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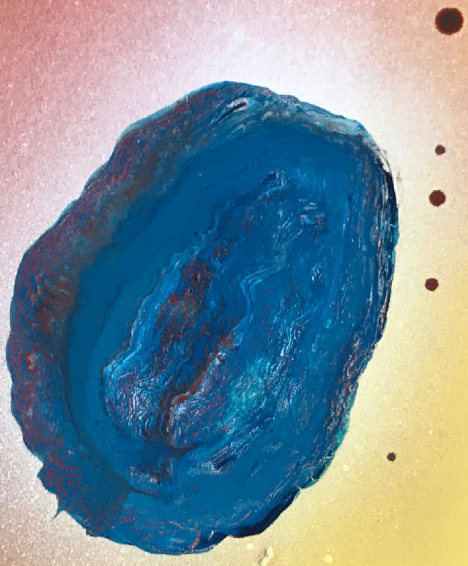

Re-evaluating Nature, the Economy and Life post Corona

CARLOS DE BOURBON DE PARME
SYLVESTER EIJFFINGER
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INTRODUCTION

'EVEN NOW ONE REGULARLY HEARS from Christians how nature is oh-so beautiful and how this beauty testifies to God's greatness and goodness. Dear people, nature is nothing short of terrible, nature is one great suffering(...) What is so good about a creation which houses the most terrible parasites to man and creature alike? What is so good about a creation in which all organisms are terrorized by parasites, including the parasites themselves?'[1]

These words of Maarten 't Hart are irrefutable. Now that the coronavirus is causing a disease which reminds us that life is more fragile than we would want, 't Hart's words would have been almost prophetic had he added 'viruses' after 'the most terrible parasites'. There is nothing good

1 M. 't Hart, *Wie God verlaat heeft niets te vrezen. De Schrift betwist* (Amsterdam, 1997), 7-8: 'Nog steeds krijg je van christenen regelmatig te horen dat de natuur zo wondermooi is en getuigt van Gods grootheid en goedheid. Ach, lieve mensen, de natuur is ronduit verschrikkelijk, de natuur is één groot lijden (…) Wat is er 'zeer goed' aan een schepping waarin de vreselijkste parasieten in mens en dier huizen (…)? Wat is er 'zeer goed' aan een schepping waarin alle organismen geterroriseerd worden door parasieten, dus ook parasieten zelf?'.

about viruses, infectious micro particles that penetrate cells and then use these 'host cells' to attack other cells, if they spread plagues like Covid-19. These viruses lead to too many good people dying. Whole societies are getting disrupted. Loneliness, fear and uncertainty for many, good, people is the result.

What is wisdom in this corona crisis? Wisdom is derived from interpreting past events or from a thought process informed by different perspectives of other people. Yet it is unknown whether the approach we are taking to reverse the crisis is the right one. It is, in fact, many times more difficult to fathom the present than to interpret the past with its fait accompli.

In any case, long before Maarten 't Hart, old philosophers refused to accept the idea that creation is only cruel and chaotic. Augustine observed in a sermon and in his short treatise the *Providentia Dei* (God's Providence) that a flea is excellently put together, a human body is a beautiful system and that everything has a logical place in the order of creation and of nature. At a time when "God" had not yet disappeared from scientific hypotheses, most rejected the belief that creation involved the work of some deranged god, as Gnostics thought, or that creation was a coincidence. However, many also found that life in the dimensions of time and space, the *seculum,* encompassed something very tragic: that everything in the *seculum* is transient, prone to change and that everything ultimately goes to waste. Destruction from war simply helps nature in this regard.[2] For Cicero and Augustine, creation and history formed a fabric (*textura*) in which ugly and beautiful threads accentuated each other, with the understanding that it was the task of ugly and bad threads to emphasize

2 Augustine, *De Ciuitate Dei*, book XIX, passim.

the goodness and beauty of the rest.[3] According to both, evil is useful and necessary to be more grateful for the goodness in creation.

From this point of view, every crisis is an opportunity to further personal and perhaps collective growth or to reach a deeper understanding. In Chinese, the characters *Wei Ji* (危機) stand for 'crisis' and 'opportunity' at the same time. A well-known statement from Rahm Emanuel, one of Barack Obama's chief advisers, was: "You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it's an opportunity to do things you think you couldn't do before". Bearing in mind this phrase raises the question of what we can learn from the coronavirus crisis. Should society and the economy be subject to reform? If so, how should society be reordered? What should we focus on? And what do social reforms have to do with Joseph Schumpeter's creative destruction and the interplay between justice and mercy? How can we live our lives when nature in the form of the coronavirus forces us to take measures that imprison us in our homes? Is the virus a punishment of nature: a punishment we need from a virus which does not need us? Or is it an infectious organic structure built into the creation of God, which forces us back in line with the order of nature when we challenge this order? If one considers it this way, is it a punishment from God?

3 Augustine, *sermo* 360A; cf. A.-I. Bouton-Touboulic, *L'orde caché. La notion de l'ordre chez saint Augustin* (Paris, 2004), 91-93.

TOWARDS A NEW SOCIAL ORDER?

THE CORONA CRISIS SHOWS HOW disruptive the effects of nature can be on society. The reordering of society will be a major challenge in the post-corona age. A great many people have had little or no benefit from the economic recovery after the great financial crisis, and now this crisis comes on top of this. Without bold policy and systemic changes, it will strengthen the divisions in society between those with a good starting position and those who were already behind. The resulting broader sense of unease and uncertainty can lead to a mutinous middle class, with all the socio-economic consequences that this entails. One example is that the stability of the political centre could be affected. Nevertheless, there are a number of views which lead to a proper reordering; visions that each require a certain change in our life choices and lifestyle how we live.

First of all, we see that the corona crisis has given rise to discussions about the conditions that northern European countries want to attach to the European Recovery Fund in the post-corona age. The intention behind these conditions is to ensure that structural reforms will take place in southern European countries to generate the higher growth needed to

lift these countries out of their public debt. Given the corona pandemic has been found to be a temporary emergency, these conditions have been packaged as temporary solutions. As the situation in southern European countries became increasingly worse, the corona crisis offered northern European countries an opportunity to become as good as the father of the prodigal son in the parable found in the New Testament (Luke 15: 11-32). The story is about a boy who asked his father for his inheritance in order to go travelling. Once in a distant land, he lead a dissolute life and eventually fell into poverty. With regret, he returned to his father. To the frustration of the eldest son, who had always been faithful to his father, the father forgave him and welcomed him back with open arms. None of the three characters in this parable fits perfectly the situation at hand. But perhaps the northern European countries can be compared to the perfect eldest son who had always been good, had faithfully fulfilled his duties and never had the shortcomings that his younger brother had. The eldest son never fell short and still feels wronged; so wronged that his younger brother who is in acute trouble – even if it is through his own fault – is denied help by the elder brother. The parable teaches us that while feeling wronged here is understandable, not forgiving can ultimately permanently harm relationships. It teaches us to show mercy first and then justice, second.

Had the father first questioned his distraught younger son how his desperate situation came to be and required his son to get his bookkeeping in order before being welcomed back into the family, the father would have lost him. Thanks to the father's forgiving attitude, this did not happen.

It must be said that the father's mercifulness was certainly in his own interest too. Had he not helped his son, it would ultimately break him, because he would not choose the positive route of trusting in a better fu-

ture for his son and consequently for himself. Again, every comparison between the parable and the matter at hand is imperfect. But in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), known as *The Wealth of Nations,* the founder of economics as a science, Adam Smith, developed the idea that acting out of self-interest ideally benefits the common good. Inversely proportional to his vision, the father acts altruistically and with blind trust because this ultimately also serves his self-interest. Acting on the back of trust is complicated because by doing so one always takes a risk. Nonetheless, avoiding risk and displaying a lack of mercy may ultimately not yield anything at all, except isolation in multiple dimensions of one's existence.

