

Solidarity at Issue: Pandemics and Religious Belief

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Abstract

A global pandemic such as that of the 2020 Covid-19 corona virus, causing great suffering and loss of life, brings home the difficult conditions that make for our fragile human life. But the question that religious belief poses, about “natural evil” in a world created by a loving God, satirised by Voltaire in the 18th century, masks the more existential problem, the possibility of greater human solidarity. In the background is the Deist view of God complementing the “polite society” of mutual benefit and guaranteeing the latter’s benevolent outcome. It is a worldview, as Charles Taylor (2007) explains, that has put aside the premodern idea of human transformation, that was symbolised by religious virtuosi, saints, theophanies, and so on, now looked upon with suspicion by modernity. But the possibility of transformation, of a generous human response to suffering, is what is called for in a pandemic. In Camus’ novel, *The Plague*, we see the more authentic response that resists being boxed in by religious enthusiasts to a constricted and ideological affirmation of a cosmic picture that obscures the fault-lines of bourgeois society.

Keywords: Camus; solidarity; Charles Taylor; pandemic; Voltaire; religion

Introduction

Any natural disaster can provoke people of faith to ask questions about how God can allow such suffering. In the background to how this question is posed, however, is the Deist view of God complementing the “polite society” of mutual benefit and guaranteeing the latter’s benevolent outcome. It is a view that is satirised by Voltaire in the 18th century—but the question masks the more existential problem, the possibility of greater human solidarity. In Camus’ novel, *The Plague* (1947), we see the more authentic response that resists being boxed in by religious enthusiasts to a constricted and ideological affirmation of a cosmic picture that obscures the fault-lines of bourgeois society.



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Camus' approach frames our discussion. The contrast is with Voltaire's *Candide*, which mocks the attempt to square the circle, reconciling the divine intention with the human experience of suffering thought of as unmerited. What has changed since that time is the shift from a linear cause-and-effect Newtonian world to an evolutionary picture in which there is an awareness of the fragility of the development of the planet and of human persons. On the other hand, the ethical outlook has not yet caught up with this shift in focus, staying with formal principles of equality that presuppose a stable "polite society" of autonomous individuals. As Charles Taylor (2007) explains, bourgeois culture has put aside the premodern idea of human transformation, which was symbolised by religious virtuosi, saints, and theophanies, now looked upon with suspicion. But the possibility of transformation, of a generous human response to suffering, is what is called for in a pandemic.

Bernard Lonergan has expressed this blind spot of modernity well. He likens the situation to what used to prevail in a primitive society, taking the Trobriand islanders as an example. Malinowski had pointed out how, while in practical living the islanders exercise their rational faculties, beyond that realm intelligence yields to myth and magic. For modernity, on the other hand, the tendency is to be content simply to further cultivate that practical part of human living, while, Lonergan (1990, 101) says,

... maintaining a surrounding no man's land which used to be inhabited by myth and magic but which is now empty—we do not admit, Here be strange beasts; we simply do not bother about it. The real problem of human development is the problem of occupying this territory, this blank, with intelligence and reasonableness ...

Lonergan is referring to the whole dimension of personal development, the spiritual side of life. It is helpful, in order to understand this fault-line of a technological society, to see how with the emergence of the Deist, polite society, worldview, human transcendence and personal development have been elided. Charles Taylor (2007, Chapter 6) has sketched a historical account of how this situation came about, and we will return to this in our conclusion. The impersonal bureaucracy of modern society has failed to balance the basic need for autonomy with the equally basic needs of the human psyche for bonding and for meaning. This is the central theme in Mary Clark's (2002) comprehensive and cross-disciplinary analysis of global social conditions. Polite secular society works with procedural policies for dealing with groups that fall through the net of mutual benefit, or are alienated from it. But pandemics call for something more. Subaltern groups may mobilise under the rubric of equal respect for cultures and traditions, but what is called for is more than this—generosity and solidarity. Religions, and religious identities, may be mobilised but it can be argued that resistance to

mobilisation, to an assertion of a group identity, is a better start for a post-pandemic world.¹

Shifting the Question

At first glance, it may seem irrelevant to return to the classic theological question of how a good God can permit unjust suffering on a global scale. But if this notion of God involves some obviously self-contradictory propositions, as suggested in the debates about “natural evil,” the way is now open for religious faith to take on board any number of irrational elements that could have destructive consequences. One could think, for example, that, against medical science, the corona virus would be ineffective in large church gatherings. So, we have not in any way left behind the debates around theodicy. If we unpack what is presupposed to the question (God responsible for nature, we ourselves responsible for human behaviour), we will see that the conditions for a deepening and widening of human generosity, for solidarity among all peoples, require a shift in focus from the “abstract” question about natural evil, to the more existential one about the human response. It requires a self-conscious putting-aside of the earlier question. We need to learn from Camus’ articulation of this approach in his novel, *The Plague*, once he had followed through, in his earlier novel, *The Outsider*, on the misleading optimism of the polite society.

