



## SEARCHING GOD IN A POST-COVID MILIEU TOSH THOMAS

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**Abstract:** *The COVID-19 pandemic was regarded by many to have taken several significant changes in the established structures. All this may (probably?) contribute to our thinking in various arena in future. The domain of theology and the process of theologizing aren't any different from this reality. Surely, a situation that challenged the existence and providence of God shall bring out a new mode of interpretation in our God-talk. The pandemic experience demands a redefinition in our ideas on God and man. Our life in the post-pandemic era must show signs of transformation and renovation. This academic paper deals with the significance of God in a post-covid milieu.*

Key Words: Covid 19, Significance of God, Post-covid, the Existence of God

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was regarded by many to have taken several significant changes in the established structures. All this may (probably?) contribute to our thinking in various arena in future. The domain of theology and the process of theologizing aren't any different from this reality. Surely, a situation that challenged the existence and providence of God shall bring out a new mode of interpretation in our God-talk. The pandemic experience demands a redefinition in our ideas on God and man. Our life in the post-pandemic era must show signs of transformation and renovation.

### 2. THE PSALMIST PUTS FORWARD A QUESTION

The psalms are faithful and honest faith responses of people, who in times of their crisis, turned towards God for help and protection. The psalmist often found relief in submitting himself before Yahweh. Hence, the COVID pandemic asks us to ponder in line with the Psalms. "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalms 11:3). The foundations could be metaphor for the order and stability in any society – the established institutions, social order, and moral norms of a community. The present pandemic is no less than a disturbance made in

the established order. All those elements that assured identity to an individual prior to COVID-19, such as laws, customs, culture etc., are swept away by a little virus. Identification in terms of one's social status, profession, fame, wealth etc. suddenly lost their value and power. The fortresses of our conceptions have left us naked to the truth of uncertainty. But even then, the crisis is not just merely phenomenal but spiritual. The existential questions that offended human conscience in the past contexts of war and crisis, have resurfaced again – Who am I? What is my place in relation to this world? One of the main reasons for suffering is the disruption of normal life patterns, relationships, financial setup, and loss of loved ones. But the suspension of the social bonds seems to be the most assaulting phenomena of this time. Such crises have challenged us to doubt the very grip of our faith. The only solution we find is that we need to build a fresh view of our understanding of God and submit ourselves totally in his providence. Proverbs 18:10 reminds us: "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe."

### 3. CHALLENGING THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

James Sire in his book, *The Universe Next Door*<sup>1</sup>, opine that there are essentially three worldviews – theistic (belief in a

<sup>1</sup> J.W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, (USA: Intervarsity Press 2009).



supreme being – God – who has created everything including human beings and maintains them), atheistic (belief in no supernatural dimension) and pantheistic (amalgamated belief of God and cosmos into one impersonal entity). One's worldview makes essential differences in their reaction towards disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Abandoning God and embracing atheism is not a good solution when one feels the apparent absence of God in times of pandemic. Eliminating God from this equation does not eradicate the pain and suffering. It leaves them untouched. But removing God does remove something significant – hope.<sup>2</sup> Hope in a Transcendental being gives ample impetus to move forward. “Positive religious reframing can help people transcend stressful times by enabling them to see a tragedy as an opportunity to grow closer to a higher power or to improve their lives.”<sup>3</sup>

The popular understanding on suffering described in Old Testament is that the victim who suffers is punished by God for his/her sins. This is the Deuteronomistic theology. But this argument is challenged in the book of Job. The concluding chapters of the book is a protest against this popular view. God himself says to Job's friends that they are wrong to blame Job as responsible for his own suffering (Job 42: 7-9). In the New Testament, Jesus likewise negated the theory that suffering was necessarily associated with personal transgressions (Jn. 9:1-3, Lk. 13: 1-5). This implies that the world where we inhabit bring before us disastrous events, for which God is not always responsible for its occurrence, even though he is sovereign over everything. Hence, one must be wary of anyone who interprets this pandemic as a divine punishment. But also, it is safe to be aloof from those who say that God remains indifferent throughout this pandemic.