Conversely, the long term requires a different vision and attitude. Had the younger brother's situation been less desperate, then a balance can and even must be struck between mercy and justice, between long-term rights and duties. The corona crisis has also put common European bonds ('eurobonds'), which always will remain a form of debt-sharing, back on the agenda as a more long-term responsibility to be added to the European Recovery Fund. Both short- and long-term measures form, once again, part of a broader discussion on the future shape of the Economic and Monetary Union. Within this debate there is always a search for a balance between rights and obligations when concerning the long-term development of a European fiscal union. The ideal fiscal union should have a structure in which decisions are made collectively on structural reforms in the euro area in order, among other things, to increase the growth potential of the southern European countries, thereby reducing their public debt. A European fiscal policy must therefore aim at structurally increasing growth potential in Europe. At a higher level of growth, debt can be carried more easily. In this path of traditional, long-term structural reforms, which will still have a positive impact on growth,

the pursuit of justice must prevail. For those Euro countries discussing European fiscal union and a European fiscal policy, it will be important to first strive for justice, however utopian this may sound. And if one country has a reputation for fiscal irresponsibility, then justice should prevail above mercy. Here, the crisis offers an opportunity to genuinely strive to do each other justice. Otherwise , by putting mercy first, it would increase injustice and inequality.

Then there is a vision, which does not concern itself with the question of pursuing mercy or justice during crises. Rather this vision, through economic theory, views crises as opportunities. The relevant theory here is that of *creative destruction.* In his magisterial work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (first published in 1942), Joseph Schumpeter argues that creative destruction, the process whereby old ways of doing things give way to new ones, is not only useful but even necessary. Creative destruction is ultimately the only source of economic growth and increases productivity structurally.[4]

This theory may in a sense include an invitation to dismantle our 'just in time' economy intelligently. We have made our production and delivery infrastructure run on limited means to cut costs and promote efficiency. This has impacted our vital sectors particularly. At the beginning of the corona crisis, the wearing of mouth masks in the Netherlands was discouraged in order to prevent panic and above all to prevent a shortage for the healthcare sector. The fact this shortage could occur shows clearly how risky long supply chains are. One solution would be to replace longer supply chains with shorter ones in vital sectors. Something similar can be said about food production chains. The Netherlands exports

4 J.A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London-New York: Routledge, 1982), 81-106 (Fifth Edition: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003).

approximately 75% of nationally produced food but imports much more.[5] The question is, why we don't simply shorten these chains by consuming what we produce domestically? In light of Schumpeter's theory, the disruptive corona crisis can be viewed as the prelude to a process of creative destruction because it offers unexpected opportunities for economic growth through the increased use of, for instance, digitalization, artificial intelligence, and robotization. This is because society was forced to use these new technologies given that physical and real contact was discouraged in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus. This 'destruction' of the old way of doing things implies that companies should not try to save their old business models, but embrace the new models that are emerging in and thanks to (sic) the corona crisis. Schumpeter also argues that governments would do well to stimulate the development of these new business revenue models.

Moreover, in his view, creative destruction leads to the need for a new social contract for the labour market because the segmentation of the labour market into flexible and permanent workers is not only socially unjust, but also no longer efficient economically. Now the corona crisis has exposed the difference between vital and non-vital institutions and professions. Suddenly it became painfully clear how the vital professions (in healthcare, security, and education) have been neglected through decades worth of cutbacks in working conditions and budgets. The social system in which such neglect could happen will become subject to creative destruction if the vital institutions and professions in the post-corona age are reinstated to the level of before the budget-cuts. This creative destruction will translate into new guarantees for the resilience of our

5 Cf. B. Baarsma, *Nederland Voedselparadijs* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Pluim, 2020), passim.

economic and social infrastructure, in which the vital professions are respected.

On the other hand, but not insignificant: non-vital companies and institutions (involved in events and mass tourism for example) should be helped with a bridging loan to aid in adopting the new business models needed to survive in the post-corona era. Nevertheless, these companies should not be protected against market forces in the long term and ultimately have to accept the risk that comes with doing business. This, too, could be the consequences of the corona crisis.

The creative destruction resulting from the pandemic can have very profound effects in all aspects of our society. Yet if the Netherlands and Europe successfully channel the force behind Schumpeter's creative destruction towards good, the corona crisis might turn out as a blessing in disguise despite the great tragedy it caused.

Firstly, creative destruction during the post-corona era may lead to awareness that the division between the haves and have-nots is greater than previously thought and has grown larger after the corona crisis. Secondly, through this awareness society will realize that, as divisions deepen, the middle class weakens and the resulting sense of unease and uncertainty can lead to deterioration of the political centre.

Even so, the corona crisis will prove to be a blessing if the aforesaid understanding of social divisions finally leads to the pursuit of a new type of *social contract*. A social contract which reassures all parties concerned: citizens, workers, entrepreneurs and the government. A good social contract makes everyone resilient and flexible. It is precisely in a crisis that resilience is guaranteed if this social contract offers both security and opportunity, thereby allowing those who are party to it to take on major changes. If only basic guarantees and arrangements are offered, for example a basic income for all, then it is realistic to fulfil them as well. This

helps nurture the credibility of and trust in the government as a partner during and after crises. Resilience is closely linked to flexibility. The virtue of flexibility presupposes the ability of citizens, businesses and the government to adapt quickly and adequately to new developments. The foundation of these two virtues – resilience and flexibility – is reciprocity. This fundamental virtue – which needs us to trust each other – requires citizens and businesses to all contribute to society and thereby keep collective services affordable. It is precisely a crisis that provides us with a chance to rediscover these virtues as forces that make a society good and beautiful.

NATURE AS A TEACHER

'CIVILISATION WILL LEARN NOTHING FROM this virus. For all she wants is return to normality. And this normality comes in the form of cheap flights and cheap latte, Chinese girls sewing our T-shirts in appalling conditions, forest fires of biblical proportions and barrels full of oil. Normality is (...) African children poisoning their bodies while sorting toxic waste sent there from the West, normality is nitrogen pollution, smouldering tree stumps and dying oceans.'[6]

Our relationship with both the less privileged and nature and all life on earth can hardly be more toxic. Consumerism brings out carelessness towards other people and disrespect towards all life in nature.

6 B. van Raay, 'Onze cultuur neemt veel meer dan ze teruggeeft. Interview Paul Kingsnorth', in: *De Volkskrant*, 16 May 2020, 23: 'Niets zal deze beschaving leren van dit virus. Alles wat zij wil is terug naar normaal. En normaal, dat is goedkope vluchten en goedkope latte, normaal is Chinese meisjes die onder bewapend toezicht onze T-shirts naaien, normaal is bijbelse bosbranden en vaten vol olie, normaal is (...) kinderen in Afrika die hun lichaam vergiftigen door het sorteren van plastic dat wij daar dumpen, normaal is stikstofvervuiling, smeulende boomstompen en stervende oceanen'.

Rethinking our relationship with nature and other lifeforms is perhaps a greater challenge than reflecting on the social relationships of the post-corona age. What insights does the corona crisis bring us in relation to the way we interact with nature? And how do these insights contribute to a more respectful approach to all that lives?

Years ago, neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso expressed his regret over the neglect in research on the behaviour of plants by academia. In *Verde brillante. Sensibilità e intelligenza del mondo vegetale* Mancuso could confirm what Darwin already suspected. Plants have amazing skills. They communicate with each other and help each other in finding food. Through emitting odorants, plants can warn each other about hostile herbivores and lure other animals to defend themselves. Although, according to Mancuso, deforestation and other climate disrupting activities cause the demise of many plant species, plants will survive given they make up 99 percent of the earth's biomass. Humanity needs plants, not the other way around. Considering the quantitative insignificance ('quantitativamente ininfluenti') of the human race, Mancuso and many others have long advocated embracing a worldview that is less anthropocentric.[7] As even though we live in the Anthropocene and only make up one percent of biomass, we can largely determine the future of the other 99% of life.