Camus’ take on the Deist picture of the world is that it is an abstraction. In his narrative of the plague, the character Rambert, who participated in the Spanish Civil War on the side of the republicans, represents the idea that ideologies (“abstractions”) are destructive. Camus feels he has dealt with the issues raised by “the problem of natural evil” in his earlier fictional work, *The Outsider (L’Etranger)* as well as in his philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus’ fate, to forever be tasked to roll the stone up the hill, only to see it roll back down, is the fate of all humankind in a world that does not conform to the beneficial regularity laid down in the Deist view of things. Things happen to you in an arbitrary way, what Camus terms “the absurd.” Meursault, in *L’Etranger*, cannot see his way to finding meaning in the supposed moral order of the world. He is a victim of what he sees as arbitrary rules of behaviour.

Camus notes his shift of attention: “Compared to *The Outsider*, *The Plague* marks, without any possible discussion, the passage from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community with which one has to share the struggle” (in Masters 1974, 60, my translation).

It is this “impossible” discussion that I want to pursue; the passage from the earlier question around the Deist picture to the later question about how one takes up one’s membership of the human community. I do this by unpacking, with the help of Charles

1 One can think here of the way some churches in South Africa claimed, towards the start of the pandemic, exemption from restrictions on gatherings in view of their status as “essential.” Other faith groups—one can think of the Gift of the Givers as an example—simply got down to work.

Taylor's now classic study, *A Secular Age* (2007), the elements involved in the Deist approach to God and the world. Camus' later question simply assumes there is evil in the world, and asks, what should you, as a member of humankind, do about it? It is a question addressed on the level not of one's ideas about things, but of one's attitude and response to things. This clearly involves (in spite of Camus' suggestion that any reasonable discussion of this is impossible) some or other idea about how things are (which will not be that of the Deist viewpoint!), but that is only one dimension to the larger problem.

The Problem of "Natural Evil": Voltaire's *Candide*

The problem, which has engendered its own discipline, "theodicy" (Kern and Splett 1975), can be put as follows: How can one plausibly believe in an all-powerful God that allows such unjustified suffering to take place? Many have phrased this question in terms of a logical disjunction: either God is all-powerful and could do something to prevent this suffering but chooses not to—which would suggest that, in fact, God is of a cruel, not a loving, nature; or, since this seems far from what people through the ages have thought of God, God is benevolent, good-willed to humankind, but unable to put into effect the kind of alleviation of the suffering that would be expected. As Masters (1974, 85) comments: "He is either cruel or incompetent." God cannot logically be both all-powerful and all-good. But these are precisely the attributes that have traditionally been ascribed to the God that people think worthy of their faith and their worship.

When Voltaire's satirical novel, *Candide or Optimism* (to give its full title), was published in 1759, it was an immediate success. It had struck a chord among the thinking public. The church authorities were in need of strong criticism, and it was not simply that those who criticised the church were of a social class that felt they had advanced beyond the less-educated classes; it was a genuine feeling of the true value of self-determination, greater degree of critical thinking without a condemning authoritative voice claiming a franchise from God. Secondly, the philosophical justification of the existence of God was very thin, even self-contradictory. Both these elements are evident in the novel and play a part in Voltaire's (negative) response to the question of God in the face of natural evil.

The representative of the Deist faith in God is the tutor of the young Candide, namely Pangloss. Pangloss states his point of view at the start, that everything has its proper place in God's design for the world.