The wreckage that the corona virus has imbued in our lives must prompt us to ponder on the consequences of our actions that has fractured this world. Though God speaks to us irrespective of our situations, it is during the

moments of pain and sufferings that His voice penetrates and affects our life. “We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>4</sup> The whole event has induced in our conscience a sense of dependency towards God and interdependency towards our fellow beings. Belief in God gives one a holistic picture of the reality. “Challenges and struggle have been happening for ages. But religion teaches you that God has a plan and it has helped accept reality a lot more.”<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. PUNISHMENT OR INVITATION?

As illustrated before, the Scripture, often view epidemics as manifestations of the judgement of God. These direct the people to turn towards God and their individual moral responsibilities. The pandemic too is an opportunity to refocus our life to God and our neighbours. In this light, it becomes an occasion to return to our fundamentals in relating with God. “Just as the COVID-19 pandemic forced us all to focus on something we would rather dodge, so it has steered many of us to take stock of our lives and to think about where we stand with God.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps a more fraternal society will emerge out from this global crisis.

Modern societies, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, focused mainly on the body and well-being, largely excluding spirituality, and thus narrowing human desires only to the physical sphere. Impacts of COVID-19 invites us to re-read our faith praxis today. The fast-paced lives of our hectic construct have unexpectedly turned to be slow-paced. This created room in the hearts and minds to experience silence; something that had been long forgotten due to the rapid material chase. Silence provides everyone the valuable moment needed for reflection and introspection that shall lead one to live their lives meaningfully. It was neither in wind nor in earthquake nor in fire that Elijah heard the voice of Yahweh, but in the sheer silence (1 Kings 19:11-13). When we rely on searching Him in the external

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. C. Lennox, *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*, (America: The Good Book Company 2020), 24.

<sup>3</sup> B. Goodman, “Faith in a Time of Crisis”, *American Psychological Association*, (May 11, 2020), 2. [<https://www.apa.org/topics/COVID-19/faith-crisis>]. (Accessed on August 3, 2021)

<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (UK: Harper Collins 2009), 91.

<sup>5</sup> M. Pandey, “Coronavirus: ‘Religion helped me through lockdown’”, in BBC, (June, 24 2020), [<http://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53081929>] (Accessed on September 3, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> M. Hitchcock, *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics and the Coming Apocalypse*, (Nashville: W Publishing Company 2020), 81.



grandeurs, the crisis disappoints us. Pain and sufferings question our faith to such an extent that we may ask, “What now?”. It is time that we must rediscover amongst ourselves the presence of God. Pope Francis reminds us in his exhortation, *Gaudete et Exultate*, “God is mysteriously present in the life of every person, in a way that he himself chooses, and we cannot exclude this by our presumed certainties. Even when someone’s life appears completely wrecked, even when we see it devastated by vices or addictions, God is present there.”<sup>7</sup>

## 5. A CALL FOR STEWARDSHIP AND COMMUNION

Our current age has misguided us to prioritize our physical needs and pleasures above our moral sensibilities. Technological advances of the last century have given us unprecedented power. Yuval Harari opines that, “Today the human being stands at the verge of becoming god, poised to acquire ...the divine abilities of creation and destruction. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever.”<sup>8</sup> Modern weaponry and warfare techniques have threatened the world towards an impending destruction. The negative consequences of our moral failings have far greater consequences. Unfortunately, we have declared ourselves the owners of this planet and its resources.

The Pharaoh in the Exodus narrative realized in the framework of the last plague, that he is no longer the master of his own near ones. It became a moment for him to end the sufferings of the Israelites. The pandemic too must be an opportunity to acknowledge the universal majesty of God beyond everything of this world. Our civilization, in many spheres have rejected this and turned our faces towards various idols (money, fame, pleasures etc.). “The coronavirus calls us to make God the all-important, pervasive reality in our lives. Our lives depend on him more than they depend on breath.”<sup>9</sup> It is now time to realize that

faith in God, and God alone, actualizes our purpose of being here. “We cannot afford a moral irresponsibility any longer. We need to respect dignity, nature, life and freedom.”<sup>10</sup> If we are not caretakers, we ultimately turn to be its destroyers. Thus, communion with God and with others is a decisive factor for our future years.

