

Theological impacts of the pandemic: The notion of God and its relation to nature

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We know quite precisely the human impact of the pandemic, at least quantitatively. We know the numbers – and they are horrifying. Many of the most developed nations, as well as most developing countries, have suffered tremendous losses in human lives¹. Some of the people who have been infected with the virus are still suffering, months later : we have all heard of the « long COVID » and its effects. The toll is huge.

But the human impact goes beyond the numbers. And here too the picture is not pretty : the youth have suffered psychologically at a level we cannot quite imagine. Young people, who like all of us but arguably even more than most of us adults, need human contact and human relationship as much as we all need water and food, have been deprived, for weeks on end, of contact with their friends. Right before the first lockdown, they organized massive parties, sometimes labelled « Apocalypse Now » ou « Apocalyptic Party », to anticipate all of these days and evenings where it would not be possible to go out and have drinks with friends or to make friends. Clearly, organizing such parties was very foolish and dangerous, as we knew even at the time, these gatherings could become and probably became in some cases superspreader events, but does blaming these young people help in any way ?

The human cost is tremendous. I am thinking of so many people who were not able to accompany close parents, a mother, a father, a grandmother or grandfather, a sibling, a daughter, a son, a granddaughter or grandson, in the final weeks and days of their lives, until their last breath. We as a people had to practice vicarious pastoral and human care. Our gratitude for the medical personnel who did so much in this and in other regards is immense. Certainly, the pandemic has also produced magnificent gestures of solidarity, acts of support and friendship. We have seen musicians sing and play from their balconies, restaurants offer food to hospital workers. We have seen scientists working around the clock to develop a vaccine, local politicians and government officials discussing and communicating tirelessly in all of the various phases of the worldwide crisis we have had to confront, and which we are still trying to overcome regionally, nationally and as a human family.

I was asked to discuss with you the theological impacts of the crisis, with a focus on the notion of God and its relation to nature.

¹ As of October 2021, Europe counts 770'000 deaths. My own country, Switzerland, has lost 11'000 of its citizens. Germany is nearing the figure of 100'000 deaths, whereas France counts 117'000 deaths. The United States have reached the figure of over 700'000 deaths.

This is not an easy topic. It can be tackled in a number of ways. The title indicates that there are several theological impacts (note the plural) of the pandemic. I will consider two questions before you and with you. First : Who is God in relation to a natural catastrophe like the pandemic ? And second : Where is God in relation to a natural catastrophe like the pandemic ? I offer these thoughts as an invitation to reflect together about these topics.

1. Who is God in relation to a natural catastrophe like the pandemic ?

For many people in Europe, this is a non-question. We live our lives without reference to God, and so we also die our death in this manner. God is not necessary for us. God might be interesting to some citizens, but to me, to us, « God », and what this word symbolizes, is simply irrelevant. Some, however, who live their lives without reference to God do not die in the way in which they lived : suddenly the question of God becomes lively, even urgent. For others, the question of God in relation to nature is a somewhat intriguing question, at least marginally so, or at least on a theoretical level, but not much more than that. For Christians, it is a question which raises significant problems and difficulties. I wish to ponder some of them with you.

1.1. God's power

Christians confess God as almighty (*omnipotens*). They have done so for two millenia. They do so each time they recite, as they regularly do, the traditional creeds, be it the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. When they read the Scriptures, they are likely to encounter mentions of God's power, of YHWH *Sabaoth*, of the « hand » of God at work in the world.

But confessing God's power has become difficult for many. If God is indeed almighty, then how can a catastrophe of proportions like the pandemic happen ? How can this occur, if God exists and if God is powerful, indeed all-powerful ? Who is this supposedly almighty God ? Isn't God utterly powerless in the face of natural catastrophes ? Isn't our only hope and our only rescue found in what science can provide, namely in a vaccine ?

The first thing I would like to say in relation to questions like these ones is that these questions are valid. They should not be put aside as expressions of unbelief or disbelief ! They are questions that believers themselves ask, not just once or twice in their lives, when things go wrong, but repeatedly. I would venture to say that believers who do not ask such questions are strange believers, believers of a very different kind from the believers we see in

the Scriptures, who ask difficult questions like these, and who do not ask these questions in a kind of distanced, theoretical manner, but with their guts !

