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# *Reflections on the Field*

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# COVID-19 AND RELIGIOUS ETHICS

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## ABSTRACT

The editors of the *JRE* solicited short essays on the COVID-19 pandemic from a group of scholars of religious ethics that reflected on how the field might help them make sense of the complex religious, cultural, ethical, and political implications of the pandemic, and on how the pandemic might shape the future of religious ethics.

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19, public health, racism, Confucian ethics, humanitarianism, environmental ethics, refugees, vulnerability, justice, food ethics, work, mental health*

*In mid-May, as the COVID-19 pandemic was tightening its grip on our globe, we invited a group of scholars of religious ethics to reflect on how their training in religious ethics might help them make sense of the complex religious, cultural, ethical, and political implications of this pandemic, and on how the pandemic might shape the future of religious ethics. Within weeks of our invitations, attention in the US and elsewhere shifted to the rage that erupted in response to the unjustified police killings of George Floyd and others. As a result, several of these pieces weave together these two separate, yet connected, events. Others focus more singularly on the pandemic.*

*Our presentation of fifteen short reflection pieces is a departure from the usual scholarly format of the *JRE*. This was deliberate on our part, as we wanted to convey immediate, passionate, and timely responses. We wanted to know how our colleagues in religious ethics were digesting, collating, and imagining these global events. When we embarked on this project, we knew that we could not cover every topic or every perspective. These short essays are not intended to be the final words on this topic. Rather, we hope that they will spark conversations among our scholarly community and lead to fruitful scholarship in the future. We also anticipate that these short essays may serve as useful tools in the classroom, as they reinforce our sense of the field as broad, interdisciplinary, and vibrant.*

—The Editors

While we were cooking dinner a few weeks ago, I observed to my wife, “White liberals are really scared of coronavirus.” She responded, “Well, they aren’t allowed to be scared of Black people anymore.”

We have all known times in our own lives where we are uncertain and times when we, individually or collectively, have been surprised. There have been times when we have had too many options, or no options at all. There have been times when a healthy relative or friend suddenly faced a grave illness, when natural disaster struck, or when an election that all the experts thought would go one way went the other way. But the present moment carries with it a level of uncertainty that few of us have ever known. We knew there was a disease, but we did not know exactly how it spread, how severely it would sicken, how it could be treated, or how it could be prevented. And the stakes are extraordinarily high: life or death for ourselves and those we love.

Uncertainty is not a brute fact. In recent years, uncertainty has been produced by reactionary forces to defend the interests of the wealthy and powerful. They charge that there is no consensus about why the earth is warming. They charge that a terrorist attack may happen at any moment; a generation earlier, a nuclear attack. They charge that routing money through the mysterious machinery of government may produce waste whereas keeping money in the hands of citizens or private charities gives us confidence about where it goes.

Expertise is supposed to counter the political mobilization of uncertainty. Scientists, economists, and intelligence professionals give reasons and arguments that quiet uncertainty, or at least solidify it into probabilities. Experts can tell us for certain that the climate is warming because of human activity, can name the best practices for minimizing the risk of terrorist attacks, and can explain how government expenditures benefit the common good. Experts may disagree with each other, but except for a few outliers (pseudoscientists mobilized by political reactionaries), they participate in a common conversation that is tethered to knowledge about the world.

The liberalism that is regnant in the North Atlantic—white liberalism—achieves its self-confidence by means of expertise. There is uncertainty in the world, but there are also authorities who can name and contain that uncertainty. The task of political leaders, at their best, is to sort through what those authorities say in order to respond to the most pressing problems of their constituents. Regardless of party name and official ideology, this has long been the consensus view in mainstream North Atlantic political discourse. Only a very few dissenting voices explicitly embrace putting one's hand on the scale in favor of tradition over present authorities (conservatism) or overriding present authorities with a future vision of justice incommensurable with the world of the present (radicalism).

Regnant liberalism is twinned with regnant whiteness. Each sets a horizon of possibility that promises universality while in fact excluding or managing some. Those who do not accept the authority of experts, tethering political discourse to the world, are excluded from liberalism; so are those who do not accept the norms of whiteness. Whiteness, like liberalism, manages uncertainty: the meaning of whiteness is, fundamentally, mastery. From the primal scene of whiteness, in slavery, to the afterlives of slavery today in police violence, microaggressions, and environmental racism, whiteness is concerned with establishing a well-ordered,

predictable, controllable world—pushing uncertainty onto the lives of others. Not only is racism heightened “vulnerability to premature death,” as Ruth Wilson Gilmore famously asserts (2007, 28), but it is heightened vulnerability as such, heightened uncertainty.

In short, liberalism and whiteness are habits of thought and practice for managing uncertainty. They are quite good at this, but today face unprecedented challenges. The economic crisis of 2008 brought difficult-to-manage uncertainty, opening up possibilities to the left and right of liberalism, and outside the scope of whiteness. The current pandemic brings a tsunami of uncertainty: economic uncertainty an order of magnitude greater than the Great Recession, social and political uncertainty as institutions strain and fail to respond, and existential uncertainty as we each confront unexpected, uncontrollable sickness and death.

In this context, we witness the death throes of the old regimes for managing uncertainty. We see compulsive attachment to statistics, data, and expert advice. We see absolutist proclamations from those who ostensibly renounce absolutism: about mask-wearing, social distancing, and about what activities are licit during the pandemic. When protests against anti-Black police violence erupted across the US and beyond, suddenly the pandemic absolutism faded (or was displaced to Confederate monuments and anti-racism reading lists). Then it returned with a vengeance, fueled by white-collar workers’ worries about returning to work and the failed virus containment policies of Southern and sun belt states. Now, with white liberals unable to push uncertainty onto marginalized people in general and Black bodies in particular, pandemic absolutism is held even more tightly.

Fear appears to naturally follow from uncertainty: this is the engine that fuels liberalism and whiteness. But there is nothing natural about the flow of fear from uncertainty. It appears natural from the perspective of privilege, the unspoken condition of liberalism and whiteness. (Indeed, reactionaries manufacture uncertainty about expertise and channel it to fear while liberalism and whiteness manufacture and channel uncertainty as such.) For those without much to lose, for whom uncertainty is already a daily reality, the tsunami of uncertainty brought about by the pandemic is but a somewhat larger-than-ordinary wave, not eliciting fear and overwhelm. Outside of gated communities, literal and metaphorical, uncertainty is the condition of life, not the occasion for existential fear. From this perspective, coping with uncertainty, which is to say living, requires tools, sometimes those of experts, sometimes those of neighbors and loved ones, sometimes those of ancestors. Put another way, for reactionaries, expertise is rejected; for liberals, it is fetishized; but for marginalized communities it is democratized, deployed pragmatically.

At its best, religious ethics reflects on life with uncertainty, when the possibility of worldly certainty is foreclosed. At its worst, as a project of liberalism and whiteness, religious ethics moralizes, promising certainty, relishing expertise. The current pandemic may force a cleavage in the field. Religious ethics that involves shrill cries for certainty will become increasingly detached from the social and political world we inhabit. Religious ethics that takes uncertainty seriously

will develop in dialogue with the experiences of marginalized communities and non-liberal political movements. This is the risk brought about by considering ethics beyond a secular horizon, considering authorities beyond the world: it can lead toward humility or arrogance.

—*Vincent W. Lloyd*  
*Villanova University*

On the morning after protesters decrying police brutality against Black people clashed with police in dozens of US cities, my local paper had a large, front page headline declaring “We’re all in this together.” “Really?”, I thought. The irony was painful, but the issues this common pronouncement raises are nevertheless quite significant.

It is tempting to denounce this phrase as a misleading bromide, particularly when applied to the United States in the time of COVID-19. A friend on Facebook did just that, claiming that it is obviously false that we are in this together, or else people wouldn’t be hoarding food and toilet paper, and relying on underpaid workers to deliver things they need to their door. More specifically, the effects of this pandemic are notably differentiated. The virus afflicts the old more intensely than the young, and it infects people who are non-white and/or poor more severely than middle-class white people who can telecommute. Her point was that claiming “we’re all in this together” papers over these differences and ignores them, while making relatively comfortable white people feel warm and fuzzy about their imagined American community, while still sticking others with the most dangerous work.

Almost all normative discourse can be used and re-used for a variety of purposes. In this case, while “we’re all in this together” certainly could be used to distract us from our complicity with structural evils in society, it seems to me that when people use this phrase they are usually exhorting each other to come together in some substantive way, and care for their neighbors and fellow citizens. The exhortation is needed because people are all too frequently selfish and fearful, especially in conditions of danger and scarcity, all of which stokes our tendencies to hoard necessary items and shirk our duties to care for others. Moreover, the phrase also serves as a reminder of some important facts: that all people depend on each other in myriad ways, and that the virus can be transmitted to and by any of us, regardless of how sick any individual becomes.

“We’re all in this together,” in other words, raises a classic issue in religious ethics, that of moral anthropology. What is human nature, and what are the purpose(s) of human life? These questions are to some degree scientific, concerning the nature of human biology, for example, but most answers to these questions involve ethical visions founded in a religion, or functionally analogous religion-substitutes.

To take an example relevant to the United States, the many variations of Christianity that have developed over time provide a range of answers to these questions. Some central Christian tropes highlight the social nature of humanity,

and the need to cooperate with and care for each other, especially in times of need. To take some obvious examples, Paul's image of the church as the "body of Christ" made up of many "members" working together to glorify God highlights the way in which Christians, at least, are supposed to be "in this together" whether or not they are Jew or Greek, enslaved or free (1 Corinthians 12:12–26). And the story of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus told to explain what love of neighbor requires, enjoins listeners to care for strangers in need, even at great personal cost (Luke 10:25–37).