He could also have substantiated this insight with an intuition from Scripture. In Genesis, a distinction is made between *chayyah* – the life of plants – and *chayyah nephesh* – the lives of animals and humans (Gen 1:20, 21, 24, 30; Gen. 2: 7). Hence a difference between the lives of plants and animals (people) exists. But because *chayyah* is used for both forms of life, there is also unity in this diversity. Animals and humans inhale ox-

7 S. Mancuso, A. Viola, *Verde brillante. Sensibilità e intelligenza del mondo vegetale* (Florence-Milan, 2015), 20-70; 128-144.

ygen and exhale carbon dioxide; plants inhale carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen. But everything breathes, and, if it were up to the psalmist, ideally praises the Lord (Psalm 150). Plants, animals and humans are thus seen in Scripture as part of a natural system in which everything is interdependent and while humans are the crowning glory of creation, they are not central to it.

Mancuso's vision shares much in common with those of the stoics, pope Francis, and the psychiatrist Damiaan Denys. All help us to see a very defining cause of the corona crisis. The stoics have already called on humanity to consider itself as part of something greater, nature, and not as the culmination of a creation to be exhausted and consumed. Via the *oikeiosis* theory, the stoics believed that if humans live according to the laws of universal nature then the human race, out of all living beings in the cosmos, would be able to make the greatest contribution towards conserving this nature.

But the opposite also rings true. In his globally acclaimed encyclical, *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis criticized the devastating effects of human activity on the balance of the planet. Among other things, he wrote about the melting polar ice that causes the release of methane gas resulting in the greenhouse effect; about the loss of biodiversity by the destruction of tropical forests and the acidification of the oceans by our industry. In clear lamentations that would make those of the prophet Jeremiah on the misery of his people pale in comparison.[8] The Pope called the demise and destruction of our ecosystems unprecedented: "with serious consequences for all of us". For example, rising sea levels can lead to very serious situations, when we consider that a quarter of the world's population

8 Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 17-61; 101-136.

lives on the coast or nearby and that the majority of our megacities are located in coastal areas.[9]

Well before the coronavirus outbreak, Pope Francis said in *Laudato si'* that climate change, the scarcity of drinking water and declining biodiversity are affecting the poor in particular and will continue to affect the poor disproportionally. Global warming is putting at risk the availability of essential resources. Drinking water and energy will become even more necessary; their quantity will therefore become more limited. With the inevitable price-increase of these resources poor countries will have to be more economical. Consequently, especially in poor and warmer areas, crop yields will be lower, resulting in even greater poverty. All the more so because these climate changes are also caused by the unbridled consumerism of people in rich countries, behaviour the Pope deemed as unacceptable. To him, ecology and social justice, moderation and universal fairness are interconnected.[10]

That is why, in *Laudato si',* Pope Francis explicitly advocates a lifestyle – individually and collectively – and an economy that take into account the pressing social and environmental challenges facing humanity. He underlined the interplay between a serene and balanced personal life and peace on the one hand, and poverty reduction and the preservation of the earth on the other. Justice and peace on earth are not possible without personal, inner peace and moderation:

'On the other hand, no one can cultivate a sober and satisfying life without being at peace with him or herself. An adequate understanding of spirituality consists in filling out what we mean by peace (…) Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good be-

9 Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 24.

10 Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 49.

cause, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of the meaning of life.'[11]

The ecological crisis, according to the Pope, is therefore rooted in a moral crisis within the hearts of people in rich countries; a moral crisis because we treat nature as disrespectfully as we are immoral. The need to consume comes from the need to fill the emptiness of our hearts. This consumption then happens too much without regard to the consequences for the rest of the world.[12] As a consequence, disrespect towards nature goes hand in hand with disrespect towards others.

Mind you, the Pope does not criticize capitalism as such. In all social encyclicals, popes state that free market economy provides the means for people to engage creatively, responsibly and in solidarity.[13] Also very recently, the cardinals Luis Ladaria and Peter Turkson in *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones* noted that capitalism is not intrinsically bad or morally irresponsible. Though it gets bad, if it becomes detached from the (economic) goal of contributing to the dignity of every human being or if the economic order is not based on the golden rule.[14] ('Don't do unto others, what you don't want done unto other'). Without any demonstrable consultation with pope and curia, Deirdre McCloskey appears in her magisterial trilogy *Bourgeois Virtues, Bourgeois Dignity* and *Bourgeois*

11 Pope Francis *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 225, Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 71.

12 Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 17-61; 101-136; 137-162.

13 Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), 15, 34, 42, pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), 65, and passim.

14 L. Ladaria, P. Turkson, *Oeconomicae et pecuniariae quaestiones* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), paragraph 2-16.

Equality to share the same view as them about capitalism. For McCloskey, modern capitalism is by no means immoral. In fact, the success of capitalism can be maintained if those at the head of this system pursue virtues such as 'moderation', 'courage', 'wisdom-prudence' and 'justice'.[15] Samuel Bowles also makes it very plausible that modern capitalism is not an immoral mechanism, but rather has brought about civilisation by extending the trust one has in one's own family or tribe to also cover a wider community as well: 'Markets may have assisted 'the civilizing process'.[16] Independently, great minds do sometimes express the same insights.

But back to *Laudato si'*. As the popes Leo XIII, Pius XI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI did in their respective social encyclicals, Francis also scrutinizes these economic mechanisms which make the rich ever richer and the poor ever poorer. In this way, he seeks to raise awareness that all races and languages belong to one and the same family and that the resulting existential involvement in people living below the poverty line is the solution to the problem of poverty. Pope Francis, also in his recent encyclical *Fratelli tutti,* is much more firm and explicit than his predecessors in articulating the disrespect towards others, individualism, indifference and unbridled consumerism of many Europeans.[17] Due to this culture of selfishness the poverty of non-Europeans remains ignored. Europeans do not concern themselves with the question of solidarity and

15 See D. McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality. How Ideas, not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016; id. *The Bourgeois Dignity. Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); id. *The Bourgeois Virtues. Ethics in an Age of Commerce* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

16 S. Bowles, *The Moral Economy. Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), 45-150.

17 Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), 5, 88-126.

commitment to fellow brothers and sisters in 'the common household', the earth.[18] Pope Francis even writes:

"Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth."[19]

The stoics used the word *sympathy* to express the cosmic and physical coherence of everything in the universe. By extension, in early Christianity, *sympathy* was seen as a feeling that connects people in a morally responsible way and is closely related to *compassio*, ('compassion'), even called a form of love by Gregory of Nyssa. It was this Church father who aspired to a culture of compassion towards the poor and the weak, because this is the prelude to eliminating the difference between rich and poor and thus restoring balance.[20] Hence Pope Francis is part of a long tradition.

The core of Catholic social doctrine truly presents itself when Pope Francis describes international solidarity as necessary. "All are responsible for all," the Pope writes, echoing his predecessor John Paul II *(Sollicitudo rei socialis).* This may mean, for example, that personal property should never be prioritised at the expense of the common good; this

18 Cf. Pope Francis' speech, 25 November 2014.

19 Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 92; cf. 110.

20 Th. Kobusch, 'Sympathie. Zum Ursprung der modernen Solidaritätsidee', in: R.A. Barton, A. Klaudies, Th. Micklich (eds), *Sympathy in Transformation: Dynamics between Rhetorics, Poetics and Ethics* (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 39-48 (*Transformation der Antike*).

common good also includes the poor and future generations.[21] It is only through solidarity that the right social conditions are created for people in poor countries to finally be seen. Moreover, in Catholic social doctrine, as in the thinking of preacher-politician Abraham Kuyper who organised the first Christian Social Congress in 1891, a good self-realisation includes a life in which justice is done to the intrinsic dignity of man. This dignity is given to everyone on the basis of their birth as human beings. In concrete terms, it means that a vulnerable person is considered as precious as someone who achieves the levels of productivity deemed acceptable by society and is more economically viable than the vulnerable person. This principle must be cherished at different levels of social life.

