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More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Religion Studies

How Christian theology helps us make sense of the pandemic

Religion Studies starts with the assumption that a study of religion does not entail a personal religious conviction but is justifiable as an intellectual pursuit of knowledge about the human condition. It also recognises that there are a variety of ways in which humanity understands and responds to the impetus of religion from within (e.g. faith) or from without (e.g. the environment).

All religion is about seeking – a search for understanding and for answers to questions or a world view that is persuasive and becomes a way of life. The sudden arrival of COVID-19 once again places such searching questions at the centre of human lives. What does the study of religion allow us to understand in relation to the pandemic?

Without taking anything away from the broader study of religions, I limit my focus to my area of specialisation which is Christian theology. Christian theology works with tools in history, philosophy, culture and language studies, and psychology to express this idea of the human, especially in its relationship with and understanding of God, as well as in its moral life. Christian theology, it has been said, is first and foremost about the human and the totality of human relationships. It is through seeking to be fully human that one seeks to understand what God wills for one's life.

For that reason, Christian theology is about the imagination. It is by the power of the imagination that so much of Christian life makes any sense. It is accordingly in myth and symbols, story and meaning, worship and human expression in music, dance and movement, poetry and art, that the story of faith can be truly told and faithfully understood. Mouton describes this phenomenon in apt terms as "the ability of the human imagination to *redescribe* reality, to *rename* experiences, to *retell* their stories from new angles"¹. Theology thereby helps one not to be confined to the obvious, natural and material, but to explore the metaphysical world beyond with as much confidence.

To be a Christian is an acknowledgement of God as a 'presence' in your life and in the world, or as one's response to the moment of encounter with a 'living God'. It is a life of confession of Christ in word and deed to be the Saviour of the world, *salvator mundi*. Contrary to what some may believe, the Christian faith is not a transactional religion or about bargaining with God. It is an acknowledgement of God in one's life and in the world. It is rather a compelling reflection and outworking of a life in the midst of a messy world. It makes God 'visible' to the inhabited world and evangelism becomes an offer and an invitation to share the life of Christ.

What this means is that a belief in God and of God's Son Jesus Christ is to be alive to The Other, their significance in making one fully human, the energy derived from relationships, and the moral effect of living together in a community of sharing and loving. This idea of The Other is not only about the recognition or an acknowledgement of God. It is also about the knowledge that The Other is one's neighbour, who has needs and wants.

Christian theology further helps one to understand that not everything that we experience today is known or knowable. It is always being open to new knowledge and understandings that we become human. It is in the surprises of life that the knowledge of God gives substance and meaning.

And yet, Christian theology teaches that human living is never an act in futility but rather one infused with purpose. That purpose is to fulfil God's intentions in Creation. As a moral substance, being human is about taking responsibility and understanding human agency. As agents of God, humanity is continuously a part of the making and unmaking of Creation. If that is so, then choices are made in such a way as to fulfil the act of God.

That explains why Christian thought is able to denounce evil and injustice, and campaign for a fair and a just world. It is out of that ethic of love and peace with justice that a fair and just distribution of wealth is demanded and lasting and viable solutions to the human predicament are sought. Religion and theology therefore is itself a part of science. It lives and breathes science.

Finally, COVID-19 is ultimately never just about the person affected or dying in isolation at a point in time. It is about community and family. The work of caring, of assurance and hope is an ongoing task for those who understand the dynamism of community that is formed and shaped by a selfless community.

After COVID-19 systems must be put in place, families must continue to live wholesome lives, loved ones must be memorialised and humanised and community that has been broken must be formed and re-formed. Religious communities formed as churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, or in ceremonies in African traditional belief systems, for example, become important in sustaining the value of human life beyond death.

Reference

1. Mouton E. Christian theology in the university: On the threshold or in the margin? *Herv Teol Stud.* 2008;64(1):431–445.