And so we should accept to live with these questions. Trusting in God implies living with them, sometimes on a daily basis, even if most of us, and I am tempted to add, thankfully so, might not consider them day after day.

What I will be saying about these questions should not be interpreted as an attempt to resolve these questions, or to circumvent them. Even as I make some proposals in relation to these questions, my aim is to not suppress the questions, but rather to articulate some claims that may help us consider these questions in a slightly different light.

We should all be worried of people who think they have solutions, especially theoretical solutions, to the kinds of questions that so many human beings have been wrestling with and are still wrestling with.

And we should be even more worried of people who try to explain the presence of evil as a way to « excuse » God of any wrongdoing. Theories have been proposed to explain the reality of evil and suffering in the face of God who is both good and powerful. These theories, which belong to what is known since modernity as « theodicy », are for the most part unhelpful and unsatisfactory. In some cases they downplay the presence of evil and suffering, and in so doing, by refusing to acknowledge the very material and concrete reality of pain and suffering, these theories in a way add evil to evil². They do not just try to « explain » evil : by denying its reach and its scope, they increase it.

Let us consider divine power.

Divine power, God's power, is a relational notion or reality. God is considered powerful in relation to other realities, or over other realities. This is important, for it means God is not powerful in a sort of solipsistic way, as a reality cut off or disconnected from any other reality. Philosophers and theologians have talked, at times, of an « absolute power of God » (*potentia absoluta*). This is a dangerous way of talking and thinking. God is powerful *over* some thing.

As humans, we know that power often corrupts, and absolute power may corrupt absolutely (as Lord Acton put it). This does not diminish our will for power, as human beings. Luther said that whereas human beings like to look up and increase their possessions and their power, God looks down and goes the way of dispossession.

² See Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

In the 20th century, we have witnessed extraordinary attempts by human beings at exercising power over other people, over entire nations, through warfare, invasions, the attempt at totalitarian control, and genocides. These events almost always raised, quite acutely, the question of God's power. And one could say they were attempts at duplicating in our world certain distorted conceptions of divine power.

This led theologians to denounce any direct identification of « power » as such, unlimited or absolute power, with God and with God's power. God's power is not « power » as such, it is not unlimited power. It is *God* who defines what God's power is like, rather than power as such, or raw power, defining how God may be powerful. God, for instance, cannot decide to become a God of violence and war, a God of anger towards humanity. Why ? Because God is eternally God who is God *with* God's creation, with God's people, and *for* God's people. God is eternally « Immanuel », the One who hears the cry of those who suffer. Surely, there are certain portrayals in the Scripture where God aligns God's power with the power of monarchs, as we see when God is said to have used the power of Nebuchadnezzar to crush the people of Israel because of their disobedience... We also find many interpretations of catastrophes in human history as divine « punishment ». We need to be very careful how we interpret such texts today, and resist the temptation to update such texts for our own context. Martin Luther, in « Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague » (1527), wrote this about the plague, alternating very interestingly between the notion of « punishment » by Christ and Satan's « fury » (my emphasis) :

« So there are battles without and terrors within, and really grim ones; *Christ is punishing us*. It is a comfort that we can confront *Satan's fury* with the word of God, which we have and which saves souls even if that one should devour our bodies. Commend us to the brethren and yourself to pray for us that we may endure bravely under the hand of the Lord and overcome the power and cunning of Satan, be it through dying or living. Amen. At Wittenberg on All Saints' Day in the tenth year after the trampling down of the papal bull, in remembrance of which we, comforted in both respects, have drunk a toast. »³

³ Trans. Carl J. Schindler, *Luther's Works*, vol. 43, 119s (« Ob man vor dem Sterben fliehen möge », in Weimarer Ausgabe 23: 339–79). « I am of the opinion that all the epidemics, like any plague, are spread among the people by evil spirits who poison the air or exhale a pestilential breath which puts a deadly poison into the flesh. Nevertheless, this is God's decree and punishment to which we must patiently submit and serve our neighbor, risking our lives in this manner as St. John teaches, "If Christ laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" [1 John 3:16]. » LW 43: 127. « What do all kinds of pestilence or devils mean over against God, who binds and obliges himself to be our attendant and physician? » LW 43: 129. « What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way: "Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. If God should wish to take me, he will surely find me and I have done what he has expected of me and so I am not responsible for either my own death or the

What is clear, theologically speaking, is that God's power cannot be cut off from God's justice, God's will or God's love. God's power must be closely articulated to both God's justice, will, and love, to mention only these two characteristics of God as Christians confess and trust in God. Disconnecting God's power from God's will, from God's intention, is a grave theological error.

