

## Article

## COVID-19 and Religion

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has produced a social drama in which churches, government, and individual actors have played prominent roles. While neo-conservative evangelicals have resisted governmental and scientific overreach in the name of “faith over fear”, liberal religious groups have joined in government and medical efforts for the good of the commons, offered comfort and assurance to those suffering, and called for support of the poor at home and abroad. Religions have turned right and left, from apocalyptic “resets” of global order to new calls for social justice. In this context, the root metaphor of the *epidemic* has been called up as a historical construct that helps to conceptualize, analyze, and act upon the COVID-19 crisis. Searching the past helps us see that not everything about COVID-19 as a social drama is a new or unheard-of challenge. For example, there are new evocations of the black death of 14th-century Europe that became a crisis in the church, as well as the great Lisbon earthquake in 1755, which upended the confidence of the European Enlightenment. Another way to appraise the dimensions of the COVID-19 outbreak is to call on the varied approaches characteristic of the sociology of religion, that is, to consider how ideology and belief are socially constructed in order to account for new intellectual responses to societal challenges. Does religion always produce the “collective effervescence” Durkheim posited? Does religious change always arrive downstream of cultural change, or can it also become an independent variable? This article attends primarily to the sharp responses of conservative religious expression in the face of attention-getting upheaval, which has readily translated into right-wing political action and electioneering. But the social uplift and altruism of liberal religion is not neglected either. Thus, this article provides an account of how science and governmental action have both been challenged and embraced in response to COVID-19. As such, it is not an empirical study stemming from new Pew-like social polling. Rather, it is a wide overview rooted in sociological methods and theory for tracking religion historically and presently in America in a manner that aims to inform a discussion of how COVID-19 has impacted religion and religious expression, and vice versa.

**Keywords:** Christian nationalism; apocalyptic; ideology; conspiracy theories; libertarianism; religious exemptions; social justice; social drama



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## 1. Introduction: The Moment of the Epidemic

In *The Anthropology of Performance*, Victor Turner defines *social drama* as “a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive, or agonistic type” (Turner 1988), and he delineates stages of the breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism. This essay is an invitation to see the play, analyze the actors and their settings, and inquire about the final acts. We are witnessing a drama on the national stage in which the COVID-19 pandemic and American religion are mightily engaged, just as all epidemics or natural disasters in history have produced social dramas in which religious and national cultures go up against cataclysmic disruptions and sometimes against each other.

A simple google search leads to a wide array of newspapers, journals, books, and government documents reporting on COVID-19 and religion interaction. A notable actor is conservative evangelical religion, but there are also surprises in the wings. In August 2022, Sheera Frenkel of the New York Times reported that a wealthy, liberal, upper-class

population in the Bay Area suburb of Orinda, CA, gathered to proclaim “No Vaccines, Protect our kids, and “Our kids, our choice” (Frenkel 2022). Of course, requests for religious exemptions to vaccinations, masks, and restrictions to public gatherings are far more common on the evangelical right. Misinformation driven by anti-science, anti-elitist, and anti-government instincts gives rise to conspiracy theories. Ideological intensity disguised as religion reveals a Christian nationalism that sanctifies America as God’s country, which exempts conservative religion from cultural norms and hallows conservative ideologies with a patriotic obligation.

But religion can also produce cooperation among government, culture, and churches in times of crisis. Cooperation may be rooted in many admired religious instincts, such as the sense of obligation to the whole human family; serving one’s neighbor and the common good; charitable obligations to the poor; the religious support of institutions that aspire to serve the community; the increase in religious sensibility in times of common distress; appeals of faith to the support of vaccination; and even new discussions of Bishop Tutu’s African ideal of *ubuntu*, “I am who I am because we are who we are” (Battle 2009). Both conservative and liberal religions struggle for space in the plot.

Lest we think of COVID-19 as a *de novo* occurrence, and in order to learn from the past, I turn to the concept of an epidemic as a widespread occurrence of infectious disease in a community at a particular time. The term “epidemic” evokes all the ways in which societies have responded to the catastrophic spread of disease. These responses represent challenges to religion and society, and the radical changes they sometimes produce have a long history. Epidemic becomes a signal for what we might expect today in the current moment of our own pandemic and a paradigm for coaching and cautioning church and society during the present crisis. In this respect, as Randy Shilts has noted, an epidemic is both a litmus test for learning what society currently values, as well as an indication of what power various actors have in the public space for shaping social values (Shilts 2007).

At least until now, the great influenza of 1918 was regarded as the greatest pandemic in American history (Barry 2005). But the most famous example of this model in Western history is the civilizational crisis of the plague in 14th-century Europe. Not an epidemic (or pandemic), but a natural disaster was the great Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which shook the easy conscience of the European Enlightenment and required fundamental re-imaginings of religion and culture.

Epidemics do not appear in a social vacuum. Problems and themes already pressing now make an accelerated appearance. One of these is government regulation and the administrative state. Indeed, it is now possible to suggest that the after-effects of COVID-19 may lie less for religion itself than for emerging political action through movements driven in part by an awakened conservative evangelicalism.

The drama is not over, but it may be abating as the infection rate and level of virulence of COVID-19 begin to oscillate. At its height, however, over a hundred books were written about “religion and epidemic”. These ranged from angry volumes (Lugeons 2020) that curse the church for obstructing society’s well-meaning response to the COVID-19 pandemic and ruining worthy efforts to equally angry responses, to government and science posing as all-encompassing religious-like worldviews (Habakus and Holland 2012; LeRoy 2022), to many volumes that picture the challenges of an epidemic, to the churches as opportunities for self-transformation, “reset”, and modernization in its ministries.

## 2. COVID-19 and Religion as Social Drama

The COVID-19 pandemic and religion have collided to produce a social drama in which all of us are implicated as actors, and government, society, culture, and religion are the platform and wings of the stage. According to Victor Turner’s theory (Turner 1988), we can expect “a sequence of social interactions of a conflictive, competitive, or agonistic type” and stages of the breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration or schism. In such circumstances, it is not unusual to discover that the emperor has no clothes. In Hans Christian Anderson’s tale, the weavers play on the emperor’s vanity by saying the suit is only visible to people

who are clever and competent. In our time of COVID-19, a different game may be in play. When Dr. Fauci appears on the stage, not many are willing to acknowledge the clothes he is, in fact, wearing.