It is demonstrable that things cannot be other than they are. For, since everything is made for a purpose, everything must be for the best possible purpose. Noses, you observe, were made to support spectacles: consequently, we have spectacles ... Pigs were made to be eaten: so we eat pork all the year round. (Voltaire [1759]1993, 2)

So far so good. But what about things that are clearly evil? Pangloss has his answer. His companion, James, expresses the problem that there are things that seem to exist out of

man's bad will. Men, he suggests, "were not born wolves, but they are become wolves. God did not give them twenty-four pounders nor bayonets, but they have made these things for their own destruction." To which Pangloss replies: "All that had to be ... Private ills make up the general good. It therefore follows that, the more numerous the private ills, the greater the general good" (Voltaire [1759]1993, 11–12).

We can see here what is echoed in Adam Smith's theory of the wealth of nations, namely that private, self-interested motives (getting the best of the deal for myself) lead to the general wealth of the nation, through the "invisible hand" of the market. There is no space for the encouragement of virtue. For the moment, as Keynes suggested, going one step further, "we must pretend ... that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not" (in Schumacher 1974, 82). By removing virtue from the equation, we seem to be positing a magical (that is to say, abstract) conception of the world.

What is one to say about the human suffering caused by the earthquake? Pangloss comments: "All this is for the best, since, if there is a volcanic eruption at Lisbon, then it could not have occurred in any other spot. It is impossible that things should be elsewhere than where they are; for everything is good" (Voltaire [1759]1993, 14). This is what one would call not a reason, but a rationalisation. It abstracts from the harm suffered by the people. Candide's girlfriend has been ravished by two Bulgarians, flogged, stabbed in the stomach twice, seen mothers and fathers have their throats cut. Candide comments: "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what can the others be like?"

An Evolutionary Worldview and the Question of Human Response

Behind the posing of the question about "natural evil" is the Newtonian universe, one in which everything is part of a system of causes and effects, in principle discoverable by the natural sciences. "Purposes" are eliminated; the stone does not "of its nature" seek to be at rest but falls to the ground in virtue of the gravitational force operating on it. Newton's genius was to treat everything as "inert." The living, purpose-framing world of human persons finds itself alien in this picture, in the cold, dead, universe. To this day, philosophers struggle to find a "place" for consciousness, and for acting freely in accordance with good reasons: "the hard problem of consciousness" and "the intractable problem of free will" is how it is phrased in analytic philosophy.

And this picture spills over into how the economy is thought of, as a well-designed system of mutual benefit, each following their own private interests and the "invisible hand" of the market ensuring the general wealth of the nation. As we must rationalise the fault-lines of what actually happens in the best of all worlds (the Covid-19 pandemic was not predicted, only sporadically managed, or mismanaged); so too with the free market. Those who migrated from Mozambique to work on the South African mines, for example, do not seem to figure in the trickle-down effects of the free market, the market in which each is free to sell their labour, and each free to employ labour at the best price possible.

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What has changed since the time of Voltaire is our greater appreciation of ourselves being part of nature, of the evolutionary universe in which there is a part played by destruction, by the death of a star giving birth to our solar system, mammals (such as *homo sapiens*) flourishing because dinosaurs became extinct, by our sun “shedding its life” to give us life. The shifting of the tectonic plates that gave rise to the tsunami is understood to be the way the planet keeps itself in stable equilibrium and continues to sustain life.

Keith Ward puts this new grasp of the conditions of human being well:

Human beings are essentially parts of an evolving physical universe with general laws that have to be exactly what they are in order to produce human persons. Those laws will produce earthquakes, stellar explosions, periodic extinctions of life, and volcanic eruptions as an essential part of having a universe like this. If beings like human persons are going to exist, they have to exist in a universe in which suffering and death are necessary. ... We cannot have human persons and a universe without suffering. (Ward 2008, 80)

That seems to be reasonable so far as “natural evil” is concerned. Brian Swimme (1996, 44) pushes this new perspective even further: “Human generosity is possible only because at the centre of the solar system a magnificent stellar generosity pours forth free energy day and night without stop and without complaint and without the slightest hesitation.” What is needed, in the light of this changed cosmic perspective, is a repositioning of the debate around suffering.

In spite of the growth in our understanding, since the time of Voltaire, of the “fine tuning” of the evolutionary universe alluded to above, we have religious critics today who repeat Voltaire’s attack on this idea of God. Thus, Dawkins: “If there is only one Creator who made the tiger and the lamb, the cheetah and the gazelle, what is He playing at? Is He a sadist who enjoys spectator blood sports?” (cited in Clayton 2012, 26). The point is not to debate Dawkins on this: the point is that the question is heading in the wrong direction.

