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A Christian response to pandemics

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Introduction

The year 2020 has been an exceptional year, with very few people anticipating the wide-ranging implications resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The statistics show the devastating effect of the coronavirus with over 750,000 deaths directly attributable to the virus and over 20 million confirmed cases spanning 213 countries, as of 20th August 2020¹. The whole world has ground to a halt, with forced change to 'normal' livelihoods and it seems inevitable that life beyond COVID will be significantly different to how it was before.

This topic particularly interested me as I am studying in the field of medicine with an interest in global health but also as a Christian. It forced me to ask some of the deeper questions, such as, 'Where is God in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic?' It moved me to investigate whether the Christian faith has sufficient and robust answers to such questions. The world is crying out for hope and meaning and I am convinced the Christian Gospel is more than equal to the task.

Viruses: friend or foe?

The word 'virus' conjures up negative connotations, since it is usually associated with a group of pathological micro-organisms that cause disease and death. But was that always the case? In other words, were viruses intrinsically malevolent from their inception? After all, if we affirm a central Christian doctrine that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth², this must surely include viruses and if viruses are intrinsically evil then it calls into question the goodness of God for including viruses in His creation.

Surprisingly to many, viruses are very much essential to the world's ecosystem. Viruses are non-living micro-organisms consisting of genetic material (DNA or RNA) covered with a proteinaceous coating that reproduce by attaching to target cells and using its 'machinery' to replicate copies of itself. There are over 100 million different types of viruses present on the earth, with only 21 types known to be harmful to humans³ meaning only 0.000021% of all virus types are infectious to humans, a microscopically small percentage.

Furthermore, their role in the ecosystem is more crucial than the reputation often ascribed to them in the media. In fact, virologists say that if all viruses were eradicated off

¹ Coronavirus Death Toll and Trends - Worldometer [Internet]. Worldometers.info. 2020 [cited 20 August 2020]. Available from: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/>

² Genesis 1:1

³ Pollard P. Are viruses actually vital for our existence? [Internet]. World Economic Forum. 2015 [cited 23 August 2020]. Available from: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/are-viruses-actually-vital-for-our-existence/>

the face of the earth, life (including humanity) would be **finished**⁴. How come? For example, in mammals the placenta is one of the essential organs for reproduction. Having a closer look at the gene that codes for syncytin, which is a membrane protein for the placenta, we find that the gene finds its ancestry in retroviruses which incorporated their genetic information by infecting their host genomes long **ago**⁵.

Furthermore, there is a civil war within the micro-organism community where phages (a type of virus) infect bacteria to limit their population in the ocean. Without 'phages, these bacterial populations would exponentially increase leading to the eradication of oxygen-producing plankton from the oceans due to a lack of available **nutrients**⁶. There are multitudes of other examples of how viruses, let alone bacteria and fungi, confer huge benefits to the world's ecosystem. So far from exposing a flaw in God's character, the existence of viruses and micro-organisms in general should increase our awe and wonder of God through His creation.

A Christian response

Phillip Yancey was once asked if he could name one thing the Christian faith offers to the world that the rest of the world cannot. He replied with one word: 'grace'. The Apostle John goes one further when he writes in his timeless gospel prologue 'grace and truth' and they both come together through the one person Jesus **Christ**⁷. Christians can proclaim to the world about Jesus who is able to comfort us with grace and truth in a time of crisis.

The topic of viruses can lead to a lengthy philosophical discussion on theodicy but oftentimes we find that what we want is not necessarily a sound argument that satisfies us intellectually (helpful though that may be) but a presence that satisfies us experientially. Professor John Wyatt once said: "*Suffering is not a question that demands an answer; it is not a problem that demands a solution; it is a mystery which demands a **presence***"⁸. And we find this true, don't we? Sound reasons won't make the pain go away but a friend who comforts us does a great amount **of good**,⁹ both in the short-term and the long-term.

In Christ, we have a human Presence who exercises grace by empathising with us in every way in our **sorrows**,¹⁰ having experienced intense grief and anguish Himself whilst on

⁴ Nuwer R. Why the world needs viruses to function [Internet]. Bbc.com. 2020 [cited 23 August 2020]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200617-what-if-all-viruses-disappeared>

⁵ American Society for Microbiology. "Viruses: You've heard the bad; here's the good." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 30 April 2015. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/04/150430170750.htm>.

⁶ Nuwer R. Why the world needs viruses to function [Internet]. Bbc.com. 2020 [cited 26 August 2020]. Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200617-what-if-all-viruses-disappeared>

⁷ John 1:17

⁸ Wyatt J. Matters of Life & Death. 2nd ed. IVP; 2009.

⁹ Proverbs 17:17

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:15

earth. He also weeps with compassion with those who are going through the most extreme suffering,¹¹ while commanding His people to weep with those who weep¹² for mutual encouragement and comfort. Furthermore, He also reveals to us the truth about this world, that it's not what it's supposed to be like, corrupted by sin and in a trajectory of decay¹³ and yet offering us a certain hope of a new heaven and earth descending from heaven free from sin, suffering and death¹⁴. This is the hope we can offer to the world.

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Coronavirus Death Toll and Trends - Worldometer [Internet]. Worldometers.info. 2020 [cited 20 August 2020]. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/>

2

Genesis 1:1

3

Pollard P. Are viruses actually vital for our existence? [Internet]. World Economic Forum. 2015 [cited 23 August 2020]. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/are-viruses-actually-vital-for-our-existence/>

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Nuwer R. Why the world needs viruses to function [Internet]. Bbc.com. 2020 [cited 23 August 2020]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200617-what-if-all-viruses-disappeared>

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American Society for Microbiology. "Viruses: You've heard the bad; here's the good." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 30 April 2015. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/04/150430170750.htm>.

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Nuwer R. Why the world needs viruses to function [Internet]. Bbc.com. 2020 [cited 26 August 2020]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200617-what-if-all-viruses-disappeared>

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John 1:17

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Wyatt J. Matters of Life & Death. 2nd ed. IVP; 2009.

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Proverbs 17:17

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Hebrews 4:15

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John 11:33-35

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Romans 12:15

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Romans 8:20-22

14

Revelation 21:1-4

¹¹ John 11:33-35

¹² Romans 12:15

¹³ Romans 8:20-22

¹⁴ Revelation 21:1-4