## 6. BUILDING A COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The poetic quote of Pastor Martin Niemöller is a quite famous one. Speaking of the atrocities done in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, he said:

First, they came for the Jews; but I did nothing because I am not a Jew.

Then they came for the socialists, but I did nothing because I am not a socialist.

Then they came for the Catholics, but I did nothing because I am not a Catholic.

Finally, they came for me, but by then there was no one left to help me.<sup>11</sup>

Its relevance echoes in our present scenario where we realized in a later time that we too are part of the whole. The first death by the virus was reported in China on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2020.<sup>12</sup> We remained unbothered when it first hit China. Many felt it as a localized epidemic. Some blamed the Chinese for their consumption of bats, snakes and pangolins. Some others viewed it as God’s punishment for the country reasoning out their atheistic political ideology and being polemic towards religious freedom. Added to these, some confidently boasted that this shall never affect India due to its climatic and geographical conditions. Not to exclude, some even gave credit to the moral uprightness of Indian culture in relation to other parts of the globe. Within a span of few weeks, Italy came under threat. We thought, “Well, the Italians are sociable, tactile people, certainly it will spread there, but not here”. And then it arrived in London. And then the superpower, United States of America suffered gravely. And soon we realized that there was no safe space on the planet. As I write this article, there

<sup>7</sup> *Gaudete et Exultate* 42.

<sup>8</sup> Y. N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, (Canada: Penguin Random House Company) 369.

<sup>9</sup> J. Piper, *Coronavirus and Christ*, (Illinois: Crossway 2020), 83.

<sup>10</sup> P.J. Titus, “God, Plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7: 8 – 11: 10) and COVID-19: A Biblical Perspective”, in *Word and Worship*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Jan – Mar 2021, 16.

<sup>11</sup> “Martin Niemöller: First They Came for the Socialists...”, *Holocaust Encyclopaedia* (March 30, 2012)

[<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>] (Accessed on September 1, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> D. B. Taylor, “A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic” in *The New York Times* (March 17, 2021) [<https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>] (Accessed on September 1, 2021).



are lakhs of cases of infection worldwide, with several thousands of deaths.

COVID-19 has awakened the spirit of unity and interconnectedness in the health systems of several countries, coordinating the decisions and actions of national, state/provincial, and local levels. It demands global collaboration – unified action in the interest of wider population.<sup>13</sup> The post-pandemic society ought to eradicate from itself any trace of individualism. A new chapter of viewing reality as a collective unit is obligatory. This is necessary since the pandemic shall leave its scars in many families and societies that we need to address. “A kind of planetary solidarity then manifests itself, not only in the face of the disease, but also in the face of economic woes that it entails for a long time.”<sup>14</sup>

Humanity must wake up to a state where the ‘other’ becomes a part of my own existence. The corona virus has taught us that we are not only physically contagious but also psychologically and spiritually. The pandemic has made us capable to transcend our individuality and realize our interconnectivity. Regina Ammicht Quinn, hoping for an enlightened future from the fragments, says,

So perhaps there is hope in the shards, even in the broken pieces, a pandemic leaves behind. But only if we don’t sweep the shards aside too quickly, but take them carefully into our hands, develop an awareness that they are a *symbolon*, a symbol that there are ‘others’, that only if we see their shards and put them to ours, a whole can be created.<sup>15</sup>

## 7. A NEO-LITURGICAL AND PASTORAL APPROACH

The Catholic bishops of England and Wales reflected on the post-pandemic recovery and challenges faced by the Church in bringing back the flock to sacramental life. They identify three groups of people –

those who have lost the active and regular participation in parishes, those who have seen a gap between the spiritual dimension and communal expression in worship and those who have encountered the Church through various media platforms.<sup>16</sup>

“The Church is compelled to accept new adaptations, and embrace more functional lenses to read the Word of God with the focus on the signs of the times.”<sup>17</sup> A new biblical hermeneutics in our preaching is needed that incorporates the lessons we learned from the pandemic. In a time when our churches remained closed and people were unable to attend the liturgical services directly, the Word of God must reach and comfort the people. Use of media and technology to reach out and make available these services to the people were put forward worldwide as the effective way. Many faithful who were regular in their devotions made use of this means and found solace. Their sincere participation in the spiritual communion helped them in continuing their faith practices. Strengthened by faith and by professing it we can become once again a faith renewed global community.

