UK Christian Church Leaders' Attitudes Toward Science and Religion

with Lydia Reid and David Wilkinson, "Building Enthusiasm and Overcoming Fear: Engaging with Christian Leaders in an Age of Science" and Zara Thokozani Kamwendo, "Resistance to Narratives of the COVID-19 Pandemic as an Act of God."

RESISTANCE TO NARRATIVES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS AN ACT OF GOD

by Zara Thokozani Kamwendo

Abstract. This article examines the views of 12 bishops of the Church of England in understanding the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of divine action. The most consistently mentioned *unhelpful* narratives hinge on an understanding of the pandemic as an act of God. Although there are several possible contextual explanations for this resistance to understand the pandemic as divine action, an analysis of the data shows that it is grounded in a desire to maintain (1) a space for the pandemic, the suffering, and the virus that caused it to be understood as part of creation and (2) focus on human agency and responsibility as the appropriate response to the pandemic. I argue that the strong resistance among the bishops interviewed to a narrative of divine *punishment* in particular is ultimately grounded in a desire to disable the blunt but effective tool of making moral judgments in the name of divine authority that regularly follow in the wake of global disasters.

Keywords: act of God; Church of England bishops; COVID-19; interventionist theology; pandemic; senior church leaders

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced a variety of reactions from faith leaders across the globe. Gaining insight into how faith leaders are responding to a situation like the one presented by the emergence of the SARS CoV-2 virus is crucial. The ways in which faith leaders understand and navigate significant events in the world shapes both the guidance they provide to others and the behavior they model for the communities they serve (Bouveng and Wilkinson 2016).

Zara Thokozani Kamwendo is a Research Associate in Science and Religion at St John's College, Durham University, Durham, UK; e-mail: zara.t.kamwendo@durham.ac.uk.

 ISSN 0591-2385

The political and social influence of faith leaders on their communities, including the potential for religious leaders to stem the tide of religious violence, is being increasingly recognized (Lane 2002; Archbishop Justin Welby 2016; Humaid 2020). The UNICEF, for instance, recognizes the importance of working in collaboration with religious leaders on issues of inequality, not just for their considerable influence in communities worldwide, but for their skills in communication, mediation, and offering spiritual and psychological support (UNICEF 2017).

Studies also show that faith leaders have a significant influence on behavior change, including health behavior, not least in their capacity as role models (Heward-Mills et al. 2018). In 2015, the Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England published a document intended to "inform the developing patterns of senior leadership" that underscored the importance of senior leadership with respect to their considerable ability to shape the church as a whole (FAOC 2015).

This article is based on responsive qualitative research into how senior church leaders are practically and discursively navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The study forms part of the ECLAS project, focused on engaging senior Christian leaders in questions around science and science-engaged theology. The data consist of two sets of semistructured interviews with a total of 12 diocesan and suffragan bishops of the Church of England conducted in July and October 2020, respectively.

The sample was determined in collaboration with selected team members using a criterion-based sampling method (LeCompte 1993) with the key criterion being holding or having recently held the office of bishop of the Church of England. Both honorary Church of England bishops and bishops who had been nominated, but not yet taken office by November 2020, were excluded from our sample universe. We deliberately sought to include women in our sample, despite the gender ratio of Church of England bishops in the United Kingdom remaining heavily skewed toward men.[1] To this end, we invited all current female bishops of the Church of England to take part in the study, and as a result, of the 12 bishops interviewed, three were women and nine were men. Our sample also includes two non-white bishops that makes it percentage-wise more ethnically diverse than the general population of Church of England bishops.

The 12 bishops interviewed had an average age of 63. This is comparable to the average age of 61 of active Church of England bishops in November 2020. With one exception, all the bishops in our sample were active bishops at the time of the interviews. This marginal age difference is largely due to the one retired bishop in our sample. The 12 bishops in our sample preside(d) over a mix of urban, suburban, and rural dioceses, with their diocese often covering both urban and rural areas. An exploration of published information about the bishops in the sample indicates an even spread across the political and theological spectrum on several issues

including political leaning and theological questions such as the ordination of women.

The first set of interviews ($n = 7$) were conducted with the additional intention of creating video resources for the ECLAS website. For this reason, these interviews were conducted with bishops who had some previous interaction with the project in the form of attendance at one of the ECLAS led church leader conferences. Although this was likely not a significant factor, we reasoned that attendance at an ECLAS led conference did imply an openness to science-engaged theology that could not be assumed in the wider population of Church of England bishops. The second set ($n = 5$) therefore was chosen because they had no previous involvement in ECLAS led events or research activities to mitigate the possibility that the responses given by the first set of interviewees were in any way influenced by their engagement with previous iterations of the project. Importantly, I found no substantive differences between the responses of the first and second group of interviews in the analysis related to the question of previous interaction. I did find a possible effect related to the timing of the interviews that is reflected in the discussion.

Although consent for using the interviews as video resources precluded complete anonymity for the first set of interviews, all the participants were asked to give oral consent for the recording and were assured of anonymity of the interviews in transcribed form for the purpose of publication. Accordingly, the bishops are referred to using a simple randomly assigned numbering system (B1–B12) to indicate quotes extracted from the same interview. There is no correlation between the order in which the interviews were conducted and the number assigned to each bishop.

The interviews had an average duration of 30 minutes and were conducted virtually via Zoom. Interviews were kept deliberately short in order to increase the possibility of the bishops accepting the invitation to be interviewed. All the interviews were both audio and video recorded in Zoom. The audio was then extracted, transcribed automatically, and corrected manually.