1.2. Two biblical passages

When catastrophes occur, human beings are quickly interested in figuring out *why* it happened. For many centuries, and still today, they have asked what God may have had to do with it. I know of two key biblical passages, in the gospels, in which this very human instinct is mentioned and discussed, by Jesus of Nazareth.

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. (Luke 13:1-5)

And then this other passage, in the fourth gospel :

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" ³ Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. ⁴ We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. ⁵ As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. ⁶ When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, ⁷ saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. ⁸ The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." ¹⁰ But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" ¹¹ He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." ¹² They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know." (John 9:1-12).

death of others. If my neighbor needs me, however, I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely, as stated above. See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God. » LW 43: 132. « Our plague here in Wittenberg has been caused by nothing but filth. The air, thank God, is still clean and pure, but some few have been contaminated because of the laziness or recklessness of some. So the devil enjoys himself at the terror and flight which he causes among us. May God thwart him! Amen. » LW 43 : 133-134.

The message of these two passages is worth pondering. First, Jesus unambiguously rejects any attempt at pointing out where the guilt might have come from that led to the tragedy of the Galileans murdered by Pilate or to the death of people when the tower of Siloam fell, or also to this man being born blind. Believers are tempted to go back in time, in order to identify the fault or the guilt that led to a certain evil.

Jesus's message in these two texts counter a certain Christian, and more broadly a certain religious and even human tendency to search for causal explanations or factors. If this happened, it is because x happened, because we human beings did this or that. We are immediately reminded here of the « friends » of Job and their certainties concerning Job's guilt, the hidden disobedience that they are convinced led to his sufferings.

Certainly, in the case of the current pandemic, we have been searching for explanations : mostly *scientific* ones, quite tellingly, even as religious explanations or, more accurately, theological ones have not been missing in certain Christian (e.g. radically evangelical or even fundamentalist) circles.

Jesus is not interested in the causes of this or that catastrophe – be it a man-made human tragedy, in the case of the Galilean uprising and its demise, or a sort of natural catastrophe in the case of the tower of Siloam. Jesus is interested in how *we respond* to tragedy as human beings. How should we understand his words : « unless you repent (μετανοήτε), you will all perish just as they did » (Luke 13:3) ? It seems to me that, if we remember the etymological meaning of *metanoia*, Jesus is calling us to leave aside any inquiry into other people's sin. « Unless you repent », here, may mean : unless you include yourself among those who are sinners and thus are at risk at any moment, you will also perish. Do not imagine that these others are sinners, that you can look at them and think that you, unlike them, are pure or innocent. The message here is similar to the one in the striking and very important parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple, several chapters later in Luke's gospel (Luke 18:9-14).

These various biblical passages orient us in a different direction than the kinds of theological reflections that we regularly find in older as well as more recent theological writings on divine providence in relation to nature as such.

1.3. Divine providence

The theme of divine providence is in crisis. This crisis, however, is not new. It has been with us in the West at least since 1755, the year in which the city of Lisbon, on November 1st, suffered a series of massive earthquakes followed by a tsunami and fires, killing between a

third and a fifth of the entire population of 275'000 people. What did God have to do with this catastrophe ? This question became hotly debated. Voltaire, notably with his novel *Candide* (1759), and Rousseau took part in the debate. Almost overnight, Leibniz's philosophy of nature and of our world as « the best possible world » seemed untenable, obsolete⁴.

I mention these debates to make clear that the COVID crisis is only one more catastrophe in a long series of events that compel us to think of God, and God's relation to nature, anew.

Traditional theism, with Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, argued for a maximalist position : God is the *creative cause* of everything in the cosmos⁵. Everything that exists comes into existence through the creative activity of God. God is also the conserving cause of everything that exists : God *maintains* the world as a whole and in all of its parts. Beyond creative and maintaining, God also is the *concurrent cause* of every worldly or created action. God acts concurrently with every action in this world, be it a leaf falling from a tree (this was one of Calvin's examples), in order to bring about the specific effect of that particular cause.

In this interpretation, God is at work in every contingent, worldly event, even in the most minute one. As something happens, anywhere on our planet and in the cosmos, God is there acting concurrently, meaning simultaneously.