The Emergence of the Deist Worldview and the “Polite Society”

The image of God in the Deist approach is built on the understanding of a Newtonian world that operates strictly in accordance with the forces discoverable in the physical sciences. In other words, omitted from the picture is the dimension of human intentionality and meaning, the normal way we would understand human behaviour and, importantly for our purposes, the presupposition for any ethic.

Taylor unpacks the genesis of the Deist attitude to religion by means of four developments in thinking about God. Firstly, there is the eclipse of the idea of a “higher” purpose. Purposes are confined to “the common intent and mutual happiness of his rational creatures” (Tindal, cited in Taylor 2007, 222). Secondly, there is the eclipse of

grace. Nothing more is needed in human life than reason and discipline, our gifts by nature. Thirdly, the sense of mystery is put to one side. God, the designer, does not adjust things in particular cases! And fourthly, the notion of God transforming human beings into God's own likeness is dropped. One classical idea in the Christian tradition was that of partaking in the life of God, expressed for example in the gospel of John, the idea of indwelling—the Son in the Father and we in the Son.

The aims of religion are now seen to coincide with the aims of the political society. No longer is it thought that the Christian vision is that of sharing in the life of God, “theosis.” Now, comments Taylor, the “next world” has a different function, “not to complete a path of ‘theosis’ begun here, but to provide rewards and punishments which fulfil the demands of justice on our actions in history” (Taylor 2007, 736, in Cloots, Latré, and Vanheeswijck 2015, 966). It is functioning more or less as supplementary to the job of the police and the prosecuting authority.

The implications of this Deist approach to the new understanding of society are important for how religion is going to be rethought. You cannot now, in the new conception of society, have God intervening. As Hutcheson argues in his *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755), this “would immediately supersede all contrivance and forethought of men, and all prudent action” (cited in Taylor 2007, 224). What we have is the idea of “polite society.” Replacing the medieval notion of acts of the warrior, are the acts of peace, promoting economic progress and manners that lead you to treat the other person as independent, with their own aims, for mutual benefit. This is the God that will come to the aid of decent folk, and ensure crime is punished, in this world or if not, in the next. Gilson (1941, 106–107) describes this kind of religion: “a vague feeling of religiosity, a sort of trusting familiarity with some supremely good fellow to whom other good fellows can hopefully apply when they are in trouble: *le Dieu des bonnes gens*.”

However, the “contrivance” and “prudent action” of people in the Deist picture of polite society clearly fail in the face of massive natural disasters, where people are rendered helpless. Because these attitudes are precisely where the modern religion is focused, “natural evil” calls into question this whole faith. But, more importantly, it distracts us from the more pressing problem: that of the human potential for generosity and solidarity. Alongside the problem of “natural evil” it is supposed that we have the complementary problem of moral evil, the dimension of harm caused, rather than harm (unjustly) suffered.² And the latter is solved, for some, by an otherworldly resolution. The God-man pays the debt owed to the Creator for the sin of humankind. This is, no doubt, a metaphor, but one can still ask whether it obscures the ethical awareness-raising that is necessary in a post-pandemic world.

2 The translation of “natural evil” and “moral evil” into the more illuminating categories of “harm suffered” and “harm done” is the point well made by Augustine Shutte (2006).

Camus' *The Plague*

Writers have been quick to pick up on how apt Camus' novel is for our present situation (Joseph 2020; Judd 2020). Carlos Franco-Paredes (2020), for example, writes in *Clinical Infectious Diseases*:

Pandemics represent the most dramatic presentation of the rapid and effective spread of infectious pathogens such as bacteria or a virus acting as the wildcards of world's history ... Camus's narrative reveals our contemporaneous familiarity with the concept of how our lives and our sorrows become instantly meaningless in the face of an epidemic that spreads rapidly and unexpectedly, inconveniently interrupting our daily routines. But more than anything, Camus reminds us that we can never be mentally or fully prepared for pandemics. The gifts of the Enlightenment and the advances of civilization are pointless when a pandemic removes the safety bumpers of our lives.

But is not this safety bumper guaranteed, in the religious view of the world! Camus' starting point in the novel is a rejection of this Deist picture of things. He turns to tackle what he sees as the real problem, how to become human in a fragile world. And this is unpacked through the very different responses to the plague by a variety of well-sketches characters.