In response to the corona crisis, psychiatrist Damiaan Denys drew our attention to a link between the spread of the coronavirus and our exploitation of the Earth. It traces the spread of the virus ultimately to a failure to comply with hygiene standards in a market where live and dead dogs, armadillos and bats were offered for sale. Even so, the main cause he considers lies in 'the boundless wanderlust' of the richer world citizen, who, at the expense of nature, entitles himself to flying all over the world together with millions of others at a time. Denys therefore does not hesitate to connect the spread of the coronavirus to our 'megalomania'; our delusions of grandeur:

"If you look at how this virus behaves, you can see that its success is not caused by the virus itself, but by our lifestyle. We eat everything we see. If you're just going to gorge on all the animals, then you're more at risk of being infected by an animal virus, simple as. If Western people

21 Pope Francis, *Laudato si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 159.

were to eat 30 percent less a day, it would save a lot more lives than our current efforts in fighting the virus."[22]

In short: that people die from a virus is not exclusively the fault of that virus. Besides, there are good viruses and bad viruses in the *ordo naturae.* It was willed this way by an inscrutable creative Mechanism. The fact that there are both good and bad viruses does not make nature a rose garden, but a house of learning. The fact that evil viruses can spread, and many more people die than should be the case, is therefore not a punishment of God but a consequence of the delusions of grandeur of the phenomenon of humanity, who no longer know their place in this *ordo naturae.*

As in a *pas de deux,* the Pope and psychiatrist denounce yet another abuse. The haves, who travel, buy and consume excessively place a huge ecological footprint on mother earth. It is a footprint that – if all seven billion human earthlings were to demand such a lifestyle – would require seven Mother Earths to provide the raw materials needed to satisfy this demand.

If we let the words of pope and psychiatrist get through to us, it is actually strange that economists and ecologists still work so little together in their scientific research. After all, economics is about the optimal allocation of scarce resources and about the welfare related to this. The natural environment provides humanity with these resources and is therefore a source of welfare. We talk a lot about 'interdisciplinarity' but most of the time scientists find it complicated to adapt fundamental principles of

22 Damiaan Denys, 'Je kunt corona ook omarmen', in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 3 April 2020: 'Als je kijkt naar hoe dit virus zich gedraagt, dan zie je dat zijn succes niet veroorzaakt wordt door het virus zelf, maar door onze stijl van leven. We eten alles op wat we zien. Als je zomaar allemaal beesten gaat opvreten, dan loop je meer risico dat je besmet raakt door een dierenvirus, ja. Als de westerse mens 30 procent minder per dag zou eten, zou dat veel meer levens redden dan we nu met het bevechten van het virus kunnen doen.'; Cf. Damiaan Denys, 'Dit virus stelt ons mateloze consumeren aan de kaak', in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 10 April 2020.

their discipline by combining them with those of others. What would it be like if, for example, economists were to integrate the fundamental insights of ecology into economic principles? Or even the relatively simple task of including externalities in economic models?

We are not yet sufficiently aware that the prosperity, health and *well-being* of future generations will be much more dependent on the availability of natural resources. Denying the link between economics and ecology in the idea that there is a solution to everything cannot be the right way. It is regrettable that, when environmental issues came to the forefront during the 1970s, they were not considered by collaborations of economists, ecologists, philosophers, theologians and psychologists.

Both the psychiatrist and pope confront us with our inability to put into practice the stoic *ne quid nimis-* (nothing in excess) principle. Stoics emphasized that people do not become happy when they have something 'to an extreme extent'. On the temple of Apollo in Delphi was written: 'Mèden agan' ('in nothing in excess!'). Moderation is a cure for megalomania. But also, a path to happiness. In his self-help booklet *On the Happy Life* (!) Augustine writes that those who are extremely poor know fear because he or she is afraid to have too little food for those in his or her care. But those who are far too rich also have a fear: namely the fear of losing all the possessions they have gained. The right balance in the ownership of possessions provides one with peace and inner cohesion: a restfulness and peace that greed is not going to threaten, also because intemperance is accompanied by an ever-increasing search for more and thus with unrelenting unrest and discontent.[23]

Augustine wrote *De beata vita* in 386AD. Around 427AD, in his final years – he died in 430AD – he delivered a glowing sermon on a passage from the Gospel of Matthew (11: 25-26), *sermo Mai* 126 (= *sermo* 68). As

23 Augustine, *De beata vita* IV. 25-28; cf. *sermo* 50.3.

an old bishop, Augustine describes the same dynamic in almost the same terms as in his self-help booklet on happiness written 40 years before. He suggests to his followers that if people obtained something they longed for, they will no longer be tortured by the desire to have something that is not yet in their possession, nevertheless this torture is replaced by another: the fear of losing the obtained.[24]

John Stuart Mill stated in his *Principals of Political Economy* (1848) that the economic growth generated by the industrial revolution in the West would be transitory. At some point, material scarcity will be overcome. From this, in his idea, a society will emerge, in which no one would be poor and – perhaps therefore – no one would want to become richer because there was sufficient prosperity at the micro, meso and macro level. Even John Maynard Keynes assumed in his *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren* (1930) that an economic growth of a hundred years of scarcity would lead to 'enough' and a society full of happy people would result.

Augustine saw this differently. He realized that the habituation that occurs when living in higher prosperity is always accompanied by the insatiable desire for something new. Moreover, the grass of the neighbour is always greener. Hence a vicious cycle occurs whereby an increase in prosperity increases the sense of unhappiness. Furthermore, the relentless growth in consumer needs is adversely affecting public goods such as the environment, making us even more unhappy. This brings us to the following.

What may also help to reflect on our relationship with nature and in conjunction with everything and all who live in it, is a reflection on our human image. Certain insights developed in the period of the Enlightenment may have put us on the wrong track regarding our relationship

24 Augustine, *sermo Mai* 126, 10.

with other living beings. In one of his interpretations of the creation story in *De Genesi ad litteram* (401), Augustine, as in his *sermo* 150, states that both animals and humans have a soul, an 'anima viva'.[25] He systematically uses the word *anima* to describe the soul of the animal and man; *animus* is the word he applies to the human soul, of which the spirit (man) is a part.[26] It is true that he attributes only to the *anima rationalis,* man, judgment and free will.

Perception, memory and taste belong to the irrational part of the soul and are influenced by emotions and desires, people and animals have this in common. The mind, understanding and will are part of the rational soul and are peculiar to humans. Augustine emphasizes the traditional way of thinking that the rational soul can curb irrational emotions and desires. But it is striking that when he talks about people and animals at the same time, he uses *inclusive* language. Apart from the fact that animals are as animated as humans, he recognizes that animals like humans have a memory. They avoid what they have previously perceived as threatening. Like humans, animals remember things and people. They recognise situations and people.[27] They have the ability to process their experiences and from them formulate instincts. In an early edition of Augustine's *De quantitate animae* ('On the magnitude of the soul'), he writes that animals have a form of consciousness that borders on knowledge: in that they 'know' certain things. This does not amount to them possessing intellectual capacity, but he cannot deny that they have a certain degree of knowledge.[28] In a sermon, he even emphasises that animals can have a superior

25 Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 9.14.25 ('anima viva'); *sermo* 150.5-6.

26 G. O'Daley, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1987), 7.

27 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 12.2.

28 Augustine, *De quantitate animae* 50; 54; cf. *De ciuitate Dei* 11.27. Cf. G. O'Daley, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1987), 97-99.

sensory awareness: the eagle has sharper sight than a human; the sense of smell of dogs will often be considerably more sensitive when compared to a person; and, animals generally have a better sense of the passage of time and changes in nature, for just one example birds can discern the changing seasons and migrate accordingly. In short, for Augustine, that which divides animals and humans is minimal.[29] In fact, one could contest that such differentiation is so slight that one is not free to 'use' an animal as they would use a table.

