



A theological engagement with the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The Covid-19 virus has led to crises on many levels. Not only is the pandemic a serious medical issue, but also a huge challenge on many other levels. Economically, politically, socially, religiously and ethically, the pandemic is changing all previously held ideas and understanding. At present, the whole world is struggling to find a solution on these levels. It is useful to ask theological questions regarding the pandemic. Opinions differ concerning the theological implications of the pandemic. Some regard the virus as an evolutionary development, while others view it in the light of God's wrath against sin. It can also be regarded as a sign of the second coming of Christ as we speed up towards the end times. Christ's death on the cross, his resurrection and his salvation for humankind must also be emphasised. One should consider sin and God's wrath against it as well as the call to conversion, but the glorious redemption in Jesus Christ is considered to be the final answer for humanity.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, wrath of God, sin, redemption in Christ.

Introduction

The world is in a deep crisis in terms of the pandemic of the Covid-19 virus. It relates to every aspect of our lives. It has implications for all that we do, and for the way in which we live our lives. There are many different aspects regarding the crisis that should be accessed. There are also substantial theological implications for humanity. Opinions differ on how to view the pandemic from a theological perspective and according to diverse religions. Finally, reference should be made as to how to deal with these challenges from a Christian perspective.

The crises

The medical crisis

The pandemic poses a medical crisis. There is at present no known way as to how to stop this virus. There is yet no final vaccine and limited medical interventions for people suffering from high levels of symptoms.

More than 150 coronavirus vaccines are in development across the world—and hopes are high to bring one to market in record time to ease the global crisis. Several efforts are underway to help make that possible, including the U.S. government's Operation Warp Speed initiative, which has pledged \$10 billion and aims to develop and deliver 300 million doses of a safe, effective coronavirus vaccine by January 2021. The World Health Organization is also coordinating



global efforts to develop a vaccine, with an eye toward delivering two billion doses by the end of 2021. (McKeever, 2020)

Some are of the opinion that there will soon be a safe working vaccine, but the vaccines in Russia are regarded with scepticism in a 'Cold War' mentality. Medical teams are working around the clock to find a vaccine or medication for the virus. The medical challenge is however still very serious. Many medical doctors and other medical professionals who are helping people who contracted Covid-19 have also fallen ill and many have died in the service of humanity. The origin of the virus is not yet clear. Winter and Hegde (2020:758) explain:

Indeed, it is not clear whether early cases of COVID-19 were from infection by animal or human, and data are limited and unreliable. In this case, models fitted by early data probably produce results divorced from reality. Early modelling studies have proved overly optimistic about the situation in Wuhan.¹² The closer to reality, the more resources a model requires.

Dong et al. (2020:58) refer to research to find a new vaccine. Scientists are looking in all directions such as to Western medicines, natural products, and traditional Chinese medicines for possible answers to the medial challenges. Zu et al. (2020:E16) explain that, in mid-January 2020, the mortality rate was high in China. They refer to the contagious aspect of the disease. The WHO (August 2020) warns against resurgences:

Globally, risks of COVID-19 resurgence remain in all countries that have managed to suppress transmission. Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, highlighted this during a statement to the press, indicating that as summer turns to autumn in the northern hemisphere, we must make sure that we adopt the right public health measures to enable the safe return to school, manage the approaching influenza season, sustain our economies, and address the increased health risks to older people at this time of year.

Rajgor et al. (2020:776) show that mortality rates are still high, although not as high as expected. Bendavid et al. (2020:s.p.) explain that there are still many issues regarding the way in which death rates are estimated.

Measuring fatality rates and projecting the number of deaths depend on estimates of the total number of infections. To date, in the absence of seroprevalence surveys, estimates of the fatality rate have relied on the number of confirmed cases multiplied by an estimated factor representing unknown or asymptomatic cases to arrive at the number of infections. 3-6. However, the magnitude of that factor is highly uncertain. Because the implications of infection fatality rate and projected deaths are large, the extent of COVID-19 infection under-ascertainment (the multiplier used to arrive from cases to infections) has been a topic of great interest and provided estimates of the number of infections about 1-6-fold higher than the number of cases. 7-10.

The economic crisis

Secondly, there is an economical challenge. Many people suffer from the economic fallout of the virus. Due to the fact that lockdown was established in many countries worldwide, normal economic relations were shut down and it was not possible to empower people economically and this is problematic as many live in dire poverty while others thrive. It is clear that many



countries will suffer negative growth for a few years. It is also clear that many projects had to close down. Small businesses go out of business daily. Larger businesses struggle to pay their employees. The challenge for existing in this environment is extremely high. Especially the transport and leisure industries are suffering a great deal as is evidenced in daily media reports.