Three of the characters seem to represent aspects of the view of the author, Rieux, Tarrou, and Rambert. We can, briefly, take each one in turn. Dr Rieux is the central figure and is depicted as an ordinary medical professional. In his work he is faced with a Sisyphus-type of situation, in which his healing is never fully achieved, but he has to do it over and over again. He is aware that he will never really win the battle. We have some idea of this in aiming, with Covid-19, simply at "flattening the curve" of the infection, no more. One can better understand Dr Rieux by comparing him to Fr Paneloux, the Jesuit priest. Paneloux says to the doctor: "You too are working for man's salvation." To which Rieux replies: "Salvation's much too big a word for me, I don't aim so high. I'm concerned with man's health; and for me his health comes first" (Camus [1947]1991, 219).

Tarrou is a visitor to Oran, but throws himself into the struggle, joining Rieux in forming work groups, the sanitary squads, to help the afflicted. Earlier in his life, he had confronted the question of the legal execution of criminals and had resolved never to be on the side of that. He sees that absolute justice (motivating the death penalty) is not possible. So, he decides on a compromise—to take the victim's side. He is an idealist, wants to know how to become "a saint without God."

Finally, Rambert is a journalist from Paris. He finds himself separated from his wife in mainland France, something that Camus himself experienced when in France in 1942 and his wife was cut off, because of the war, in Algeria. Rambert had become disillusioned with ideologies during his participation in the Spanish civil war. Ideological zeal is destructive, he now thinks. The only thing that matters is feeling,

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“being in love,” sharing a life with its joys. He wants to live and die for what he loves. Eventually, however, he forgets his attempts to leave the lockdown town, and joins Rieux in the struggle. He sacrifices his own life for solidarity with everyone.

Some of the other characters represent reactions to the plague that one can see as plausible. Grand is uneducated and a kind of victim, not being able to find the right words to express himself and so cut off from communication. But he knows he must continue to fight the plague as best he can. Clearly, he has no ideology.

Cottard is the one character who manipulates the situation for his own criminal ends. But even here the reader is given an insight into his motivation, for Cottard is in despair. At first, he tries to commit suicide. Eventually the town folk take revenge on him.

Fr Paneloux is the representative of the Deist world picture that is our problematic in this discussion. He is shown giving two very different kinds of sermon to the faithful. In his first sermon he points to the situation of the plague in terms of divine retribution. It is clear that it is a wake-up call to the people to lead a more just and charitable life in common. In this way the suffering is given a meaning, one that ordinary people can understand. It is argued that the suffering is in a way a good thing: “This same pestilence which is slaying you works for your good and points your path” (Camus [1947]1991, 98).

After the death of a child, with great suffering, Paneloux changes. He now gives a much more humane sermon, speaking not of “you” but of “we.” He still avers that we have to trust in the mysterious ways of God, without trying to explain them. Masters comments that “The priest must retain his idea of a good and just God at all costs, even if it means allowing the evidence of human suffering.” He means “unjust” suffering. And finally, Paneloux refuses medical aid for himself when he catches the disease. To do so, he feels, would be to admit that there is no real place for God in our world today: he tells Rieux: “it’s illogical for a priest to call in a doctor” (Camus [1947]1991, 229)! Nothing is more expressive than this of the difference between the abstract problem of evil (Voltaire’s concern) and the existential one (the concern of Camus).

Mobilisation versus a Response of Solidarity

Paneloux tries to pressurise Dr Rieux into consenting to the well-designed system guaranteed by God. You should love God’s ways without trying to understand them, he contends. Rieux is silent. Then he replies: “No, Father ... until my dying day I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to torture” (Camus [1947]1991, 218).

In his enlightening discussion of Camus’ attitude to Christianity, Jean Onimus cites what he takes as Dr Rieux’s expression of a secularised notion of transcendence: “Perhaps it is better for God that we not believe in him and that we struggle with all our strength against death without raising our eyes to heaven where he sits silent” (cited in

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Onimus 1970, 45). As himself a believer, Onimus (1970, 55) judges that Camus' refusal to go along with Fr Paneloux is justified: the God Camus fought against was a philosopher's God, "an idea, not a presence."

