

COVID19

The current global situation, in which most of the world is in some form of lockdown, is both unprecedented and unimaginable. Popular culture, which has a certain morbid fascination with dystopian futures and apocalyptic imagination has been unable to conceive of this present reality and the humungous proportions of it. While it is estimated that 70% of the world's population will be exposed to COVID19, fact is that it has exposed us and the ability of our political economy to handle a crisis such as this.

In a way the spread of the virus itself is a creation of our political economy. In a time of economic globalization which has subsumed the world into a single economic system, the virus has travelled along trade routes and continues to infect people across the globe. This passing of disease through trade routes is of course not new, it is exactly how epidemics and diseases have been transmitted through the centuries. But the scale of the modern economic system and the interwoven connectedness that we now both enjoy and endure has also escalated the spread of the virus exponentially and in a manner that threatens to break down the health care systems.

There can be no denying the role that capitalism as an economic system has played in not just transmitting the virus but also in worsening the present crisis. As capitalism has been pushing for the privatization and commodification of life and all that makes for the fullness of life, health care systems and the pharmaceutical industry also have been relegated to the private sphere, with nation states often being forced through structural adjustment programmes to withdraw from subsidizing health care. In several countries around the world, health is no longer even imagined as a fundamental right, but is available for only those who are able to pay for it. In the midst of the COVID19 pandemic it means that only those who are able to afford it, or afford medical insurance, will have access. The poor, the elderly on pensions, women will be excluded. Of course, the scarcity of certain resources due to panic buying and hoarding is only an extension of the logic of capitalism into the banal practices of daily life. On the other hand, the wealthy have sequestered themselves into their mansions or their bunkers which were built specifically in anticipation of such crises.

The death dealing economic system that has proved itself to be incapable of meeting the needs of the masses and has been exacerbated by authoritarian governments who seek to use force and misinformation as a means of controlling the population. The pandemic has unleashed on a globe a new normal in terms of both fundamental rights as well as in terms of bio-politics. While physical distancing is necessary for flattening the curve, it has also meant that populations have been made to give up certain fundamental rights, the right to assembly, the right to religious freedom and expression... in certain instances these rights have been enforced and in others the population have volunteered to give them up. The crisis has further atomized and individualized us making us consumers through e-commerce and is threatening to break up community solidarities. The very use of the term 'social distancing' instead of physical distancing should offer us clues to how this crisis is being used by dominant forces to make populations fearful and therefore compliant.

In other contexts, rituals of nationalism are being continually invoked to make populations sacrifice our fundamental and human rights into compliance and obedience of the leader who

is presented as the father figure thereby reinforcing patriarchy and state patriarchy in particular. What is even worse is that these rituals of compliance are being theologized and mythologized in support of the deification of authoritarian governments and leaders.

The fact that the pandemic is also a gendered crisis. We are now, more than ever, acutely aware that the home is not a safe space and we are once again exposed to the violence of patriarchal families. Not only is domestic violence on the increase but at the same time as jobs are being lost women are often the first to be let go. Moreover, women in the context of the household are the primary care givers of the sick and the elderly and this is work that is not just unpaid but invisibilized. Women in the health care system are often at the lower rungs of the profession, in many cases being the nurses, attendants and are therefore have the most exposure and the least protection.

There is no doubt that the pandemic is forcing us to rethink the world that we live in. What we do not need is to return to normal, it is what was 'normal' that has made this crisis what it is and it is what is 'normal' that is making it so much worse. This is the opportunity for us to imagine and implement a new world and a new theology that built by placing the needs of the most vulnerable at the centre. What we need is not the support of corporations but the eradication of hunger and poverty, we do not need the bailout of billionaires but the reduction of inequality. We need a global health care system that is accessible and available to all, a pharmaceutical industry that is not run for profit but that is directed towards care and support of the sick and dying. Neither can we go the route of ecological fascism that sees the earth resurging in a time of human crisis, the earth is not resurging because of human illness but rather because capitalism is being brought to a halt.