Baker et al. (2020:11-12) refer to the fact that the virus has tremendous economic implications, especially on global stock markets. Bonaccorsi et al. (2020:15530) view the economic challenge as huge. "Concern is arising regarding the economic consequences of lockdown and how it can disproportionately hit the weak and the poor." Chang and Velasco (2020:34) mention another aspect:

Much has been written since Covid-19 hit about the stark choices governments face between preserving lives and preserving livelihoods. Much less has been said about the equally stark choices regular citizens face. Yet in the end, what citizens do could be at least as important as what governments do in determining how, when and at what cost we overcome the pandemic.

Coibion et al. (2020:s.p.) refer to the many claims for unemployment:

The arrival of the [C]ovid-19 virus and the policy responses have led to unprecedented numbers of initial claims for unemployment since early 2020: over 16.5 million by April 4th, 2020, with new claims arriving at a rate of 6-7 million per week. But concerns about state governments' inability to process so many claims in such a short period, combined with the fact that many workers are ineligible for unemployment benefits, has led to concerns that total job losses are being understated by these numbers. Furthermore, because official labor market indicators compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) take time to be released, the current state of the U.S. labor market remains unclear.

The social crisis

Many people suffer in lockdowns in their homes for example they have to live on their own and some people such as the elderly do not get visits from other people and they are extremely vulnerable. Then there are many who suffer from depression and other illnesses. Others are worried about how they will cope again. Marriages are under stress and the way in which people deal with one another is challenging.

Jordan et al. (2020:1) write: "As the covid-19 pandemic accelerates, governments are warning people at high risk to be particularly stringent in observing social distancing measures because if they become ill they are more likely to need critical care including ventilation, and to die."

Mortality from Covid-19 is not as high as expected, but it is still a cause for concern. The WHO (2020a) (April) writes:

WHO has developed the following definition for reporting COVID deaths: a COVID-19 death is defined for surveillance purposes as a death resulting from a clinically compatible illness in a probable or confirmed COVID-19 case, unless there is a clear alternative cause of death that cannot be related to COVID disease (e.g., trauma). There should be no period of complete recovery between the illness and death.



Luchetti et al. (2020:906) explain how devastating the virus is on social relations: “For groups at risk, such as older adults, it may be useful to have preventive programs in place that offer support and promote online social interactions.”

The political crisis

Governments have to apply strict regulations. It is not always clear if that was well considered. Challenges concerning this aspect in South Africa are the regulations regarding alcohol and cigarettes. There is corruption and many tried to gain additional financial wealth from the government's programmes. The political challenge is therefore, extremely high. Not only in the United States of America, but also in India, China and other countries, and of course the way in which governments are dealing with this virus has extreme implications for the world at large.

Hall et al. (2020:s.p.) explain:

Economies throughout the world are faced with a terrible question: How should we trade off large declines in consumption and GDP versus deaths from the coronavirus pandemic? As is well appreciated in economics, individuals make life-and-death decisions every day when deciding what job to take or whether to drive across town. We apply the basic framework used to evaluate these kinds of individual decisions to a utilitarian social welfare function to help us think about trading off consumption of survivors versus deaths from the pandemic.

The religious crisis

Religious challenges are also evident. During lockdown, people could not attend church. Many churches tried to reach their congregants by means of online services, online prayer meetings, and online visits. *Koinonia* is under a great deal of stress. The theological challenge on how and why certain things happen to people and why there is this virus lead many to challenge God's rule on earth.

There is a religious challenge regarding the way in which churches will develop and grow in future, once the pandemic has ended. A total new way of worship came about. Financial constraints will be hard to deal with. It will also be difficult to empower people spiritually who have lost much during the pandemic. Some will also struggle with the theological understanding of the pandemic especially when they lost loved ones.

The ethical crisis

Brennen et al. (2020:8) pay attention to ethical questions.

While describing the landscape of COVID-19 misinformation as an ‘infodemic’ captures the scale, our analysis suggests it risks mischaracterising the nature of the problems we face. As we have shown, there is wide variety in the types of misinformation circulating, the claims made concerning the virus, and motivations behind its production. Unlike the pandemic itself, there is no single root cause behind the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus. Instead, COVID-19 appears to be supplying the opportunity for very different actors with a range of different motivations and goals to produce a variety of types of misinformation about many different topics. In this sense, misinformation about COVID-19 is as diverse as information about it.