Certainly, online worship is not devoid of any defects. “Due to the virtual celebration of the sacraments, there emerged a tendency of spiritual escapism.”<sup>18</sup> Youth have started to think ecclesial communion and participation as evitable. Shepherding the disembodied communities is yet another challenge. Though such groups preserved the continuity of the worshipping community, their moral progress is a question in the long run. “Disembodied community in this cyber and digital era, also like any other forms of human togetherness, will turn fanatic and blind when it is not inclusive and not based on respect and openness to the other communities or structures or groups

<sup>13</sup> Cf. S. Salve, “A Personal Reflection on COVID-19’s Spiritual Impact”, (March 24, 2020), [<https://www.internationalhealthpolicies.org/blogs/a-personal-reflection-on-COVID-19s-spiritual-impact/>] (Accessed on September 5, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> P.J. Titus, “God, Plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7: 8 – 11: 10) and COVID-19: A Biblical Perspective”, in *Word and Worship*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Jan – Mar 2021, 14.

<sup>15</sup> R. A. Quinn, “Handle with Care: Fragile Humans, a Pandemic and the Legacy of the European Enlightenment”, in *Jeevadhara* Vol. LI, No. 301, January 2021, 40.

<sup>16</sup> K. Morris, “Catholic Bishops reflect on Post pandemic challenges for Church”, in *Catholic Diocese of East Anglia*, (April 23, 2021), [<https://www.rcdea.org.uk/catholics-bishops-reflect-on-post-pandemic-challenges-for-church>] (Accessed on September 3, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> A. Madalaimuthu, “Prophetic Caution on the National Disasters in 1 Kings 17-19: A Call to Respond to the Challenges of COVID-19”, in *Word and Worship*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Jan – Mar 2021, 32.

<sup>18</sup> M. J. Mandumpala, “Groaning of Nature and Humanity: A Re-Reading of Romans 8:18-22 in the Context of COVID-19”, in *Word and Worship*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Jan – Mar 2021, 54.



and the society and humanity at large.”<sup>19</sup> Many developed beliefs and value systems that are contrary to the Church and society at large. But from a positive point of view, the youth, being digital natives, can amplify the voices of all people, share their lived experiences, develop greater understanding and empathy towards diverse realities through social media.<sup>20</sup>

We are however uncertain regarding the future of sacramental participation without a physical presence. “The obvious indication that graces that are proper to sacramental order can be acquired without participation in the ritual is going to be critically important for developing a sacramental theology that addresses more fully the pastoral needs of a post-pandemic world.”<sup>21</sup> Praying at home leads to a faithful awareness that all can access God through Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:18), and all have the priestly obligation of interceding for others (1 Pet. 2:9). We grow to understand that like fellowships in physical church buildings, praying together as family within their homes is also the real Church (Body of Christ) in a spiritual sense. Nevertheless, “the debates about locking churches can easily stir up lesser controversies, between those for whom the building and all its bits and pieces has been a vital part of their spirituality, and those for whom all such things are irrelevant since one can worship God anywhere.”<sup>22</sup>

A neo-approach towards formation and evangelization is an urging need of future times. “We are going to need lay folk who are doing outreach, who are trained theologically and spiritually to do this kind of outreach within the parish, talk to their neighbours, be involved in conversations.”<sup>23</sup> The future Church needs more lay-led catechesis, community-based prayer life, popular devotions and participatory evangelization with less dependence on the clergy. The devotional life of laity within their families and neighbourhood must keep the fire of faith and mission burning. This could be done via participation in

digital space and group catechesis. The clergy and religious too need to be helping the faithful with their pastoral needs that demand them to move out of their closed enclosures.

