

Religion Goes Viral: Reflections on Faith and Belief in a Pandemic

On August 15th 1665, the weekly statistics on deaths in London were published. *Bills of Mortality* had been continuously published since 1603 by the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks. By 1665 London had 130 parishes, and these *Bills of Mortality* provide a fascinating insight into how people viewed health, safety and mortality. August 15th 1665 records that eight people died of “excessive wynde”, one person from “lethargie”, one from being “frighted” (more were recorded in previous weeks), another from “meagrome”, over one hundred from “teeth”, just fifteen from “wormes”, six from “thrush” – and over six-and-a-half thousand from something termed as “plague”. The register adds that same week there were one-hundred-and-sixty-eight Christenings.

London’s plague of 1665-6 recorded almost 70,000 deaths, although the true figure is probably over 100,000. To say that the plague of London – the Great Plague, as it became known – was devastating, is to understate the matter. In just eighteen months, almost a quarter of Londoners died from bubonic plague. We have tended to view this tragic pandemic of seventeenth century London through rather rose-tinted spectacles. Our present political leaders have, to a large extent, paid little attention to similarities in the dynamics that made London a no-go area in 1665-6, and Covid-19 today.

Frank Snowden’s *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (Yale, 2019) highlights how the massive increase in urbanisation and intercontinental travel has exposed us, globally, to new pandemics. The warning signs were already here: HIV/AIDS, Avian Flu’, Zika, Sars, Ebola – to name but a few. We had rather assumed that our highly-developed societies gave us immunities to relatively recent afflictions, such as polio, tuberculosis, and Spanish flu’. In fact, some of these older diseases and pandemics – typhus, cholera, smallpox, consumption – have been surfacing again in the twenty-first century. Poverty, and cramped, poor, unhealthy social conditions, act as breeding grounds for new viruses and bacteria. Malaria always thrives in environments where there is polluted, still water. It still kills five million children a year under the age of two.

The thrust of Snowden’s book argues that pandemics have always re-ordered society. They invariably result in a “new normal” emerging. Out of the hysteria, superstition, tragedy and loss, comes a realism that re-boots society. This in turn prompts some fundamental political impetus for re-ordering society. Snowden’s book confirms what we know from other more popular studies of medieval England’s health. Jack Hartnell (*Medieval Bodies: Life, Death and the Arts in the Middle Ages*, 2018), John Hatcher (*The Black Death*, 2008) and Ian Mortimer (*The Time Traveller’s Guide to Medieval England*, 2009) give interesting insights into how the plague-pandemic of the time re-ordered society – politically, financially and socially.

For example, people born to serfdom might suddenly find that they were beneficiaries and heirs. Pandemics redistributed power and money; they challenged authorities and prevailing social constructions of reality; they promoted new consciousness, and reordered priorities. The common denominator across these studies is that there is not much one can do to escape pandemics and their social and economic consequences. Plagues come and go. We are seldom ready for them. When confronted by their reality, we often go into denial. The numbers that are published now on Covid-19 have as much impact as the *Bills of Mortality* in 1665. Inside, most people say to themselves, as they have done in previous centuries, “it won’t happen to me”. Maybe.

It might surprise many readers to learn that the relationship between religion and viruses is as old as the hills. Most religious traditions have adopted positions on the origins of evil, misfortune and illness – what we usually term ‘theodicy’. Most sacred texts include stories, parables, instructive fables or doctrines that attempt to address the relationship between God (or gods), health, wholeness, disease and death. Whilst ancient religions were obviously unable to distinguish between genetic, bacterial or viral illness, the causes and effect of illness and disability were the focus of much speculation. The Old Testament speaks of many kinds of plagues, and God as the source of these for purposes of chastisement and judgment.

In the New Testament, Jesus is interrogated for healing a blind man (*John 9*), with the discussion turning on why the man was blind (with Jesus somewhat indifferent to cause), and then asking whether spiritual blindness is worse. Finding theological meaning in the midst of suffering is a well-established trope in literature. For example, in Thornton Wilder’s, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927), we meet a Franciscan monk ruminating on the apparently pointless deaths of five people who fell from a bridge. What is the point of this, he muses? Where is God’s purpose in this tragedy?

“...some say we shall never know, and that to the gods we are like flies killed on a summer day, and some say, on the contrary, that the very sparrows do not lose a feather that has not been brushed away by the finger of God...”