Theological challenges

Our biggest challenge is to understand the nature of the theological implications of this virus. How must and should we understand this virus? In what way do we regard the virus? Is it from the wrath of God viewpoint, or is it only an evolutionary development that came about naturally?

Evolution

Although evolution very often, but not always, challenges the belief, in God it must also be listed as a theological challenge, because some regard the pandemic as an evolutionary development of viruses in nature, even under the hand of God. They understand the virus as normal development in life. Viruses are present in life and this virus developed from other viruses. They therefore regard this development as part of nature. It should not be understood as a specific intervention from God's involvement in nature. It is regarded as an evolutionary development. Nature is always in ebb and flow, during which viruses develop (see Dawkins 2006:139ff).

The wrath of God

The second possibility is to view the virus as coming from the wrath of God against sin. In the Bible, the wrath of God sometimes leads to serious challenges for human beings. God challenges human beings in their human condition, because of the rejection of God's rule and the human condition is explained as a condition of sin. Human beings have rebelled against God and are seeing the results of sin in this world. The wrath of God is clear from the very beginning with Adam and Eve where the sin of the human being is explained and where God's wrath is clear in the expulsion of the couple from Eden. We must understand that, in the current theological world, the way in which sin came about in the world is challenged in many ways. It is clear that there is sin in the world, there is evil, there are challenges for the human condition. Weaver (2003:59) writes: "A theology of sin requires a focused, sustained recognition of the person acting in the world and with others before God."

It is obvious that the wrath of God should be acknowledged by humanity. God is a Holy God and God is against sin perpetrated by his creation, the human being. God is also challenging the human being to follow him in all instances. Where this does not happen, God's wrath is clear against the sin of human beings. The prophets explain the wrath of God. Even in the New Testament, God has made it very clear (Romans 1 and 5) that human beings experience the wrath of God.

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1)

In that sense, the virus could be regarded as from the wrath of God.

One must be guard against saying that the wrath of God is against a specific sinner or a specific person. On the other hand, it is clear that the wrath of God is explained against a human being and human condition in general. That should be taken into consideration. However, the wrath of God in the Bible should always be read against the background of the notion of salvation in and through Jesus Christ our redeemer.



Platinga (1994:1222) explains that responsibility for sin must be considered:

What could be more patronizing than the refusal to blame people for their wrongdoing and to praise them for their right-doing, and to ground this refusal in our assumption that these people have not caused their own acts or had a hand in forming their own character?

McMin (2004:54) writes:

Theologians discuss the noetic effects of sin, meaning that our intellect is dulled—our eyes closed—as a result of living in a fallen state. In the narrow sense, it means we cannot reason well enough to see our need for salvation...

Burke (1996:53) also refers to aspects of social sin:

Its value lies in its holistic approach and disciplined process. It has the capacity to sensitize the participants to the presence and effects of social sin and social grace in all the structures in their lives and in the lives of those they are companioning.

Kelly (1992:13) explains that Jesus has come to call sinners. Sinfulness of the human must therefore be fully considered.

Alison (1997:93) refers to the way in which Jesus dealt with the blind man in John:

The story of the man born blind thus has a role as a prophetic commentary on what is to happen to Jesus, and how what happens to Jesus is going to function. It is going to function as an element which makes it impossible for the righteous, the good, those who think that they see, to maintain for long their goodness by the exclusion of people considered evil, sinful or blind.

It is important to explain that sin and the wrath of God against sin is a reality when referring to the Bible. It is, however, extremely important to engage the way in which the Bible deals with redemption and salvation by God in Jesus Christ.

Humanity

Some regard viruses and illnesses as part and parcel of our human condition. We are human beings and, in our human life, we experience different challenges. It is said that the wrath of God does not lead to these challenges, but the human condition does. We are human beings and our human condition is viewed as the way in which we have to deal with different challenges in the world. Our humanity is part of this world and, in this world, we experience viruses, illnesses, challenges, huge destruction, cataclysm and so forth. Humanity must, therefore, experience this as part and parcel of our daily life. We must simply understand it as the way in which we live. Viruses are part of a natural life. We understand that this Covid-19 virus is also part of natural life around us, whether it comes from a bat or from whatever else. It is usually part of our understanding of natural life in the world around us.