Social dramas occur within groups sharing common values and interests and a common history. Public reflexivity takes the form of a performance—not theatrical but political, cultural, and religious. The languages through which a group communicates within itself are not just talk, they are political action, graphic representation, symbols, and rituals. All are stepping into “liminality”, Turner’s term for threshold experiences, betwixt-and-between (Turner 1969). Turner’s anthropology of performance has taken the play off the stage and centered it in the commons. The performance is the making of culture, that is, the reinventing of new ways of being in the world, where power often changes hands. Rituals are staged actions in which individuals or groups perform themselves, as when the public health officials who rose to recognized prominence over the last three years appeared weekly to declare what was what, announcing a new order in which the masses chose to participate or not. Turner’s theory invites us to keep our eye on the interplay of event, spectacle, culture, religious ritual, and audience so that we can see and not miss how we are performing the social drama in which we are involved.

The deployment of the idea of an epidemic serves as a challenge to religion and society, and is at the root of radical changes in culture and belief with a long history (Snowden 2019). Recent works follow the epidemic paradigm in coaching and cautioning the church on pastoral responses to the COVID-19 crisis (Danielson and Whyte 2021; Pless and Corzine 2020; Wright 2020). In *The World the Plague Made: The Black Death and the Rise of Europe*, James Belich traces how the Black Death unleashed revolutionary change across the medieval world and ushered in the modern age (Belich 2022). In 1346, a catastrophic plague beset Europe and its neighbors. The Black Death was a human tragedy that abruptly halved entire populations and caused untold suffering but also brought about a cultural and economic renewal on a scale never before witnessed. Belich’s book is a panoramic history of how the bubonic plague revolutionized labor, trade, and technology and set the stage for Europe’s global expansion.

Belich takes readers across centuries and continents to shed new light on one of history’s greatest paradoxes. Why did Europe’s dramatic rise begin in the wake of the Black Death? He shows how the plague doubled the per capita endowment of everything even as it decimated the population. Many more people had disposable incomes. Demand grew for silks, sugar, spices, furs, gold, and slaves. Europe expanded to satisfy that demand—and plague provided the means. Labor scarcity drove more use of wind power and gunpowder. Technologies such as water-powered blast furnaces, heavily gunned galleons, and musketry were fast-tracked by plague. A new “crew culture” of “disposable males” emerged to man the guns and galleons. Setting the rise of Western Europe in a global context, Belich demonstrates how the mighty empires of the Middle East and Russia also flourished after the plague and how European expansion was deeply entangled with the Chinese and other peoples throughout the world. Who knew epidemics could be generative rather than degenerative?

Although Belich does not take up the question of how European Christianity responded to the Black Death, there is much information available elsewhere. An Honors Thesis by McLaurine Zentner, “The Black Death and its impact on the church and popular religion” (Zentner 2015), nicely summarizes three issues: the severely weakened and compromised status of the church, the rise of traveling flagellants as an alternative (and heretical) religious response, and the persecution of Jews who were blamed for bringing on the plague. Of course, the official church’s position was that the plague came as God’s punishment for sins. People were admonished to pray, repent, and plead with God to stop the pestilence. But an increasingly secular church, and then one whose manpower was decimated by the plague, was not up to the task. The plague fully exposed the vulnerability of a Christian society. The black death contributed to the decline in confidence and faith of the laity towards the church. A church that had been turning towards wealth and

political power was now overwhelmed by the needs of the populace. A Christian society no longer seemed coherent. The clergy proved unprepared, and so a flagellant movement arose. Groups of men and women publicly flogged their bodies while they traveled to and from European cities, preaching their version of Christianity without the permission of the Church. When all else failed, Jews were attacked for having spread the plague. Nothing approaching this is present today.

A natural disaster is not unlike an epidemic in its effects. A famous disaster that similarly challenged the religious and social order of the day was the great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 (Gibbons 2010; Molesky 2016; Paice 2009; Shradly 2009). It struck a land that was economically busy and deeply religious—with 40 churches, 90 convents, and a population with 10% of its members in religious orders. The earthquake struck on November 1, All Saints Day. Ten percent of the population died, and every important church was destroyed. But the European Enlightenment of the time had confidently posited a well-ordered universe. Its philosophers observed nature and used reason to deduce a clockmaker God. The German polymath Leibniz famously produced a theodicy in which we find ourselves in *the best of all possible worlds* (von Leibniz 1985). In his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope wrote: “One truth is clear: Whatever is, is right.” All that crashed with the great earthquake in Portugal.

The *ars moriendi*, an elaborately ritualized art of dying, had been an important tradition in preparing for the ultimate journey of death. Now the clergy who coached this art were in disarray or absent without leave. Confessions were not heard. Boccaccio wrote that plagued bodies lay around like dead goats with no proper burial (Boccaccio 1995). Rituals failed the living and the dying, who no longer experienced the sacramental overlay of the church. Many parish priests fled, leaving no one to offer services, deliver last rites, and comfort the sick. Flight might have been intellectually explicable, but it was morally inexcusable. One dubious response was the provision of new papal indulgences, more expensive now and providing time off from purgatory. COVID-19 does not provoke quite this dramatic a civilizational crisis.

Since epidemics do not happen in a vacuum, it may be expected that latent themes in religion and society will now come to the fore. Before COVID-19 appeared, there was a simmering debate over government regulation and the administrative state. Contemporary government regulation, or government and science posing as the new gods, came forth as the triggers of conservative religion protesting masks, vaccination, and external controls over when and where religious groups could gather. Resistance to the big government was not a unique issue but had become a rallying cry ever since the Reagan revolution made a call for small government a theme.

We may consider another example in response to climate change, which also engages the debate over the role of government control and the administrative state in furthering the good of society—or spoiling it. Indeed, there is a significant argument on both the left and the right regarding this. Global warming, a catastrophe on the horizon, has been declared a hoax by some conservatives, while liberals advocate drastic government controls in response to the service of social justice and equity (Merrill 2022). In “Federalist Society: The Conservative Pipeline to the Supreme Court”, Jeffrey Toobin has documented the history of the Federalist Society and its grooming of judges certain to assert small government and a deregulated capitalist economy (Toobin 2017). With this political backdrop, crises were bound to become triggering events. Upheaval, inevitably surfacing from time to time, gives way to a new round of societal decision making about governmental intervention, with the corresponding convictions of proponents and detractors there to determine the shape of the social drama.