The interview schedule consisted of six questions designed to inform three separate but interrelated themes (two questions per theme):

(1) The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the views among senior church leaders in the Church of England toward science and science-engaged theology.

(2) Theological understandings/biblical narratives/religious voices that the bishops have found to be either helpful or unhelpful during the pandemic.

(3) The bishops' views on how the pandemic is changing or challenging our relationship to God's creation and to each other.

Through an initial inductive analysis of the complete data set (Braun and Clarke 2006), looking for correspondence across the responses to the different questions I found particularly strong agreement within the responses to the open question "Are there any theological understandings or religious voices in response to the pandemic that you have found unhelpful and that you think we should resist?". Having identified this strong agreement, I created a smaller data set by isolating the responses to the question of unhelpful narratives. I then divided these responses into categories corresponding to the kinds of narratives mentioned. I found that three of a total of four categories of responses all hinged on resisting an understanding of the pandemic as an act of God. These were responses expressing:

(1) Resistance to a narrative of the pandemic as divine punishment/judgment ($n = 7$).
(2) Resistance to a narrative of the pandemic as divine punishment/judgment in conjunction with a narrative of Exile ($n = 2$).
(3) Resistance to a narrative of special status for people of faith ($n = 2$).

Having established "resistance to an understanding of the pandemic as an act of God" as a latent theme in the data set, I returned to conduct a more theoretically driven analysis of the entire data corpus to construct an explanatory account of this resistance.

In this article, I offer an analysis of the reasons for the bishops' resistance to understand the pandemic as an act of God. The resistance is not surprising given the bishops' theological training (in line with less interventionist theologies), and the fraught history of Christian commentators interpreting natural disasters as divine action. However, an analysis of the interview data for the reasons behind their rejection of this understanding in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic nevertheless sheds light on how the bishops view the relationship between God and Creation, as well as humans' relationship to each other.

With the use of extracts from the interviews, I begin by showing that their theological objections to it revolve around notions of control, human agency, and a concern to understand the virus to be a part of creation. I then show how narratives framed this way are perceived as problematic by the bishops because of the negative practical consequences that could potentially follow in their wake, complicated by a willingness of some of the bishops to see the pandemic as an opportunity for repentance and reflection on our treatment of creation and each other.

I find that the resistance to understand the pandemic as an act of God is a result of the bishops' concern to maintain a space for the pandemic, the suffering, and the virus that caused it to be understood as part of creation and to maintain focus on human agency and responsibility as the most

appropriate response to the pandemic. Finally, I argue that the bishops were particularly concerned with resisting understandings of the pandemic as a direct judgment/punishment from God in order to avoid the moral and ethical ambiguity intrinsic to appealing to divine action as explanation for a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objections to Understanding the Pandemic as Divine Action

Divine Punishment

The most common response to the question about what narratives the bishops found unhelpful and should be resisted was a narrative of the pandemic as divine punishment and/or judgment ($n = 7$). The bishops were often quite emphatic in their dismissal of the divine punishment narrative describing it as a "very, very unhelpful" (B2) narrative that needed to be "really, really, deeply avoided" (B8).

The resistance to the narrative was also often cast in terms of its perceived theological poverty, with the bishops making statements such as "it's just bad theology" (B6), and "we have to be much more theologically acute than that" (B1). In a similar vein, it was also often expressed as a narrative that simply did not correspond with their understandings of God, either within their theological formation or with their interpretation of scripture, through statements like "God isn't like that [...] that's not the God I read about in the New Testament" (B8) and from one bishop simply "I don't believe in a God like that" (B5).

At the same time, nearly all the statements about the unhelpfulness of the punishment narrative were accompanied by some version of the caveat that this was not a narrative they had encountered very often in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, these qualifications seem to raise questions about why the narrative was so salient in the minds of the bishops interviewed, despite its absence in their own experience of the first 6–9 months of the pandemic.

As mentioned in the introduction, the significant history of Christian commentators, writers, and poets interpreting natural disasters as a punishment from God goes some way to explain why the punishment narrative was so consistently mentioned by the bishops as an unhelpful narrative, despite many of them stating openly that they had not come across in relation to the current pandemic (Chester and Duncan 2010). Noteworthy examples include the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake (Braiterman 1998; Kverndok 2010; Mahn 2012) and more recently, the AIDS epidemic that emerged in the 1980s (Kowalewski 1990).

Importantly, however, none of the caveats offered in the interviews question the existence of religious voices that mobilize the punishment narrative in their interpretation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather they

function as a way for the bishops to create institutional, intellectual, and geographic distance between themselves and those who endorse it. The qualifications found in these statements consistently places endorsement of the narrative outside the sources that they have chosen to consult ("I haven't come across them directly, or gone out to look for them, but I know the punishment narrative is out there," B4) outside their network of friends and colleagues ("I've not heard [it] pitched up in the circles I move in," B5), outside the Anglican Community ("I've not seen much of that in the United Kingdom and in terms of my own community, the Anglican community," B10), or outside the context of their geographic area ("I haven't seen what I could have feared, it might be happening in other parts of the world," B1).

Punishment and Exile

Two of the bishops referred to judgment/punishment narrative as unhelpful through or in conjunction with a narrative of Exile. Exile is another narrative that has proved quite popular among Christian commentators on the pandemic (see, e.g., Pecknold 2020). This narrative of the defeat and deportation of certain groups of the Jewish people and the destruction of the Temple by their Babylonian captors in the sixth-century BCE, is a central Old Testament theme. The core imagery that the Babylonian Exile evokes is one of uncertainty and disorientation with the dissolution of both religious and political institutions. However, it is also recognized by commentators as a period of theological growth underpinning both Jewish and Christian thought (Hiebel 2019).