But there are other strands of the tradition that arguably emphasize individuality, and the very different destinies that await different people. Some are saved, some are damned, and for many Augustinians, at least, this is how God has justly arranged things. So one might ask whether salvation is properly thought of as individual, even if each of us is commanded to love our neighbors, or as communal, so that only the community as a whole can be righteous or justified in God's sight? Different Christianities propose diverse answers to this question.

Comparative religious ethics helps highlight the range of possible conceptions of moral anthropology, showing that sharply individuated anthropologies are only one end of a spectrum. It can also show how scriptural and theoretical formulations condition people's embodied habits of living, if we take an appropriately broad look at what moral anthropology might involve. One can thus expand questions of mutual responsibility by looking at religions other than Christianity. Are our lives (and salvation) fundamentally an individual matter? Or for anyone to save themselves, do they simultaneously need to save their families, their cultural group, all of humanity, or perhaps all sentient beings everywhere?

Adherents of Confucianism, for example, have developed relational conceptions of personhood. On this sort of conception, individual character, while important, is always enmeshed in and responsive to the relationships in which one participates—within the family above all, but also in the community, the state, and even the cosmos. In the early tradition, texts such as *The Great Learning* argue that cultivating one's own character is the essential "root" of a flourishing family, community, and state, which in turn provide necessary conditions for self-cultivation. The similarly early text *Mengzi* discusses the "five relationships," each with distinctive virtues, that structure human life and make possible a good and flourishing life for anyone (3A4). Only by caring for others can we possibly care for ourselves, on this sort of vision.

In the later tradition, under the influence of Buddhist ideas, the sense in which individuals might be part of something larger only grows more robust. The Ming dynasty Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming (1472–1529), for example, suggests that people actually "form one body with Heaven and Earth," even if many do not properly recognize this fact. Because, according to Wang, each of our minds is at root identical with the "principle" (*li* 理) that structures everything in the universe, compassionate action to help other creatures and things is as natural and sensible as caring for a part of our own body when it is injured or endangered. We might note that this use of the "one body" metaphor emphasizes a fundamental

oneness with all things and people, in contrast to Paul's counsel that we should each accept our place as a particular part of the body of Christ, with a specific function, however humble.

Embracing Wang's sort of vision, that all things are one, including us, leads to a passionate sense of mutual participation and responsibility. And all the religious views I've discussed are obviously a far cry from the sort of individualism or libertarianism that refuses all mutual responsibility beyond conscious agreements to cooperate with others. They also conspicuously refuse to separate humanity into different races with supposedly different natures, although there certainly are religious views that make such distinctions (see, for example, Johnson 2004). In any case, a serious encounter with religious ethics can help call into question the adequacy of any vision of society that insists on a foundational individualism or ethnocentrism in ethics and politics. Perhaps if we Americans can give up our racist and individualist illusions, we might actually live more as if "we're all in this together."

—Aaron Stalnaker  
Indiana University

Public health is best promoted when citizens voluntarily follow preventive measures without government coercion. Wearing a face mask or covering is a case in point. Some people resent government-mandated face-masking as an intervention by a paternalistic government into a citizen's private life. Four months into this epidemic, some US citizens are still strongly resisting mandatory face-covering in public places because they resent a "nanny state." The fact that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the US Surgeon General, and Dr. Anthony Fauci (the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases) all reversed their position from *discouraging* people to wear masks in public places to *encouraging* them to do so only adds to the suspicion that the reversal was driven by politics. After all, by early July 2020, President Trump had neither advocated wearing face-masks, nor worn a mask himself.

Religious ethics can make a significant contribution if it can persuade citizens that voluntary face-masking is the right thing to do, regardless of what the government says. This has been the case in Hong Kong.

In Western liberal societies, many embrace the two key theses of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*: (1) our conduct can be divided into self-regarding and other-regarding acts; (2) while other-regarding actions are to be regulated by the principle of harm, self-regarding actions, "the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign" (Mill 1975, 11). According to this way of thinking, risky behavior in the middle of a pandemic—such as going to a crowded event without face-masking—is self-regarding and so should be completely free of compulsion. Mandatory face-masking is considered an aggressive and dangerous extension of automobile-seatbelt and motorcycle-helmet legislation.

Unlike Western liberal individualism, which sees the self as separate, disconnected, and atomistic, Confucianism sees the self as relational and dependent. Each relationship—family, neighborhood, community, society—contributes to the development of the overall constitution and identity of the self. Some Chinese philosophers have translated *ren*, the supreme virtue advocated by Confucius, as “co-humanity.” Instead of stressing individual independence, Confucianism emphasizes interdependence. Whatever affects me will affect whoever is connected with me (Tu 1984, 5; Lo 2016, 90–95). On this account of personhood, the distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding conduct is fuzzier than Mill and his defenders would admit, especially in public health issues.

From this Confucian ethical perspective, risky behavior does not affect me alone; it affects all significant others with whom I have contact. In the time of COVID-19, risky behavior affects the entire community, especially health care workers. The rampant spread of the virus and the insufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE) puts health care workers’ lives, as well as the entire health care system, in danger. The emphasis on interdependence rather than on independence is evident in the way the people of Hong Kong reacted when the pandemic started in mid-January 2020. For example, when Hong Kong experienced a second surge of confirmed cases due to a large number of overseas students returning to Hong Kong (mainly from the UK and US), healthcare workers worried about the impact of such a surge on our health care system. To motivate citizens, they produced dozens of pictures of a public hospital doctor holding a poster proclaiming “I stay at work for you. You stay home for us” (Grundy 2020). Citizens of Hong Kong responded well to this message of interdependence.

Face masks had not been common in Hong Kong before the coronavirus. We first wore masks during the 2003 SARS epidemic. From then on, people would wear masks when they were sick and in public. With COVID-19, local medical experts immediately explained to citizens that universal face-masking was a way to prevent asymptomatic virus-carriers from infecting others. People complied because this is good citizenship. In addition, we practiced personal hygiene and kept social distance for the same reasons—for our own sake, for the sake of not infecting our family members, and for the sake of not overwhelming the hospitals. Communal solidarity is more valued than individual freedom.

As a result of the self-awareness of citizens and the prevalence of the Confucian view of personhood, Hong Kong has so far obtained very good results without a government-enforced lockdown or a mandatory policy of universal face-masking. The people of Hong Kong trust public health experts, whose advice resonates with Confucian ethics, even while they do not trust the government. When Carrie Lam, our Chief Executive, once dismissed the benefit of universal masking in a press conference, citizens ignored her.

As of June 30, 2020, there are only 1233 confirmed cases and 7 deaths in Hong Kong, a city with a population of 7.5 million. These low numbers contrast with US cities such as Houston, Texas, where the number of confirmed cases is about 16 times that of Hong Kong, and the number of confirmed deaths is 32 times that of

Hong Kong. The high numbers in Houston are due both to public policy and to ethos. The ethos of Houstonians, I submit, is different from that of Hong Kong Chinese, who are still influenced by Confucian ethics.<sup>1</sup>

—Ping-cheung Lo  
Hong Kong Baptist University

Why did the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis lead to sustained, massive global protests against police brutality, and the introduction of comprehensive legislation to reform criminal justice? George Floyd's death came, to be sure, on the heels of other shocking killings—those of Ahmaud Arbery, killed by neighborhood vigilantes while jogging, and of Breanna Taylor, shot at least eight times by police who stormed her apartment in search of a drug suspect. But these killings were only the most recent in a long string—indeed, an unbroken chain—of such killings, which capture headlines and elicit protests and soon, all-too-predictably, fade from attention. We can also point to the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, which, together with increased usage of police body cams and the ubiquity of cellphones and thus of video evidence of police crimes, has made these killings more visible. Whites previously regarded police killings of Blacks as anomalies, accidents, or at worst evidence of a few bad apples. These perceptions have started to shift. As of May 2020, 57 percent of Americans believed that police were more likely to use excessive force against African Americans; in 2014, only 33 percent of Americans had this perception (Walter 2020). This is a dramatic change.

These are important factors. Were it not for the Black Lives Matter movement, for sustained organizing against police brutality that has been mounting over the past seven years, for the videorecording of Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck, and for the viral spread of that video over social media, we would not have seen the protests gather momentum as they did.

But there is more. And this more has to do with COVID-19, with vulnerability, and with empathy. At the time of George Floyd's killing, the nation, together with much of the world, was just beginning to emerge from months of quarantine. Evolutionary anthropologists today call us hyper-cooperators; long before, Aristotle called human beings social animals. And in Genesis God declared it not good for the human to be alone. We thrive in company with one another, with family members, to be sure, but importantly also together with larger social groups.

We need not whitewash this sociability; its dark side is our deep-seated tendency to vilify both in-group deviants and members of out-groups. Racism is one particularly persistent expression of the dark side of our hyper-cooperativity. Human beings have impressively expansive and flexible capacities for empathetic understanding, but these are not extended uniformly in all directions. We predictably foreclose the

<sup>1</sup> It is also worthy of note that not only do some people in the US and UK not bother to wear face masks, but they are also very bothered by someone wearing a mask in their vicinity. Hence early in the pandemic, there were incidents in both countries of racist attacks against Asians wearing face masks.

extension of empathetic concern to those we perceive as other. If we do not literally deny their humanity, we very often judge them to be bad, sick, or perpetually immature. We judge them not to suffer as we do, not to feel as we do. Or we excuse the limits of our moral concern by making them responsible for their own suffering.