### 3. The Discipline of Sociology as a Way into Religion

Beyond the utility of the epidemic as an interpretive concept and the latent themes which may underlie it, I turn now to the role of *sociological* understanding and to the entire enterprise of the sociology of religion, which promises to be a view into the interaction of

COVID-19 and religion. Sociology is not a new partner in understanding religion. For the last fifty years, sociological methods have played a significant role in Biblical interpretation, becoming a key variable in historical-critical approaches and, more recently, in feminist biblical studies. For example, in *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* 2005, [John H. Elliott \(2005\)](#) discusses at length the role of the sociological method in his commentary on and grasp of the situation in the late 1st century when the letter appeared. Another example is the well-regarded work of Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* ([Schussler Fiorenza 1994](#)). After its promising origins in the late 19th century, the sociology of religion came into its own in the middle of the 20th century as a distinctive discipline and flourished in many universities, such as Berkeley, Chicago, and Columbia. Charles Glock and Rodney Stark were early practitioners of survey research (as now also practiced by the Pew Research Center), in which an issue is carefully defined, standardized questionnaires or interviews are constructed, and a statistically formulated sample size (“n”) is identified—in order to gain a macro impression of the social-cultural landscape by carefully interviewing, or collecting surveys, about people and their preferences, thoughts, and behaviors in a systematic manner. In *Religion and Society in Tension* Glock and Stark studied religions’ place in society ([Glock and Stark 1965](#)). In *American Piety: The Nature of Religious Commitment*, the first of three volumes in “Patterns of Religious Commitment”, Glock and Stark startle their readers with the contrasts in beliefs, practice, and experiences revealed among eleven major Christian denominations that are compared ([Stark and Glock 1968](#)).

In this setting, American civil religion has become a much-developed and argued phenomenon rooted in sociology. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already coined the term in chapter 8, book 4, of *The Social Contract* ([Rousseau 2019](#)). The concept of “civil religion” built bridges between sociology and religion and referred to the implicit values of a nation, as expressed through public rituals, symbols, and ceremonies on sacred days and at sacred places. But much more recent and influential was Robert Bellah’s 1967 essay “Civil Religion in America” ([Bellah 1967](#)). Bellah saw civil religion as an institutionalized collection of sacred beliefs about the American nation. But Bellah wanted to raise the prophetic role of civil religion which challenged “national self-worship”, calling for the subordination of the nation to ethical principles that transcend it in terms of which it should be judged.

Bellah considered the significance and possibilities of civil religion, to which he kept looking for its best example. Relying on the requirements of “virtue ethics”, Bellah wrote *Habits of the Heart: Middle America Observed* ([Bellah et al. 1988](#)). This is a longing for a democratic community that draws on our diverse civic and religious traditions. Later he returned to civil religion in *Varieties of Civil Religion* ([Bellah and Hammond 1982](#)), in which he once again examined the force of religion in politics and society. But he was always a realist and a prophet. Along the way he kept picking into a too easy going civil religion and wrote his anguished *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* ([Bellah 1992](#)). This was a caution about the encroachment of a secular world order and a plea that the religious dimensions of American society, as distinct from its churches, must also have their own integrity and the same care in understanding that any religion requires. This would suggest that in a time of epidemic, it is not just a vigorous churchly presence which is called for, but the constructive presence of religion in the national psyche. From the powerhouse at Berkeley of Glock and Bellah came their most distinguished student, Robert Wuthnow, who examined the human response to existential threats—once a matter for theology but now looming before us in multiple forms ([Wuthnow 2010](#)). Nuclear weapons, pandemics, global warming: each threatened to destroy the planet, or at least to annihilate our species. Freud, he notes, famously taught that the standard psychological response to an overwhelming danger is denial. In fact, Wuthnow writes that the opposite is true: we seek ways of positively meeting the threat, of doing something—*anything*—even if it is wasteful and time-consuming.

Wuthnow began to turn to small community life, as in *Small Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future*, in which he showed the fragility of community in small



towns (Wuthnow 2013). Almost anticipating the fractures in society this pandemic would open, he wrote *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America* (Wuthnow 2018). What is fueling rural America's outrage toward the federal government? Why did rural Americans vote overwhelmingly for Donald Trump? And is there a more nuanced explanation for the growing rural-urban divide? Wuthnow shows that rural America's fury stems less from economic concerns than from the perception that Washington is distant from and yet threatening to the social fabric of small towns. In the rituals and public performances of COVID-19, where was small-town America? Protesting vaccinations and masks? Wuthnow would come to argue, in *What Happens When We Practice Religion? Textures of Devotion in Everyday Life*, that throughout the past few decades, the study of religion has shifted away from essentialist arguments that grandly purport to explain what religion is and why it exists (Wuthnow 2020). Instead, using methods from anthropology, psychology, religious studies, and sociology, scholars now focus on what people do and say: their daily religious habits, routines, improvisations, and adaptations.

By 2020 Robert Putnam was producing a revised addition to his highly influential *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Putnam 2000) to address social media and the internet. Simply put, everyone once bowled in leagues, but no longer. Now we live disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures. Our shrinking access to the social capital that is the reward of communal activity and community sharing poses a serious threat to our civic and personal health. One might add that there is insufficient social capital to be spent on COVID-19. Between his two editions, Putnam wrote *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (Putnam 2012). Based on vast survey research, this is a sweeping look at contemporary American religion and assesses its sociological causes. Unique among nations, America is deeply religious and religiously diverse, but in 2012, it was already undergoing seismic shocks. Today, and not only because of COVID-19 but possibly accelerated by it, the deep and sharp divisions between neo-conservative evangelicalism (with aspirations to become a political movement) and mainstream Catholicism and Protestantism are most noticeable in the American drama.

This was all in keeping with the classical preoccupation present in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1966 (Berger and Luckmann 1966) major treatise on the sociology of knowledge, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann posited three stages in social construction: *Externalization* posits society as a human product. *Objectivation* sees society as an objective reality. *Internalization* finds humans to be a social product. Many conclusions arise: Society is a habit. If we define certain situations as real, they become real in their consequences. Religion could be thought of as successive definitions of a situation. Concepts do not have an independent reality.

