the soft breath of Spring brings more than the usual hope this year, promising a loosening of COVID’s icy grip upon our societies and our spirits. Even as many continue to suffer devastations of disease and disruption, attention is shifting from lockdown to a re-opening of the world. As that attention shifts, what lessons have we learned about religion in this pandemic that may have implications for the future? There are doubtless many, but I will focus here on two: freedom of religion, and theodicy.

Pandemics have often produced confrontations between public health and piety, between measures undertaken to minimize contagion, and the rights and privileges of religious institutions. Responding to the arrival of the bubonic plague in Italy in 1348, the town council of Pistoia ordered all borders closed, prohibited trade in goods believed to carry infection, and forbade gatherings of ten people or more. These were just a few of the measures listed in the ordinance, which ended with a coda: “Saving that anything in them which is contrary to the liberty of the church shall be null and void.”

Responding to the same pandemic in the Islamic city of Granada, physician and prime minister Lisān al-Dīn ibn al-Khaṭīb composed a treatise entitled Convincing the Inquirer about the Terrible Disease. Some frowned on theories of contagion, claiming they diminished the power of God by assigning agency to pathogens. Ibn al-Khaṭīb disagreed. “If the senses and observation oppose traditional evidence, the latter needs to be interpreted.” Observed patterns of infection confirm the theory of contagion, making the need for quarantine evident, he insisted, quoting the Prophet Muhammad, “may God pray for Him and grant him peace: ‘The sick should not be watered with the healthy.’” To allow attendance at mosques, he wrote, is tantamount to suicide, and violates the Qur’an admonition “not to contribute to your destruction with your own hands.”

Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s explanations for the plague’s spread do not seem significantly different from those one might expect from a modern public health expert: “repeated contact with the infected at funerals, exposure to their clothing and items, living in close quarters, and overcrowding” he wrote, adding as well “mismanagement, carelessness and lack of awareness due to widespread ignorance and the absence of knowledge about these matters among the masses.”

Even his vocabulary of suicide echoes today. Last May the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco upheld the Governor of California’s restrictions on religious services as constitutional. “We’re dealing here with a highly contagious and often fatal disease,” the majority wrote, quoting a dissent by Justice Robert Jackson from 1949: “There is a danger that, if the Court does not temper its doctrinaire logic with a little practical wisdom, it will convert the constitutional Bill of Rights into a suicide pact.” A week later a more divided Supreme Court upheld (5-4) the Ninth Circuit’s ruling. Last November, after Amy Coney Barret replaced Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the Supreme Court adopted a different position, ruling 5-4 that New York’s size restrictions on religious gatherings violated the First Amendment’s protection for the free exercise of religion.

What is the proper balance between public health and freedom of religion? From the point of view of the legal historian, the cutting edge of that question may be sharper today than it has ever been in the history of the United States, and it is not likely to be put back into a drawer when the pandemic recedes.

Consider vaccination policies. Religious exemptions from vaccination mandates are required by most states, and frequently invoked. In a national survey Kraig Beyerlein, Kathryn Lofton, Geneviève Zubrzycki and I administered in collaboration with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research just before the pandemic reached the United States, we offered respondents the following scenario: “A parent does not vaccinate their children because of religious beliefs against this practice, and the children are denied enrollment in public school because of its policy that all students must be vaccinated.” Nearly three quarters replied that un-vaccinated children should be denied enrollment, and the same majority maintained that this denial does not constitute a violation of the child or parent’s religious freedom.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 29
EVERY GIFT MATTERS

Philanthropy is a key part of supporting the stories in Criterion. Your gifts provide aid to students in need of fellowship support, enable scholarly work at critical hubs of research and academic exploration, and maintain the classrooms and facilities in which professors and students work together to expand knowledge of the world and its religious traditions. Your gifts matter. Help us continue to flourish as a community where important questions are pursued with tenacity and care.

