

Christian Theology in the Midst of COVID-19

Online conference: Wednesday 17th June, 12:00-18:00 British Summer Time

Invitation and call for papers

Introduction to the theme

This online conference is an attempt to stimulate some initial theological reflection on the global COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has changed our lives suddenly and dramatically. As the crisis has unfolded, immediate responses at individual, community, national and international levels have of course focused on the actions needed to treat the sick, limit the spread of the infection and bring it under control, care for those who are particularly vulnerable, manage the economic impact of the pandemic, and so forth. At the same time, many people's time and energy is consumed by sudden and major changes to working and domestic life, combined with the personal impact of the pandemic on them and their loved ones.

For Christian people, communities and theologians, however, there are also theological questions to be asked about the pandemic and our responses to it. Christian traditions have, after all, historically had plenty to say about plagues. Theological questions that could be asked include – though they are by no means limited to – the following.

- How might Christian communities read the Scriptures in times like these?
- How have churches and theological traditions responded historically to epidemics and plagues, and what is to be learned from those responses?
- How should we understand God's providence, God's goodness, God's judgement and God's mercy in the context of COVID-19? One telling question is: what are Christians and churches praying for (and what should they be praying for)?
- How might scientific and theological narratives about the pandemic relate to one another?
- Questions about political and economic life, social and economic justice, and how we understand and serve the common good.
- Ecclesiology, liturgy, worship and mission: what does it mean to be the body of Christ and participate in the mission of God when churches can no longer gather in one place for worship or use their buildings for witness and service, but when the needs of communities beyond the walls of the church are even more evident than in 'normal' times?
- Ethical questions about health care, science, social life and Christian practice.
- Questions about trauma, suffering and loss: how Christian communities respond to them, and how they can help others to respond.
- What forms of theological reflection will most help to resource the churches' responses in preaching, pastoral care, community action, etc.? Are there forms of theological response that should be avoided, because they are irresponsible, unhelpful or actively harmful?

There will doubtless be a time for more measured and extended reflection on these and other questions after the pandemic. However, there are also good reasons for at least attempting to begin the theological work now, in the midst of the crisis. First, churches and Christian people are called upon to respond, here and now, to the demands of the situation, and it is surely important that those responses be resourced by theological reflection. Second, religious commentary on the pandemic has the potential to do harm, by informing and motivating dangerous, damaging or reckless responses, so those who do theological work bear some responsibility to ensure that it is done well even in the heat of the day. Third, normal times seem unlikely to return for some while to come, so it is not clear that it is possible to put this theological work on hold until they do. Finally, there is perhaps something distinctive to be gained from doing some of this work in the midst of a crisis that to a greater or lesser extent involves us all. The view is different from here, and it seems worth trying to capture that different view, not least as a resource for later and longer reflection.

Guidance for presenters and participants

It is planned that the conference will take place online on **Wednesday 17th June from 12:00 to 18:00 British Summer time**. Details of the online platform to be used will be confirmed later.

Proposals for papers of up to 3,000 words are invited on any of the questions outlined above, or others related to the theme. Since this is an *initial* exercise in theological reflection, it is recognised that papers might present first thoughts rather than definitive conclusions about the topics addressed. However, academic rigour and potential to make a valuable contribution to the discussion will nonetheless be the criteria used to selecting papers for presentation.

It is anticipated that each paper will have a 30-40 minute time slot. The presenter will have up to 10 minutes to give a brief introduction to the paper, and the remainder of the time will be for discussion. Papers will be circulated to all participants one week before the conference, and presenters should therefore submit them **two weeks** before the conference date (i.e. by 3rd June).

To submit a paper proposal, please e-mail an abstract of up to 250 words **by Thursday 30th April** to the organiser, Prof. Neil Messer: Neil.Messer@winchester.ac.uk

To register for the conference, please send your name and email address **by Wednesday 27th May** to: Neil.Messer@winchester.ac.uk

It might be necessary to limit the number of participants, depending on the technical limitations of the chosen platform. If there is high demand and not everyone can be accommodated on one occasion, we'll look at ways of enabling all to participate.

It is hoped that we will be able to disseminate the papers, or a selection of them, after the conference in a way that is appropriate to the theme and motivation of the conference, and useful to the various constituencies it is intended to serve.

Names and contact details of presenters and those who register for the conference will be kept on a contact list in order to send you information about the conference, enable your participation and co-ordinate any follow-up activities (such as dissemination of papers). You may request removal of your name and details from the list at any time by emailing Neil.Messer@winchester.ac.uk