One can see how rich the background detailed above is as an interpretive backdrop for thinking about the interface of plague and religion. From the seminal works just mentioned, we might pause to reflect: The Bible itself originated amidst defining social circumstances, and its interpretation is aided by the insights and approaches of sociology. Questions characteristic of the sociological approach emerge. How is reality itself, and therefore also religion, a social construction, and is it the case that once we define certain situations as real, they become real in their consequences? The original scholarship of survey research, now a mainstay of the Pew Research Center, opened up access to endless data and reflection about the role of religion in American life as well as called to attention American civil religion as the conceptualization of how religion may clothe American society and nation with ultimate meaning, and vice versa. Will our practice of "bowling alone" continue to shrink our access to the social capital that is the reward of communal activity and community sharing?

#### 4. Ideology and Belief as Social Construction and the Social Construction of Apocalypse

The social construction of belief or ideology may therefore be seen through the lens of the sociology of religion—and the social construction of religion. Many religious people see theology as deriving from sacred texts. Many see religious assertions and practices as constructions emerging from social situations. Some look for a combination of the two. An ideology seems to be a person's or group's set of beliefs or assertions as a social construction to serve a theory or practice for the times. Religious tenets may be a combination of revealed theology and the social constructions of religious communities.

A theodicy is a religious account of good and evil that wants to offer a vindication of divine ways. Some ideologies, functioning like theodicies, want to account for difficult realities amidst massive uncertainty in a bewildered age. Recently some ideologies have morphed into conspiracy theories that explain events or situations by invoking sinister and powerful groups bent on evil. To some, these transpositions are no more than outrageous self-serving inventions out of nothing, while to others, they are satisfying explanations of evil and what to do about it, functioning as unifying, if bizarre, grand narratives.

Not every belief arrives as a virgin birth from religion itself. Social construction alludes to constructed beliefs and religious claims from materials at hand that amount to responses to secular ideology, cultural and economic norms, and political actions and processes in a sustained and systematic way. A religious ideology can refer to an entire system of belief or an ephemeral spiritual mood that arises from the times. To call it religious is to claim that it has ultimate grounding or that it participates in an apocalyptic movement—often alluding to what may ensue before Christ returns. Already in the Berkeley 1970s, a common bumper sticker was “Jesus is back, and he's pissed.”

Common themes in conspiracy theories are anti-science, anti-elites, anti-establishment, and anti-globalism. All these may arise during a pandemic to challenge old or new orthodoxies. These narratives are typically stoked by right-wing, often white supremacist political figures. The dictates of science, which are viewed as unreliable or authoritarian, are contrasted with one's own spiritual devotion for providing unseen, and therefore miraculous, protection. Science is seen by some as part of an intellectual elitism that also embraces critical race theory, LGBTQ, and trans movements and is, therefore, to be ignored and denounced. Survey after survey, for example, shows that religious believers identify with Q'Anon somewhat more than others (Cox 2021). The core Q'Anon theory is that of a cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic sexual abusers of children operating a global child sex trafficking ring conspired against former U.S. President Donald Trump. Such a stark narrative is at once totally constructed based on prior convictions about a sense of a world in disrepair and, once constructed, further reifies just this worldview.

We may think about some of these recent phenomena that arise as apocalyptic responses to the times from within an increasingly politicized conservative evangelicalism. Reverend Tony Spell, a pastor of Life Tabernacle Church, a Oneness Pentecostal congregation in Baton Rouge, explained his defiance of the Louisiana Governor's order banning meetings of more than fifty people. He said: “It's not a concern. *The virus, we believe, is politically motivated.* We hold our religious rights dear and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says” (Vowell and Foster 2022). About three hundred people gathered on the Tuesday after the ban and over a thousand on the following Sunday. Reverend Spell handed out anointed handkerchiefs, preached against fear, and told his people, who are mostly bussed in from poor regions all around the city, that this was an extreme test of faithfulness brought on by the spirit of the antichrist. While this pastor saw himself as championing “faith over fear”, he also provoked a petition calling for his arrest and prosecution for reckless endangerment, signed by over 7000 people. Some found this flirting with endangerment reminiscent of earlier Christian practices in Appalachia, in which members of some Holiness churches saw themselves as proving their faith and celebrating divine love and care by taking poisonous snakes out of their cages and handling

them in an ecstatic trance-like state, thereby taking a serious health risk to demonstrate God's protection.

Likewise, in the June 2022 issue of the *Atlantic*, Tim Alberta wrote about "How politics poisoned the church" (Alberta 2022). Pastor Bill Bolin of Flood Gate Church in Brighton, Michigan, fills each Sunday's worship with 40 minutes of praise music, 40 minutes of preaching, and in-between those two activities, 40 minutes of what he calls his *diatribe*. For a decade, Bolin preached to a crowd of about 100 congregants on a typical Sunday. Then came Easter 2020, when Bolin announced he would hold indoor worship services in defiance of Michigan's emergency shutdown orders. As word spread around the conservative suburbs of Detroit, Bolin became a minor celebrity. Local politicians and activists borrowed his pulpit to promote right-wing interests. Flood Gates' attendance soared as members of other congregations defected to this small roadside church—becoming a community of 1500 people. His themes are the election stolen from Trump and, ominously, hone in on how the left has made a power grab to systematically dismantle religion and banish God from the minds and hearts of believers.

This posture grew from apocalyptic concerns about the rise of secularism and the decline of religion. It was characterized by a faith affiliation that rose in light of politics, concerns about the next election perhaps triggering the nation's demise, with more and more Trumpers self-identifying as evangelicals (rather than the other way around). These movements had already arisen in part from profound distrust of Obama, which took the form of both questioning whether he was American-born and of the spreading rumor that he wore a secret Islamic ring. In response to all this, Pastor Bolin saw himself as the rock star who disobeyed the government. For good and for evil, Pastor Bolin saw the nation moving *from pandemic to endemic*. Radical change, God-pleasing or not, was on the way.