The narrative in the Old Testament details the reasons for the Babylonian Exile to be interpreted as divine punishment as a result of the people of Judea breaking the covenant of God. It also details lessons learnt during the Exile and the longing for and eventual return to Jerusalem. Christian faith leaders and commentators have drawn extensively on the narrative of Exile not just to reflect on this pandemic but for other times when the Christian church has been perceived to be marginalized in an increasingly secular world (Gibson 2014). Use of the narrative as a metaphor for marginalization draw primarily on its theme of keeping faith in difficult times.

One of the bishops interviewed (B7) began by stating that narratives of the pandemic that imply judgment of God should be resisted, and then spoke of a perceived overuse of the narrative of Exile based on the view that theologically church buildings are not analogous to "homeland." Following this logic, the bishop felt that the Exodus might be a better metaphor for the church in terms of how the pandemic is causing a reformation of the community "in the desert" (B7). The reason for this preference for Exodus over Exile, though it was not mentioned specifically, may be an

effort to avoid the narrative of punishment intrinsic to the metaphor of Exile. Unlike Exile, punishment is not a central theme in the story of the Exodus, best characterized as a narrative of liberation from oppression, overcoming adversity and, moving from the old world to the new.

A second bishop (B8) spoke directly to the connection between the narrative of Exile and divine punishment, explicitly identifying references to the Babylonian Exile as unhelpful in the context of COVID-19 because of it. This bishop argued that while it may be tempting to use the narrative of Exile as a metaphor for the predicament of the Christian church during the pandemic, particularly in relation to the suffering endured by many within the faith community and the hardship of being shut out from ones' place of worship, the narrative needed to be used with caution. A member of the bishops' team had raised the point that the narrative of Exile in the Old Testament is expressly understood as a punishment for the sins of the people of Israel:

> Exile was, you know, directly punishment for sin, and I think those are narratives that we need to be careful to avoid. (B8)

It was clear that this bishop found the narrative of Exile to be potentially useful for the Christian community to understand the COVID-19 pandemic but was hesitant to endorse it fully precisely because of its implications for punishment for sin. These comments can also fruitfully be compared with the response from a third bishop (B1) who suggested the narrative of Exile as a *helpful* one in its reference to liminality and questions around what the Christian community might be hoping for in future but was otherwise adamant that a narrative of divine judgment/punishment was decidedly *unhelpful*.

> My mind goes back to that period in Judea's history in Exile in Babylon having lived in that kind of liminal space […] that liminality has been our experience here. Are we hoping to return and see this just as an interruption of a norm that we are happy with or is it going to be […] a whole new norm, normal, or if we go back, how do we go back? […] what kind of church do you want? So, there's a whole lot of issues there about Exile which have been interesting. (B1)

Importantly, the Exile imagery does suggest *a return* to something that existed previously, while as mentioned above, Exodus is primarily about movement from one world to a new world. The references to Exile show the link between punishment and Exile, but also how the bishops are less categorically negative about the narrative of Exile than about the narrative of punishment. Exile is understood as a useful metaphor "to a point" to signify a time of revival and change but is understood as unhelpful precisely in its links to direct punishment of God and its emphasis on "return" over "renewal."

Theological Implications of an Interventionist God

The Problem of Control

Taken together, the responses that reference the punishment narrative reveal an underlying discomfort about positing the pandemic *as an act of God*. This is because the punishment narrative in particular suggests a theology of direct divine intervention. A focus on divine intervention opens up questions of both the extent to which God is in control of events in creation, and the extent to which God chooses to intervene in human affairs. In other words, the majority of the bishops' responses to the question of unhelpful narratives reflect a particular approach to the Christian doctrine of Divine Providence that moves away from the image of an interventionist God.

This move away from an interventionist God is not unexpected in light of the kinds of theology that likely shaped the theological formation of the bishops interviewed. Western theology in the twentieth century saw a movement from an interventionist God through the development of process theology, kenotic theology, and open theology (Wilkinson 2004, 2010). Process theology broadly understood events in the universe to be the actualization of a set of possible outcomes, and envisioned the power of God as an exercise of persuasion as opposed to coercion (Cobb 1973; Griffin 1975; Pailin 1989). Kenotic theology centers on the self-limitation of God through creation and Christ in order to allow for both chance in the universe and a degree of human self-determination (Moltmann 1985; Murphy and Ellis 1996; Richard 1997). And open theology builds on developments in physics stipulating a chaotic, unpredictable universe in reaction to Newtonian mechanics, and envisions a God who intervenes in these chaotic systems in ways not discernible to humans. In this way, God allows for humans to act as free agents within divinely ordained natural processes (Polkinghorne 1989, 2009). The important point to make here is that the bishops interviewed received their theological formation in conversation with theological understandings that stressed the self-limiting of God's power to intervene in human affairs.

The freedom of human self-determination afforded by less interventionist theologies is important here. Several of the bishops explicitly linked the problems of the divine punishment narrative to its theological implications and the core objection that it takes both responsibility and agency away from humans:

> [the punishment narrative] is just such an unhelpful take on human affairs generally I think […] God is in control and if we pray hard enough God will sort it out - that kind of handing over the problem to God and saying over to you. (B1)

As is visible in the quote above, it is also clear from the responses that the bishops were uncomfortable with the notion of God being in control of the pandemic because of its implications for perceptions about the extent to which we as humans have the capacity to exercise control over God. If the pandemic is a punishment for human sin, the implication is that humans through our actions caused God to cause the pandemic. On the same token, humans could conceivably influence the outcome of the pandemic by controlling God through actions such as prayer, or through otherwise repenting from the sins that caused God to punish us in the first place.