Compared to this theology of providence, modern and contemporary theologies of providence appear to be on the defense, working on limiting the damage as much as possible in the face of Darwinism and the theory of evolution (which does not call for any divine involvement in the history of life on Earth). One possible way to deal with this is to retreat from a maximalist to a minimalist position and say that God may have triggered creation in the beginning, but then God stopped intervening in the world. This position was favored by the Deists, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance in book 4 of his work *Émile or On Education* (1762), in a remarkable text known as the « Confession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar ». Frederick Temple, in lectures given in 1884, taking into account Darwin's theory of evolution, argued that God « did not make the things, we may say : no, but He made them make themselves. »⁶ In other words : the Creator has endowed creation from the start with the natural capacity to evolve as God intended it to evolve. Another possible response to modern science is to consider God as acting intermittently, whenever it is really necessary, or

⁴ See Leibniz's *Theodicy* (1710).

⁵ For what follows, see the entry on « Leibniz on the Problem of Evil » (Stanford's Encyclopedia of Philosophy). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/leibniz-evil/>. For an account in Thomas Aquinas' writings, see Thomas Aquinas, *Disputationes de potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 7, resp.

⁶ Frederick Temple, *The Relations Between Religion and Science*, London, Macmillan, 1884, p. 115. Quoted in David Ferguson, *The Providence of God. A Polyphonic Approach*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018, 193.

whenever we cannot as of now explain something scientifically. God's action would then be understood as « miraculous » in a specific sense, as prodigious interventions now and then. These tendencies are not sound, theologically. The risk here is to end up with a « God of the gaps ». God is located and seen as acting in the places where our knowledge has no explanation, as of now, for this or that worldly phenomenon. Dietrich Bonhoeffer already denounced this, for good reasons.

How should we conceive God's action today, in relation to the world ? This is the vast question that lies before us, and that cannot be answered fully in one lecture. But let me give a few indications of what a Christian theology might wish to say on this topic today.

- God is not just the « originating impulse »⁷ of created reality. Traditional theism was and is right to closely associate creation with preservation, with the sustaining of the world.
- God is not merely tinkering with creation at various moments. There is a constancy of God's action. God works in, with and through creation and creatures⁸. Is there a time when the Spirit of God, as well as the Word of God, are not active ?⁹
- The maximalist position that closely associates any contingent act or event in the world with God's concurring or simultaneous act raises many problems. Not everything that occurs in the natural world is either eternally determined or willed by God ; perhaps it may have been allowed or permitted to happen by God, although talk of divine permission raises many troubling questions, for how would a benevolent God « permit » so much suffering and pain, so many deaths in utter loneliness ? We need to conceive of a certain « divine restraint » with regard to worldly events, even as we may wish to affirm the presence of God « in and through each creaturely event »¹⁰. Karl Barth made it clear, when treating the theme of God's power, that what we experience in reality is not always and everywhere God's omnicausality, « but merely an ocean of unrealities, of revelations of the power of powerlessness, of demonic forces, and therefore of impossibilities of every kind » (*Church Dogmatics* II/1, 531)¹¹.

⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁸ Ibid., 231.

⁹ Ibid., 239.

¹⁰ Ibid., 195 and 237.

¹¹ « Ohne die Offenbarung der besonderen, der ihm eigenen, der in seiner Allwirksamkeit sich nicht erschöpfenden Allmacht Gottes des Vaters, des Sohnes und des Heiligen Geistes können und werden wir in der angeblichen Wirklichkeit, in den angeblichen göttlichen Weltordnungen (mit Einschluss der sogen. Heilsordnung!) gerade nicht die Allwirksamkeit Gottes, sondern nur einen Ozean von Unwirklichkeiten, von Offenbarungen jener Macht

- The fact that God does not intervene to save people who are gravely ill and who are dying may not be surprising to us. A number of us have lost people who were dear to us, people whom we loved with all of who we are. Jesus himself was not magically saved by God in his trial and his passion, he endured it all, to the last drop. And according to two witnesses in the New Testament, namely Mark and Matthew, he died in anguish and with a cry ! Socrates died with a smile on his face. Jesus of Nazareth died with a cry in his heart and on his lips, with a sense of abandonment ! God's presence had vanished before him, but even in the abandonment of God, he cried to God, saying : « *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me ?* ».