The spring of 2020 was a time of immense social upheaval and disorientation: months of quarantine and social deprivation, loss of income and work for many, heightened fear of illness joined with economic pain and insecurity and extended illness, and looming over it all a sharpened awareness of mortality.<sup>2</sup> We know from past pandemics that situations like this elicit a predictable array of responses: paroxysms of planning, defiantly risky behaviors, remarkable acts of self-sacrifice, outpourings of generosity and solidarity, scapegoating and finger-pointing. It is not surprising, then, that months of careful quarantine gave way overnight to massive assemblies. George Floyd gasping for breath vividly reminded us of Eric Garner's 2014 death, and of the millions of Black Americans who symbolically struggle to breathe in a systemically racist society. Chauvin's knee on his neck embodied white domination. But not just this; in a context of shared and heightened vulnerability, George Floyd, calling for his mother, was any of us and all of us, bewildered, forlorn, alone, with familiar routines upended and the taken-for-granted texture of our lives lying in shambles around us.

Augustine in his sermons often addressed the wealthy in ways that powerfully exposed shared vulnerability (Herdt 2015). It was insufficient simply to appeal to the wealthy to give generously of their abundance, and insufficient, too, simply to emphasize the need and suffering of the poor. What was critical was eliciting recognition of fundamental equality in vulnerability and dependence on God. Grasping the human tendency to attend to the minute details of our own pain and lack, while failing utterly to be aware of the experiences of those we perceive as other, Augustine asked the wealthy: "How can you have the face to ask your God for something if you don't take any notice of your equal? . . . I'm not asking what you are like in your clothes, but what you were like when you were born. You were both naked, both feeble, both beginning a miserable life, and so both crying" (Augustine 1991, 145 [Sermon 61.8]). Again and again, Augustine underscored shared nakedness at birth, shared weakness at death, common sinfulness, all that might dismantle barriers to sympathetic identification (Augustine 1992, 246–47 [Sermon 123.5]; 1990, 162–63 [Sermon 33A.3]; Augustine 1993, 181–82 [Sermon 259.5]). His goal was not merely the redistribution of wealth. It was to build a new form of human community, one that cut across ordinary patterns of affiliation and identification, patterned on and empowered by divine life. In doing so, he took himself to be following Jesus, who had called his followers to love their enemies, and who had challenged them to imagine a good Samaritan, to whom they might become vulnerable enough to accept aid.

<sup>2</sup> Here too there are striking racial disparities. As of June 2020, African Americans were twice as likely to die of COVID-19 as white Americans, and the unemployment rate for Black Americans was 16.8 percent, compared to 12.4 percent for white Americans (Stolberg 2020).

Empathy is a powerful force; it is also fickle and fleeting. Because it can capture our imaginations and emotions, it can initiate change—the expansion of our visions for human and creaturely flourishing. Only institutions can sustain these changes. As they do so, new patterns of identification and affiliation form, new outgroups and new notions of inner deviance arise. Christians built an array of institutions to care for the poor and the sick, transforming the face of the ancient world. They also went on Crusades and burned witches. This side of the eschaton, the work is never done. Wash, rinse, repeat: attend to our common vulnerabilities, engage the transformative power of disruptive empathy, build the best institutions we can, and keep watch for their failures and exclusions to emerge into view (see West 2006).

—Jennifer A. Herdt  
Yale Divinity School

In mid-March 2020, the University of Virginia School of Medicine cancelled clinical rotations for all students in the classes of 2021 and 2022—over 300 students altogether—because of a severe shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for clinicians and hence for trainees in the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the medical school urgently needed new online courses. So within a few days, Marcia Day Childress in health humanities and I created a new required two-week course, “Confronting Epidemics: Perspectives from History, Ethics, and the Arts.”

Focusing on plague in the medieval and early modern periods, cholera in nineteenth-century London, the influenza pandemic in 1918–19, HIV/AIDS, and COVID-19, this course considered three major ethical issues: (1) health care professionals’ responsibilities to care for victims in a pandemic, even at some risk to themselves—for example, treating victims in the little understood Black Death, or patients with COVID-19 without adequate PPE in 2020; (2) the use (for instance, in 1918–19 and now) of nonpharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) such as social distancing, limits on group gatherings, quarantine, isolation, face masks, and determining whether these should be voluntary or mandatory; and (3) deciding who should receive scarce resources, such as hospital beds and nursing care in 1918–19 and intensive care and ventilators in the current pandemic.

In light of this experience, as well as earlier courses I taught on confronting plagues, I can safely say that societies rarely, if ever, learn the lessons they should from prior outbreaks, and they invariably repeat many earlier mistakes. And yet each new epidemic or pandemic has what Yale historian Frank Snowden calls its distinctive “personality” (Gonzalez 2020), which includes characteristics that require distinctive and even novel responses.

The novel coronavirus with us now is strikingly undemocratic. Just as influenza in 1918–19 struck unevenly, mainly killing healthy adults between the ages of twenty and forty, children under the age of five, and others over the age of sixty-five, SARS-CoV-2 does not equally threaten all ages and all segments of society. Early evidence indicated that older adults and persons with underlying health

conditions were most likely to become very sick and die, even with hospitalization. It quickly became evident that people of color and poorer people were among the most vulnerable in the US, as coronavirus has feasted on health disparities, including comorbidities that make recovery from COVID-19 more difficult.

Ideally, public health works upstream, using preventive and other measures to improve the community's health and to reduce health disparities and inequities. But it is too late for upstream interventions to help people presenting with COVID-19. Thus, bioethics and public health ethics face hard questions about how to proceed with rationing downstream to determine who will receive a particular scarce, but potentially life-saving, medical intervention. One important ethical concern is maximizing good outcomes, such as saving the most lives, what I often call medical utility. Another is the egalitarian principle of equal respect or equal regard, which often supports the use of random selection or a lottery, at least as a tiebreaker among candidates with roughly equal needs or prognoses. A further specification of the principle of utility assigns priority to health care workers and others in specific essential social roles and functions on grounds of medical utility or narrow social utility—e.g. to help maintain social functioning (Childress 2020, 272–88). Many of the important articles early in this pandemic presented similar, though not identical, frameworks of ethical principles and values (Emanuel et al. 2020; Truog et al. 2020; White and Lo 2020; Wikler 2020).

In light of the disproportionately high number of COVID-19-related hospitalizations and deaths among disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities, a challenge quickly emerged (see Schmidt 2020). Should conventional approaches to rationing be modified to include social, corrective, or reparative justice in order to address these health inequities? In response, some ethical frameworks proposed that institutions identify patients from disadvantaged communities through metrics such as the Area Deprivation Index (ADI) in order to increase their chances of receiving scarce treatments, for instance, through a weighted lottery. To take one example of this approach, in Pennsylvania, the Department of Health and other state departments and agencies developed an “Ethical Allocation Framework for Emerging Treatments of COVID-19” (Pennsylvania Department of Health et al. 2020). Among its several values are community benefit, equal respect, individualized assessments, and what I have called narrow social utility or instrumental value. Negatively, it rules out discrimination based on irrelevant characteristics such as age, disability, religion, race, and ethnicity, among others. Positively, it aims to provide meaningful access to all in need, and at the same time, still on the basis of equal respect, “to proactively mitigate health disparities in COVID-19 outcomes” (Pennsylvania Department of Health et al. 2020). This mitigation strategy goes well beyond most approaches to rationing scarce health care resources, even though elements can be found in organ allocation policies, for example. It embraces a weighted lottery among patients who meet clinical eligibility criteria for a particular resource such as the antiviral drug remdesivir, giving heightened priority to individuals who live in disadvantaged areas as indicated by an ADI score of 8–10 (these scores fall between 1 and 10, with 10 being the worst).

Essential workers—broadly defined—also receive priority in a weighted lottery. Patients whose chronic end-stage conditions indicate that they would be unlikely to live longer than a year with treatment are still entered into the lottery, although assigned lower weights.

This ethical framework represents an important symbolic commitment to social, corrective, or reparative justice in rationing, a downstream response to health inequities. However, difficult questions remain, and much more work is clearly needed. One question is whether the ADI applies accurately and reliably for comparative purposes at the level of individual patients. Another is whether its use can and should extend across all possible scarce public health and medical interventions. For instance, the use of the ADI may appear unfair if applied in critical life/death decisions about ventilators.

In struggling through—or, better yet, in preparing for—a public health crisis like this pandemic, public engagement is crucial to the process of developing ethically acceptable rationing criteria, including mitigation of the effects of health disparities and inequities. It is also vital for engendering and maintaining the public's trust. Such trust is essential for the public's cooperation with public health measures, including acceptance of NPIs and a vaccine if a safe and effective one is developed.

—James F. Childress  
*University of Virginia*

Almost sixty years ago, as a first-year student at Brown University, I walked into a seminar led by William R. Schoedel on leading themes in the Hebrew Bible. I had no significant religious background or training, but soon found myself fascinated by my encounter with the Hebrew prophets. Although I didn't know it at the time, that encounter would begin a career that took me through graduate work under John Rawls and half a century of teaching social and religious ethics at Dartmouth College.

What most impressed me that term about the prophets was their ethical passion and insight. I learned that despite common understandings, the prophets were not social revolutionaries. Rather, they were religious conservatives deeply committed to the divinely established constitution of their nation, the body of laws believed by the people to have been delivered at Sinai by their God, Jahweh. Nor were the prophets clairvoyants, individuals endowed with mystical abilities to see the future. Rather they were ordinary mortals equipped with keen social and political insight, able to discern how constitutional violations would cause social divisions, the loss of national strength, and, ultimately foreign conquest and domination.