Apocalyptic thought, with a reach back into the Old Testament and continuing into the New Testament, is certainly an attempt to find God amidst the ways of the current perilous times, providing a *nomos* by delineating for God's people what to expect and how to respond. But both religious and secular observers are likely to see apocalyptic as a social construction in the face of disaster. If the world may be coming to an end or heading for disaster for God's people, then the idea of a *global reset* makes sense. A drastic religious response to COVID-19, or other disasters, is the projected coming of the anti-Christ and a self-conscious call for a complete change of view in the Christian worldview (Hitchcock and Kinley 2022). The apocalyptic preoccupation opens believers' eyes and alerts them to how world leaders are using their own concept of global reset to seize pandemics, natural disasters and catastrophes, civil disorder, political unrest, and other current events to reshape every facet of life—all pointing toward the universal economy and godless global government of the Antichrist. Some look back and wonder if COVID-19 is equivalent to the Biblical Flood (Hever 2021). Others imagine a future with the coming apocalypse (Hitchcock 2020). "After the rapture" is the keynote of others (Jeremiah 2022). Religion, in this respect, poses its own reset to counter an all-embracing secular reset—to keep the secular world from getting away with anything—as when science, and not God, is where one looks in responding to a disaster. COVID-19 is seen as unleashing a cascade of consequences that are now reaching far beyond the pandemic itself. Governments are seen as leveraging the coronavirus and even the vaccine as a power grab, setting the stage for further intrusions in the future. These accelerants are driving the world to the precipice of fundamental, irreversible transformation. The winds of change are blowing. Tectonic shifts are underway at every level.

To the apocalyptic eye, these realities are alarming by themselves. And yet, there remains a still deeper, more sinister agenda embedded within. According to prophecies found in the Bible, a one-world government will indeed emerge in the end times. According to a dominant interpretation of the book of Revelation among evangelical conservatives, a future unified government will encompass the whole earth, and Satan himself will be behind it for the ultimate purpose of ruling over all the earth and being worshipped by its inhabitants. While we are not yet in the end times, we are on the edge of the precipice. In



the ideology of “global reset” readers will discover not only the setting for the end-time scenario prophesied in Scripture but also the cosmic setting for the return of Christ.

To many on the right, being unable by government decree to practice corporate worship seemed catastrophic. Locking church doors meant that religious ritual and online worshippers were not happening in the same space, at the same time, in a way that evoked a sense of community—the very contravention of the *collective effervescence* Durkheim thought was the origin and heart of religion, necessarily including the emotional arousal resulting from an intense form of communal sharing that empowers us and touches us in deep, often implicit ways. Collective effervescence is the basis for Durkheim’s theory of religion, as posited in his seminal work *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912). When an entire group gathers together, they can become sacred and experience the transformation through the ritual of the present into the sacred beyond.

From the perspective of the one accustomed to this form of religious expression, forced isolation risks this essential dimension of religion. Although zoom technology arrived in time to meet the new challenge of access, churches found online services a little different from styles of worship with featured performers, particularly those that are heavily sacramental or emphasized an Orthodox physicality in daily ritual. Congregants had cause to ask: could the government be allowed to tamper with such basic religious freedom as coming together regularly? Can science and government constrain what Durkheim thought was the very inner dynamic of religion?

### 5. Are Religious Representatives Permitted to Be Actors with Something to Say about COVID-19?

We have seen how the discipline of sociology opens up our understanding of religion, particularly with the idea of the “social construction” of religion. This concept does not weaken or negate the spokesperson for religion as an imaginative actor or one who takes the initiative, interrupts the flow, or is driven into new space by its theological motivations. Yet we may have to grant that such a figure can be an independent, imaginative actor—with a theological agenda.

But what if that person is all dressed up but not allowed to go anywhere? What if they are quarantined in homes or church buildings? What if they are denied room to be present and active in public life? Richard John Neuhaus takes up this question in *The naked public square: Religion and democracy in America* (Neuhaus 1984). He describes the empty and uncomely condition of today’s public space doctrine, which has been developed without consideration of religion and religious values. In the face of a secularism which disdained religion, Neuhaus calls for an activist religion that acts out its values and aspirations precisely in the public square and not just in the confines of church buildings. Admittedly, he made this argument in light of neoconservative Christianity, as seen in the years he edited the journal *First Things*. But that is not the only direction to go in Christianity, as becomes evident if we pay attention to the social justice characteristic of the Sojourners movement, a vigorous example of an Anabaptist movement as well as the leftist or social gospel which actively contends with the state (Heinz 2020, 2022).

So illuminative was the term “the naked public square” that religion’s forced isolation from the public square as a result of the latter’s domination by the religion of secularism became a major trope. The earlier prominence of concern over church and state issues and the fear of religious establishment gave way to vigorous assertions of the free exercise of religion as just one of the “discourse communities” contending for public space in post-modern times. The decline or elimination of the God hypothesis had seemed to become the default worldview of science, modernism, the Enlightenment, higher education, and even government. Religion would have no role in shaping the public conversation and public policy. But then changes ensued. A telling historical example is the silencing of church bells following the French Revolution. This became a contest for presence in the “aural landscape”. Eventually, the sound of church bells returned, and religion was no longer silenced. It could be heard again.

In the post-modern world of multiple discourse communities, religion is one of them—both left and right. In *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007), Charles Taylor argued that both secularism and religion are more fluid concepts than lately acknowledged. According to Taylor, postmodernism is both post-religious and post-secular. Secularism is not the absolute assertion of nothing but just another competing something. Taylor's challenge to the concept of "immanent frame" protested that all the available windows permit only one way of seeing. Loss of transcendence became another dimension of modern life.

The secularization thesis in the social sciences had been based on a single global idea of religion, a definition of secularity as the absence of religion, and then the triumph of instrumental reason. To this extent, it became the subtraction of religion from the public square. This is the understandable key to conservative evangelicalism's feeling of displacement and loss of heritage. Religion seeking its place may feel it is coming upon a total secular occupation of the public square. Secularism as an all-embracing meaning system escapes the Establishment Clause because it claims to be no religion while, in fact, functioning as an absolute claim-making religion. Thus, as Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon note, the church must contest for the right to speak its own language, in its own dialect, to tell and be its own story—in public (Hauerwas and Willimon 2014). Religion is one of the stories jostling for acceptance in a post-modern age, one of the master narratives. In this context, many religious studies scholars suggest that religion, and other worldviews, be tested by their "adequacy to the human condition". Bold religious leaders insist they, too, have something to say when it comes to subjects, including the subject of COVID-19.

A world disenchanted may become disenchanting. A world without the depth of the sacred can become superficial, without ultimate comfort. If late capitalism is the only ideology left standing, how well does it pass the test of responding to a pandemic? Is economics all anyone has to say? How adequate to the human condition is it? A reduced social imaginary is secularism's result in the Western Master Narrative. Matter minus spirit. When religion returns to the public square, it questions this hermeneutic and exposes its inadequacy and challenges its sufficiency for human meaning.