I now turn to the second question I wish to consider with you. We have reflected a little bit on the « who » question (« who » is God in relation to a natural catastrophe like the current pandemy ?), now I will address the question of « where is God » in events like these.

2. Where is God in relation to a natural catastrophe like the pandemic ?

We need to distinguish between the question of God's presence in nature as a whole, God's cosmic presence, and God's comforting presence by and with those who suffer, as well as by and with those who assist those who suffer.

It seems quite clear, reading the Scriptures, that God is close to those whose hearts are broken (Psalm 34:18). Faith may discern this presence, in our distress, in our brokenness and in our loneliness. But even faith may be shaken by this distress we experience, faith can be veiled, covered by the tears in our eyes.

Those who attend to people in suffering, in illness (whether this illness is the virus or anything else that ails human beings) are a reflection of God, of who God is. They are acting in God's stead. They are the instruments of God's benevolence and grace. They may only be doing their job, they may never think of what they do in relation to God's mercy, but they are doing more than just their jobs : they are doing the work of God, which, I wish to stress again, is never a malevolent work, but always and only a work *for the sake of life*.

As Christians, we discover who God is and how God works through the one true witness : Jesus, the Christ of God, the anointed one.

In the gospels, do we see Jesus engaging in malevolent acts, in the course of his ministry ? Never ! Not once ! We see him healing, forgiving, restoring to life. Yes, we also see him

der Ohnmacht, von Dämonien und also von Unmöglichkeiten aller Art zu erleben und zu erfahren bekommen. » K. Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1 (1940), 597.

arguing with certain people and replying to verbal attacks : but we should understand this as a sign of God's own resistance to human distortions of religion and politics, to our quests for personal power and security. This word « resistance » is very important. In the gospels we see Jesus challenging and confronting religious authorities who are imposing a heavy burden on people through commandments related to purity laws as well as other laws.

In Christian theology, we find interpretations of the Easter events as both a challenge, by God, of our sinful and violent ways, of our decision to suppress the One who comes in the name of God as a way to protect our security and power, and also as the most important sign that God is not a God of death or a God of the dead, but a God who raises the dead to new life, raising them so that they may take part in God's own life. Easter has these two dimensions : a word that radically denounces our pretenses, our arrogance, our fears, a word that reveals us to ourselves as we are, and also, simultaneously, as a word that confers to us the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation with God and with one another. Significantly, the word of denunciation does not exist for itself, it exists only for the sake or in service of the second word, which is the actual aim of it all, namely forgiveness and reconciliation. We speak of Good Friday and Easter Sunday as two events, and they are indeed distinct, even radically distinct events, since the first one focuses mainly on what we human beings did to Jesus of Nazareth and what he endured, whereas the second one depends mainly on what God the Father, in the power of the Spirit, did to his beloved Son (and also on what female and male disciples witnessed at the tomb). But as Christians we also speak of Easter in the singular, and there are good reasons for this. We proclaim Easter as the event in which God liberates us and all creation, as God liberated the people of Israel, from all that separates us from God, i.e. from the One who is true Life.

As Christians, our whole lives are marked, imprinted by Easter, by Christ's passing through death to new life, to God's own life. This imprint, in Greek, is termed « character », from a Greek verb, *charassein* (χαράσσειν), which means « to sharpen, to engrave », and the noun *charakter*.

This is the central meaning of baptism : we have been associated in who we are, in our entire existence, with Jesus's death and with his resurrection. We are on our way, not just from life to death, as in the natural course of any living creature, from death to life (see the Taizé song, « Bless the Lord my soul », and the words : « who leads me into life »). We have been buried in Christ's death in order to share in his life.

When confronted with a massive, global crisis like the pandemy, our faith may very well be shaken. Questions may rise within ourselves, and within the community of believers. These

questions should not be suppressed, but addressed and reflected upon, and shared communally.

Some people want to suppress the question and find an easy explanation or solution to the problem. This is not the way the book of Job recommends : Job's friends have not spoken rightly of God. And this is not what Jesus calls for when tragedies occur.

Christian existence is characterized not just by faith, but also by hope and love. And Christian hope is, at its heart, « hope against hope » (Rom. 4:18), hope in the face of death and meaninglessness.

