

Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Anything to Do with God?

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In the Apostolic Creed as well as the Nicene Creed, Christians confess their faith in God the father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. If God is the creator of heaven and earth, of the visible and invisible world, then we must conclude that everything that occurs has something to do with God. Yet since we do not live in heaven but on earth, we do not live in paradise or in the new world to come where “death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev 21:4). Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986), a famous German Lutheran theologian, was on the lecture circuit in the United States in 1972 when during the Olympic Games in Munich, Germany, a terrorist attack occurred targeting the Israeli team. Being German and a theologian, Thielicke was immediately asked to comment on this horrible occurrence. He answered saying: “The youth of the world gather in Munich in a peaceful contest and celebration. But exactly at this moment the anti-godly forces show their devilish visage to demonstrate to us with death and suffering that we still live in the world which only in small fragments gives us a glimpse of the paradisiacal future.” Yes, we live in a world tarnished by brokenness, death, and suffering. At the same time, as Christians we know that it is God who upholds the world against the destructive efforts of the anti-godly powers. So where is God in this present pandemic crisis?

Perhaps we can glean some insights from the reformer Martin Luther (1493-1546). For him there was no doubt that God holds the whole world in his hands, as centuries later the African-American spiritual proclaimed. Yet Luther was also convinced that there are two kingdoms in this world. The first is the kingdom of the devil. In the Gospel of John, the Lord calls the devil “the ruler of this world” (John 14:30; 16:11), that is, the ruler of the kingdom of sin and of disobedience. Then there is God’s kingdom which unceasingly engages in combat with the devil’s kingdom. As the great adversary of God, the devil, as Luther calls these anti-godly powers, is seen behind everything that opposes God’s ultimate will for the creation and humanity. According to Luther the devil is active in misfortune, in diseases and other life crises, and in death, for is he is the master and holder of power over death. The

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threat posed by the devil and his seduction can be avoided by no one. The devil has a share in the dimension of the divine being, so he is omnipresent. Hence the power of God and of the devil are opposed to one another, and a great conflict ensues between them that permeates all of history and keeps it in a state of turmoil. History is, therefore, a witness to the battle of the devil against God, of God against the devil, and of the true God against the anti-God. Although the power of the devil is so great that he can be called the God of this world, the singular divinity of the true God is never for a single moment called into question. It also limits the dualism between God and the devil through that omnipotence and sole-activity of God. Nevertheless, God and the devil battle over humanity and for dominion of the earth.

At the same time the devil is God’s instrument, as all things in the world must serve God. Luther writes: “God indeed makes use of the devil to martyr and kill us; but the devil could not do this, if God did not want in such a way to punish sin in us.”¹ This means that God uses the devil to punish our sinfulness. Thus, Luther can say that the devil has received his power and authority from God. He embodies the wrath and justice of God, since God uses him as a tool, indeed, as his executioner to bring his punishment

1. Luther in his exposition of Psalm 90:3, in *WA* 40/III:519.13-14.

on us. The hands and feet of the devil are the dreadful, atrocious claws of the wrath of God and of eternal death. The devil does not, then, rule unrestrictedly, but only so far as the wrath of God extends. His authority is derived and limited and is contingent on the ultimate authority of God.

Luther clearly insists that one must distinguish between the activity of God and of Satan even though they are one and the same, because the intentions and goals are radically different. Both assail and challenge human beings to the utmost. But God does it for salvation so that human beings can be freed from their own selves and all self-confidence, and flee to the arms of the merciful God. Satan, in contrast, seeks to snatch humans once and for all away from God. Christians recognize through faith that everything that happens ultimately works toward their salvation, while others who are confronted with the same negative experience despair of the misfortune and depart from God. Tribulation, therefore, always has two faces: the face of God and the face of the devil. Although God is also the God of Satan, Satan continues to work ultimately toward the goal that human beings renounce their faith in God.

What does this reference to Luther's view of God and the anti-godly powers have to do with the Corona virus? We can gather from Luther's view that the negative things that take place in the world and in the lives of individuals are of such a destructive, anti-godly character that one can neither attribute them to God without making God into a demon, nor simply attribute them to human beings without minimizing these events. The Corona pandemic has interrupted our history in an unprecedented way. While the reality of the anti-godly, destructive powers that was self-evident for Luther must be acknowledged, Luther's anthropomorphic concept of the devil is no longer tenable today. Moreover, from the perspective of the divinity of God, it is not justified to introduce a second power equal to God but yet with negative intentions into the affairs of this world. Faith in God almighty does not tolerate any dualism. This means that the anti-godly powers, real as they are, must eventually, even unwillingly, contribute to the glory of God.