The work of primatologists Frans de Waal and Jane Goodall complements this early Christian conception of animals. They discovered that bonobos and chimpanzees can be motivated by power, lust, fear, love and mourning; forces that humanity has more recently reserved exclusively for one's own kind.[30] In *Mama's laatste omhelzing (*'Mama's last embrace'), De Waal rejects the idea that it would be futile to study emotions in animals. A position that some scholars hold because of their view that animals' emotional range is far more constricted than that of humanity and thus people could not learn anything from such study. Nicholas Tulp discovered in 1641 that a monkey carcass resembled the human body like two drops of water. By extension, the dissection of two dead chimpanzees revealed that they had exactly the same number of facial muscles as humans.[31]

In fact, animals have even been observed to take part in commercial transactions, thus displaying the emotional intelligence that is entailed

29 Augustine, *sermo* 277.5.

30 Cf. for example, F. de Waal, *De aap in ons. Waarom we zijn wie we zijn* (Amsterdam-Antwerp: Atlas Contact, 2005); F. de Waal, *De aap en de sushimeester. Over cultuur bij dieren. Culturele bespiegelingen van een primatoloog* (Amsterdam-Antwerp: Atlas Contact, 2001); J. Goodall, *The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

31 F. de Waal, *Mama's laatste omhelzing* (Amsterdam/Antwerp: Atlas Contact, 2019), 79.

as such: with research by primatologists proving that on Java monkeys have an ability to barter. At some Balinese temples they steal objects from tourists and then wait to see how many peanuts tourists are willing to trade for the stolen goods. This extortion game was studied by the primatologists and they argued that monkeys had a pretty conclusive understanding as to which object had the greatest value to a tourist.[32]

The French mathematician, philosopher and practising Catholic René Descartes in his *Discours de la méthode* (1637) gave rise to a human image, in which the dividing line between man and animal was drawn much more rigorously than it had been in the past. His method of returning to 'first principles' was very akin to the meditative techniques in the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Order of the Jesuits with whom he had attended La Flèche. He saw doubting as a form of thinking. That's why he found that the first certainty of people was that they doubted: "I'm having second thoughts, so I think, so I exist." The emphasis on the autonomy of the rationally thinking 'I' in his *Discours de la méthode* was, unfortunately, accompanied by the postulation of a dividing line between human and animal, which in the history of humanity and animals alike was unparalleled.

It is apparent that Descartes did not conceive animals as 'monstrous,' which later interpreters have attributed to him. For example, he did not claim that animals could be considered *automata* which are purely mechanical. He is also relatively vague in his answer to the question of whether animals have a conscience. Moreover, he recognises that humans are also able to carry out operations with an almost mechanical nature and in accordance with a predetermined order.[33] But in his *Discourse de*

32 F. de Waal, *Mama's laatste omhelzing* (Amsterdam-Antwerp: Atlas Contact, 2019), 157-159.

33 Cf. J. Cottingham, 'A Brute to the Brutes?': Descartes' Treatment of Animals', in: *Philosophy*, 53 (1978), 551-559, in particular 553.

la méthode he states that animals are created 'comme une machine,' ('like a machine') albeit by a creator of a much higher order: namely by God, instead of being like the machines made by human hands.[34] Even though he never gave a systematic explanation of how he saw the animal to be similar to a machine, he assumed that animals were machines, *automata*: which were without language, could not think and also had no self-awareness.[35]

Based on his work, rigid interpretations saddled humanity with a vision of animals, in which animals were no longer seen as 'animated' but rather reduced to 'objects' that could be used.[36] Descartes did not conceive animals to have *res cogitans* (the capability of thought), as humans have, but, that they were merely *res extensa*: thoughtless matter. But this does not mean that he did not attribute animals as capable of having feelings. In Descartes's letters to Henry More, he attributes emotions such as anger, fear, hunger and joy to animals. They don't behave for him *like* they're feeling pain. This is a thought that Frans de Waal also describes as unreasonable since emotions manifest themselves in the bodies of humans and animals in a similar way and the brains of all mammals are similar. Nevertheless, rigid interpretations based on Descartes's work have saddled humanity with a very limited vision of animals. [37]

Thus, certain interpretations of Descartes's work during the centuries after his death had encouraged an usurper relationship with all life: hu-

34 R. Descartes, *Discours de la methode* V, in: C. Adam, P. Tannery (eds), *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris, 1897-1913), Part VI, 56.

35 J. Cottingham, 'A Brute to the Brutes?': Descartes' Treatment of Animals', in: *Philosophy*, 53 (1978), 552.

36 M. Spallanzani, 'Descartes e il 'paradosso' degli animali-macchina', in: *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 17, No. 1 (2011), 185-195.

37 F. de Waal, *Mama's laatste omhelzing* (Amsterdam-Antwerp: Atlas Contact, 2019), 148.

manity did not see animals as creatures that, like humans, were animated and deserving of their own dignity. On the one hand, in the Netherlands the dignity of some animals is respected: the slaughter of dogs and cats is prohibited. Namely, those pets for sporting and recreational purposes, who have a name and a snout. On the other hand, animals kept for milk and meat production live anonymised and in large numbers in mega-stables; they are slaughtered for consumption without any emotion or substantial interaction.[38] Anthropocentrism, which resonates in our way of dealing with the latter animals, is morally and theologically sinful. Pigs, for example, which are used as 'material' for consumption do not deserve this instrumental adage. After all, pigs are as smart as a 5-year-old child, can play computer games and grieve when a fellow pig dies.

The immense gap that we have posited between humans and animals for our food production and consumption makes us immune from the well-being of other living beings. Rather, our perception of them was in line with the way we perceive natural resources: as 'things' that we can squander at will and deal with so carelessly, allowing viruses to jump from animals to humans. The United Nations FAO statistics show that 70% of new diseases in humans come from the animal kingdom. These figures show how close the relationship is between humans and animals. In short, if animals are reduced to consumer products, we pay a high price. Albert Schweitzer once wrote:

"It was quite incomprehensible to me – this was before I began going to school – why in my evening prayers I should pray for human beings only. So (...) I used to add silently a prayer that I had composed myself for all living creatures. It ran thus: "O, heavenly Father, protect and bless all

38 M. Korthals, *Goed eten: Filosofie van voeding en landbouw* (Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2018), 170-174.

things that have breath; guard them from all evil, and let them sleep in peace."[39]

Like Augustine, he therefore emphasises what we have in common with animals and opposes the Cartesian framework that limits ethics to the community of people. The ethical implications of Schweitzer's ideas can be summarised in a maxim: protect all life and try with the utmost dedication to alleviate all suffering.

It is time to give us a space in which we, like the contemplative religious, reflect on the due diligence, care and respect with which we treat all living beings. The relationship with all that is living is much more reciprocal than we are inclined to assume in the proverbial hunting of existence.

39 Quoted in R.P. McLaughlin, 'Non-violence and Nonhumans: Foundations for Animal Welfare in the Thought of Mohandas Gandhi and Albert Schweitzer', in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2012), 678-704.