The constitution that the prophets defended described a roughly egalitarian economic and social order. The Book of Numbers (33:54) depicts a division of the land taking place at the time of the Israelites' entry into it from Jordan in which holdings were given to each of twelve tribes according to their size. Within the

tribes, parcels were distributed by lot to each kin group (*mishpahah*), and within kin groups, to extended families. Once distributed, land became an unalienable sacred inheritance. Through numerous forms of taxation and debt remission, provision was also made for the landless: the Levites (the priests of Jahweh's cult); for non-Israelite resident aliens; for those who through mismanagement or bad luck had fallen into indenture; and for the most unfortunate, the abandoned widow or orphan. Taken in their entirety, these provisions delineate a progressive tax system with significant economic support for the least-off members of society (Green 2019).

This is the system that the prophets defended. Frequent targets of their denunciations were those who amassed landholdings at the expense of economically distressed kinsmen. Isaiah of Jerusalem typifies this protest: "Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land" (Isaiah 5:8). In this context, we can understand the curse uttered in Deuteronomy against "anyone who moves their neighbor's boundary stone" and thus disturbs the ancestral inheritance (27:17; see also 19:14). In the prophetic and later texts (Hosea 5:10, Proverbs 23:10), the moving of boundary stones becomes synonymous with willful subversion of the just economic order. In a bitter lament, Job echoes the prophets when he sets the moving of boundary stones at the top of the long list of transgressions, from oppression of the widow, orphan and needy, to theft and murder, that he accuses God of not acting swiftly enough to punish (Job 24).

The prophets watched as Israel lost its constitutional footing in the quest by individuals or cliques for power and wealth through idolatrous experiments with foreign gods. Class divisions increased, rulers acted selfishly and corruptly, and the nation's waning unity ultimately invited foreign conquest. The prophets saw all these developments in terms of divine punishments. Even nature would turn against the wayward people. On the eve of the Babylonian exile, the late prophet Jeremiah, speaking as Jahweh's prosecuting attorney, depicted the fate that his prophetic predecessors had long predicted (34:17): "Therefore this is what the Lord says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim 'freedom' for you, declares the Lord—'freedom' to fall by the sword, plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth."

If I were to sum up the prophet's message, I would borrow a phrase from our current street protests against racial injustice: "No justice; no peace." No matter how large or powerful it is, a society cannot survive if it fails to affirm the dignity of all its members and protect the lives and well-being of all its citizens, including the least off.

We are a long way from the Babylonian exile. We no longer all share the religious confidences that animated the prophets. But the events of the past half-century bear out their certainty that there cannot be peace or national flourishing without justice. Now, in the midst of a terrible pestilence, the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to take stock. As I look back on the decades since I took that

first-year seminar, I see some progress but also a great degree of erosion in our national integrity and commitment to social justice.

The progress is easy to sketch. It stems from the revolutions begun by the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s. Those stirred our awareness of racial injustice, and began the work of repairing it, even if real progress in doing so was slow and often non-existent. The death of George Floyd starkly illustrates how much remains to be done. These struggles for justice also sparked other movements toward equality for women and for LGBTQ people. Notable, too, was the reform of our immigration system, ending decades of discrimination against immigrants from non-northern European nations and starting us on the road to the rich national diversity we now experience.

But the steps backward have been equally or more significant. They include a deliberate political turn by the Republican Party to racist elements in the South (Richard M. Nixon's "Southern strategy" in the 1968 US election), and with that the slow adoption by one of our two great parties of backward-looking cultural policies, from the host of patriarchal attitudes and policy stances to the rejections of science. George Wallace may have lost his election, but ironically, his spirit lives on today in the party of Lincoln.

The leading event in the economic sphere was the profound retreat from progressive taxation begun under the Reagan presidency and accelerated under every subsequent anti-tax Republican administration. With that retreat, revenues that were once available to fund vast infrastructure projects benefitting all classes like the interstate highway system came to an end. Ill-considered wars in Vietnam and the Middle East further sapped revenues available for social purposes and, paradoxically and sadly, strengthened the attractiveness among all classes of the anti-tax message. With the weakening of labor unions as a result of deliberate policies as well as globalization, income inequality grew. In our rust belt cities, self-destructive anger and resentments festered.

The result of all this was the recent election of a president and administration that reflected and aggravated all the weaknesses in our society. Tax cuts accelerated and prevented further investment in the social programs, from education to health care to infrastructure improvements, that were needed to lessen the class divide and ease the anger and hatreds building up among those left behind, whether white or black. This same anger was self-destructively turned against the least of the least, those new immigrant "resident aliens" who perform much of the hard labor in our society. And the disdain for science was fully marshaled, first to combat the climate science that alerts us to impending global disasters, and more recently, to dismiss the warnings about the possibility of global disease transmission and to weaken the agencies established to counter it.

The pestilence that Jeremiah warned of has become our daily reality, one artifact of the national weakening that has followed our slow retreat from social justice and national integrity.

Beginning at least with Martin Luther King, we have had our prophets. But the kind of moral and political sagacity that I first witnessed in that first-year seminar sixty years ago is needed now more than ever.

—Ronald M. Green  
Dartmouth College

The COVID-19 pandemic has made familiar certainties seem suddenly fragile. Over the last few months, the rhythms of daily life have changed with a speed and scale that were unimaginable in advance. Some people have been forced to work in unsafe conditions while others have spent months in isolation—unable to work, unable to travel, and unable to bury their loved ones. The cost of this crisis has been enormous, especially for those who were already vulnerable, and there is reason to think that things will get worse. In this context, I think religious ethics can clarify our capacity to endure despite the grief and anxiety that many of us feel. In my view, the discipline of hope allows us to acknowledge our vulnerability while working together toward a more just world.

In the recognition that human understanding is limited, some religious traditions have reflected with great sophistication on the possibility of commitments that persist even when things are ambiguous. In Christian thought, this capacity is often called “hope.” The Apostle Paul writes that “hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with perseverance” (Romans 8:24–25). This suggests that Christian hope is suspended in a state of unfulfilled desire, persevering in the absence of sight.

Later theologians draw on this motif to resist theological complacency. According to Dionysius the Areopagite, because God is beyond sight and understanding, Christian thought must incorporate self-critique. Crucially, however, Dionysian negative theology does not reduce Christian thought to simple silence. Instead, Dionysius speaks of the invisible while insisting that it remains beyond comprehension. In this, he models a faith that does not claim an impossible knowledge, sustained instead by a hope that acknowledges darkness (see Newheiser 2019).

Some scholars claim that Christian hope constitutes a form of certainty (Elliot 2017, 54), but I think this is a theological mistake that is ethically disastrous. Because Christian scripture repeatedly describes God’s actions as surprising, Dionysius insists (following Paul) that the future is rigorously mysterious. Construing hope as certainty makes it brittle, liable to shatter upon disappointment or fade like a feeling. In contrast, understanding hope as a disciplined persistence (rather than an affect or conviction) enables hope to continue even when satisfaction is unforeseeable. For this reason, Christian hope exemplifies the resolute desire required to keep any commitment—personal, political, or religious.

The current crisis makes clear that unjustified confidence can lead to disaster. In March, the president of Brazil dismissed COVID-19 as “the sniffles,” and the US president repeatedly claimed that the virus would simply disappear (Watson 2020; Goldberg 2020). By the end of June, more than 180,000 people had died in the two countries, and the rate of infection was rising dangerously (<https://covid19.who.int>). Nevertheless, many Americans (and a majority of Republicans) reported that they think the worst of the virus is over (Pew Research Center 2020). In a paradoxical echo of those who underestimate the pandemic, two recent studies show that people who view the virus as inexorable are less likely to adopt preventive practices (such as handwashing) that slow its spread (Akesson et al. 2020; Jimenez et al. 2020). It is evidently tempting to assert that the future is certain, whether for good or for ill, but the result can be disastrous.

I think religious ethics can help us understand the hope required to sustain individual and collective action in response to this crisis (Newheiser 2020). On my understanding, hope is a discipline that holds desires which are vulnerable to disappointment. To say “I hope” already acknowledges that one may not get what one wants, but hope does not take this as a cause to quit. Because hope is unfulfilled by definition, it can be painful to maintain, but it also permits us to press forward into the unknown. In a world where everything is unsettled, hope enables us to resist the pacifying pull of complacency and despair.

A great deal remains unknown about the virus and its effects on our societies. In this context, hope allows us to act on the best information we have available while admitting that our understanding is limited. By encouraging engaged humility, hope helps us attend to each other. If a pandemic infection has anything to teach us, it is that each individual has a profound effect upon others. This can be a source of anxiety, but it also offers opportunities for mutual care. Hope makes the risk of community possible, and the communities formed in this way nourish hope in turn. Things may get bleaker before they get better, but hope enables us to work together to make the future better than it would otherwise be.

It is destabilizing to live in a world in which nothing seems certain, but this very disruption suggests that hope need not be limited by what appears to be possible. In the last month, people have protested around the world in response to the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others. The movement for Black lives has mobilized enormous energy, and yet—at the same time—Black and brown people have continued to suffer disproportionately from COVID-19, in the United States and elsewhere (Bassett et al. 2020). Racial injustice is deeply entrenched, but communities continue to imagine unforeseeable transformation (Winters 2016). As I have sought to suggest, we need hope to weather this current crisis, but this crisis also teaches us something important about hope: anything, even miracles, can happen.

—David Newheiser  
*Australian Catholic University*

The COVID-19 pandemic has made ethics more real than trolley problems. To be sure, from questions of medical triage to reopening the economy, Kantians and utilitarians have made their cases, now often forced to engage structural inequalities, complex global networks, and historical legacies that more tidy thought experiments do not confront. But, as with hypothetical counterparts, casuistry has its limits.