What if a dissenting church is the only meaning system left standing to offer a counter-story to that of late capitalism or scientism and the challenges of the epidemic? In this context, the Roman Catholic Declaration of Religious Freedom in 1965 argues not merely for courts to be neutral toward religious freedom, but nurturing and enabling (but without privileging one particular religion). Religion would like to be the yeast that leavens the commons. It does not concede that only politics, not religion, is the realm of cultural power.

So religion claims the right to be a social movement in the public square. St. Francis and the current Pope Francis saw that you have to see something and be something and do something—if you are to be a disciple of Christ (Pope Francis 2020). But the religious may lose their nerve. Consider the "God-gap among Democrats", fearful of being too assertive but perhaps catching up, as depicted by Amy Sullivan in *The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God-Gap* (Sullivan 2008). Or the hopeful prodding of Brian McClaren, in *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (McClaren 2017), which wants to display better ways to be Christian (and become the Church 2:0!).

When churches or individual religious actors decide they have something they must say or do, they may remain individual prophets called by and responding to sacred *texts*. But it may have been perilous contexts that called them forth. (These are sometimes called "Bonhoeffer moments" to refer to the Lutheran theologian and martyr who felt called forth by Nazi Germany to form the "pastors' emergency league" and become the "confessing church".) When I wrote my dissertation on the Bay Area Jesus Movement in the 1970s, I practiced participant-observation in a Jesus Movement in Berkeley that sassily called itself the Christian World Liberation Front (Heinz 1976). Although its early leadership originated in the conservative evangelical student ministry Campus Crusade for Christ (now called CRU), it quickly moved leftward, certainly in its style, but also soon enough in its political and religious message. It was a good example of how well-sighted individuals can turn

themselves into movements that bring new blood into a Christianity in need of cultural transfusion and radically new religious vision and of how re-discovered Biblical texts achieve relevance in new contexts. They become what the times require. There is a “history of effects” (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) going far back into the Hebrew Bible, picking up again in the New Testament, and then persistently breaking through in new ways throughout the history of Christianity. Sociological analysis cannot miss how new religious movements rise up at opportune moments and change the course of religious traditions, equipping them for radical change as a new and necessary environmental response, thereby changing the course of society and culture as well. The Christian World Liberation Front moved to Berkeley from California beaches, introduced guitars to worship, appointed themselves to preach on the Berkeley campus, and could have petered out there. But they transformed much of American evangelicalism and became a yeast in American Protestantism. They became pastors and professors and college presidents, and even Orthodox bishops. Last year they met in Berkeley to celebrate their 50th anniversary.

And yet American history displays a series of “great awakenings”, periodic revivals that stirred individual hearts and refreshed the commonwealth. These did not necessarily call for resistance to government but may have implied stirring the government—and especially tens of thousands of camp followers—to religious values. The more “individual religion” was expressed, and this was typical of the several awakenings, the less likely such hearts were to resist the government or challenge social norms.

## 6. Turning Right or Left?

Therefore, when actors and movements are born, when the religious feel called to respond to a crisis like COVID-19, do they turn right or left? To take an extraordinary individual, Martin Luther King, Jr. began as a black evangelical, practiced moving to the center, and ultimately moved to the left—both calling for radical social justice for the poor and then, when he saw the connection, opposing the Vietnam War. To the outside observer, of course, religion may turn right or left. While many, like Bishop Tutu, or social gospelers, would expect religion to be communal, constructive of societies that become commonwealths in which much “social capital” is traded and committed to building up a community, in some other religious communalism libertarianism rings the bells.

Once, it was thought that Ayn Rand’s philosophy, for example, was inimical to religion and its commitment to the community. Religion would stand up in favor of social construction for the good of all. Meanwhile, Rand’s hero in *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark, seemingly expressed a worldview opposite to religion: “I do not recognize anyone’s right to one minute of my life. Nor to any part of my energy. Nor to any achievement of mine. No matter who makes the claim, how large their number or how great their need” (Rand 1996). Rand’s world is defined as a battle between *creators and parasites*. The creator is self-sufficient, self-motivated, and self-generated. He lives for himself. The parasite lives second-hand and depends on others.

A principled conservative religion that instinctively resists government encroachment on the commons and believes social justice is a leftist cause may resemble the libertarianism of Ayn Rand. When Paul Ryan, whose hero was Ayn Rand, was still the Speaker of the House, the Georgetown Jesuit faculty admonished him that his social and economic philosophy was in clear opposition to the social theology of the Catholicism he also claimed. The welfare of the commons far exceeds the claims of the individual entrepreneur. A common trope one sees on Facebook depicts two libertarians looking out their window during a severe blizzard and pronouncing, “Here comes that socialist snowplow again.”

On the other hand, perhaps it is a government that has recently come to be libertarian in denying its responsibility to serve the commonwealth. The legacy of economic theorist Milton Friedman, and every “rational actor” following in his train, declares that the only responsibility of a capitalist economic system is to achieve maximum profits for its shareholders and renounce all claims from so-called “stakeholders”, which is to say the entire commons. An epidemic is likely to surface debates about the meaning and demands of

the commons. Both conservative evangelical religion and Republican politics may share a libertarian view (Heinz 2020).

A piece of good humor in recent decades is the counselor who says she would not do “marriage counseling” because marriage is an abstract construct devoid of personal or social reality. She only does “individual counseling”—meeting men and women who happen to be married separately. Indeed, the very word *social* has become suspicious, as in neo-conservative religion’s certainty that “social gospel” must imply “cultural Marxism”. Conservative evangelicals commonly denounce social justice as a possible Christian aspiration. Religion as a source of spiritual and psychological comfort remains a major theme, both to the left and the right, and evangelicals are often leaders in “world relief” organizations such as Franklin Graham’s *Samaritan’s Purse*. But religion as a source and motivation for public benevolence and building community may split the right from the left, despite that almost all world relief organizations, liberal or conservative, enthusiastically apply for and accept government funds allocated to worldwide economic and famine and medical relief organizations, which have long appeared on the right and the left, among evangelicals and social gospellers.