Camus thinks of the plague as a metaphor for the German invasion of France, the Vichy government's compromise with them, and the choices facing the French population in the light of this situation. Cottard, for example, seems to reflect those who chose to collaborate, and were, in some cases, hunted down and killed after the liberation. But Masters (1974, 91) is critical of this analogy:

The weakness of the analogy is apparent, however, when we remember that war is a result of the wickedness of men towards men, whereas a plague is a natural catastrophe for which men have no responsibility. There is no solid comparison possible between the impersonal cruelty of an epidemic, and the human cruelty of the Occupation forces.

I would like to disagree. I think Trump's action, or lack thereof, and in South Africa the corruption in the absence of proper tender processes in the supply of PPE for hospitals, show that human responsibility is always a factor in the face of natural disasters. Tarrou remarks that he "suffered from the plague long before" he came to Oran (Camus [1947]1991, 245). His comment is instructive: "What is natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will" ([1947]1991, 253). What is key is your attitude to yourself, as responsible, rebelling against any deflection of this responsibility ("God"!).

Some years ago, Charles Taylor (1994) identified a problem with the oversight in liberal democracies of the human need for recognition. In the liberal framework, normativity is elided, and normative identity has to be constructed, "people need to be convinced that they are really X's and not Y's" ("African" not "Western"; to change Taylor's example, 2007, 457). Identity, in the "politics of recognition," is asserted within the frame of mobilisation. The Enlightened elite of the world can be seen to have mobilised in the first place, and fundamentalists of various religions in response, as well as any number of other subaltern social categories. However, what is called for in a pandemic is not mobilisation but ethical transformation. This can be hidden from view in the polite society, where the moral sources are not articulated, or not fully so. "Human rights," if

that is how the polite society frames its moral outlook, are taken for granted as moral imperatives. But more is required.³

Paneloux's focus would seem to mask the fact that the "polite society" is failing its citizens. In this way it takes the form of an ideology, held to in spite of the evidence to the contrary. A useful complementary narrative to this can be found in Orlan Pamuk's novel, *Snow* (2004) which treats some of the contemporary social and religious conflicts in the rural town of Kars in Turkey. The reformists have mobilised, in the style of the 1930s' modernising movement of Kemal "Ataturk" by putting on a play in order to show how a girl may be liberated by throwing off her headscarf. In response, the counter-mobilisation has the young religious enthusiasts cry out, "Down with the enemies of religion! Infidels!" "Why not take everything off and run to Europe stark naked!" (Pamuk 2004, 85). The religious enthusiasts attempt to convince the more reflective individuals to "stand up" for the legitimising God—in this case, the one called upon to challenge and overthrow the dominant European system (also identified with Christianity). The hero of the story is Ka, a poet who has the future of the people at heart, but who is sensitive to the nuances in Islam's relation to the West. He is confronted with the question as to whether or not he is an atheist, and he replies he doesn't know.

"Then tell me this: do you or do you not believe that God Almighty created the universe and everything in it, even the snow that is falling from the sky?"

"The snow reminds me of God," said Ka.

"Yes, but do you believe that God created snow?" demanded Mesut.

Ka did not reply. He watched the black dog run through the door to the platform to play in the snow under the dim halo of the neon light. (Pamuk 2004, 155)

The novel is no apology for "Europe." When Ka returns there, he seems to represent a negative side of that society, a sense of alienation, expressed, in Ka's case, through the consumption of pornography.

3 I am delighted that an anonymous referee points to work in Christian theology in South Africa that has taken up these themes, often connected to a critique of coloniality, citing the writings of Itumeleng Mosala, Takatso Mofokeng, Gerald O. West (and, further afield, Cornel West). All this is beyond the scope of this paper, but I can suggest, in view of further research, how the emphasis in the theology of liberation, of an awareness of "the poor", and preference for that perspective on the world, would seem to sum up the idea of the fragility of human existence and the need for solidarity that is highlighted in a pandemic. To give just one example, the Latin American theologian Gonzalez Faus (1993, 503) cites with approval J. B. Metz's understanding of faith as referring to "the I in its initial intersubjective aspect, in its condition of brother, sister". The whole volume in which this is found is instructive.

Conclusion

The upshot of this discussion is that the important question of human solidarity is hidden when the whole framework of thinking is a procedural one, hiving off questions of the content of the good life, along with religions (and “diversity”). In Anglophone cultures the framing or meta-ethical principle of individual autonomy is not even thought of, it is so basic, like the rules of cricket. In his earlier book on ethics, Charles Taylor (1989, 10) had remarked on how contemporary liberal culture is reluctant to articulate the “moral ontology” underpinning its values. He makes a similar point later: “The mistake of moderns is to take this understanding of the individual so much for granted that it is taken to be our first-off self-understanding ‘naturally’” (Taylor 2004, 64). Autonomy is taken for granted, and religion is treated as a private option: the policy of the secular state is to treat them in terms of a human rights procedure, “leave them alone.”

