mind. They concern *metanoia*, humility and trust.

The primary quality that Jesus of Nazareth encourages in his disciples is *metanoia*. This expression in Greek, in the Gospels, is often translated as ‘conversion’. Actually, it is a quality that lies at the core of being a religious person, whatever one’s faith position or affiliation. *Metanoia* is a combination of two Greek words: “*meta*” and “*noia*”. “*Meta*” implies “change” (present in words like metabolism, metamorphosis) and “*noia*” lies behind words linked to knowledge and knowing. *Metanoia*, the primary characteristic for disciples, concerns *changing the way we think*. This time of physical distancing ourselves from others and keeping ourselves protected from an unseen “enemy” that could be conceivably communicated by those closest to us certainly moves us deeply into a time of *metanoia*. We are forced to change the way we think and perceive of our reality. It is an invitation to let go of the expected and conventional and seek surprising and new paths of social communion with those we love, and with whom we share life and faith. For Christians, this is a time of deepening discipleship.

This draws us into a second characteristic linked to *metanoia*. It concerns humility. The present reminds us that we are not in control of the planet on which we live, nor the masters (or mistresses) of our destiny. While we scramble to discover a vaccine that will eradicate the virus from our system, unexpected truths and ways of conduct have emerged. We are learning humility or, better, rediscovering the need for humility. Humility comes from the Latin “*humus*” meaning soil, ground or Earth. This time reminds us that we are people who are Earth-connected and dependent. What has occurred in one place on this planet affects others globally. While in this age we have found ways to disconnect ourselves from Earth’s people and creatures by technologically and digitally attractive devices, at our core we remain *human* beings, creatures of *humus*, of Earth. And the best leaders that have emerged in this time of crisis are those who exhibit humility, open to wisdom from scientists and health experts, and seek paths of cooperation with others, even those who in different and pre-virus circumstances might have posed a political or military threat.

For people of faith, this time invites us to trust. We believe in a God who looks after us, embraces us, cries for us, rejoices in our delights. This God will not give us up or let us become overwhelmed by what surrounds us, though there are times when we do feel overwhelmed. No matter what happens, no matter how successful or not we are in devising an antidote to the virus, this does not change God’s attitude to us, the desire to be with us in eternal communion. Certainly, this is the conviction of the earliest Jesus followers who pondered the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Strangely or perhaps ironically, the height of the pandemic came when we were celebrating Easter. It came at a time when the figure of a suffering, dying Jesus gave himself into the hands of his God in whom he trusted without reservation. Pain, suffering, even death do not circumscribe or determine our God.

In the midst of our suffering, perplexity and confusion, I am reminded of these words from the prophet Habakkuk:

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails,  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold,  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.*  
(Habakkuk 3:17-19 NRSV)

## **DIALOGUE IN THE TIME OF VIRUS**

*Celia Deutsch*

I write, as one always does, from a particular place -- geographic, religious, social. I write as a Roman Catholic Sister of Our Lady of Sion, engaged in Jewish-Christian dialogue in a variety of contexts. I write from New York City, home to the world's largest diaspora Jewish community (more than 1 million), a city that has so far lost more than 24 thousand people to Covid-19. I write from Flatbush in Brooklyn, one of the most severely affected neighborhoods in the city, and in the nation.

As I write this, hundreds of thousands of people in more than 700 cities and towns across the country, are engaged in protest against the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police. The protests, however, cry out against the systemic racism that is the legacy of more than 400 years of our national history. The two realities – the U.S. experience of the pandemic, and racism – are inextricably linked in this context. People of color are poor in disproportionate numbers. This means that they often live in crowded conditions. They work in areas that place them at risk of infection (the meat-packing plants, supermarkets, public transportation, etc.) They often do not have access to adequate medical care. People of color of all social and economic classes, are also subject to disproportionate rates of pre-existing medical conditions, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, that make them vulnerable to Covid-19 and more likely to die of the virus than their white counterparts. I cannot reflect on the pandemic apart from the reality of racism. Similarly, I cannot reflect on the pandemic apart from the reality of the climate change crisis and the care for the earth.

Flatbush is also home to large Jewish and Muslim communities. All of us are experiencing the isolation and the pain of being unable to gather in our churches, synagogues, mosques. Sunday Mass live-

streamed is certainly meaningful, but Catholic Christianity, like all our traditions, is intensely communal, intensely physical. How do I celebrate Eucharist *without* my fellow-congregants in the same *physical* space? Our neighborhood interfaith coalition (Jewish-Christian-Muslim) has had two events via Zoom. They have been moments of coming together in the joy of seeing one another and reflecting on the resources our traditions bring to our experience of the pandemic. Those moments make us long to be together once again in the same physical space, and give a promise of better times ahead.

The Christian and Muslim partners, in our little interfaith coalition, are predominantly immigrants and people of color. Some of the Jewish partners are also immigrants and/or people of color. All of us have lost congregants in these weeks; we are connected by sorrow and loss. Members of our communities serve on the “front line” as health care nurses, physicians, hospital support staff, postal workers, public transportation workers, gardeners, and more. All of us have a sense that the country, the world are changing in ways that we cannot yet see. We wait, disoriented, even as we try to provide for our sick, and support our care-givers, even as we march in the streets or support the marchers. Together we live the reality of a global pandemic, and walk the long road to a world of justice for all.

As a Christian, I believe in a G-d who goes before us as a “pillar of cloud by day” and a “pillar of fire by night” (Exod 13:22). I believe that this G-d will not leave us, the people, just as G-d did not leave the people of Israel. As a Christian, I believe that the present moment calls us to new courage in our journey, trusting in a G-d who walks with us to the extent of becoming one of us. I look to the coming Reign of G-d, and try to remember that that reality is already in our midst, calling us to build a social and environmental order that reflects that reality. I remember the words of the G-d of Israel, the G-d of Jesus, through the prophet Amos, addressed to *us*: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream” (Amos 5:24).