## 8. MAKING MEANING OUT OF OUR LIMITED EXISTENCE

A survey was conducted by experts from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Poland, among 324 respondents in Poland from March 13 to 16, 2020 concerning the enhancement and influence of religious participation in the pandemic situation. The last question of the survey probed the increase in the sense of security and belief in the protective power of faith in the times of the pandemic. As many as 86.92% of respondents who completed a secondary level of education or have college or university degree responded with a ‘yes’.<sup>24</sup>

David B. Perrin opines that, “For now, what we can say is that the pandemic has emptied us of many of our routines and our daily meaning-making activities.”<sup>25</sup> He continues to state that intentionality and mindfulness regarding our practices makes us authentic during the time of pandemic. Even the limited entertainments ought to be opted with certain intentionality regarding its meaning-making process. This further invites us to examine our life, be it ecclesial or social, in the light of making meaning – for us and others. The pandemic challenges one to reconsider his/her worldview and relationships that integrally define the personality.

Times of crisis, while trying, can yield abundant fruits for those use them for reflection and re-examination. When life slowed down its pace at the offset of the pandemic, there was ample time to sit and reflect about things that we neglected before in the rat-race of our own fabrication. This inevitably involves one’s personal state of spirituality and sanctity. It is in a time when church buildings were closed, that one’s sense of ‘sacred space’

<sup>19</sup> J. Valamparambil, “Disembodied Community or Imagined Community – A Conceptual Clarification in the light of History of Philosophy, in *Aikya Samiksha* Vol. 18 No.1, July 2021, 25.

<sup>20</sup> J. Mondol, “COVID-19 and Challenges on Youth” in *Indian Journal of Spirituality* Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, April-June 2021, 174.

<sup>21</sup> J. Valliyattu, “Disembodied states of Communion: Paradigm from Early Church” in *Aikya Samiksha* Vol. 18 No.1, July 2021, 41-42.

<sup>22</sup> N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, (London: Zondervan Reflective 2020), 63.

<sup>23</sup> C. Muth, “Church Likely to Undergo a Transformation in the Post-Pandemic Era”, in *Catholic News Service* (March 16, 2021), [<https://www.catholicphilly.com>] (Accessed on September 4, 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. Bajek et al, “Religion and Faith Perception”, in *Journal of Religion and Health* Vol. 59 (2020), 2675.

<sup>25</sup> D. B. Perrin, “The Collapse of Self-Transcendence: COVID-19 and the Reshaping of Meaning Making in Everyday Life”, in *Vinayasadhana* Vol. XII, No.1, January 2021, 24.



attain its clarity. This must challenge us even in future with the question, “Where am I in relation to God?” Subsequently, “Where am I in relation to my fellow being?” If this spirit is not lost, then humankind will emerge out to be more considerate towards others.

“Religious creeds and beliefs not only allow us to understand but they also influence the meaning of many events occurring in everyone’s life.”<sup>26</sup> The pandemic time taken as time for sowing shall reap out for the upcoming generations, the fruits of love, fraternity and unity. The Pope makes this clear in his latest encyclical, “The pain, uncertainty and fear, and the realization of our own limitations, brought on by the pandemic have only made it all the more urgent that we rethink our styles of life, our relationships, the organization of our societies and, above all, the meaning of our existence.”<sup>27</sup>

## 9. CONCLUSION

The danger of neglecting our pandemic experience is probable in the post-COVID world. As soon as the health crisis vanishes, we may return to our ways of consumeristic and egoistic approaches that favour only themselves individually. Perhaps, this pandemic might be vanished from our memories as if it hasn’t affected us at all. But, learning from this pandemic certainly gives new insights and visions for a renewed conscience and lifestyle. One must resolve towards a novel experience our community as one human family.

Though I began by urging a restructuring of the theologizing process, this urge doesn’t cease here. The need to contextualize theology is ever alive. It is then that we learn that we are members of one family whose Father is God. It’s true that the world is in constant cry for healing, physically, considering the pandemic crisis but also, spiritually. Let us hope that God cause something good from the current brokenness of the world. The global pandemic has harmed a lot, but the global community shall arise to build a generation that proclaims God, not by words, but by their own life.

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