Yet Wilder ends his novel with an affirmation of what the gospels assure us of; namely of God’s total care and love for everyone, wherever and whoever we are:

“But soon we shall die and all memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them. Even memory is not necessary for love. There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

But what of viruses? Twenty-five years ago John Bowker, then Dean of Chapel at Trinity College Cambridge, wrote an intriguing book entitled *Is God a Virus?* (1995). Bowker reflected on the argument that belief in God could be likened to a virus infecting human minds, with damaging results. His claim was discussed and tested in the context of work both in genetics and theories of gene-culture coevolution, and suggested ways in which the interaction between genes and culture may be interpreted. In a complementary vein, many advocates of secularisation theses have likened the gradual reduction and retreat of the role of religion in public life as a kind of ‘cultural virus’. The body politic – society, in other words – has been infected and affected by invasive and pervasive factors that have weakened the strength and ‘immunity system’ of religion.

Still with ‘viral religion’, I recall an electrifying (unpublished) lecture and paper also given in 1995, and from the late Professor Anthony Dyson, in which he suggested “the body of Christ had Aids/HIV”. His lecture galvanised and divided the audience. Some interpreted the paper as meaning the incarnational solidarity and suffering of Christ was being appealed to (in much the way that we can see in the famous Alsace *Isenheim Altarpiece* sculpted and painted by Nikolaus of Haguenau and Matthias Grünewald between 1512–1516). Others read Dyson’s paper as saying that the contemporary church could not fight or withstand viral secularisation. Others understood Dyson to be arguing that the ‘virus’ was a kind of natural pathogen within religion, which moderated the spiritual body-politic.

Then there is mortality to consider. To what extent do we need religion to make sense of death, or faith to provide consolation in the midst of loss? For many, some spirituality remains important in the face of death. However, it must be conceded that religious forms of memorialisation (including ritual) are now subject to considerable secular competition, and that formal faith-orientated ceremonies are contracting in contemporary culture.

In the short prescient novel by Albert Camus – *The Plague* (French: *La Peste*, 1947) – we encounter a story that narrates a plague sweeping the French Algerian city of Oran. Initially, just a few die; then some more; then even more. Panic grips the streets as the epidemic enfolds the population. No-one was ready for this, and few thought any plague could draw near to them.

The citizens of Oran live in a state of perpetual denial. Even when, like London in 1665-6, a quarter of the city is dying, they reason it will not be them. These folk are, after all, living in modern times. They have newspapers, cars, aeroplanes and telephones. The people of Oran cannot, surely, perish like the poor wretches of 17th-century London or 18th-century Canton?

The hero of the book is Doctor Rieux, and his resilient humanism is profoundly moving. He does not buy into the religious interpretations of the plague offered by a local priest, or of the abrogation of reason by the citizenry. As the death-toll peaks at 500 per-week, Doctor Rieux reflects on a child he has tended, but who has died. He reasons that suffering is unevenly and randomly distributed. For all the theodicy in the world, suffering simply makes no sense. It is absurd – and that is the kindest thing one can say of it.

How does Doctor Rieux respond to what is going on around him? He works tirelessly to lessen the suffering of those in his care. But he is no hero. As he later remarks that “[this] may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency.” Another character enquires of him as to what decency is. “[Just] doing my job,” replies Doctor Rieux. In other words, duty and vocation come first. He is committed to caring for others in need. Little more need be said.

In life, there is no guaranteed security. From Camus, through Doctor Rieux, we learn the following lesson: to love our fellow humans (whether we like them or not, and no matter how long they live for, or how much time they take to die), and work with courage and hope for the relief of suffering. Life is ultimately a hospice, not a hospital. We are here to provide some salve in the midst of desolation and despair.

As the novel closes, Doctor Rieux opines that “this chronicle could not be a story of definitive victory,” because the plague never dies; it “waits patiently in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, handkerchiefs and old papers” for the day when it will arise again. One might think this is a depressing note to end this novel on. But it is profoundly humanitarian. In selecting this adjective ‘humanitarian’, I choose the word with care.

Because to be humanitarian is to have a binding duty and concern for helping to improve the welfare of people, and this pulse can spring from moral and religious roots. To be a humanitarian can be religious and humanist (and neither party will mind which), because it is about valuing people as inherently precious. Or, as God would value them. The result is the same. It is the lesson of the Good Samaritan (*Luke* 10). Or the Ten Lepers (*Luke* 17). Goodness for goodness’ sake: not for gratitude. Or for converts. Mercy matters.