Faith does not bring ready-made solutions to the question of evil, but it gives people a horizon in which they may live in the trust that God transforms lives so that they may reflect God's own goodness.¹² Faith, nourished by hope and love, exclaims : « Your kingdom come ! Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven ! » These words do not point in the direction of a theoretical solution, but rather represent a practical response, in prayer and in other deeds. Faith looks to the fulfillment of God's will, to the coming of God's kingdom on earth. These petitions presuppose the fact that in our existence God's will is not yet accomplished, that our earth is not yet ruled by God's will : it is also ruled by forces that tear us apart and that destroy us. These petitions express our longing for the overcoming of evil by God's goodness.¹³

The reality of suffering and diseases is a big, lasting question mark for those who believe that God is good, that God's creation is, at root, good.

Jesus of Nazareth does not delve into theoretical arguments, but calls those who hear him and who listen to him not to solve a riddle, but to embark into a practice of « conversion » or « repentance », by which he means a turning or a transforming of our ways of seeing the world and of understanding reality. He calls us to see the world in the light of God's goodness and God's resolve to be God *with* God's creation and *for* God's creation. He calls us to stop thinking we might be pure, whereas others are sinners and therefore have to endure catastrophes or difficulties.

The reality of suffering, of the current pandemic, is a wake-up call addressed to us all : how do we treat animals that are supposed to live and remain in the wild ? What does it mean to treat all creatures, including wildlife, with respect, rather than as products for our own insatiable consumption ? How is our research on animals and on viruses pursued, and with what kinds of safety measures ? Are we not playing with fire ?

¹² Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Malum. Theologische Hermeneutik des Bösen*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2008, 545.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 516-517.

Jesus's way to address the reality of suffering remains potent. In John 9:4, he says : « We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. » The command is not to reflect on a theoretical conundrum, but to do the works of him who sent him, Jesus, « while it is day ». We know what these works look like, since we have seen the one whom God sent : works of service to the frailest members of our humanity, works of humility and never of arrogance and domination. Works for the sake of a life lived within the human community, rather on its margins : a shared human life in mutual respect and service.

Final remarks

The pandemic we have endured and which we are still enduring has been quite extraordinary. It has single-handedly done what I think nobody could imagine : it stopped, almost overnight, our ways of living « normally », it stopped all international travel, it radically modified the ways in which we relate to each other, the ways in which we greet each other, the ways in which we support each other in times of illness, the ways in which we work on a daily basis. It turned out to be an event, or a crisis, of extraordinary power.

What did this extremely powerful event had to do with God's power ? Was the crisis an expression, a manifestation of God's power ?

I don't think so. I think that it would be quite disastrous to correlate the power of the pandemic with God's power.

The power of the pandemic was a *divisive* power, a power that separated us, even from loved ones who were ill and in some cases even dying.

But we know who, or what, seeks division between us human beings as well as being us and the creation we are apart of. Division has something « diabolical » to it.

God's power is a life-giving power, a power in service of life in its fulness.

This is the conviction, which I think is a Jewish and a Christian conviction, that leads to me reject any conflation between the power of the current crisis and God's power.

Does that mean God simply lets awful things such as a pandemic unfold ?

Here again, answering affirmatively would not be an adequate answer.

God is at work, through God's Word, through God's Spirit, sustaining this world, breathing God's mercy into human beings and throughout creation, breathing a Spirit not just of joy and light-heartedness, but also breathing a Spirit that cries within us as well as within creation,

crying for deliverance from pain and suffering (Rom. 8). The Spirit cries within us : « Abba, Father », just as Jesus cried : « Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani ».

The Spirit is also a Spirit of deep, ineffable yearning.

The person who is praying, in some of the Psalms, is expressing her or his lament, giving voice to the anguish that inhabits her or him.

The Bible, in this way, is telling us that lamenting, being in anguish, is part of being human, is part of being a believer. It does *not* contradict our faith, but is one of the expressions of our faith, alongside joy and praise, and perhaps also within joy and praise as well.

God does not magically solve the crises that we face as a species, or as countries, or as churches, or as people.

Some mocked Jesus during his Passion, asking him to pray his Father to send legions of angels to deliver him from the torture he was enduring. But Jesus was left to drink his cup until the very last drop.

We too will not be spared suffering in our existence, even as we hope for joy and a peaceful death.

We are called to do certain works while there is the light of day. Not just any works, but quite specific works, the works of the Father : « We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. »