

## Editorial

# Self-Sacrifice versus Self-Interest: Christian Responses to Pandemics Then and Now

Lethal infectious threat to human life has been worse than this. Much, much worse. Other pandemics and more geographically contained epidemics have taken the lives of exponentially higher percentages of populations than COVID-19 has, so far.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. By one year later, on March 11, 2021, the 2.65 million of the world's 7.8 billion people who had died from COVID-19 comprised only .0003% of the world's population. According to Johns Hopkins University of Medicine, Coronavirus Research Center, in the United States, .0016% had lost their lives; in the United Kingdom, .0019%; in Canada, .0005%; and in Australia, .00004%. Thankfully, we now have the medical science to understand the virus, the vaccines to combat it, plus the communication technologies to inform and direct the populous, which together have kept mortality rates historically low. Because it was not always so.

The most recent pandemic to which the current crisis is conventionally compared was the "Spanish flu" of 1918–1920, when 3–5% of the world's population died. The 1665 Great Plague of London killed 20% of its population. The well-known Black Death of 1346–1353 wiped out 40–50% of Europe's population. That same century, Mexico suffered three separate epidemics of the smallpox virus brought by European explorers, which eradicated 90% of the indigenous population. The even earlier, lesser-known Plague of Justinian, 541 C.E., also depopulated Europe by 40–50%. Before that, two epidemics radically reconfigured the Roman Empire. Between 165 and 180 C.E., about 30% of the people in the Empire died from what might have been the first appearance of smallpox. Then in 251 C.E., five thousand people per day reportedly died in the city of Rome alone from what might have been measles.

In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark (1996) detailed the sharply contrasting response of pagans and Christians to those two epidemics during the Roman Empire. While pagans (including the famous physician Galen) pushed the ill away and fled the cities, still healthy Christians stayed and cared for sick and dying Christians and pagans alike, many at the cost of their own lives. They would have readily gone to the end of a vaccine line. Their radically social ethic called them beyond a merely self-interested exchange between humans, in astonishing contrast to the pagan religion of the time.

Stark went on to calculate and document the comparative mortality rates that ensued as Christians developed immunity and subsequently superior survival rates. The net result was both a larger proportion of Christians in the population and a spike in conversions to Christianity due to pagans increasingly aligning with the Christians who had risked their lives to

nurse them. A century later, the emperor Julian launched a campaign to have pagans emulate the charity and benevolence of Christians which had created what historian Paul Johnson (1976) termed an informal social welfare state.

However, as Christianity evolved in concert with Western culture, its ethics became ever more individualistic, as promoted by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. The Protestant Reformation provided the doctrinal basis for focus on the self, the Enlightenment provided the cultural basis for focus on the self, and modern Christianity embraced and celebrated the self. This modern social construction of the liberal, autonomous individual casts the self as the primary reality, having priority over the community. As such, community becomes merely the contractual relationships that individuals enter to advance their various self-interests.

Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) explained the "elective affinity" of Calvinist theology and capitalism. Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption* (2018) illuminated further "how [Calvinist] theology and ways of life laid the groundwork for the later Romantic preoccupation with self and the self's pleasures" (Clapp 1997:178). John Witte and Frank Alexander's *Christianity and Human Rights* (2010) explicated how Christianity cultivated the cardinal ideas of human dignity and equality in bearing God's image, and thereby delivered what by now are high universal notions of individual human rights.

Today it has come to where we even have a minority of Christians denying any social responsibilities amid a pandemic far less lethal than those faced by early Christians. Defiantly, they declare it their individual personal right and collective public duty to gather for worship, no matter that it irrefutably endangers others. It is their God-given human right, they claim, to exercise their personal freedom of religion as they now feel called, and to meet their personal needs by indulging their personal desire for "community." Waving "Hugs Over Masks" placards, they willingly accept fines from government agents as evidence of their persecution and victimization. Wearing "Faith Over Fear" T-shirts, they sanctimoniously legitimate their personal prerogative and social recklessness. Flouting what they deem to be Big Brother's social control, they claim a higher calling in full accord with the Western cultural value of the human right of freedom, and especially the freedom of religion. How dare anyone argue or act against that, they demand to know.

Whether such arguments or actions are normative or deviant in any particular locale, they are at least cause to pause for deeper reflection. True, freedom often appears at the top of compilations of current Western cultural values. But what all can happen when we absolutize personal freedom and hold it simplistically as an unqualified good? More specifically, what has already happened when freedom of religion has been exercised at the expense of the well-being and very lives of people at least since the principle was written into the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1791?