THE RIDICULOUS IDEA OF A VIRUS AS PUNISHMENT OF GOD

IN 2008, THE FRENCH ISLAMIC scholar Olivier Roy wrote a high-profile book: *La Sainte Ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture*. In it he described the demise of religion in Western society, which in the 1980s, for example, manifested itself in the implosion of the layers of organisation in the Roman Catholic Church. Society in Western Europe had been defined and structured by churches and their social institutions, their hospitals, schools and universities. Roy paradoxically also noted that even in secularised societies, in which churches were completely marginalised, there was and is a resurgence of religion, sometimes also in forms that were completely new. He saw a connection between the demise of religion and the resurgence of it in new forms.[40]

According to Roy, this connection between the decline and resurgence of religion lies in the fact that religions are less and less bound to where they were born. All over the world, beliefs and ideas can grow in a particular religion without being geographically limited as they were be-

40 O. Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance: Le temps de la religion sans culture* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008), 15, 20-21, 40, 141, 212, 226-227.

fore the digital age. He calls this phenomenon *déterritorialisation*. Then there's *déculturalisation*: for Roy, this involves the process in which the cultures that shaped the religions become less and less important in the way in which religion manifests itself. Fundamentalism is in his idea the form of the religion, which thrives thanks to these phenomena of *déterritorialisation* and *déculturalisation*. It adopts 'only' religious ideas without being bound by a particular culture and place. It is precisely this cultural bondage that gives context to religious texts. The layering, depth and scope of a word like 'God' or 'Buddha' are lost in the process of *déterritorialisation* and *déculturalisation*. Thus, it may be that statues of the Buddha are offered for sale everywhere in garden centres, because the Buddha is 'only' associated with rest and relaxation. It may also be the case that fundamentalists take words pertaining to God out of context in order to legitimise a particular ideology; when in the original religious culture in which these words were given meaning, there was a meaning denoted with which violence could not possibly be legitimised.

In any case, religion – even as a phenomenon in which values and norms are mediated – is still important, across the world and in the Netherlands. According to the Pew Research Center, 84% of the world's population is currently religious and 87% will be by 2050. Also, in the Netherlands, despite the desertion of religion by many, except in the growing Pentecostal and evangelical Christian churches, those that identify as untethered spirituals, and Muslims; religion remains present within society, not least in the form of the 800,000 Dutch people who attend weekly church service. In addition, countless people 'simply' visit church buildings: 'In the pre-corona era, the churches were like an extra living room in the city for those who wanted to unwind. I like to call them charging

stations of kindness and comfort. Even if you were there for an hour, no one said anything, and serenity prevails'.[41]

In its numerous forms, religion still matters. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the times of corona crisis authors, who want to claim that the pandemic is a punishment from God, are given a platform and are even seen to resonate with society.

Those cynical of religion believe that the religious faithful cannot but wonder the purpose of such a virus. For example, Max Pam recently wrote:

"Inevitably, the believer is faced with the question: what is God doing with this virus? What is His plan with that, what meaning and dignity are behind it? Why do these people all suddenly have to die in such a painful way?[42]

Some faithful believe they have an answer to this. For example, Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, former papal nuncio in the United States, sees Covid-19 as the result of the wrath of God. This, in his idea, is caused by the disorderliness and perversities of man, of which abortion is the first and failing to honour the Sabbath is the last one he mentions. At the outbreak of the pandemic, he immediately concludes that the Pope, bish-

41 Stijn Fens, 'Ik heb last van kerkhonger' in: *Trouw*, 10 May 2020: 'In het pre-corona- tijdperk waren de kerken als een extra huiskamer in de stad voor wie even tot rust wilde komen. Ik noem ze graag oplaadstations van vriendelijkheid en troost. Al zat je er een uur, niemand zei er wat van'.

42 Max Pam, 'Wat is de bedoeling van corona?', in: *De Volkskrant*, 20 May 2020, 24: 'Onafwendbaar komt de gelovige toch voor de vraag te staan: wat heeft God voor met dit virus? Wat is Zijn plan daarmee, welke zingeving en waardigheid zitten daar achter? Waarom moeten die mensen ineens allemaal dood op zo'n pijnlijke manier?'.

ops, priests and all the faithful should immediately and absolutely repent and start believing in the authority of the Church again.[43]

That clergy trace the genesis of the pandemic back to God's plan and then project their own priorities onto this plan: this is a tale as old as time. The 'black death' was conceived as punishment of God in the Middle Ages, before it was known that the disease was caused by a bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, which was spread by fleas hosted on rats. Collective mass psychosis was the result, which became concrete in the movements such as those of the (mad) dancers or those of the flagellants (floggers) and which called for conversion. The fear of the plague, among other things in the form of the fear of God, had greater consequences for public health than the plague itself. It is all the more gratifying that science is progressing, capable of tracing the plague back to a bacterium and a deadly virus to the neglectful treatment of animals by humanity. That the rapid spread of a virus is due to our megalomaniacal wanderlust and consumerism and not to the bad mood of a God, who is portrayed as a mere human, is then verse two; a verse that demonstrably underlies the work of man and not of a god. There is, of course, no scientific evidence that there is a God who has circulated a virus to call the Pope to order, although the bishop, coincidentally, is right when he suggests that Sunday rest can help contain the outbreak of a virus. But certainly, in the light of scientific findings, he goes too far when he derives from the outbreak of coronavirus the belief that this is a means of God, by which the lawless humanity is punished and by which the Pope and Bishops are called to order. Medieval theologians such as William of Ockham had already confronted such beliefs by pointing out that God in his absolute power (*potentia absoluta*) could have made another creation – one without gravity for example. But now

43 M. Matt, 'Interview with archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò', in: *The Remnant*, 30 March 2020, 1.

that God has willed and created gravity, animals and people, are 'bound' by the laws that give rise to them. This is then called *potentia ordinata*; which in turn does not take away from the fact that God can intervene again through his *potentia absoluta*. In the case of the coronavirus, the science therefore indicates that neither the virus nor its spread can be traced back to this last power. Thank God.

This means, however, that the theologian who neglects scientific findings regarding a particular natural phenomenon and wants to see an almost direct link between God's wrath over human sins and the outbreak of a virus, neglects the stratification, depth and scope of a word like 'God', in which a moment of mystery lies contained. It is very much a matter of granting God qualities that are human, all too human. Church fathers in both the East and the West like Johannes Chrysostomus and Augustine recognised that this could be very dangerous for the experience of faith of their fellow Christians. Overly anthropomorphistic representations of God draw God as a mystery – like 'Being', which because of the narrowness of the human mind cannot actually be 'encapsulated' in words, theology or even in our thought. It is ridiculous to imagine God as a merciless and punishing superior being, giving the impression that if people do not want to listen they should feel it. Even though there are certain representations in Scripture that could support such an image: Paul and many interpretations of Scripture after him have rushed to emphasise that Scripture is "milk for the little ones." In doing so, they expressed that the being and efficacy of God are by definition wronged in the words of Scripture, but humanity here in time and space cannot fathom God more than the mind allows: the mind is the ability that unfortunately equips us to understand truths only as the smallest children. Like babies, we tolerate milk but we are not yet ready for solid food like adults are. Those who do not heed this reservation when seeking explanations about calamities

in this world, practises theology in a way that borders on the development of an ideology. This is the path to fundamentalism, because ideologists think they have 'God' in their pocket and that is laughably not so.

Unsurprisingly, albeit for a different reason, the Roman Catholic Bishop, Heiner Wilmer of the Diocese of Hildesheim, on behalf of a large group of Protestant and Catholic clergy, did not shy away from describing the depiction of a punishing God – meaning one who presents humanity with the bill for any misconduct – as terrible and also completely un-Christian idea.[44] He even suggested that those who adhere to this idea can be called fundamentalists. This is because, when they consider representations in Scripture about the Judgment, they seek to simplify it – even though the text on which base their assumptions, has many layers and evokes a mystery. On the basis of this simplification, they then claim that they "know the will of God exactly" and consider themselves the "guardians of true faith and the right morality". However, the bishop added that the spirit in which the scriptures are written mainly aims to emphasize God's mercy. Consider, for example, the aforementioned parable of the prodigal son.