In Francophone culture, in contrast, there is a more self-conscious appropriation of the value of autonomy, and the policy of *laïcité*, addressed to the religions, is “leave us alone.”⁴ Democratic politics, as Jean-Luc Nancy (2006) says, represents autonomy over against heteronomy, the *pour-soi* (for-itself) over against the *en-soi* (in-itself). Citizenship is a “form of political or moral resistance” to heteronomy. The state therefore has the duty to symbolise this value.

The objection to heteronomy can be seen as an objection to any mobilisation that distracts from an awareness of the more encompassing ethic of solidarity called for in the conditions of fragility that are more evident during a pandemic. Whatever the practical implications are of this idea of Nancy, and of France’s policy of *laïcité*, in the various situations that arise, we can see that resistance to inauthentic religiosity—Dr Rieux and Ka—can form part of the ethical mandate for the solidarity we are looking for. Humanism, properly understood, is an essential part of the “new” question of human spirituality. As reported in *Marianne* (7 October 2020), French President Emmanuel Macron (2020) has recently put forward, as reasonable values defining the common good, the dignity of the person, freedom of conscience, and the equality of men and women. No religion can put forward “higher values” that come into conflict with these. To the extent that this is supposed, say, in the case of what Macron terms Islamic separatism, the target of his proposals, the religion needs to undergo an enlightenment.

There is, however, a story of secularisation that does not appreciate the need to create, articulate, the commonweal, the common values, that define our life together, and with a commensurable influence on how premodern religious traditions articulate themselves. This is the story that autonomous individuals are “simply there.” Taylor calls this understanding of secularisation the “subtraction story” (Taylor 2007, 22–29; 1997, ix–xv). This approach, he argues, fails to see that it is not a question of simply freeing human beings from the ties of religion so they may become what they naturally are, autonomous individuals. Rather, new moral sources had to be created, giving new

4 For a full explanation of the policy of *laïcité* and its contemporary critics, see Mialle (2016).

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meaning to the spiritual impulse of humankind. Taylor (2007, 245) speaks of the “sense of the over-riding moral importance of the order of mutual benefit, the sense that this order had to be realised as far as possible, and that it was in our power to do so.”

The subtraction story doesn't allow us to be as surprised as we ought to be at this achievement—or as admiring of it, because it's after all one of the great realizations in the history of human development, whatever our ultimate views about its scope or limitations. (Taylor 2007, 255)

And Taylor continues:

So exclusivist humanism wasn't just something we fell into, once the old myths dissolved, or the “infamous” ancient regime church was crushed. It opened up new human potentialities, viz, to live in those modes of moral life in which the sources are radically immanentized. (2007, 255)

It is these new moral sources that are at issue when it comes to an adequate response to a pandemic such as ours of 2020. The focus needs to be on rethinking the nature of human spirituality in an immanent frame. Hiving off religions to the margins of the public sphere fails to allow this.

I can conclude with the view of Marcel Gauchet (1997), who has argued that much of what is taken as a liberal democratic social framework in fact arises out of the Christian religion, which, he contends, was always pushing for an autonomous, not heteronomous, worldview.⁵ If this is so, then one must recognise new forms of this religion outside the more calcified parts of the religious institutions. “There is at least as much, if not more, religious inspiration behind what has flourished since the 16th century outside established dogma, than in what has been preserved inside it” (Gauchet 1997, 61–2, in Cloots et al. 2015, 964). There could be a plus side to the global pandemic if this new understanding of the social order, and its relation to its premodern past, emerges in a post-pandemic world.⁶

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5 See my discussion (Giddy 2019).

6 On a personal note, and I am sure other contributors to this thematic issue have similar stories, since I wrote this paper I went through the fire of fragility: I drove my father-in-law, Alex Camerer, to Constantiaberg Mediclinic on December 13, 2020 (no ambulances were available)—he died in the ICU after three weeks on a ventilator. Any “religious response” will always involve a willingness to act—on the part of the family, and the society.

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