Pandemics, like death itself, have also encouraged broader religious and philosophical reflection. Meditations on suffering bodies, solitude, fear, contingency, crisis, and theodicy find a ready audience. Some skeptics make for surprising alliances in the critical assessment of the technocratic regime of experts, the reemergence of the nation-state, and the valorization of biological survival (see Ramos 2020). At the same time, most Americans have identified failures of governments to a much greater extent than previous pandemic attributions to divine punishment or religious minorities (Lofton and Zubrzycki 2020). Governance and demands for accountability, as resurgent interest in political theology has shown, can be a deeply religious matter.

The contested practice of modern humanitarianism coordinates these phenomena—religion, ethics, politics, and pandemic. Religion’s entanglement with humanitarianism is now a central theme in many disciplines, especially anthropology, history, and political science (see Barnett and Stein 2012; Ticktin 2014). Didier Fassin, for example, investigates the moral ambiguity of humanitarian reason and sentiment as a “form of political theology” (2012, 251). Studies like his, and work by religious historians, pose serious challenges to the ever-expanding humanitarian work that many religious communities are deeply invested in doing (see, for example, Curtis 2018). COVID-19 makes these concerns especially salient for religious ethics given the relative neglect of the normative issues raised by the remarkable internationalization and professionalization of humanitarian activity since the end of the Cold War.

Religious ethics has engaged in extensive discussions about the scope of beneficence and justice, the role of charity in religious traditions, and the relation between near and distant neighbors in the provision of care. These classical themes might be connected to recent philosophical interest in relational ethics, effective altruism, and the dilemmas of global justice and cosmopolitan ideals as well as the increased attention to political economy, postcolonial studies, and racial capitalism in religious ethics. But they are seldom linked to our actual world of humanitarian action and the politics of philanthropy and global public health. (For two exceptions, see Hollenbach 2019 and Gregory 2019.) This brief reflection highlights three themes that might affect the way we think about COVID-19 and religious ethics.

*Agency.* Status hierarchy and power dynamics are consistent concerns in humanitarian studies and religious ethics that should be joined. COVID-19 has highlighted ongoing troubles in talking about the agency of the global poor. Even as the virus spread rapidly in Europe and North America, its spread in poorer countries—especially sub-Saharan Africa—was much slower (Moore 2020). It is

tempting to instinctively attribute lower death rates to factors beyond their control: that they have lower population densities, more favorable climates, or less globally integrated economies. Notice that this common first strategy reaches for non-agential explanations. At this point it is unclear how much of this relative success is long-term and agential. But non-agential explanations obscure the fact that, for example, Senegal's government shut its borders quickly, adopted comprehensive contact tracing, and offered hospital accommodation for every patient. It did all of this because it recognized that many Senegalese live in multi-family homes. Liberia instituted contact tracing early on, having witnessed its importance firsthand during its Ebola pandemic.

Modern humanitarianism encourages us to think of donors as agents and recipients as patients. Recipients are identified with their needs. The coronavirus challenges us to move beyond the donor model. Training ourselves to shift subject positions and attend to the agency of the global poor in their creative local experience can help unlearn bad habits donor humanitarianism teaches. This allows us to learn and benefit from poorer nations. The wealthy nations are not simply witnesses of suffering, Good Samaritans, or even robbers. They are among the wounded, with acute disparities in health outcomes given their own domestic inequities.

*Structure.* Critics have long argued that humanitarian aid displaces innovation and thwarts needed political change, with pre-COVID-19 calls to blur the lines between "emergency humanitarianism" and structural development. These issues raise complicated empirical questions as well as larger concerns about the existing global order that scholars of religious ethics should engage. COVID-19 exceeds the capacity of even the massive humanitarian sector (itself an important player in the economies of both wealthy and poor nations). What will the pandemic reveal about the fragility or relative strength of transnational actors like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Health Organization? Religion played an important role in the genesis of these institutions, even as their religious critics today abound on both the left and the right. On a different scale, how will the pandemic impact rates of charitable giving and the functioning of faith-based organizations themselves? Will new activism and digital technologies transform humanitarian work or simply exacerbate current inequities?

COVID-19 has also revealed, for better and for worse, the importance of states. Whatever good non-governmental actors do, crises of a certain scale require governments. Can a new humanitarianism more intentionally work with local communities for better and more stable political arrangements?

*Solidarity.* Researchers have suggested that pandemics can increase feelings of solidarity, even in the context of political polarization. Will COVID-19 help or hinder religious efforts to reimagine a shared humanity? We have noted how donor humanitarianism makes it impossible for wealthy nations to learn and benefit from the aid of poor nations. This removes grounds for solidarity. For us to all be in this together, we must each be able to depend on another during difficult times.

Solidarity is further undermined by the fact that many humanitarian organizations pulled staff out of countries once the coronavirus began to spread. This, understandably, was to protect workers and deflect conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, this highlights the difficulty of solidarity under donor humanitarianism. The flight of aid workers seems likely to reduce social trust (Aly 2020).

COVID-19, like climate change, is no respecter of borders even in an era of social distancing. Donor humanitarianism imagines donor countries as free from humanitarian crises, and thus in a position to disburse aid. With respect to the coronavirus, the United States is decidedly not in such a position. This suggests the need for a new model. This new model cannot stably carve up the landscape as donors and recipients, where donors are free from humanitarian crises and therefore in a position to send aid to recipients, constantly beset by crises. Instead, its structure should aim at fostering solidarity: today, in this way, one country may need our help; tomorrow, in that way, we may be the ones who need help. Transnational cooperation has been a matter of both religious ideals and religious activism. Thinking more concretely about humanitarianism in its broader cultural and political context is an important task for the field of religious ethics.

*Conclusion.* Scholarly discussions of humanitarianism are melancholic, sometimes feeling like an arms race to offer the most cynical interpretation possible. Relentless critique tempts despair. But one need not be thoroughly skeptical of the fundamental nature of humanitarianism to see it as a social practice in need of improvement, even radically so. Neither need one be Pollyannaish about humanitarianism to see in it goods worth preserving. COVID-19 has foregrounded questions that, if considered critically, might teach us about a more just, respectful, and sustainable humanitarianism. Of course, religious ethics too has its limits: it is too early to tell which—if any—constructive changes humanitarian action will assume as a result of this pandemic.

—Eric Gregory and Toni Alimi  
Princeton University

When international borders began closing in Spring 2020, I was preparing to travel in the Jordan River basin with a multidisciplinary team. Our project, Sanctuary Lab, investigates how places regarded as sacred are interpreting and managing planetary stresses, as a way into contextual interactions of religious and ecological change. We were in the midst of a planned four-year sequence, having worked in Bhutan in December 2019 and looking ahead to Ghana in 2021. So an immediate answer to the question of how the pandemic affects religious ethics is one shared by everyone whose research practices involve crossing borders or working intimately with others: coronavirus shuttered our work.

However, this nonhuman actant affords a different chance to observe religious change happening in response to a crisis with the rest of the living world. I here suggest three lines of a pandemic inquiry for religious ethics, each advancing

post-humanist premises learned from research on religion and climate change. And, as with responses to the climate crisis, each supposes that the pandemic responses of marked religious communities (hajj suspended, eucharists altered) may indicate broader cultural pressures that can be illuminated by questions from religious ethics.

1. *How do nonhuman animacies figure in accounts of moral failure?* Attributions of fault for the pandemic sometimes carry cosmopolitical imaginations. Environmental writers observe that human pressure on reserves of biodiversity combined with crowded animal agriculture operations set the evolutionary stage for this pandemic. In this storyline, wrong relation with other animals, and disturbance of those ecological conditions that would minimize contagion, are at fault. Pandemic thus points to the need to restore convivial respect and reciprocity with the rest of the living world. However other writers focus on underfunded surveillance of new viruses and inadequate biosecurity in cross-border commerce. That account of failure focuses on vigilance toward exogenous threats to bounded human order. Other writers attribute the bloom of contagion to acute inequality and inadequate health coverage. In this storyline, human equality plays a role in the sort of biosocial resilience that contains microbial disturbance.

Those stories align with recent ethnographic research on responses to climate crisis. In many different kinds of communities around the world, interpretations about unexpected environmental changes are often explained by a moral failure of some kind. Whether ritual negligence, sexual immorality, consumerist lifestyles, or political corruption, there seems some need to create a sufficiently local narrative of failure that hearers can assume or re-establish responsibility for relations with the more-than-human world. Sometimes these stories impel a community to rethink their understanding of the animacies and powers of the world. Maybe a benign spirit is experienced as angry, or the climate system is animated as Gaia, or, in the other direction, traditional forms of landscape interaction are disenchanting by global systems explanations. Insofar as that kind of interpretive stress is true also for this pandemic, failure narratives offer implicit guidance on how to interact within multispecies worlds, and may give rise to new patterns of perceiving their liveliness.

2. *How does coronavirus construct human moral personhood?* COVID-19 deaths correlate with air pollution, and in the United States air pollution is more likely to occur within brown and black neighborhoods. Somewhat like the structure of a successful virus offers implicit description of the cell it evolved to invade, so does its lethality depict vulnerabilities of the communities it most plagues. Environmental justice scholar Robert Bullard writes that “the coronavirus is like a heat-seeking missile zeroing in on the most vulnerable . . . It’s those same communities where we’ve been fighting against environmental racism for years that are now getting hit hard by Covid” (Lerner 2020).

The perception that the virus aims like a missile for people of color reveals something critical about structural white supremacy. As coronavirus invades the unique metabolism of American political economy, harnessing its transmission

capacities to spread itself, it finds and takes advantage of routes opened by biosocial flows of risk and power. As with the lethal animacies of lead and hurricanes, coronavirus kills along racialized asymmetries in whose lives are permitted to matter.