Correspondingly, there is nothing explicitly ‘Christian’ about Dame Cicely Saunders and her founding the modern hospice movement. Committed to the alleviation of suffering, she wrote to her patients: “You matter because you are you, and you matter to the end of your life...we will do all we can not only to help you die peacefully, but also to *live* until you die.” Similarly, Chad Varah, a Curate from Lincoln, founded the Samaritans to help the suicidal and the depressed. All it took was the suicide of a young teenage girl, traumatised by her commencing menstruation, to restart Varah’s vocation.

Both these examples are profoundly humanitarian, and the religious pulses within them are lively, if implicit. Sometimes it is only the shock and despair at the manner of people's deaths that leads us to review actual lives of others, and how to respond. Think Live Aid. Think Christian Aid. "We believe in life *before* death". What was it Einstein once said? "Not everything that counts can be counted; and not everything that can be counted, counts".

Einstein was right. For what can measure the loss of trust by so many, when it only concerned the actions of a few? We need to be mindful of what we count; and always question the value attributed to any numbers we are invited to note (and those we are asked to ignore). Everyone matters. No-one is expendable. For all the talk of "spikes", "flattening curves" and "keeping the number below R1", there are going to be over 50,000 preventable deaths. Which means at least 500,000 (perhaps a million) preventable bereavements.

Recently I took a funeral for a friend, whose mother had died in a Care Home. Our funeral followed the protocols of the time. One son present, with his partner, the Funeral Director, and me. It was not the send-off he would have planned for his mother. Many more could have come, and would have come, were it not for restrictions on travel and the demands of social distancing. Yet we commended her to God's gracious care and keeping, and I thought of the words of comfort Jesus offers: "where two or three are gathered, I am in the midst of them" (*Matthew* 18). I thought of times when Jesus sat with the bereaved (*Luke* 8, *John* 11). The life and ministry of Jesus teaches us that to God, each and every one is precious. The *detail* of caring matters. As *Luke* 12: 7 has it, "the very hairs of your head are all numbered...so do not be afraid, for you are worth more than many sparrows". Put another way, to God, no-one is expendable. We all matter. We are asked to live as God sees this world: everyone matters.

Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1978) sold millions of copies worldwide. But few recall that this best-selling book grew out of his own personal loss. Kushner was a Rabbi who dedicated to the book to the memory of his young son, Aaron, who died in his early teens from an incurable genetic disease.

So the book was written by a good man who prayed very hard – but who still lost his son. Like Doctor Rieux and Albert Camus, Kushner knew that real religion is not measured by how we avoid suffering or loss, but rather, how we engage with it:

"...people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have, instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered...[because] God...doesn't send us the problems...but God does give us the strength to cope with them (pp. 125-127)."

We are plagued by all manner of numbers and statistics in our age. But even plague-related numbers and statistics may not be looking and counting in the right way anymore. We are asked to see the world and humanity as God sees it. To count as God counts. One stray hair, one stray sparrow (*Luke 12: 7*), one stray sheep (*Luke 15: 3-7*): all matter. Everyone matters. No-one doesn't. Each person is made in the image of God, and precious to God's sight and heart. I think Jesus, as the Verb of God, would agree. It is certainly what he practised. And it is what he believed. Jesus was less concerned with what people believed, and far more interested in how they acted. A good atheist is better than bad Pharisee. A kind sinner or a good Samaritan engaged in caring was of far more use to God than a separatist Sadducee. Jesus did seem to think that you could be spiritual, but not religious.

What drove the humanitarian impulses of Doctor Rieux, Cicely Saunders and Chad Varah – and many who currently work on the frontline of NHS and in challenging social care contexts, whose names will never be known – is what had Einstein hinted at. Everyone counts, equally. No numbers or statistics that any government promotes on pandemics, and that suggest it might be otherwise, have any real business to be wielding much power in this world. Nor in the world to come.

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Abstract: This article reflects on the relationship between faith, viruses, secularisation and religion in contemporary culture. It invites the reader to think through the symbiotic connections that may exist, and what that means for humanity in the midst of a pandemic.

Discussion Points:

- How do we make sense of suffering and death in an increasingly secular society, which gives less space and prominence to religion, yet is still spiritual?
- If religion is a virus, we probably all have caught it at one time or another: have you ever had a bad 'bout' of religion, and if so, how did you recover?
- Many viruses live 'naturally' in the body without causing harm, and quite often doing good. What are the good aspects of religion in the modern world, even if you don't want any part of faith yourself?
- Have a look at the *Isenheim Altarpiece* – what do you think the painter and sculptor were trying to tell us about the life of God in the world?
- Write your own obituary. How would you like to be remembered?

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