Thus, the fundamentalist vision that portrays the spread of the coronavirus as a punishment by God is very strange. What binds Jews, Christians, and Muslims to this day is the awareness that God is unknowable and God's efficacy inscrutable – to the extent that we humans cannot even speak of "the being of God" or "God's activity" because these words evoke too many associations with realities in the dimensions of time and space, to which God does not actually belong. Therefore, in the Jewish

44 H. Wilmer, 'Gedanke von strafendem Gott ist fürchterlich und unchristlich', https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/25004-wilmer-gedanke-von-strafendem-gott-ist-fuerchterlich-und-unchristlich; see also the comments of the archbishop of Bamberg, L. Schick, 'Corona als Strafe Gottes zu bezeichnen ist zynisch', https://www.katholisch.de/artikel/24838-erzbischof-schick-corona-als-strafe-gottes-zu-bezeichnen-ist-zynisch

tradition, the name JHWH is not pronounced; while Muslims state that Allah is described by 99 names that are not invented by humans, but the hundredth name – the name of silence – cannot be pronounced by anyone. Both Scripture and the Koran emphasize that Moses cannot see God's face, even if he asks for it. And John the Evangelist wrote at the beginning of his gospel that no one has seen God, just as Paul also wanted to convince his friend Timothy that God is an inaccessible light.[45]

For the three Abrahamic religions, speaking about God is therefore speaking at a human frontier. After all, language is of this world; God is not. Therefore, one cannot use the limited tool language to describe the unlimited God. An overly concrete representation of God in image, word or even in thought is therefore inappropriate for the Jew, the Christian and the Muslim. God cannot be adequately encapsulated or expressed in thinking and speaking, and, if in the case of Christians, anything can be thought or said about God, it is best to do so on the basis of study and familiarity with the life of Jesus. If we are to believe the evangelists, Jesus is consistently more likely to show mercy than anger, even if he does so occasionally.[46]

But there is a reason for this, which Augustine will aptly articulate later. Admittedly, he says in his early *De beata vita* and in his *De diuersis quaestionibus,* that fear and other passions work the opposite of wisdom, and fear must be banished because this state of mind can cause havoc. Later in life, however, he recognizes that fear and apprehension are sometimes good for preventing forms of complacency from taking root. And so, he writes that decisions or actions that are exclusively motivated by fear – born out of what we now recognize as lower layers of the brain – are not good, because they cause havoc and obstruct the view of the *lex aeter-*

45 Soera 112; Exodus 3: 13-14; 33: 18-23; Joh. 1: 18; 1 Tim. 6: 16.

46 cf. Mat. 21: 12-13; Mc. 11: 15-18; Joh. 2: 13-17.

na, God's law and order.[47] Only when *perturbationes,* worrying states of mind such as fear *(metus),* disordered desire *(cupiditas),* joy *(laetitia)* and sadness *(tristitia),* are filtered through reason (*ratio),* then they contribute to informed decisions and actions. For example, *metus* becomes *cautio (*caution) and *real* anxiety – fear that cannot be traced back to a phobia or neurosis – : that fear therefore has sense.[48]

In the aforementioned parable of the prodigal son (Luc. 15: 25-37), the preceding story of the lost sheep (Luke 15: 11-24), and especially in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luc. 10: 29-37), it becomes clear what 'mercy' means. It is a virtue and institution of life in which one comes to the aid of another without regard to personal consequences and without prejudice; "moved by pity," as is often said of Jesus when he meets someone (for example, Mat. 9: 36). And as Jesus proclaims mercy, he also proclaims that God is not so much angry or vindictive as merciful. In a speech (Luc 6: 20-49), Jesus calls upon a large crowd in particular to follow the Father in his mercy: "Be merciful, as your Father is merciful" (Luc. 6: 36). The parallel text in the gospel of Matthew (5:48) notes, "So you will be undividedly good, as your Heavenly Father is undividedly good" (cf. Mat. 25: 31-4 and passim).

However inscrutable and unpronounceable, God's name must be associated primarily with mercy because the authors of books in the Old Testament[49] and in the New Testament are deeply aware that God's in-

47 Augustine, *De beata vita* IV. 24; *De diuersis quaestionibus* 25; 33.

48 Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* 14.5.8. See Also: E. Bermon, 'La théorie des passions chez saint Augustin', in: B. Besnier, P.F. Moreau, L. Renault (ed.), *Les passions antiques et médiévales* (Paris, 2003), 178-190, 193 and P. van Geest, '*Ante omnia igitur opus est Dei timore converti* (*doctr. chr.*. 2.7.9). Augustine's Evaluation of Fear', in: A. Dupont, G. Partoens, M. Lamberigts (eds), *Tractatio scripturarum. Philological, Exegetical, Rhetorical and Theological Studies on Augustine's Sermons* (Louvain: Peeters, 2012), 443-464 for further evidence.

49 Cf. Exodus 34: 6; 2 Chron.30: 9; Psalm 51.

scrutable being can most adequately be expressed with the flawed expression "mercy." Therefore, mercy towards others is especially commanded:

"But be kind, merciful, forgiving to each other, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4: 32).

Or, as James puts it, as timeless as it is brilliant:

"For merciless will be the judgment of him, who has not proven mercy; mercy, however, boasts against judgment' (Jac. 2: 13).

EPILOGUE

DUE TO THE LOCKDOWN CAUSED by the corona crisis, nature has taken back part of its place. This benefited and benefits man. Air quality in Hong Kong, China, the Po Plain in Italy and in many other regions improved. Emissions of harmful substances such as nitrogen decreased. And in cities like Venice, dolphins returned and fish were observed again. But the lockdown, which was *self-inflicted* by our travel habits and consumerism, brought much doom to humanity. Businesses are dying; people are dying – some even alone in the hospital, without anyone being able to comfort them or say goodbye. Would this have been the case if we had been more respectful of nature?

Entrepreneurship and self-initiative have brought huge profits and even led to a reduction in poverty worldwide. At the same time, it has fuelled intemperateness and brought about the idea of limitlessness. It has often been written in recent weeks that 'the virus conquered the whole world', or that 'the virus had killed many people again'. In a formal biological sense, these are correct statements. But by assigning human characteristics to the virus and almost displaying it as a bad person, we are disguising the second cause of the crisis, which may be even more important than the first cause. The virus was able to spread so rapidly because globally oriented people from the wealthy part of the world devel-

oped an unbridled need for travel and an excessive desire for meat. This latter desire means that humanity increasingly encroaches on the habitat of animals or animals are confined indoors. This has one very bad consequence for human beings: namely, animals, confined and kept inside, transmit their viruses to humans. This phenomenon, called zoonosis, often occurs.

However, zoonoses are not a modern phenomenon. Throughout history, they have been a threat to humans. In the *Proceedings of the Royal Society B,* the findings of a large-scale study were published very recently which found that as many as 142 zoonoses could jump from animal to human. And nearly 70% of human infections can be traced back to contact with animal species. But the reason why, unlike in other times, zoonoses have recently developed at such a rapid rate, is the unbridled need of Western people for travel, global action and operation and intemperate consumption. The more these aspects manifested themselves in the global economy, the faster the coronavirus could strike. In the unbridled need for travel and consumption, lies the greatest threat to humanity. Both needs make people increasingly encroach on the habitat of animals and neglect their well-being. They lead to the emergence of zoonoses more frequently and quickly. It is a law of nature that if we continue to affect the habitats of animals and do not respect their well-being, then we can expect that new infectious diseases will emerge.[50] We must not realize too late that there is less that separates us from animals than connects us to them.

In addition to a good vaccine, a lifestyle in which moderation is sought is at least as important as any medicine. Paradoxically, moderation provides the freedom we seek to achieve.

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50 Chr. Johnson et al., 'Global shifts in mammalian population trends reveal key predictors of virus spillover risk', in: *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, vol. 287, issue 1924 (March 2020), https://doi.org/10.1098/ rspb.2019.2736

The fact that humanity can no longer safely know its place in this world, is not a punishment of God, but a consequence of the thoughtlessness attributed in the first book of the Book of The Bible – Genesis – to the first man, *ben-Adam*. His vices also turned out to be transferable to his progeny, with all the consequences that entailed.