One of the bishops (B2) was especially clear about this element of the punishment narrative and its connection to notions of control, including how the pandemic has had an impact on our sense of control generally. The view expressed was that it gives rise to a misguided notion of the extent to which either we humans or God have control over events of the world:

> I don't think that kind of narrative is helpful […] I much prefer to say, how do we see God in amidst our circumstances whatever those circumstances are rather than that those are being somehow caused by divine retribution or punishment of any kind. I think that just spreads fear and again gives us the illusion that we can control God through the way in which we behave. I don't see that as a helpful narrative within the Christian story. (B2)

In relation to this, the same bishop (B2) also talked about narratives of end times, eschatological warning from God (i.e., apocalyptic narratives) as unhelpful for similar reasons, that is, they serve to buttress the illusion that God can be controlled through our behavior.

Suffering, Lament, and the Virus

Resistance to narratives that stipulate an interventionist God also ties to understanding of suffering. The notion of a self-limiting God is partly a response to the problem of evil with the understanding that the freedom of humans to act in the world in combination with the limitations of God to intervene carries with it the risk of suffering (see, e.g., Wiles 1986; Ward 1996). Along these lines, the interviews contain several references to suffering as part of creation, and statements expressing a concern to understand God to be present in the midst of suffering (as alluded to in the quotation above). The bishops' discourse around God in the midst of suffering was anchored in either theologies of Christ on the cross and/or appeals to the notion of Lament.

Lament was a central theme in retired Church of England bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright's *God and the pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (2020), which was published during the early stages of the pandemic. One of the bishops interviewed referred to his work directly. In it, Wright argues that the

appropriate Christian response to the suffering caused by the pandemic is to stay with the suffering, mourn its existence with God, rather than understanding it as punishment for sin or as an eschatological warning. A similar sentiment was evident in the response of one of the bishops who spoke about a need to balance the inclination to identify silver linings to the pandemic and staying with the suffering that it is causing:

> I think the balance of Lament and finding silver linings has got to be very much tilted towards Lament and I think in some of the early months some voices in the churches were rushing too quickly towards seeing the positive. (B7)

The theme of Lament and the imagery of Christ on the cross for the bishops, functions as a way to "put God back into the story" of the pandemic, while avoiding the idea that God has somehow willed the suffering into being:

> The theme of suffering within Christianity or perhaps to put it another way the centrality of the cross in our faith has always been of significance to me […] it's something that we need to re-engage with in a really serious way, not in the sense of a kind of romantic idea somehow that that those who suffer are in some way, you know, suffering because of God's desire that they should suffer. It's not anything like that. (B2)

Allowing for suffering was also a way for the bishops to allow for the virus to be a part of creation. The quote below is from one of the bishops providing an alternative to the punishment narrative by invoking the sentiment that viruses are a part of God's creation. The statement is at once an affirmation of the "naturalness" of viruses, and a further distancing from the idea that the COVID-19 virus is an example of direct divine intervention. This in turn was seen by the bishop as more conducive to the Christian imperative of care on behalf of both the Christian leadership and the faith community as a whole.

> I think the task of bishops and Christian leaders is to put up our positive narrative, which is […] viruses are part of God's creation; suffering is a part of the way nature works and our role as a Christian Community is to care for those in need. (B4)

I address the issue of the Christian imperative of care further in my discussion of the behavioral consequences that the bishops saw for understanding the pandemic as divine action below. What I want to draw attention to here is the way in which the bishops navigate the tension between narratives that allow for both suffering and the virus that caused it to be part of creation, while maintaining a resistance to understanding of the pandemic as an act of God.

The Practical Consequences of Narratives of the Pandemic as Divine Action

Special Protection, Complacency, and Heroic Sacrifice

The interviews also show that the bishops' resistance to an understanding of the pandemic as divine action relates to a concern to counteract potentially negative consequences to human behavior. These can be divided into three separate but interrelated categories. First that it could provoke misguided notions of a special status for people of faith, resulting in reckless behavior endangering ones' own and others' safety. Second that it could lead to a general feeling of complacency, thereby damaging the Christian imperative of care. And third (the inverse of the second) that it could invite the imprudent view of the pandemic as an opportunity for heroism and valiant behavior, particularly on the part of healthcare professionals.

Two of the bishops focused on the notion of a special status for people of faith as particularly unhelpful in relation to COVID-19. The basic idea that they were concerned to refute is that Christians enjoy a higher level of protection from infection simply by virtue of belonging to the Christian community. Importantly, in both responses there was an emphasis on the notion that this protection would (1) be augmented while people of faith are engaged in worship or otherwise engaged in God's work and that it was (2) demonstrably refutable by empirical evidence and logical argument. As an example, one of the bishops (B9) spoke of having received correspondence to this effect:

> There's a kind of sense that because we are God's people then when we are about God's business God will protect us from the impact of the virus […] the notion that somehow when Christians are about Godly things God's protection applies in a way that prevents any bad thing happening is blatantly untrue on the evidence. (B9)

This bishop also gave two examples of this type of narrative in action. First, the then very recent assertions of the Greek Orthodox Church that the taking of holy communion would not cause infection (Associated Press 2020) on the rationale that the body of Christ could not become infected. Second, the less recent example of the 1980 assassination of Catholic Bishop Óscar Romero y Galdáme at the altar while saying mass. The latter example especially was designed to underline the fallacy of God providing protection for Christians who are in engaged in God's work using historical evidence for support.