Appreciating the significance of environmental racism requires a moral anthropology in which personhood is constituted through microbial and ecological relations, and in which concepts of dignity and selfhood extend through the flows of water, soil, and air on which they depend. Yet while ecological personhood has been a basic implication of environmental justice work for decades, it is still poorly absorbed by mainstream work on moral anthropology, which often seems to imagine skin-enclosed selves in elective relations with nonhumans.

3. *What moral shifts may the coronavirus catalyze?* Research on religion and climate has begun reassessing histories of religion with a view to climate pressures. (Perhaps the Little Ice Age played a role in the Protestant Reformation, for example.) An analogous role in conditioning emergence of new social norms may be played by the coronavirus. Consider Nikole Hannah-Jones (2020): “Colossal societal ruptures have been the only things potent enough to birth transformative racial change in this country, and perhaps a viral pandemic colliding with our nation’s 400-year racial one has forced that type of rupture today. Maybe it had to be this way; this deep and collective suffering was necessary for white Americans to feel enough of the pain that black Americans have always known to tilt the scale.”

If Hannah-Jones proves right, if material reckoning with the legacies of white supremacy become a feasible political possibility in the United States in part because of the pandemic, then the coronavirus becomes an unlikely ally of the network of agents long working for reparations. Of course the virus may facilitate other, less welcome forms of moral contagion, perhaps simultaneously. Just so, there is reason to investigate how multispecies knots—entanglements of affordance, conflict, and alliance—influence collective moral shifts.

—Willis Jenkins  
University of Virginia

As the coronavirus pandemic exploded in the United States in the spring of 2020, epidemiologists knew that it was highly contagious and sometimes lethal. They strongly suspected it could be spread by asymptomatic persons, who were more likely to be young. Consequently, beginning in March, governors across the country forced their states into lockdown. Apart from essential workers, most Americans were isolated in their homes with their family members.

While such involuntary isolation was difficult for everyone, it constituted a particular burden for persons of faith, who were deprived of their familiar rituals and cut off from their fellow believers in a time of life-and-death. When religious obligations or customs conflicted with public health restrictions adopted by the

secular government, tensions ensued, some of which rose to the level of physical conflict between police officers and religious believers.

For example, the Hasidic community in New York was particularly hard hit by COVID-19, due in part to their close living quarters and large extended families. Although most members of the community complied with the government restrictions, some did not. After the police were called in to break up a large outdoor funeral procession held for a distinguished rabbi, New York City Mayor Bill DiBlasio tweeted: “My message to the Jewish community, and all communities, is this simple: the time for warnings has passed.” His message provoked anger and resentment in the broader Jewish community, because it was widely perceived not only as anti-Semitic, but also as casting blame upon them for the pandemic (Stack 2020).

Other religious groups also expressed frustration and disagreement with pandemic-related restrictions. For example a Pentecostal church petitioned for injunctive relief from the application of the Governor of California’s COVID-19 executive order, which limited houses of worship to 25 percent of building capacity, up to a maximum of 100 congregants. In a 5–4 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court denied the petition, maintaining that the restrictions were consistent with the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. The majority opinion, written by Chief Justice John Roberts, emphasized two factors: (1) the Constitution entrusts the health and safety of the people to elected officials; and (2) the fact that the order appears to place “similar or more severe restrictions” on “comparable secular gatherings.” In contrast, writing for the dissent, Justice Kavanaugh contended that the injunction should be granted because he views it does discriminate: “the basic constitutional problem is that comparable secular businesses are not subject to a 25% occupancy cap, including factories, offices, supermarkets, restaurants, retail stores, pharmacies, shopping malls, pet grooming shops, bookstores, florists, hair salons, and cannabis dispensaries.”<sup>3</sup> Doubtless more litigation is to come.

Thus far, the public discussions of these issues have been dominated by the voices of political pundits, lawyers, and public health officials. In my view, religious ethicists can make an important contribution to the debate, in large part by uncovering suppressed premises of its prevailing terms.

For example, a key question in First Amendment analysis is whether the government is acting against religious believers in an unjustly discriminatory way. But what counts as unjust discrimination against religion? And when do believers legitimately fear unjust discrimination?

In the case of the Hasidic community, religious ethicists can helpfully highlight the West’s long history of blaming Jews for social problems—including pandemics. We can also emphasize the uneasy fit between the prevailing understanding of religion in the public square and the courtroom, on the one hand, and the life of Hasidic Jews, on the other. Influenced by mainstream Protestantism, most

<sup>3</sup> *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Governor of California*, 140 S. Ct. 1613 (2020).

Americans assume religion is a private matter between individuals and their God. On their view, worship services are beneficial but not essential; moreover, religion can be neatly cabined from the rest of life. None of those assumptions hold true for Hasidic Jews, for whom religion and culture are inseparable, and who are bound by religious law in all aspects of their life.

Unfortunately, this divergence in perspective on what counts as “religious life” significantly complicates the legal question of what counts as “discrimination” against religion. The quarantine orders may be facially neutral. Yet they undeniably have a disparate negative impact not only on the cultural life, but also on the communal religious life of the members of the Hasidic community.

At the same time, the cohesive nature of this particular community means that its leaders have a quasi-political power within its borders that rivals the political power of the secular authorities. Consequently, religious ethicists might encourage secular authorities *to work with* the community’s rabbis to tailor pandemic regulations that are more appropriate and beneficial for their distinct social context. One possibility, for example, would be to create exemptions that would allow young people to attend yeshiva schools during the pandemic, perhaps on the grounds that they are more like home-schools, given the close-knit structure of community life. Working with the Hasidic community to achieve mutually desirable goals of public safety may not be constitutionally required, but in my view, it also ought not to be constitutionally forbidden.<sup>4</sup>

The case of the Pentecostal church raises a different set of issues regarding discrimination. Rather than seeking to have their differences accommodated rather than overrun by neutrality, conservative Christians want to receive what they perceive as “equal treatment.” In the pandemic, this desire has crystalized around the question of what counts as an “essential” service that can remain open throughout the quarantine. To put the point bluntly, why are the services of liquor stores “essential” and church services not?

In my view, religious ethicists can also shed some light on this dispute. They can point out, for example, that the longstanding “culture wars” have fostered a great deal of suspicion among conservative Christians about the good will and even the good judgment of secular authorities. This suspicion leads them to worry that the secular elites disvalue and even deride their religious commitments. At the same time, religious ethicists can raise an important underlying issue: how, if at all ought a state government to take into account “religion” in making decisions that affect public health? Should they adopt the perspective of the most devout believers, treating it as a matter of transcendent, overriding significance? Or should public health decision-making focus entirely on this-worldly needs and desires in deciding what enterprises to open and up and when? If so, should they treat

<sup>4</sup> But see *Board of Education of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet*, 512 U.S. 687 (1994), which held that it was a violation of the Establishment Clause to create a special school district to benefit the Satmar Jewish community. I think this case can be distinguished, provided that the state also tailors quarantine requirements to the special living situations of other groups (e.g., people in nursing homes).

religious services simply as part of a range of associative pursuits that give meaning or pleasure to some people but not others, such as sports and entertainment?

Sharpening if not resolving this set of questions lies at the intersection of politics, law, history, theology, and religion. That intersection is precisely the place for religious ethicists in this time of pandemic.

—*M. Cathleen Kaveny*  
*Boston College*

The impact of COVID-19 on refugees highlights vulnerability as a moral concept, but requires a nuanced understanding of what vulnerability entails. Vulnerability captures the capriciousness of the human condition, or something like the concept of moral luck, but it also refers to a state of being which is created and intensified by unjust social conditions. By recognizing this distinction, we can discriminate between the vulnerability of human beings to suffering caused by a virus, on the one hand, and the particular injustice that groups like refugees face during this pandemic, on the other. The suffering and death caused by the virus, for example, is only exacerbated by the crowded and unsanitary living conditions in refugee camps. In April of 2020 in Greece, five islands with refugee camps held six times the maximum capacity of refugees (Pritchard 2020). In addition to the direct threat COVID-19 poses to the health of refugee communities, many resettled refugees have lost employment and lack reliable access to food due to the pandemic (Gostin et al. 2020). These compounding realities undermine the mental health of refugee populations, and contribute to a general sense of insecurity, fear, and desperation.<sup>5</sup> This public health crisis is accelerating an ongoing political crisis and contributing to increased inequality, suffering, and death.

Hannah Arendt's description of the dilemma of stateless persons foregrounds human vulnerability as the basis for human relationship and political interaction. Human vulnerability follows from ordinary human engagement in the public realm, but takes on a vicious quality when people have been expunged from public political space. Arendt witnessed the genocidal destruction of the Nazis and in the process observed an integral relationship between physical safety and political participation. When people are excluded from participation in the public sphere, their vulnerability increases exponentially. Arendt argued, "To be deprived of [such a space] means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance" (2018, 199). Appearance refers to a person's ability to be seen and heard by others, and thus to receive some social and legal protections.

Serena Parekh (2017) builds on Arendt's thinking to identify two distinct harms displaced persons experience: one involving legal/political harm (rights), and one pertaining to ontological deprivation. It is the latter idea that interests Parekh,

<sup>5</sup> Without an ongoing public health crisis, the mental health of refugees is an under-studied and urgent area of concern. See Rossler 2019.

insofar as it represents “the loss of something fundamental to a person’s humanity” (2018, 83). Parekh further identifies three dimensions of harm: loss of identity; expulsion of common humanity; and loss of agency. She observes that for Arendt, the stateless person’s once-unique identity (dependent on one’s participation in a political community) becomes replaced with the generic status of human being-in-general.