What we have learned is that all living beings inhabit the same world with each other and that sharing space with everything and all is a necessary condition of human life. After all, the health of people, animals and everything that lives on earth, together with that of the environment, is closely linked. The French philosopher Jacques Maritain once rejected a draft of the social contract which based a political or legal system solely on individualism, believing that the general well-being was no more than the sum of the individual parts.[51] He considered that any social contract which placed individual self-realisation as the highest priority, as opposed to the pursuit of connection with others, failed because human happiness primarily grows and thrives in relationships.

So, what helps us is an attitude towards life in which we are more willing to share our property. This leads to the well-being that we seek but are not able to find while we remain governed by an intemperate desire for possession as an end in itself (and the delusion that it will bring happiness). An example from history reinforces this thesis. It may sound strange, but there is a lesson that can be learned about the world today from a practice that has existed for centuries, perhaps even millennia, in monasteries of almost every religion. In both Buddhist and Christian monasteries, the community of goods is pursued. This means that when

51 J. Maritain, *L'Homme et l'État*, in: J. Maritain, *Œuvres completes*. vol. IX (Fribourg- Paris, 1990), 492. See also: M. Moreland, 'Jacques *Maritain*, *Thomism and the Liberal* - Communitarian Debate', in: B. Sweetman (ed.), *The Failure of Modernism: the cartesian legacy and contemporary pluralism* (Washington, 1999), 141-153.

a person enters, they renounce their own property and make it available to the community as a whole. We note here that there is a certain disinterest in the pursuit of the ideal of the community of goods: 'what is mine is yours'. It is true that philosophers and theologians such as Augustine and Benedict developed a roadmap for the realization of this ideal of the community of goods in their monastic rules. The rich person must be allowed to slowly develop the quality of being able to share his property.[52] And the poor man shouldn't immediately think that everything is his and he can dispose of it freely. So, taking into account the uniqueness of each individual, Augustine developed this roadmap to grow towards the ideal.

But, of course, this selflessness was paradoxically not selfless. Augustine was well aware that unity makes power. Moreover, he realized that the pursuit of this selflessness – concretized by sharing one's wealth- would ideally result in a harmonious community; thus, the individual who had renounced his property comes more into his own than if he had kept his property.

The coronavirus sharpens our awareness that life is still not as controllable as we thought it was after the invention of penicillin or the lightning rod. Although much progress can be made using technology, nature dictates the laws that technologists have to take into account and natural phenomena such as hurricanes and tsunamis prove unplanned and uncontrollable. Technology cannot stop the natural laws.

This is a learning moment. It is an illusion to believe that we can control and keep everything in this world under control. Control, or the idea that something is actually under control, can be seen as a vice because in this we may lose the sense of gratitude for life and thus lose our real freedom. We may become cynical, knowing that we are dependent on an uncontrollable nature, especially since in some countries even the con-

52 Augustine, *Praeceptum* I.2-8; Benedict *Regula*, cap. 36.

stitution has been set aside to deal with the crisis (with all the negative consequences this may entail). Human rights and privacy violations have been under discussion. We may also become cynical because we see the unexpected situation of the corona crisis has created a great opportunity for governments to come up with policy changes that would not be easily accepted, let alone embraced, in a normal situation. Conspiracy theories lie in wait, fuelling the divisions and polarisation in society.

And because of that same uncontrollable nature, we become insecure and feel more vulnerable than ever. We become afraid of illness, of suffocation, of the suffering and the death that follows for ourselves and for our loved ones. We are afraid of the consequences of the measures taken by governments, whether they be isolation and loneliness, or an unsafe home situation. We are uncertain about the consequences of the measures for redundancies, long-term unemployment, bankruptcy, debt, and the resulting problems in any social field.

Now we should not be gripped by fear and uncertainty, but instead see the world and ourselves differently. With the awareness that we are not the only ones who are 'next', we will become less complacent. In the best case, we are going to become even more concerned about the wellbeing of our older loved ones and others. With this, we develop empathy and compassion. And, because there is a pandemic, we suddenly know that we are connected to people, whom we will never meet, but whose pitiful circumstances suddenly start to affect us in such a way that we want to do something for them. It was not only in our own country that many initiatives were put in place to bring people closer. In the case of those who were in danger of being deprived of any kind of contact, meals and goodie bags were handed out and projects were initiated which allowed those people to be able to talk with others.

A further example of the "connecting capacity" of the pandemic is the recognition that a virus does not distinguish between classes. However, it is true that the poorest sections of a population are most at risk (both economically and in terms of health) and are most severely affected by a pandemic. Cordaid called attention to the situation in Africa where there are large pockets of poverty in some countries, such as Kenya and South Africa, and, in other countries, such as South Sudan or the Central African Republic, the entire population may live in poverty. In these countries, intense work was done to strengthen primary health care systems, in close cooperation with local communities. Doing so also contributes to the fight against a disease such as Covid-19.

Nature frees up the spirit of mercy in us. Fear of the unknown, uncertainty, the awareness of our own vulnerability can be the prelude to seeing people differently and doing things differently. That's what life forces us to do sometimes. That's very good (and by 'very good' we mean this increases community spirit and connectedness).

Yet it remains true, what Maarten 't Hart said: 'What is so good about a creation which houses the most terrible parasites to man and creature alike? What is so good about a creation in which all organisms are terrorized by parasites, including the parasites themselves?"[53] Creation is not 'very good'. But paradoxically, it is also very beautiful in its order and coherence. Nature is not 'very good'. She's like life itself. She responds, but she doesn't judge. And so, nature teaches us to be merciful. It is perhaps the intention that we will experience creation not as a rose garden but as a school of learning. And perhaps it is also in the 'unfathomable order' Augustine decided that we do not continue to see any crisis – related to anyone or anything – as misery and despair, but as an opportunity to

53 M. 't Hart, *Wie God verlaat heeft niets te vrezen. De Schrift betwist* (Amsterdam, 1997), 7-8, cf. our introduction.

grow, not only through creative destruction, but also through mercy and love.

And, as long as religion exists, the great minds emphasize that humanity can only practice hope better than despair. Augustine sees the demise of Judas not in his betrayal of Christ after the last supper but in his despair at his own fate. After all, that betrayal was already foreseen as *part of the plan.* Judas should have relied better on the goodness of God, rather than surrender to his own desperation.[54] It is almost the law of psychology that despair leads to self-destruction, whereas hope makes life. In fact, that desperation and that defeatism is hell for Augustine. *Spe salvi*, said Paul – by hope we have been saved (Rom. 8, 24). In the Bourbonnais, a region with a rich history, the first Bourbons also chose the following as their motto: *L'Espérance* – hope.

Thus, the question continues to arise how, in an age of uncertainty, mistrust, suspicion and fear of the future, hope can still prevail? In this text, we have attempted to formulate an answer. However, even these answers are provided under the consideration that those who have managed to find an answer, have actually asked too easy a question.

54 Augustine, *De sermone domini in monte* 1.22.73.

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NOTHING IN EXCESS

Re-evaluating Nature, the Economy and Life post Corona

CARLOS DE BOURBON DE PARME, SYLVESTER EIJFFINGER AND PAUL VAN GEEST

What are the lessons learned from the corona crisis? In this essay, the authors try to develop a vision in which the word 'crisis' is interpreted as 'opportunity'. First of all, the corona crisis is an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with each other in the many socio-economic connections in which people live, both globally and regionally. There is a concrete case for a change in social and economic thinking based on a reflection on the relationship of the virtues of "mercy" and "justice". The corona crisis is an opportunity to review our relationship with nature and our association with other living things. Finally, the pandemic is not only seen as punishment of our infringement on nature. The suffering and death resulting from the spread of the virus was, by some individuals, labelled a punishment from God. In the last part of their essay, the authors discuss the absurdity of such a belief and describe the corona crisis as an opportunity to go through personal or collective growth towards a world where we no longer live in excesses, but within the planetary boundaries.

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