Norman and Reiss (2020) have recently discussed the impact of COVID-19 on sacramental practices in the Christian Church, highlighting the way in which certain sacramental practices conflict with regulations put in place to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. Although, these

examples were not raised to question the significance of the sacraments for the Christian community, for this bishop, resisting the assertion of a protected status for faithful Christians was of material importance since it spoke directly to arguments about whether or not to keep churches open. The bishop was concerned to refute the argument for keeping churches open on the grounds that while God may not provide protection for the faithful "in our city streets, or in our restaurants or pubs or football matches" (B9), God *would* provide protection in churches. Ultimately then, this resistance to a notion of special status can be understood as a statement on acceptable levels of biological risk designed to invalidate attempts at theologically arguing for churches staying open.

Another bishop (B10) similarly suggested that the narrative of special protection for people of faith was particularly dangerous in the context of the pandemic. As an example, the bishop referred to appeals to special protection as an argument for not wearing masks in the United States. This bishop drew further connections between this phenomenon and political and ideological synergies in the U.S. context. Differentiating between "political" as opposed to "theological" foundations of this idea, the bishop queried an apparent convergence between those who refuse to wear masks and those who insist on their right to own firearms:

> I've heard […] of people who, for example, won't wear a mask because they say that God will protect them. […] the thing for me that underlines the political roots of that, rather than the theological roots is that it's those same people who hold out to carry a gun because they don't believe that God will protect them from their violent neighbour. So, there is no theological coherence in people who say that God will protect them from the virus, but who don't act as though God is protecting them more generally. (B10)

In contrast to the previous argument from history, this is primarily an argument from logic, essentially that it is illogical to believe that God provides special protection from COVID-19, but not from, for example, gun violence. Yet, both statements of resistance to a narrative of special protection for people of faith intersect with a rejection of a theology that understands God to intervene directly with creation. In resisting the narrative of special protection, both bishops draw a connection between the notion of special protection and denying the potency of the virus as a way to disregard the need for taking measures to protect against it. Insofar as these measures extend to the protection of others, these warnings against complacency chime with sentiments expressed by other bishops, that a potential danger of the punishment narrative is that it could be damaging to the Christian imperative of care:

> I find it particularly unhelpful and indeed just theologically poor […] to see the pandemic itself solely or primarily as an act of divine judgment. I

> also think it's […] really damaging in terms of response and care […] for that to be a primary premise in response to the pandemic. (B6)

Here, the danger of complacency is explicitly linked to a narrative of divine judgment. However, throughout the material, several of the bishops emphasized the importance of the Christian imperative of care for the suffering in a crisis like the pandemic *over* attempts to understand the reasons for the suffering emerging in the first place. This general emphasis on care for the suffering ahead of seeking explanations for the suffering also corresponds to the emphasis on suffering and lament discussed above.

However, there were also sentiments expressed in the interview that a narrative of the pandemic as divine action could allow the pendulum to swing to the other extreme. One of the bishops made a link between the punishment narrative and the idea of the pandemic as an endorsement of heroism and sacrifice. It was expressed as a particular danger on behalf of health care professionals and other kinds of workers who are central to dealing with the effects of the pandemic. But it included the possibility of this general sentiment spilling over into the rest of the population to be understood as a universal calling from God to behave in ways exemplified by the caring professions:

> that […] the virus is God's opportunity to provoke heroic sacrifice, you know, valiant behavior, from certain people, nurses particularly. It's His way of calling us back to a moral lifestyle where you know, people will behave with certain kinds of virtues that we see the nursing profession exemplify. That's all quite suspect in my view. (B4)

This way of understanding the consequences of the narrative that the pandemic is an act of God is a counterpart to the worry that the punishment narrative would lead to complacency and be damaging to notions of care. Here instead, the concern is that the punishment narrative could be perceived as a call to moral betterment, amplifying the Christian imperative of care to unhealthy levels. But it remains tied to the problem of divine action and human control over that action. In this case, the consequence of this narrative would be that the virus becomes understood as a way for God to induce a certain kind of morality, embodied in the caring professions. The implication being that the reasons for the pandemic outbreak represents a loss of this kind of morality in the human population globally, and that God has caused the pandemic as a result of this moral failing.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the narrative that the pandemic is in one way or another the work of the antichrist is conspicuously absent within the data set. Ideas about the antichrist at work gained moment in the run-up to the final stages of developing the first COVID-19 vaccines (Singh 2020), prompting refutations from a number of Christian commentators (e.g., Bohlinger 2020; Mbakwe 2020; Barrier 2020). There is

only one reference to the antichrist in the data set. Significantly, it comes from a bishop interviewed in the second round of interviews and in the context of the vaccine roll-out:

> We need to speak against those voices that think it is an antichrist in operation. Look, people are already beginning to talk about 666, the mark of the beast in relation to the vaccine when it comes. (B12)

Narratives of the antichrist in relation to the pandemic may become more prevalent as debates around the vaccine unfold within Christian communities worldwide. Examining narratives that link the vaccine with the antichrist and the "mark of the beast" will likely become an important part of understanding the level of willingness among factions of the Christian community to inoculate against the COVID-19 virus.