In most countries of this world, we have enjoyed a very long period of economic progress. Many people have even perceived globalization as a model for success. Even when we consider the horrendous problems in Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, to mention only a few crisis areas, there were seemingly irresistible signs of progress. And now suddenly everything has changed. As the German Chancellor Mrs. Merkel remarked: "Since the end of World War II we never encountered such a problem as the Corona pandemic." While we slowly return to normality, at least this is our hope, nobody knows what the future will be like. If God has the whole world in his hands as the above-mentioned African-American spiritual proclaims, this Corona pandemic should have something to do with God. Does God want to remind us that we are not the masters of our own history contrary to what many people thought? Does God want to punish us because we were so obsessed with our success? Who can deny or affirm that with certainty?

Does God want to wake us up from our excessive human-centeredness and self-centeredness to show us that not we are in the center of everything but actually God is the one and only center toward whom our activities should be directed? Could it be that the Corona pandemic is God's punishment? One cannot rule this out for sure.

Martin Luther was an astute observer of historical events. For him, history was never the working out of humanity's intentions and purposes, but it was God who was behind every historical event. This should also be true today at least for Christians. But this does not mean that everything will be just fine. We should not forget that humans have alienated themselves from God through sin. This also holds true for the most faithful Christians. Even in their best intentions at least occasionally they deviate from God's ways. This means they are sinners. Therefore, God's word has always a twofold character, that of the law and that of the gospel. According to Paul the law acts as the disciplinarian toward Christ, which means that it urges us toward the gospel (cf. Gal 3:24). The function of the law is not to condemn us but to bring us back to God. The angry and threatening God wants to awaken us from our self-centered ways and lead us back to the God who essentially is a loving and caring God. So how should we look at this Corona pandemic? Does God want to wake us up from our excessive human-centeredness and self-centeredness to show us that not we are in the center of everything but actually God is the one and only center toward whom our activities should be directed? Could it be that the Corona pandemic is God's punishment? One cannot rule this out for sure. But God very rarely interferes with our world directly. Usually he acts indirectly, which would mean through these destructive anti-godly forces or, as Luther said, through the devil. By way of the anguish and sorrow that the pandemic brings with it, God awakens us from our self-deceit in which we think that we are the shapers of history. God shows us with this pandemic that we are not even in control of our own affairs. History is not just the result of human activities. History occurs in God's world in which we are allowed to live.

If we would concede that behind this pandemic is God's law that punishes us, what is the purpose for such action? We must remember that God's actions are never just negative but in the end, they want to achieve something positive, namely to bring us back to God and God's ways. Since God is a caring and loving God, he wants us to bring forth this love in our lives too. At least for me

living in Germany, it has been amazing how much love and care has been expressed in daily lives through the Corona pandemic. Several times total strangers who passed by our house asked us whether they could do something for us since we looked like an aged couple. In the news our Chancellor Mrs. Merkel and many high government officials repeatedly expressed their thanks to those who exposed themselves to the disease and continued to do the most important jobs so that our daily lives could continue to function. These were the truck drivers to haul supplies, the people at the checkout counters in grocery stores, the nurses in the nursing homes and in the hospitals, and also the doctors, not to forget the garbage collectors, the mail carriers, and many others. In church services, which were telecast, these important people were included in the prayers. This was a totally new experience that one thanked publicly those who risked their own health to help others. Then politicians on TV repeatedly thanked the people that they obeyed the restrictions imposed on them and sacrificed their usual way of life to bring down the pandemic. One slogan which appeared on TV over and over again was, "Together we are strong." And in our federal assembly, when measures were introduced to help financially stressed segments of society and measures to restrict temporarily our freedom, both the ruling parties and the oppositions acted unanimously. There was no longer a party spirit, but a common endeavor to do whatever helped the common good. In other words, there was a rediscovery of the community spirit over against the usual party bickering which had often prevailed beforehand. While the pandemic will have severe and adverse effects in terms of human lives and of the economy, it brought about many positive traits in individuals and in the community at large which had long been forgotten. Though spatially we tried to keep our distance from each other, in mentality we came closer together. This spirit of mutuality is intrinsic to the Christian faith. As Jesus told his audience: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). Service to others is at the same time service for God. We ought to be thankful to God that many people rediscovered this service aspect of their lives and came closer together and, in spite of all the problems, were present for each another.

Although many of the occurrences brought about anguish and sorrow, it would be foolish for a Christian to say that it was not God's mighty hand that interfered with our self-centeredness. But we must keep in mind that whatever is negative in this world is always ambiguous. On the one hand it can be enigmatically under-

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stood as the just results from our estranged existence of God. This means, it can be self-induced or it can be considered as the result of God's punishment. On the other hand, it can also be perceived as the outcome of a chaotic activity. Since the anti-godly forces always act destructively, they may also have a hand in the Corona crisis. What does this mean in the end? It can never be determined with certainty who ultimately caused this pandemic crisis. Nevertheless, perhaps we needed a crisis like this. While it was uncomfortable and even life-threatening for many, the hurting corners and edges of our excessive individualism have been smoothed down and we rediscovered: we need each other, because together we are strong. Who believes in Christ can detect in this God's working and who does not believe in him is nevertheless brought into the preserving activity of God in history. As Paul fittingly confessed: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38).

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