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STAY IN TOUCH with our quarterly e-newsletter for alumni and friends, Swift Matters. Email Madison McClendon at mmclendon@uchicago.edu to subscribe.

OUR MASTERS PROGRAMS welcome students of all ages and backgrounds. With the goal of making the academic study of religion more accessible to those who wish to pursue it with rigor and sophistication, we offer multiple deadlines throughout the year, and are no longer requiring the Graduate Record Examination.
JOSEPH EDELHEIT, DMIN’01, 2021 ALUMNUS OF THE YEAR

Upon recommendation from the Divinity School’s Alumni Council, the Board of Trustees of the Baptist Theological Union has named Joseph A. Edelheit, DMin 2001, the Divinity School Alumnus of the Year for 2021.

Professor Emeritus of Religious and Jewish Studies at St. Cloud State University (St. Cloud, Minnesota), Dr. Edelheit’s career spans and links work in congregations, academia, interfaith relations, contemporary philosophy, and service. With over 25 years of service to the academy in addition to over 45 years in the rabbinate, he is an educator known for bringing a passion for understanding and dialogue into the college classroom, the congregation, and community writ large.

Dr. Edelheit’s career reflects a deep commitment to the values of equity and justice, and engages interreligious dialogue at every level, from scripture to service. Perhaps best known among his achievements is his work at St. Cloud State University. There he initiated and facilitated the transition of a Religious Studies program from a minor in the Philosophy Department to an independent college level program in the College of Liberal Arts, and worked in the surrounding communities on issues of anti-Semitism and interfaith dialogue. As a mentor, teacher, and community activist, his work has helped students and nonstudents alike develop critical and sympathetic skills needed to recognize and combat racism and anti-Semitism.

As a rabbi, Dr. Edelheit has served Reform Jewish congregations in Chicago (Emanuel Congregation), Minneapolis (Temple Israel), and Michigan City (Sinai Temple); in his retirement he works with communities without rabbis.

A long-term HIV/AIDS activist, he served on the Clinton administration’s Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (1995-2000) and also initiated and directed a non-governmental organization, Living India, for almost a decade, providing HIV/AIDS care to orphans in India. In addition to his lifelong mission of tikkun olam (repair of the world), Dr. Edelheit has contributed chapters to or been the editor of over a dozen monographs; he is the author of numerous journal articles, lectures, and papers on topics including issues in Jewish practice and belief, the work of Paul Ricoeur, the Holocaust, and religion in public thought and memory.

His most recent work, What Am I Missing? Questions About Being Human (Wipf and Stock), was published in 2020 and Reading Scripture Again with Paul Ricoeur (coedited with James More), is forthcoming from Lexington University Press.

“Rabbi Edelheit’s contributions to interfaith understanding, particularly in Jewish-Christian relations, are significant and moving,” said David Nirenberg, Dean of the Divinity School, of the award. “His service to the interwoven communities of students and scholars, practitioners of religions, and those who seek a greater understanding of our religiously pluralistic society embodies the values of The Divinity School.”

Dr. Edelheit currently lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In lieu of a public lecture, a prerecorded interview between Rabbi Edelheit and Rob Wilson-Black, AM’92, PhD’02, the President of the Divinity School’s Alumni Council, will be published later in the Spring.

ESSAY CONTEST
ON RACE AND RELIGION

The Divinity School invites submissions for an international essay contest.

Questions about how religious practices and traditions interact with structures of power and categorizations of race demand increasing attention from scholars in the study of religion.

We welcome contributions from graduate students at the master’s and doctoral levels in any field in the humanities, social sciences, or divinity, and graduates and early career scholars.

The winning essay will be awarded $2,000 and an opportunity to deliver a lecture at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Essays in second and third-place will be awarded $500 each. Up to six finalists will be invited to participate in a publishing workshop alongside senior colleagues to revise their entries for publication.