Complicating a Complete Dismissal of the Pandemic as an Act of God

As we have seen, the majority view expressed in the interviews is that understanding the pandemic as an act of God has the potential to produce mainly negative consequences for human behavior. However, this majority view is complicated by the occasional endorsement of an understanding of the pandemic as a way for God to encourage humanity to reflect on our values in contrast to seeing it as a punishment for sin:

> I think the whole idea that this is God punishing the world for what is clearly our fallen nature and a lot of things that are bad and wrong has been fairly widely pedaled and refuted and I must say I don't think that's a line that I would take. I think I would prefer to say: God can use and is using the pandemic to get us to think carefully about our values, the way we live and all that kind of thing. And I find that a much more helpful approach and a much more Biblical one. (B3)

Despite being presented as a counternarrative to the punishment narrative, this interpretation of the pandemic as an instrument for God to encourage reflection could be interpreted as retaining the core theological problem of placing responsibility for and control over the pandemic in the hands of God. God in this case is understood to use the pandemic, not to punish humans, but to induce humans to reflect on our values and ways of life.

Although control was the main source of concern for the majority of the bishops that I spoke to, the interviews do show an overall concern not to absolve humans of responsibility altogether:

> There is an underlying theological principle about our place in creation and our responsibility to creation and the humility and grace that is asked of us by God in doing that well. […] And I think the pandemic has been an environment in which we have been very starkly reminded of that and […] brought to points of repentance […] I think there is judgment in that. (B6)

Consequently, there is a tension visible within the material between a willingness to understand the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink our relationship to God's creation and to each other and the desire to dismiss a narrative of the pandemic as a judgment from God. As exemplified by the quote above, the tension arises because the notion of a need for reflection and repentance contains an element of judgment within it. The statement above also represents an interesting separation between divine punishment and divine calls for repentance, which very much emphasizes the level of directness of the divine intervention stipulated. I return to discuss this tension further in the conclusion when I discuss the moral implications of the general resistance to the narrative of divine punishment for sin in particular.

Conclusion: Divine Punishment as Blunt Instrument

The thread that binds the bishops' perceptions of unhelpful narratives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is a resistance to understand the pandemic as an act of an interventionist God. The resources that the Bishops draw from in their resistance display a combination of theological, biblical, and historical literacy. The interviews show an awareness of the problems of theologies that postulate an interventionist God and contain appeals to alternative models such as a Christology that emphasizes Christ in the midst of suffering. In this sense, they also show a recognition of diversity within Christian theology.

The interviews also contain evidence of a sense of the history of Christian commentators using divine intervention (or lack thereof) as an explanatory framework and the problems that have arisen from that history. Historical examples were mobilized to emphasize perceived misguided appeals to divine intervention and used as cautionary evidence against similar appeals in the context of COVID-19.

Finally, the bishops display a level of theological confidence in their ability to resist easy answers to every question. The near unanimous resistance to understand the pandemic as an act of God among the bishops interviewed is complicated by a concern to keep space for human agency and responsibility, both in terms of the emergence of the pandemic and for dealing with the suffering it produces. This is a concern that shows in both framings of the pandemic as divine action intended to elicit repentance and in statements that express a desire to allow for the idea that the pandemic is an opportunity to reconsider the relationship between humans and the rest of creation.

Common to both the desire to maintain human agency and responsibility and the resistance to narratives of the pandemic as an act of God is an overarching concern about the potential behavioral consequences of religious narratives surrounding the pandemic. Along these lines, the

resistance to divine action narratives also indicates a generally held conviction that theology drives practice. The bishops' identification of this kind of narrative as unhelpful is driven by concerns about the practical consequences of the narrative and its implicit theology to a greater degree than a desire to decry or defend an intellectual problem.

Consequently, the bishops' resistance to narratives of the pandemic as an act of God cannot be understood as an effort to absolve humans of responsibility for the pandemic or for dealing with its consequences. Nor can it be said to be a resistance to understand the virus and the suffering that it has caused as part of creation. Many of the bishops I interviewed pressed the point that the virus *should* be understood as part of creation, as should any future vaccine and those working to develop and distribute it.

Rather, I would argue, the resistance to an understanding of the pandemic as an act of God is best understood as a reaction against the underdetermination of the narrative—its normative openness, or to put it differently, its bluntness. The theory that the pandemic is a result of divine intervention is underdetermined by the evidence (the emergence of the pandemic). Other theories are equally supported by this same evidence. This holds for both assertions of the reasons for the intervention and whether it should be understood as divine intervention at all.

As we have seen, the most forceful resistance to the divine action thesis came from bishops who expressed objections to a narrative of the pandemic as punishment and/or judgment of God. Part of the theological difficulty with the punishment narrative in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that it is not scripturally clear whether a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic should be interpreted as a punishment from God. As Robin Gill, editor of the May 2020 issue of *Theology*, put it "The Old Testament has much to say about plagues" (Gill 2020, 162), but the link between the occurrences of plagues and divine punishment is only sporadically made. This point was raised by one of the bishops (B4) who mentioned Old Testament scholar John Goldingay having drawn attention to passages in the Book of Chronicles where "the Lord delineates between plagues which are punishment and plagues which are just plagues" (B4).

In a recent piece drawing on the Old Testament to comment on the COVID-19 pandemic, John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay (2020) discuss the way in which plagues, infertility, and illness are sometimes understood to be brought on by God and sometimes not: "Israel knew that sometimes epidemics are just one of those things" (Goldingay and Goldingay 2020, 192). For the bishop, the point was that these passages were a useful reminder for debunking the idea that plagues are necessarily punishment against certain kinds of people and for a particular set of sins. There is a clear connection here to the narrative of a special protection for people of faith discussed above. Just as some plagues are

just plagues, the logic of the argument for protection for people of faith hinges on postulating protection everywhere (not just when "the people of God are about God's business" B10) and from all suffering brought on by human sin.