Apocalyptic and Kairotic

In the Bible the term apocalyptic does not refer to end times but actually refers to a revealing, what is happening around us. It is an unveiling so that we may have a discerning of the signs of the times. But what does this actually mean for our churches? I think that it means the following

- a. We are called to do God's will on the earth – we have to see this in more than just terms of individual salvation. God calls the whole world into salvation and this means our societies, institutions and our structures as well.
- b. We cannot be serious about ministering to our congregations unless we are able to understand the social situations that affect them and us, this requires us to discern the signs of the times and what this has meant for people and communities.
- c. Faith implies commitment to justice and love in practice. Such a practice must be well informed. If we are serious about God's love for the last and the despised then we must understand race/caste and patriarchy.
- d. We must understand justice as being at the very heart of God. We are called to seek out justice because justice is the very substance of faith.
- e. For Christians justice is very often reduced to a question of ethics. Acts of justice are seen as what one should do because one is a Christian. Therefore it is not uncommon for Christians to get involved with charity work. Several

churches take on many different projects in which they try to find the right thing to do. The Accra confession however calls Christians to understand that justice is a matter of faith, it is a matter of confession. It is the very heart of God. To put it in other words, it is not Christians who should be involved with acts of justice, rather it is doing acts of justice that make us Christian as the Accra confession puts it “Speaking from our Reformed tradition and having read the signs of the times, the General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches affirms that global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians. We believe that the integrity of our faith is at stake if we remain silent or refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal economic globalization and therefore we confess before God and one another.”

- f. Calling the faithful to engage with the world: The Accra Confession is a call to the faithful to engage with the world, this has been the legacy of both Calvin and the reformed tradition! Calvin and the other reformers wrote much about the economic system of his time indicating to us that the economy serve human interests and particularly the interests of the poor. The legacy of Calvin, as well as the other reformers, in the present time should encourage us to engage with economic systems contextually and pastorally from the perspective of justice ensuring that our economies serve the interests of people and not the large multinational companies.

And we need to move from an apocalyptic unveiling of what is going on through discernment to seizing the kairotic moment of our times to see, judge and act. For this we require a new theology.

A new theology: Beyond a God of Explanations

And we need a new theology that has the ability to speak out prophetically and boldly in times such as these. The church seems to have lost itself in wondering how to conduct services and the more important question of how we speak of God now has been largely ignored. It is time for us to give up on theologies of explanations that somehow seek to explain away what is happening now as part of the divine’s plan for the planet. Rather what we need in this passion week is for us to come to terms with God absence.

It is time that we humbly accept that sometimes we need to speak in terms of God absence, God behind the veil so to speak. The psalms inform us that asking “where is God’ is a legitimate question, a question to which we may not receive an immediate answer. As human community we have often experienced moments of God absence before. To question God in this manner is a legitimate question in the face of human suffering, and it is also the experience of Jesus on the cross when he cries out, My God My God why have you forsaken me?

The liturgical year is in acknowledgement of God absence – while at Christmas we celebrate the presence of God in terms of Immanuel or God with us, in the context of Good Friday we also remember times of God absence – that there are moments of extreme human suffering

when it seems as though God is not there. This is why after the Passion Sunday and all of Passion week and Holy week the cross remains veiled. To remind us of times of God absence – an experience that even Christ had.

Yet what we must remember that even in moments of God absence we are not alone. The absence of God necessitates the presence of human community, we could even argue the presence of the community of the redeemed. In the midst of God absence, what is essential is human presence.

To Christ on the cross human presence was exemplified in the presence of the woman, the faithful disciples who stood by Jesus in his moment of despair. Even when God was absent and he cried out to God, it was the women who were present at the foot of the cross.

Today we live in the world in which there is much suffering, we should not legitimize it or spiritualize it by arguing that it is part of the Christian life or life in general, rather we must meet this suffering with human solidarity. With Christian presence.

Now is a time when we need to speak of the hope of the resurrection that is found in human resilience to suffering, of human solidarity in suffering, of human healing of suffering. But we need to move beyond the now to building social, economic and political structures that are premised on this very basis of human solidarity that seeks to alleviate suffering.

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