The status of the human being-in-general generates greater exposure to the threat of violence, especially by the sovereign state which has the power to deny the rights of persons who are non-citizens. Lacking the state’s protection, refugees may be forced to reside on the literal margins of society—inhabiting overcrowded refugee camps, or languishing in makeshift prisons on the border. Such status entails a total loss of political agency, often compounded by embodied suffering. Judith Butler (2006) describes this politically induced condition in which some populations are unjustly and disproportionately exposed to injury and death as involving precarity. Butler argues that all human life is marked by precariousness, but precarity specifically refers to the status of those “others” on the social and political margins.

As we recognize that some persons are more vulnerable than others due to unjust power structures and the unequal distribution of resources, we are disabused of a simplistic notion of vulnerability as endemic to all human life. While all humans share susceptibility to injury and death, some groups bear this burden disproportionately due to direct or indirect human influence. Powerful global political actors bear responsibility for this injustice insofar as they generate conflicts producing refugees and asylees. Wealthy Western nations, including the United States, manage and perpetuate systems of national and global inequality in which some groups remain perpetually susceptible to violence. Within the U.S., the pandemic has magnified social, economic, and health inequalities experienced by Black Americans (Rosalsky 2020). In Washington state, migrant Latinx farmworkers in the Yakima Valley have suffered disproportionate rates of infection, as demand for their labor has remained steady but their employers have failed to adapt their working and housing conditions to sufficiently mitigate the spread of COVID-19 (Pérez de la Rosa 2020). To connect the plight of migrant farmworkers with that of Black Americans and refugees is to understand that the increased vulnerability of these communities to COVID-19 is a product of sustained policy choices. Arendt was astute in her observation regarding the relationship between physical safety and political participation. In various ways, each of these groups has historically been denied citizenship rights in the United States—and when they do have rights, these rights have been curtailed by discriminatory practices (e.g., voter suppression)—and they have lacked the ability to “appear” in American civic life as political equals. That these groups endure disproportionate suffering during a pandemic is therefore unsurprising.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need for distributive justice, such as access to shelter, clean water, food, and adequate healthcare (Hollenbach

2020). It reveals the fundamental connection between bodily integrity and politics. Effectively mitigating the harm of COVID-19 requires not only finding a vaccine, but supporting just political policies that will minimize the vulnerability of persons, both within and outside of our national borders.

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An article in *The Atlantic* asks “Is this the worst year in Modern American History?” (Fallows 2020). We were already struggling through a pandemic when we learned about the brutal murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. COVID-19 and the murders of Black Americans by racist law enforcement, however, share more than a calendar year. Both events shatter the myth that our homes and communities shelter us from the outside world. Teaching our children how to navigate public and private spaces safely has become increasingly fraught. For the parents of Black children, it is literally a matter of life or death.

The idea of home as a source of comfort has deep historical roots and holds widespread appeal, but the ability to establish a home is subject to political, economic, and social forces. In the Hebrew Bible, we find the prophet Jeremiah advising his people to make a home for themselves in the Babylonian Empire, to which they have been exiled following the defeat of the Kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce” (Jeremiah 29:5). Jeremiah suggests that by establishing physical shelter and carrying on with the activities of daily life, his people will be able to create—or re-create—a place of comfort amidst a world of chaos.

To create a home, of course, requires more than simply the desire for refuge. There is a long history in the US of federal, state, and local policies that have effectively barred Black Americans from home ownership (Rothstein 2017). Such policies prevented Black Americans from acquiring generational wealth and decimated urban plans that facilitated healthy, cohesive communities. Moreover, for many Black mothers the idea of home as a sanctuary where one could raise one’s own children was simply not economically feasible. Ironically, their employment as household servants often made possible such domestic spaces for white mothers (Coleman 2014). Given racial disparities in healthcare, it is not surprising that Black Americans are dying at a much higher rate than white Americans from the coronavirus (Strings 2020).

I explain to my children that we have a responsibility to wear masks to keep other people safe and not spread the coronavirus. We have a responsibility to ourselves and our families to stay healthy. I remind my thirteen-year-old son that he needs to stay six feet away from his friend when they get together. I also explain to my children in not too graphic terms why George Floyd died; why there are protests happening all across our city of Washington, DC; and why our mayor, Muriel Bowser, painted “Black Lives Matter” in the city streets adjacent to the

White House. My seven-year-old daughter is confused about why everyone can gather to protest while we are still in quarantine.

As parents and the adult members of larger communities, we create moral worlds for children. Intentionally or not, this happens through example and exposure, as well as instruction. Although the ways we guide children are influenced by socio-economic class, education, race, ethnicity, and other factors, it is indisputable that as adults, we profoundly affect children's ways of understanding the community around them, its values, and its crises. Kathryn Lofton observes that scholars "of religion investigate how human beings solve problems in communities and how communities create concepts of the human. In its twentieth- and twenty-first century incarnation, parenting has become such a site of problem solving and human imagination" (2016, 830). When parents insist that we all wear masks, wash our hands, and socially distance, we are not just trying to avoid the coronavirus, we are also showing our children that we value the health of others as well as our own. When we encourage friendships across racial lines, participate in anti-racist activities, and talk frankly about our nation's racist history and current events, we are not just trying to raise informed citizens, we are also showing our children that we value the lives of Black people. We do this even with the knowledge that there are many other families and communities that do not share these perspectives, that do not prioritize these issues, or that do not have the resources to address the pandemic or racism.

The idea that, as parents, we can safely shelter our children in our homes is a myth. Historically, the ability to have a home that effectively functions as a refuge from worries, large or small, has been out of reach for many. Even under the best of circumstances, the world, whether in the form of a deadly virus or a violent police officer, can find its way into our homes and neighborhoods. Our responsibility as parents is not to create for our children an imaginary world in which terrible things cease to exist, but to see these terrible things for what they are, to acknowledge the role of human beings in their creation, and to inspire and sustain our children's moral agency.

—Irene Oh  
*George Washington University*

In March, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic utterly upended the way Americans worked. The changes' breadth and suddenness were unprecedented in the history of the US and possibly the world. More than twenty million people lost their jobs, as the unemployment rate went from a fifty-year low to an eighty-year high over the course of just two months (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Millions began working from home, whether that meant holding Zoom meetings from an office with a green screen or fielding customer-service calls in the bathroom, the only space in the apartment with a locking door. Teachers at all levels had to move their instruction online, and parents became de facto teachers' aides. Workplaces,

and meatpacking plants in particular, became infection hotspots. Everyone along the supply chain, from fruit pickers to warehouse employees to grocery clerks to delivery drivers kept showing up to work, despite their fear of contracting the virus or because they feared losing their paycheck, to keep the rest of us fed. And healthcare workers labored around the clock, often with shoddy or improvised masks and gowns, treating the sick.

The pandemic also upset the distinctions Americans use to assign people moral status based on their work. One of the pandemic's keywords has been "essential worker," a label that governors and mayors use to designate people whose labor everyone else could not do without. Often, the highest-earning workers were the least essential. Meanwhile it became clear that nurses' assistants were indispensable, not to mention parents performing constant unpaid domestic labor. The moral meaning of "essential worker" is flexible, however. It seems like a term of praise, but it could also mean either that you had to show up for work regardless of the risk, or that your bicycle shop could remain open while the jeweler next door could not. Some small-business owners have made a show of defying shut-down orders. In Dallas, a hair stylist went to jail for opening her salon's doors; she quickly became a *cause célèbre* for conservative figures who insisted that all work is essential (Platoff 2020).

"Essential worker" is such a fraught term because, in the American social imaginary, your right to "count" as a full social citizen is contingent on your having a job. If you don't work for pay, then you have low moral status and don't deserve to enjoy the benefits of society. In other words, you lack dignity. This is a longstanding feature of American social thought, dating as far back as Capt. John Smith's command of the Jamestown Colony (J. Smith 1908, 1:182). It has roots in Paul's decree that "anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10), a favorite verse of politicians justifying work requirements for people who receive food stamps.

When tens of millions lose their jobs virtually overnight, and through no fault of their own, the link between employment and dignity begins to look absurd. It simply can't be the case that 15% of the country's working-age adults suddenly had no dignity. A waitress whose employer closed down in March was no less worthy of respect than she was in February. The US federal response to the pandemic's economic catastrophe seemed to acknowledge this fact. The \$2 trillion CARES Act included adding \$600 a week to every unemployment check. This benefit meant that half of the newly-unemployed actually received more than they had been earning at their jobs (Morath 2020). The aid was temporary, lasting only four months. And undocumented workers were ineligible for it. Still, it was a radical shift in how the US government treats work and social citizenship. It acknowledged that people's livelihoods matter, whether they work or not.

The pandemic is no post-work utopia. But its total disruption of ordinary life is an opportunity for ambitious social thinking. If this break in ordinary modes of thought is going to lead Americans to adopt a more universal vision of human dignity, then religious ethics will have a significant role to play in fleshing out and

justifying that vision. Catholic social teaching, for instance, reverses the American ordering of work and dignity. It is not work that gives humans dignity, Pope John Paul II writes in his encyclical on work (1981, para. 6), but rather humans, made in the image and likeness of God, who give work its dignity. Of course, people work for more than dignity. But insisting on everyone's worth regardless of whether they work will lower the stakes of employment. With greater assurance of their moral and social standing, workers can see their labor more in material terms and in doing so, demand better material conditions for it. And those who do not work, for whatever reason, will know they are full citizens of society.