### 7. Do Religious Exemptions Lean Right or Left?

A response that seems unlike the above and has caused consternation in the body politic is the request for religious exemptions from vaccinations and masks and prohibitions of public gatherings. The shepherd of the flock grants exemptions! To many, this seems more like resistance to the government, but it is a churchly response when the stakes are high, and there is considerable public pressure. Such exemptions on church letterhead are rarely offered by mainstream churches, nearly unanimous in support of vaccinations and masking, and willing to experiment with zoomed worship. Two-thirds of U.S. adults say that most people who claim religious objections to a COVID-19 vaccine are “just using religion as an excuse to avoid the vaccine” (Nortey 2022). Only 10% of the public seem to believe that pandemic policies conflict with their religious beliefs, but they manage to garner much attention. And yet requests to accommodate individual consciences are typically made and answered among conservative Christians.

Conservative clergy have offered exemption letters to those in their own flocks, often emphasizing freedom of conscience rather than specific dangers of the vaccine itself. In rural Hudson, Iowa, Sam Jones informed his small congregation at Faith Baptist Church that he is willing to provide them with a four-paragraph letter stating that “a Christian has no responsibility to obey any government outside of the scope that has been designated by God”. Jones’s stories are told on the website, *The Gatekeepers: Church, culture, politics*, available by googling. Online, a loose web of largely independent faith leaders has volunteered to provide exemption letters to those who request them. An independent evangelist in Texas is offering letters online in exchange for a donation. In California, a megachurch pastor is offering a letter to anyone who checks a box confirming the person is a “practicing Evangelical that adheres to the religious and moral principles outlined in the Holy Bible”. The letters are not necessary, experts say, but they can help bolster claims that religious objections to the vaccine are sincere. Generally, such exemptions are not offered by Catholics or mainstream Protestants.

Of course, groups outside the churches can capitalize on what some churches do. Indeed, one of the most noticed phenomena in the US is with regard to Trump-voting Christians, who voted 80% for him in 2016, or neo-evangelicals and neo-conservatives looking roughly the same. Indeed, there is a debate about whether conservative Republicans have taken over evangelicalism or vice versa. It is true that religion-fueled action can turn into political movements or that conservative Republicans can capitalize on the religion-based pandemic backlash. And it may be that conservative Republicanism has capitalized on the pandemic backlash as a further argument for small government. If political backlash were to shift elections to conservatives, this could become the biggest theme in the social drama, not whether Christianity is “liberal” or “conservative”.

But even as neo-conservative evangelicals may imagine they are a decisive religious-political movement, partly as an after-effect of COVID-19, liberal Christians may dream that a global pandemic could become the call for a new holistic era of mutual cooperation and concern for a world family in which the wealthy and privileged—and effective government aid—must arise to sustain the needy. There is evidence from polls (Pew Research Center 2020) that spirituality can aid people with the everyday comfort of faith and mental relaxation in times of crisis and dangerous diseases. Religion can hold up images of the entire community, of society as a commonwealth, and seek the good of the whole. Religion can assist health professionals by urging and encouraging people to wear masks and get vaccinated. Religion has urged governments of wealthy countries to be generous with their COVID-19 aid to poor countries. One of the traditional roles of religious individuals and religious communities has been to serve a positive, integrative, charitable function in crisis situations.

At the same time, evangelical nationalism can be seen as its own kind of armed civil religion, the unquestioned assertion of America as God's favorite country. The use of force, with the AR-15 as its icon, is aimed at defending white supremacy and other values coming into vogue. Possibly the chief angle driving conservative evangelicals into anti-vax postures is that they want to be non-conforming nationalists with their own agenda, as we saw above in the stories of small churches chasing larger memberships. If they have also been pushed around by the state regarding when and how they can worship, that is an additional impetus. But mostly, they are out to build a national movement, and they can see the kinds of people already becoming activists in the anti-mask and ant-vax mode. They are likely to accept free market and free choice fundamentalism as an expression of God's right hand and connect without reservation conservative small government/unregulated capitalism/extreme caution about social constructions like "justice" or "firearms".

By contrast, a Christian social gospel would seem to imply that church and government achieve together a just society, building social programs for the unhoused, the hungry, the sick, the hungry, and the imprisoned—among whom Christians are to see Jesus, according to Jesus' last judgment story in Matthew 25 (Heinz 2022). In this move, however, conservative Christians see not a Christian ethic but a "cultural Marxism" buttressed by tired leftwing slogans. They might assert this as a way to protect the authenticity of their own understanding of religion, or they may resist a social gospel mentality in the name of their own libertarianism or in a political conservatism disguised as conservative religion. The social gospel, once regarded in the early 20th century as America's distinctive contribution to world Christianity in response to the late 19th century Gilded Age, has been derided by American fundamentalists and many evangelicals as a false delusion that leads Christians away from salvation in the hereafter that is their destiny and calling, relieving the expected behaviors of sanctified selves by displacing them onto the government. To such religious conservatives, Christianity is about individualist freedom and redemption. Any new deal is never to use the word *social*, especially if it is twinned with justice.

## 8. Pastoral Action

A less political label than left or right, conservative or liberal, is to conceive of religious leaders' responses as pastoral action, borrowing from the New Testament the concept of Jesus and Christian leaders as shepherds. *Pastoral* is a mellow word in Christianity, evoking a shepherd tending the flock, giving spiritual guidance to the community, or urging believers to stay the course.

"Intervention", that is, resistance in a social system, may be a religious concept, and it can certainly be of high value in Christianity. A pastoral approach, by slight contrast, is deeply caring but not always gentle. It could be coaching for resistance to government encroachment, as often in the New Testament. I see this in a story that unfolded in an evangelical Christian day school on the East Coast. Friends whose children attend that private Christian school asked me for advice as they faced a vaccination and mask dilemma. The "teaching pastor" at this large church issued a long and carefully argued



manifesto about why the school should not accept masking or vaccination mandates from the government. What struck me was his deliberate clarification that he was *not* objecting to the science or public health issues surrounding vaccinations and masks. As I studied the pastor's position statement, I came to see something I had not observed in discussions on this topic. I think it may be more common to evangelical resistance than most people thought.