The second coming of the Lord

There are many signs such as for example droughts, wars, pestilence, disease, environmental degradation and famine, which point to the second coming of the Lord. Some regard the pandemic as a sign of the second coming of the Lord Jesus. These negative aspects also explain to us that we have to deal with life in this regard. The second coming of the Lord is like labour pains. This world is in serious trouble, due to the challenges in this regard. The second coming of Christ will reveal everything and then we will understand aspects of the challenges we have experienced.

10 Then he said to them: “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven.” (Luke 21:10)

The cross of Jesus Christ

The cross reveals to us not only our human condition, but also God’s revelation of salvation. In the cross and on the cross, Jesus revealed himself as the One who loves human beings. The virus causes the death of many people. Christ carries the sin of people. He carries the challenges of this world (see Van de Beek 2018:31). While the pandemic may be viewed from the perspective of the wrath of God, it should also be viewed from the perspective of the cross. The cross explains that God is *for* human beings. God wants to relieve us from the depths of this world. The cross is the place where God’s love is shown, and in the cross we see Jesus Christ reaching out to human beings for their salvation and regeneration. Romans 6 explains that those who believe are taken up in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross so that they can die with him, but also be resurrected with him.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, [a] that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. (Romans 6)

The cross explains God’s way of dealing with human beings in this terrible world in which we live. This means that, ultimately, the cross will help us understand the new way to live and to be redeemed. The cross is, therefore, also the place where the redemption of Christ is explained for all of us.

Emdin (2017:248) refers to the way in which Jesus died:

God’s proclamation in Christ of His ultimate responsibility for us, is also consistent with His condemnation by Jews and Gentiles together, by the representatives of the world. It is consistent with the fact that He did not defend or attempt to justify Himself. He did not protest against an unjust sentence. He only confirmed His divine, or at least messianic, identity, and He bore all consequent abuse alone, stripped of all covering, hanging for all to see near the public highway just outside the bustling cosmopolitan capital city. Yet all this accorded with the divine will (Acts 2.23, 3.18, 4.28); Jesus brought it all on himself by behaving as, and acknowledging himself to be, ‘the Son of the Blessed’ (Mark 14.61-2; Luke 22.70; Matthew 26.63-4).



Hall (2005:12) explains that the cross remains a *skandalon*:

A Christ who really suffers is as much a *skandalon* to the religious and foolishness to the clever of our society as he was to Paul's. So, pause briefly, if you insist, to notice the beautifully poignant face of the Christ as he asks God to forgive his executioners and motions his dear mother towards the waiting arms of his beloved disciple. But do not linger there—if you know what's good for you, mister/miz preacher!

Nwatu (1997:6) fully accepts the value of the death on the cross:

He gave His life to show that by giving one's life one gains a higher form of life and by suffering for thankless humanity one casts one's life in gold. Jesus came to transform the human nature to enable it to bear the cross of suffering, especially, for a common.

Reni (2015:108) writes in this regard:

So Paul's message did not only contradict the prevailing wisdom, but it also ignored the desires and demands of the first century audience. The Jewish listeners were looking for signs, miraculous wonders to authenticate any messianic claim while the Gentiles, by contrast, were looking for wisdom to satisfy their intellectual pursuits.²⁷ It is clear that Paul did not give his hearers what they wanted to hear but what they needed to hear! I shall explore further the paradoxical nature of the cross in Paul's preaching in the next section. (See also Heim (2005:25) and Camp (1998:100)

The Resurrection

In Romans 6, it is clear that the person who died with Christ will also be saved and will be resurrected with Christ. In Christ, there will be resurrection. Christ is the One who was resurrected. He conquered death in his resurrection. He was killed on the cross, but he rose from the dead and, in that sense, he also released human beings from the wrath of God. The resurrection is the final glory of God. This means that he will also prevail over all challenges in the world. It is not the pandemic that has the last word. It is the resurrection of Christ.

10 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life[d] because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of[e] his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:10-11)

Taylor (2020:9-10) refers to the need for Easter:

This is a Christological reorientation that has implications for apologetics, discipleship, and mission. Another Easter might invite another dimension of Christology. In the particularity of this pandemic, here is a significant Christological resource. We are invited to remain with the dead, to keep placing our hands on our heads in despair. In doing so, we experience a reorientation. We are the Easter people, formed through attending to bodies broke.