The only moments of sweeping change in American work that are comparable to the current one are Emancipation and World War II. In the former case, millions came out of slavery and gained the freedom to work for wages. The latter inaugurated an era of broad-based prosperity through labor power, including women's labor. Both shifts, of course, only followed periods of great conflict and cost. And their results were uneven and inconsistent. African American workers still earn less, on average, than their white peers; in fact, the racial wage gap has widened in the twenty-first century (Gould 2019). And working-class earnings have eroded in the postindustrial, neoliberal era. Still, the economic and moral effects of these events were enormous; they can inform how we think about the changes we are experiencing now.

A major crisis, moral imagination, and political power: historical precedent suggests that is what American society needs to enact significant change in the role work plays in people's lives. The pandemic is the crisis. Religious and secular thinkers have the imagination. The only question for those who want lasting change is if they have the political power and the will to realize a new vision of work and dignity.

—Jonathan Malesic  
Southern Methodist University

Ethicists have often been tempted—perhaps under the influence of liberal moral philosophy—to focus their inquiry narrowly on individual decision-making. This focus has sometimes led to forms of ethics that are inattentive both to broader character analysis of ethical actors (seeing individual decisions in the context of a person's whole life) and to systemic analysis of ethical problems (seeing ethical actors as responsive to and shaped by the wider social and political contexts in which they act). I am particularly interested in reflecting on the matter of ethical individuation as it relates to food ethics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and more specifically, in reflecting on how ongoing work in religious ethics and food ethics illuminates the practice of baking sourdough bread at home, a practice that has become a minor icon for some people during the pandemic.

Contemporary food ethicists such as Willis Jenkins, Nichole Flores, and Christopher Mayes are worried that a focus on individual food practices may

sometimes obscure larger social and political questions. Jenkins notes that a food-movement focus on community gardens and farmers' markets might pervert its own aims by overemphasizing individual consumer choice (2014). Flores, writing about the enslavement of farmworkers in the United States, sees an important role for what she calls "consumptive solidarity," but she insists that alone it is insufficient and even counterproductive, in that it "tacitly perpetuates the underlying consumption-driven mindset that fosters human trafficking in the first place" (2018, 363). Mayes worries about the danger of food ethics being drawn into a narrow bioethical perspective that overemphasizes "individual autonomy to choose" (2016, 168).

As the pandemic quarantine began, I found that I inadvertently became a bread coach. Having baked sourdough for years, I shared starter with many neighbors and responded to questions from friends and strangers. How often should I feed my starter? Why did my loaves turn out so flat? How can there be so many ways for these three ingredients to go wrong? One friend from graduate school, a scholar of politics and a community organizer, says that pandemic baking has changed his life. I asked my brother-in-law what motivates him to keep baking, since he can buy a good loaf of bread more easily at the store. He told me there is always something he wants to improve next time, a reason for baking bread that struck me for its everyday resonance with Emersonian perfectionism. Jeffrey Stout, following Stanley Cavell, describes Emersonian perfectionism as "an ethics of virtue or self-cultivation that is *always* in the process of projecting a higher conception of self to be achieved and leaving one's achieved self (but not its accumulated responsibilities) behind" (Stout 2004, 29).

I wonder whether the new sourdough enthusiasm can contribute to the food ethics and politics I care about, given that bread baking seems to be the most individual sort of individual food practice. Pandemic sourdough enthusiasm can appear as a "hip foodie" fad of the kind Jenkins warned us about, a retreat from the difficulties of contemporary politics to the privacy of the kitchen, a retreat really only accessible to the relatively privileged, non-essential worker.

And yet, the press that Audre Lorde and Barbara Smith instigated in 1980 to ensure that women writers of color could find a publisher was called "Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press." Smith explained, "We chose our name because the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other" (B. Smith 1989, 11). They conscientiously appealed to the kitchen table as an important site of politics. More practically, Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative, founded in 1967, was premised on the fact that what is now often called food sovereignty—people's power to determine their own food production—is an essential feature of flourishing, just communities. Movements for Black and Indigenous freedom have often drawn on food and farming traditions (White 2019; Mihesuah and Hoover 2019).

When we neglect kitchens and gardens, and the ethics and politics that grow there, we often neglect the meaningful work so frequently done by women of great

power and grace to sustain our communities. I hope that the sourdough enthusiasm we are cultivating now can contribute to local organizations building communities of mutual care. I have been inspired by Jutta Mason's account of her involvement in community activities in Toronto public parks, *Cooking With Fire in Public Parks; What Can Happen in a Neighborhood When You Light A Fire* (2013). I began baking bread in a wood-fired oven at the Fitzroy Community Food Centre in Melbourne, Australia in 2018. The bread project we have ongoing draws people in, encourages them to collaborate across religious borders and other differences, and gives us all a chance to appreciate what we have together. I have found that Mason is right (2013, 17): "cooking with fire in a park draws other people, always. They almost always want to tell you a story of older ways of cooking food where they come from. Hearing stories from your neighbours or from strangers takes more time." It is a different kind of time, Mason suggests, but it is a kind of time that might fund forms of solidarity we desperately need.

Flores's work on enslaved farmworkers suggests that while consumptive solidarity is important but insufficient, communities can build "aesthetic solidarity," which she describes as "the engagement of sensory experience in the cultivation of communities characterized by mutuality, equality, and participation" (2018, 363). Mason writes, about baking bread in wood-fired ovens, "all senses become involved, intensely" (2013, 17). In this, baking bread may—in some circumstances—be an embodied way to build communities of mutual care that are "continuously being reshaped by [their] own aspiration to achieve a higher form of goodness" (Stout 2004, 29).

—Alda Balthrop-Lewis  
Australian Catholic University

Over the past several months, news coverage has traced not only the physical threats posed by the novel coronavirus, but also the mental health strain caused by the death toll, the economic burden, the disruption of mental healthcare routines, and the social isolation from the lockdowns. Experts do not know exactly how the pandemic will affect people's mental health, but some project the possibility of thousands of additional suicides in the years to come. The urgency of this issue is real and widely acknowledged (Carey 2020).

This conversation raises two points for religious ethics. First, it underscores the relative silence with which religious ethicists have treated mental distress and suicidality, including within bioethics. For example, many Christian ethicists have largely ignored mental illness by tiptoeing around it as a special exception to ethics; if a person is mentally ill, then she is taken to exist outside the bounds of rational autonomy and therefore of ethical deliberation (Nelson 2003). Relatedly, many Christian thinkers have largely ignored mental health experts by sundering suicide from mental illness and by fixating on whether suicide is a morally licit act (Gustafson 1984, 187–216; Hauerwas and Bondi 1976). One can easily see that

this approach has dominated the field, especially in the innumerable bioethical discussions of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia.

The general concerns about mental distress and suicidality from the COVID-19 pandemic therefore highlight new avenues for religious ethics going forward. Instead of exploring the moral permissibility of suicide, religious ethicists can start with a different but now commonly accepted paradigm that views suicide as triggered typically by extreme mental suffering. Suicide is less a right that the individual may be justified in exercising and more a tragic sign of the vulnerability of the human psyche in anguish. Mental distress to the point of suicidality is therefore best viewed as a type of psychological “buckling,” so it is most appropriate to mitigate the conditions that are pushing people to this point in the first place. Conversations about the effects of COVID-19 on people’s mental health reflect this sea change; more people today than ever before acknowledge the importance of attending to the health not just of our lungs but also our minds.

Second, religious ethicists are especially well positioned to situate the current conversation about mental health within a longer perspective extending beyond the lifespan of the pandemic. Some of the news coverage has falsely portrayed suicide as an utterly mystifying and intractable consequence of today’s chaos. For example, in late April, *The New York Times* reported the suicide of Dr. Lorna Breen, an emergency room doctor treating COVID-19 patients in New York City, and the article began with a telling quotation from her father: “She tried to do her job, and it killed her” (Watkins et al. 2020). The article reports that Dr. Breen had no known history of mental illness, and then it crafts a spectacularized tableau of the doctor rushing to help COVID-19 patients and ultimately suffering defeat in battle by the enemy.

Though engrossing for its dramatic evocation of war imagery, this framing overlooks the multifactorial quality of suicidal distress as it has been explored in sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, literature, and critical studies. This topic requires dedicated interdisciplinary study that endures beyond the fickle attentions of the media during periods designated as “crisis.” This is particularly the case because many factors that heighten suicidality correspond to disturbing yet “ordinary” social patterns within the United States (Berlant 2011, 95–119). For example, religious ethicists should dissect the particular pressures on physicians that make them, as a group, significantly more likely to experience severe mental distress, suicide, and deep shame about these things.

Further, religious ethicists should examine the broader patterns of mental distress and suicidality in the United States: there are now almost 50,000 suicides per year, making it the tenth leading cause of death. If it is true that suicide results not only from the capacity for self-inflicted violence but also from a deep sense of being a burden and of not belonging (Joiner 2010), then religious ethicists should analyze the structural and social conditions that push people to such agony. What makes entire groups of people feel alone, burdensome, and inured to violence against themselves? How exactly do the oppressive realities of wealth inequality, chronic poverty, lack of affordable health care and housing, environmental

degradation, sexual violence, white supremacist terror, and the prison industrial complex damage the mental state of socially and psychologically vulnerable groups of people? To what extent does this country peddle the punitive and ultimately carceral narrative that your oppression is your own fault? Further, what is the role of religious scripts here? For example, LGBTQ + people have noticeably higher suicide rates than that of the general population. How has Christianity's homophobic and transphobic rhetoric of shame enabled that? In sum, what is happening in this country in "non-crisis," "ordinary" times that pushes people to "buckle"?

These questions take us beyond the immediacy of the pandemic, but that is, in part, my point. When it comes to mental distress, religious ethicists have an opportunity here, not only to see that in this country we are in the midst of a storm, but to identify the conditions that prevented us from preparing for the storm in the first place and to build protective structures for all in the storms to come.

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