

Reflections on Covid-19 from St. Patrick's College Maynooth

Coronavirus and the Existence of God

As the coronavirus sweeps across the world, our reaction to it - short of finding a cure - is either to succumb, or to avoid it through social distancing and lock down. The coronavirus makes us mindful of the fact that whilst our intelligence can give us a technical mastery over nature, nature is not our slave and we can succumb to its devastations. As such, people are (re)turning to God, since God is the only agent who does have the mastery over nature to which we aspire.

Yet some may think it foolish to turn to God in such a crisis; indeed some may even go so far as to say that this crisis is positive evidence that God does not exist; for how could such a good God, the God of love, allow this disaster to happen to us? Either God does not care, in which case He doesn't love us, or He is unable to do anything about the current situation.

Yet, scripture is very clear that God is love and that He has a design for us which ultimately entails our salvation (cf. 1 Jn 3, and 1 Th 4:3). Scripture is also clear that God is master over all of creation (cf. Gen 1). So how does one committed to these truths address the role of God in the current crisis?

Whilst scripture is clear that God loves us, such love is manifested in His will for our salvation. But as is made clear time and again in scripture, our salvation does not consist in a life free from hardship; rather it consists in living by God's grace so that when we come to die we may enjoy His presence in eternity. In short, our salvation is communion with God and to live by the very happiness with which God is happy (Jn 17:3).

Furthermore, although God is the primary cause of all things and master over all of creation, this does not exclude what philosophers call secondary causality. Just as a person can make use of his hands to move a stick to move a stone thereby allowing the hand-stick-stone to share in his causality, so too does God permit creatures to share in His causality so that creatures can act as causes within creation.

Insofar as God is pure love and goodness, all causal interaction in the world which seeks to promote and disperse the good is in fact a participation in God's primary causality which He exercises in creation. And this is especially relevant during the current pandemic.

Without any effort God could bring to nothing all ills in creation from start to finish, but if He were to do so, creatures would be mere puppets with no causality by which they could act in the world; they would in effect be mere characters in a story. Rather God dignifies creatures with an ability to act and to share in His own causality, and this is especially so for humans who are rational and can make decisions to manifest God's goodness in the world.

Hence in regard to the current coronavirus pandemic, God permits humans the dignity of coming together and acting in such a way that they can deal with this crisis. This is manifest not only in the turning to God that is occurring all over the world, but also in the turning to one's neighbour to ensure his or her good, whether it be through key workers, family, or colleagues. Indeed, the turn to both God and neighbour is illustrative of the primary and secondary commandments that Christ places on his disciples: to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbour as yourself (Mt 22: 36 – 40).

Accordingly, far from being a situation in which the presence of God in the world is cast into significant doubt, the current crisis continues to reveal to humanity their place within and not above nature, but at the same time the goodness and dignity with which God graces humanity in coming through this crisis.

Dr Gaven Kerr is a philosophy lecturer at St Patrick's College, Maynooth