This relates directly to the crux of the problem with an implicit theology of an interventionist God and applies particularly to the divine punishment narrative: It leaves open the crucial questions of precisely who the punishment is intended for and why. In other words, if the pandemic is punishment from God for human sin, what sins and what sinners are God punishing? One of the bishops (B2) provided a particularly clear illustration of the indeterminacy of the punishment narrative:

> Those narratives that try […] to make us think that somehow this is God's punishment because of, I don't know, you know, you pick the sin, whatever it is! (B2)

The problem then is that the punishment narrative in particular is understood by the bishops interviewed to be both a naïve theology of how God operates in the world and a blunt ethical instrument for placing blame on certain sections of society. As a *Forbes Magazine* commentator remarked, the punishment narrative in general is not only often racism, sexism, and xenophobia cloaked in punishment language, it also begs the question why it would seem certain groups of the population are consistently spared the blame: "If diseases existed to punish certain groups of people for 'moral' wrongdoing, why isn't there 'corrupt politicians fever', the 'bigots blisters', the 'liars lymphadenopathy', or the 'embezzled a lot of money elephantitis'?" (Lee 2020). This is the case whether disease is understood as a punishment from God or divorced from a deity, as punishment for a lifestyle or set of practices of an identified group.

In line with this commentator, I would argue that the key to understand the bishops' resistance to narratives of the pandemic *as an act of God* is the way that these narratives can be used by anyone at any time to make whatever normative point they wish to make about human behavior. As one of the bishops put it, the punishment narrative should be resisted:

> Because we are prone to becoming pharisaic in our approach if we single out those in our world who are deserving of judgment, as compared to those of us who are not deserving of it. (B12)

The bluntness of the punishment narrative as a tool for ethical debates is further illustrated by the ways in which it has been endorsed and mobilized for a great variety of moral, ethical, and political stances, not just in the past but with reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. As early as March 2020, there were reports of an Israeli Rabbi claiming that the pandemic was divine punishment for gay pride events, and that the Arab States had been largely spared the virus because they would not allow them (TOI Staff

2020). Reuters reported at the end of May 2020 that a spokesperson for Islamic State posted a video claiming COVID-19 to be punishment from God sent to punish "tyrants of this time and their followers" (Reuters Staff 2020).

Nor has the punishment narrative in relation to the current pandemic only been mobilized by religious figures. A study of narrative framings of the COVID-19 pandemic online shows the popularity of the punishment narrative in the early stages of the pandemic with both religious and non-religious figures, further emphasizing the blurred lines between religious, cultural, and moral dimensions of instances when the narrative is mobilized (Kohlt 2020).

The argument that the reason behind the resistance to the narrative is primarily moral in nature resonates with recent work in the sociology of science and religion that argues that insofar as there is a conflict between science and religion among U.S. public(s), it is a conflict of morality rather than one between methods of understanding the natural world (Evans 2018, 2019). Along these lines, I would argue that the Bishop's resistance of an understanding of the pandemic as an act of God is driven by a desire to avoid the moral battlegrounds that the punishment narrative has the potential to create. Because divine punishment is such a blunt instrument it is also spectacularly useful for anyone wanting to make a normative point on explicitly moral grounds. I suggest that the reason behind the bishops' resistance of the punishment narrative is to ensure that it is not taken up in public discourse more generally. To mobilize the punishment from God narrative is to appeal to divine authority in support of a moral stance. For senior church leaders to resist the punishment narrative is to render a powerful, but blunt ethical instrument infinitely less viable.

Note

1. The *Ministry Statistics Report* (2020) of the Church of England published annually records 5 (13%) female diocesan bishops and 19 (28%) female suffragan bishops in 2019, compared to 33 (87%) male diocesan bishops and 48 (72%) male suffragan bishops in 2019.

References

Archbishop Justin Welby. 2016. "Why All Kinds of Religious Leaders are Essential for Building Peaceful Societies." Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-and-writing/latest-news/news-archive-2016/why-all-kinds-religious-leaders-are-essential.

Associated Press. 2020. "Communion Shared-Spoon Ritual Unchanged in Orthodox Church Despite the Virus." *Los Angeles Times.* Last modified May 29, 2020. Accessed December 12, 2020. https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-05-29/communion-ritual-unchanged-in-orthodox-church-despite-virus.

Barrier, Roger. 2020. "Is the COVID-19 Vaccine the Mark of the Beast?" Crosswalk.com. Last modified August 4. Accessed January 23, 2021. https://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/ask-roger/is-the-covid-19-vaccine-the-mark-of-the-beast.html.

Bohlinger, Tavis. 2020. "The COVID Vaccine has 666 Written All Over It…And Why That Doesn't Matter According to Revelation." theLAB. Last modified May 18. Accessed January 20, 2021. https://academic.logos.com/the-covid-vaccine-has-666-written-all-over-it-and-why-that-doesnt-matter-according-to-revelation/.

Bouveng, Rebecca, and David Wilkinson. 2016. "Going Beyond the How and Why of Science-Religion? Senior Christian Leaders on Science and Personal Faith." *Science & Christian Belief* 28 (2): 100–15.

Braiterman, Zachary. 1998. *God After Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101.

Chester, David K., and Angus M. Duncan. 2010. "Responding to Disasters within the Christian Tradition, with Reference to Volcanic Eruptions and Earthquakes." *Religion* 40 (2): 85–95.

Church of England Research and Statistics. 2020. *Ministry Statistics 2019 Report*. https://www.churchofengland.org/researchandstats.

Cobb, John Boswell. 1973. "Natural Causality and Divine Action." *Idealistic Studies* 3:207–22.