To illustrate and accentuate the point, if my personal freedom is absolute, suppose I summon my friends to meet me on Main Street in their vehicles to enjoy some drag races down that main strip in town. The standard distance of a drag race is one quarter mile (plus deceleration), so any intervening traffic lights and speed limits be damned! After all, traffic laws are a form of government oppression. I have my rights, my freedom to do what I think would lift the downtrodden spirits of my personal circle during this pandemic. If others are frightened and feel endangered, that's their problem. If someone gets hurt, the health care system will take care of them.

This, in effect, is what protesters of pandemic protocols proclaim: all laws, codes, and regulations that protect people at some cost to other people are tyrannical. And therein lie two core problems with absolutizing the human right of personal freedom. First, many human rights neutralize each other when they conflict. In my home country's Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, freedom of religion (Section 2) does not automatically take precedence over the right to life, liberty, and security of person (Section 7). Second, personal rights must always be balanced with equal social responsibilities. In our individualistic Western culture, the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights has somewhat effectively entrenched personal human rights, but we have yet to find a similar way to embed empathetic human responsibilities as their desperately needed complement.

At its root, Christian defiance of best social practices in this pandemic is merely one manifestation of the conflation of Christianity with modern individualistic culture, a coalescence that has over recent centuries deeply shaped Western Christianity, to its peril. In its refusal to "look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4), it is the degenerateness of entitlement, self-gratification, and eros, not the righteousness of humility, self-sacrifice, and agape. To the extent it is also pervasive in multiple arenas of public life, it is also a profound embarrassment to Christianity.

Prioritizing personal power over principle in politics, prioritizing personal consumption over empathy in economics, and prioritizing personal pleasure over sustainability in ecology are only a few further manifestations of the same sorry sentiment. As Adam Smith, the "father of [capitalist] economics" (Norman 2018), famously put it in his *The Wealth of Nations*, not coincidentally published the same year Americans declared their independence (1776), "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages." It was not so in the early church.

Together, all these manifestations of current self-centeredness constitute the "Ubiquitous Egoism" and "Community Lost" metanarratives by which Western individualists now live, as identified and assessed by Christian Smith's cultural sociology (2003:83-86). But perhaps the ultimate manifestation is that sociology has not only apprehended the ubiquity of

egoism, but has itself succumbed to it, as evidenced by rational choice theory having arisen within sociology to rival all competing explanations of human action. Built on the concept of *homo economicus*, rational choice theory (as well as exchange theory reliant on it) understands all human action to be driven by individual, rational, means-ends self-interest seeking to profit from calculations of what the actor perceives to be costs and rewards in a world of scarcity.

As such, egoism is increasingly asserting itself in the very sociological explanation of whatever sociology seeks to explain. Despite its dark view of humans as cold-hearted, self-centered, profit-seeking calculators, rational choice theory makes sense and rings true to the contemporary Western mind. Hence, it turns out that rational choice theory is itself another cultural artifact, even while it denies the formative effects of culture on how people think. However, as Smith asserted, humans are more accurately understood as enculturated beings, or “moral, believing, narrating animals” (2003:118), not merely rationalistic calculators, unless their culture shapes them to be so. If and when their culture does shape them so, their rational self-interest will indeed narrate their lives. Hence, rational choice theory is a “historically situated moral project . . . [that] embodies and reinforces key elements of the secular Enlightenment story . . . [of] modern liberal democratic capitalism” (2003:59-60). Problematically, the merely cultural thus becomes the social scientific.

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that the same Rodney Stark who tracked the selflessness of early Christians in the two epidemics they survived has been the foremost proponent of rational choice theory becoming the new paradigm in the sociology of religion in general, arguing that it should replace the old, Weberian, meaning-based cultural paradigm of religion (Stark 2017). Though rational choice theory could no doubt offer an explanation of those early Christian responses to the epidemics in the Roman Empire (Stark includes a chapter on the rational choice of martyrdom), it would hardly be convincing, much less compelling, or Christian.

If this pandemic is “an opportunity for a reset,” as Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau suggested to the United Nations (Woods 2020), then the most comprehensive and now urgent reset is a rejection of our current cultural norm of short-term self-interest, and a re-turn to long-term collective interest. If, instead of being complicit with the cultural scourge of short-term self-interest, Christians would again lead the way in prioritizing social responsibilities over personal rights, it could serve as a counter to the potential “fall of Christianity” in the global North already evidently in process. And while we seek to alleviate this physical pandemic, we should seize the opportunity to also assuage deeper, graver, cultural pandemics such as political devolution, free-market capitalism, and climate crisis, each their own consequence of short-term self-interest.

Meanwhile, there remains a time for everything (Eccl. 3), a time for love and a time for hate, a time for war and a time for peace, a time for civil obedience and a time for civil

disobedience. This acute physical pandemic is no time for Christian civil disobedience. These chronic cultural pandemics are.

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