This pastor saw the individualizing nuclear family as the first and last, and often only, carrier of Christian values in the public arena, the first and indispensable unit of resistance to society, culture, and government whose practices are often likely to run counter to Christian teaching and the practice of Christ himself. Government overreach is likely to impose, with sanctions, cultural values that concern the church. If Christian families (typically with the father as head) did not constantly exercise vigilance against external moral forces, if they did not hold the line, they might lose their well-practiced habit of principled resistance to contemporary (and often *au courant*) public values, including, without mentioning them, legal legitimation of gay marriage, LGBTQ, trans recognition, and abortion. A compliant church accustomed to an agreement with government and cultural trends might gradually lose its instincts for resistance, and indeed its right to resist under the freedom of religion clause of the Constitution, much fought before the Supreme Court in the last fifty years. If the science and medical authority of vaccinations and masks were not the problem, the outside force of the government's ability to bind the Christian conscience was. The government's recent and unexpected establishment of new sets of hitherto objectionable values had further delegitimized government, in the eyes of the church, as a force for the public good and rang the alarm bell calling for religious resistance. The teaching pastor saw it as his mission to train his congregation in the habit of instinctive resistance and protest to fortify the church against overpowering government and social institutions as carriers and champions of non-Christian values. Of course, the forced closing of churches or governmental directions regarding what could or could not be done when Christian communities gathered were often marked as particularly egregious.

I was not immediately prepared to interrogate these conservative oppositions to government further until I reflected on the unending calls for resistance and non-conformity in my own Christian leftism. In my book *After Trump: Achieving a New Social Gospel* (Heinz 2020), I call precisely for a social gospel that extends the church's reach, in part as a community of Christians lobbying the government into society on behalf of the poor. Indeed, I saw the social gospel as a form of resistance to and overcoming of Trumpism that dates back to Reagan's ideology of small government and almost complete neglect of those in need (imagine a government unwilling to offer vaccinations for COVID-19). I wanted Christian movements that opposed not only governmental policies of gross inequality but also invoked ambitious new government policies on behalf of the common good, especially pleading the cause of "the least of these". In my book *Matthew 25 Christianity: Redeeming Church and Society* (Heinz 2022), I call for a leftist Christianity that would regain the ability to see the presence of Jesus amidst the "least of these". A good deal of that book built on compelling observations and critiques of Max Weber more than a century earlier and was devoted to vigorous critiques of deregulated American capitalism as the government's default position and, in response, to vigorous opposition to the government (Weber 1905). The legacy of the Chicago School of economics had been responsibility only to *shareholders* (*economic stockholders*) but never to *stakeholders* (*citizens of the commons*). With great regret, I note that neo-conservative evangelicals are much more effective at saying "don't" than liberal Christians are at saying "do". Was I in the same boat as the conservative *resistance* to the government, but from the left, not the right? This raises the obvious issue that resistance to the government can come from the left as well as the right. Indeed, the phrase "non-conforming resistance movement" that periodically describes Christianity in different ages is more likely to derive from the left than the right.

A well-known test case occurs to me. It is not uncommon in Christian ethics classes to assign the book *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed* (Hallie 1984), which tells the story of how

a historic Huguenot community in the French village of Le Chambon resisted the Nazi Vichy government and managed to save the lives of four to five thousand Jews who were hidden from deportation. How did this come about? The Huguenots were French Protestants following the 16th century Reformation, who had a long history of persecution and expulsion from Catholic France, but over time some were allowed to remain under a posture of separatism. Philip Hallie argues that these Protestants, over time, developed the posture of resistance as natural to their lives, to their moral fiber. If the government forbade the ringing of the church bell, they rang it. If the government said to raise the Nazi flag, they refused to run it up the pole. When Vichy ordered them to identify and turn over the Jews in hiding, they were fully prepared to bear real risks and resist.

The irony of these resistance comparisons is not lost on me. Comparing modern evangelicals with a Le Chambon persecuted community raises a new question: How would you decide Le Chambon as right and American conservative evangelicals as wrong? Granted, it must be the issues, not the practice of resistance itself, one might reply, but the formal comparison itself raises two questions: Does Le Chambon, in fact, appeal to a Biblical ethic, while American evangelicals, in fact, appeal to political conservatism (e.g., Reagan's notion that big government is always wrong)? And when liberal Christians oppose the government, is it because the government fails to produce justice across the land? Does the left, then, oppose the government in order to get the government to do good, to cooperate with the churches in practicing a social gospel, while evangelicals are determined to keep the government from doing bad?

But do not conservative Christians resist the government in order to avoid being forced by government to surrender *Christian* obedience to *political* obedience? Is the evangelical nuclear family not being called on to practice a steady line of defense and non-surrender that is, in many ways, admirable? We saw above that epidemics, natural disasters, and upheaval can become test cases of whether and when religious cooperation or resistance is called for. Pandemics such as the one through which we are currently living can reveal the emperor has no clothes. If these historical moments of crisis have historically brought about social change, or at least revealed cracks in the system, what role does the prevailing national culture, whether libertarian conservatism, deregulated capitalism, or a New Deal-like social gospel, play in the probabilities of religious resistance to, or cooperation with, government?

## 9. Conclusions

COVID-19 has inaugurated a social drama in which pandemic, government, science, religion, and churches all play significant roles. All of these actors may undergo change, wanted or unwanted, as the play unfolds. As in Biblical religion, both Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament, powerful upheavals in the world can produce apocalyptic postures. What new revelations are on the way? Or is the crisis all over—a featherweight compared to the Black Death? What challenges will traditional religion undergo as it keeps evolving? What movements of God will be uncovered? What prophets will hear calls? On what fronts will the opposition between sacred texts and contemporary contexts be felt? What God seems to be calling for can seem to arrive from the left or the right. Did God not turn left after the Exodus? When COVID-19 departs, what will society and religion look like in its wake? For what new challenges will we have to be prepared?

The epidemic is a historic medium for understanding society and religion in perilous times. Epidemics have the power to expose strengths and weaknesses. The European Black Death was the quintessential epidemic. The Lisbon Earthquake was a natural disaster not unlike a pandemic. But an unexpected comparison to responses to an epidemic is the continuing argument over whether climate change or global warming or worldwide poverty or, even in the United States, completely inadequate healthcare are fundamental and undeniable facts and how big government should be authorized to mobilize in response. The notion of *global reset* is useful in estimating the religious and social change likely to respond to either.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic could be a useful and concrete way of cataloging for university classes the whole range of topics involved in the sociology of religion or in the history of American religion. Years ago, I began sub-titling my sociology of religion class, “religious contests for public space”. COVID-19 discussions could bring these issues to life, make test cases of them, and inquire whether the historic disciplines involved in the sociology of religion and the histories of Christian thought are sufficient to understand the times in which we live.

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