Evans, John H. 2018. *Morals Not Knowledge: Recasting the Contemporary U.S. Conflict between Religion and Science*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

———. 2019. "The Scope and Implications of *Morals Not Knowledge*." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 54 (3): 665–79.

Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England (FAOC). 2015. *Senior Church Leadership: A Resource for Reflection*. London: Archbishops' Council.

Gibson, David. 2014. "America's Christian Conservatives Ponder a 'Babylonian Exile.'" *Religion News Service*. Accessed January 25, 2021. https://religionnews.com/2014/08/18/christian-conservatives-babylon/.

Gill, Robin. 2020. "Editorial." *Theology* 123 (3): 161–62.

Goldingay, John, and Kathleen Scott Goldingay. 2020. "Thinking with the Old Testament About the Pandemic." *Theology* 123 (3): 191–97.

Griffin, David Ray. 1975. "Relativism, Divine Causation and Biblical Theology." *Encounter* 36:342–60.

Heward-Mills, N. L., C. Atuhaire, C. Spoors, N. V. Pemunta, G. Priebe, and S. N. Cumber. 2018. "The Role of Faith Leaders in Influencing Health Behaviour: A Qualitative Exploration on the Views of Black African Christians in Leeds, United Kingdom." *Pan African Medical Journal* 30:199.

Hiebel, Janina M. 2019. "Hope in Exile: In Conversation with Ezekiel." *Religions* 10 (8): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10080476.

Humaid, Dana. 2020. "Faith Leaders: An Untapped Resource in Protecting Communities." *World Economic Forum* Last modified January 14, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/faith-leaders-an-untapped-resource-in-protecting-communities/.

Kohlt, Franziska. 2020. ""Over by Christmas": The Impact of War-Metaphors and Other Science-religion Narratives on Science Communication Environments During the Covid-19 Crisis" *SocArXiv*. November 10. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/z5s6a.

Kowalewski, Mark R. 1990. "Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis." *Sociological Analysis* 51 (1): 91–96.

Kverndok, Kyrre. 2010. "Ach hvilken Domme-Dag, min GUD!" *Tidsskrift for kulturforskning* 9 (2): 55–71.

Lane, Dermot A. 2002. "Church Leaders Could Yet Shape Global Politics." *The Irish Times*, January 22. https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/church-leaders-could-yet-shape-global-politics-1.1047551.

LeCompte, Margaret Diane. 1993. *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*. Edited by Judith Preissle and Renata Tesch, 2nd ed. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Lee, Bruce Y. 2020. "Coronavirus: Here Are 10 Misconceptions Being Spread." Forbes. Last modified February 2, 2020. Accessed December 12, 2020. https://www.forbes.com/sites/brucelee/2020/02/02/coronavirus-here-are-10-misconceptions-being-spread/?sh=135382262840.

Mahn, Jason A. 2012. "Between Presence and Explanation: Thinking through Suffering with Thomas Long." *Theology Today* 69 (2): 225–30.
Mbakwe, Tola. 2020. "Medical Expert's Message to Christians Who Think COVID-19 Vaccine is Mark of the Beast." *Premier Christian News*, December 2, 2020. https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/medical-expert-s-message-to-christians-who-think-covid-19-vaccine-is-mark-of-the-beast.
Moltmann, Jürgen. 1985. *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation. Gifford Lectures*. London: SCM.
Murphy, Nancey C., and George Francis Rayner Ellis. 1996. *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology, and Ethics*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
Norman, Ziba, and Michael J. Reiss. 2020. "Risk and Sacrament: Being Human in a COVID-19 World." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 55 (3): 577–90.
Pailin, David. 1989. *God and the Processes of Reality: Foundations of a Credible Theism*. London: Routledge.
Pecknold, C. C. 2020. "Creation, Fall, and Coronavirus." First Things. Accessed January 6, 2021. https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/03/creation-fall-and-coronavirus#print.
Polkinghorne, J. C. 1989. *Science and Providence: God's Interaction with the World*. London: SPCK.
———. 2009. *Theology in the Context of Science*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Reuters Staff. 2020. "Islamic State Calls COVID-19 God's Punishment for Foes: Tape." https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-islamicstate/islamic-state-calls-covid-19-gods-punishment-for-foes-tape-idUSKBN2343B9.
Richard, Lucien. 1997. *Christ: The Self-emptying of God*. New York: Paulist Press.
Singh, Namita. 2020. "Trump-Supporting Pastor Tells Followers COVID Vaccine is 'Preparing Structure for the Antichrist.'" *Independent*, December 8. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/pastor-covid-vaccine-antichrist-trump-b1767792.html.
TOI Staff. 2020. "Israeli Rabbi: Coronavirus Outbreak is Divine Punishment for Gay Pride Parades." *The Times of Israel*, March 8. Accessed December 12, 2020. https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-rabbi-blames-coronavirus-outbreak-on-gay-pride-parades/.
UNICEF. 2017. "Why Work with Religious Communities?" Last modified June 1, 2017. Accessed January 22, 2021. https://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/index_60389.html#:~:text=Religious%20leaders%20shape%20social%20values,for%20social%20change%20and%20transformation
Ward, Keith. 1996. *God, Chance & Necessity*. Oxford: Oneworld.
Wiles, Maurice. 1986. *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986*. London: SCM Press.
Wilkinson, David. 2004. "The Activity of God: A Methodist Perspective." In *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, edited by Clive Marsh, 142–54. London: Continuum.
———. 2010. *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*. London: T & T Clark.
Wright, Nicholas Thomas. 2020. *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*. London: SPCK.