Sin redemption and salvation

The redemption in Jesus Christ is clear in the world. Salvation comes from him. He will be the One who gives salvation and glory to be with Him. His salvation will be glorious redemption. In that sense, a new life will be possible. A new life with him will be experienced. The salvation in Christ makes it possible to look at the virus and many other challenges in a new way. We can see that, in Christ, a new redemption is totally possible. It is, therefore, possible to understand that the redemption in Christ can be experienced in a wonderful way. In this sense, total salvation can be experienced and the Covid-19 virus must then be viewed as a way to call us to Christ, so that we can achieve the redemption we need. In Revelation, it is clear that many struggles and challenges in this world must lead to conversion and a new life in Christ, and this is the way in which we must and experience new life with Him.

Merry (2004:82) calls for the correct way to understand the suffering of others:

Not everyone is a Job; what may strengthen one person may embitter another. What may draw one to humble adoration may engender hatred in someone else. Perhaps, then, without compromising faith in the slightest, one will be more prudent to “honor this also with silence”.

Mihindukulasuriya (2014:206.) makes it very clear that Jesus’ substitutionary suffering led to redemption:

However, Jesus saw his own impending suffering as more than that of an exemplary prophetic martyr. He repeatedly claims for himself the enigmatic role of the Isaianic suffering servant, whose faithfulness not only leads to suffering (all too familiar), but whose suffering is substitutionary and leads to the restoration of the unfaithful (utterly astonishing!). Isaiah 52:13- 53:12 reports how the one whom God calls ‘my servant’ bears the punishment of sins upon himself in suffering and death, and in his ‘resurrection’ bringing forth the forgiveness and restoration of the guilty.

Jesus’ death on the cross has implications for human relations. Humphreys et al (2019:44) aptly refer to it:

Paul claims that Jesus is our shalom, our peace, and that Jesus, in his bodily sacrifice, brought together two races of Gentile and Jew and has torn down the wall of hostility (cf. Ephesians 2:11-16). Healing the divide between Jew and Gentile is a holy tethering. This healing justice was seen continually throughout the life and ministry of Jesus even before the cross.

See also Moe (2015:37), Greenway et al (2016:188), and Bachman et al. (2005:422) regarding the implications of the cross.

Interaction

Interaction with the pandemic from a theological perspective is very important. We have to acknowledge that this world is a world immersed in sin. We cannot move away from that and we cannot understand that in any other way. Because of sin, this world is as it is. It is not because of evolutionary development but because of the manifestation of sin in the world. The challenge of sin calls us to interaction with God and to live with God according to his will for humanity. We



must understand that life with God is possible and this life with God is only possible in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus teaches us that in the cross and his resurrection there is new life in God. Sin does not have the final word. Jesus died on the cross and once risen from the grave has the final word. In this interaction, it is possible to live with God and understand life in a totally new way. In this regard, the virus can be understood as a call to redemption and new life in Christ. It is a call to change our lives in a spirit of atonement and come to Christ to understand salvation and to live from the perspective of the salvation in Christ. In this sense, new life is exactly possible, and a new understanding of life in this situation. Then we can, in a new way, see and face the medical challenges. God calls us to yield ourselves to Him and to understand that we need more than medical answers to find a solution. Koinonia calls us to new relations in life. These new relations must always be to the benefit of our fellow human beings. This is, however, only possible in Christ who suffered and died for all human beings. His resurrection completes his graceful salvific act.

It is, therefore, important to understand that the pandemic is concerned with sin and the wrath of God, because this world is as it is due to sin. The book of Jonah makes us note that theological understanding is demonstrated in a person's actions and attitude towards challenges in life such as for example, pandemics. Only once wisdom is attained by us, can Christ's desire be known to us. Although repentance is a very important theme in this book when individuals and entire nations sin, it is ultimately their contrition and atonement with God that leads to their forgiveness for all their misdemeanours (Nicolaidis, 2017). The answer to the deep fallen state of the world lies in Jesus Christ's magnificent love for human beings and the world. A call to repentance is always a call to Jesus. He is the One who makes new life possible and offers a new understanding of our human predicament. The Christian can find solace even in dire circumstances in relationship with Him. There is also hope for a fallen world, because God brings us the option of a new heaven and a new earth if we are renewed in Christ. Christ's humanity was fundamentally holy, He is the source and model of the holiness for all of humanity (Nicolaidis, 2019).

Conclusion

Many challenges still remain in terms of a theological response to the pandemic. Care should be taken not to underestimate the seriousness of the pandemic and the call to conversion. Christ's extreme love for a fallen world should be the vantage point of all discussion. In Christ, we see God's answer to the myriad of challenges faced in societies across the globe. Although all possible interventions from the secular world to stop the pandemic must be accepted, there is ultimately a need for a deeper theological understanding and engagement with our spiritual side. This is only possible in and through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

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