Full details can be found online: divinity.uchicago.edu/essay-contest

ALUMNI AWARDS

Know an outstanding alumnus/a? Nominate them for an alumni award today. For more information, please go to bit.ly/UChDivAlumniAwards.

Wendy Doniger portrait

A portrait of Wendy Doniger, the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor Emerita of the History of Religions, is now displayed in our common room.

Professor Doniger, who retired in 2018, mentored over eighty PhD students through their dissertations during her 40 years of teaching and service at the Divinity School.

The artist, Mary Qian, grew up in Shanghai and writes of portraiture that “every new sitter is like opening a new window. The goal is to never select the pose but let the pose select itself.”

Wendy, known to all as a dog lover extraordinary, is pictured here with her Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Raja, who was a year old when this portrait was painted. They sat facing the southern exposure to the little park behind their dining room, the best-lit place in the house.
What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Religion?

When we talk about religion, we talk about ways in which human beings negotiate gaps and fissures in their lives—often in response to fallibility, suffering, and peril—along with their efforts to secure a place in the world and their reasons for acting as individuals, in communities, and in the institutions that give structure to daily existence. We understand such reasons to include not only cognitive activity but also affective and somatic registers of personal and collective identity. And we understand such reasons to be connected in various ways to languages about god and the gods, supra-mundane states of affairs, and/or sacred authorities that are presumed to have special entitlements in relation to human beings’ beliefs and actions. Because such languages are nested in practices and beliefs that are passed along intergenerationally, talking about religion also means talking about human history, power, and tradition. Moreover, because such practices and beliefs are shaped in dialogue with many other cultural traditions and social institutions, talking about religion is inescapably a comparative enterprise. As scholars of such matters, we talk interpretively, critically, and normatively about all of these topics (and more), drawing on tools from the humanities and social sciences to expand the moral imagination. We thereby seek to make sense of how others find meaning and make sense of their lives, and how we can make sense of such matters to ourselves, our students, and to the public at large.

RICHARD B. MILLER, LAURA SPELMAN ROCKEFELLER PROFESSOR OF RELIGION, POLITICS, AND ETHICS (PHD’85)
This past year, the typical “Chicago” student or alum may have found a silver lining in pandemic-related shutdowns, in that more reading time became available for many of us. In Professor Richard A. Rosengarten’s “19th Century Novels” class, students from across our degree programs had the opportunity to delve into some substantial and satisfying reads: novels situated at one of the many intersections of religion and literature.

What’s the class about? It’s about the idea of “the Great American Novel” and the cluster of candidates for that designation that appeared around the time of America’s Civil War. Hawthorne, Melville, Stowe, and Alcott each offers a vision of America that tries to describe how the nation does and does not live up to the idea that it is constituted by “we the people.” Of course their descriptions, and the severities of the variances between the ideal and the reality, differ. So the class is also about how to think about those differences—how to compare them, and whether the choice of one as exemplary need not entirely exclude appreciation of the others.

What was your inspiration for this class? In a word, students. I’ve been privileged to work with quite a number who concentrated their study in American religious and literary history. In alpha order: Elizabeth Alvarez, Lucas Carmichael, Greg Chatterley, Brett Colasacco, Alison Tyner Davis, M. Cooper Harriss, Mary Cate Hickman, John Howell, Pippa Koch, Katherine Mershon, Kit Shields, RL Watson.

And then there were the first-year master’s students (both MA and MDiv) on whom I inflicted Paul Ricoeur’s The Symbolism of Evil, where I discovered an analytic frame for identifying and then comparing the myths that constitute a culture.

Who should take this class? I wouldn’t presume to say! One of my favorite things about this teaching experience is that its enrollment includes our MA and PhD and MDiv students—a kind of snapshot of the School.

Do you have a favorite from your reading list and if so what/why? I’m most aware of what’s not on it that I love (Whitman, Twain, e.g.) or find deeply troubling yet relevant (Thomas Dixon’s The Klansman). Each is a favorite, for a different reason. Hawthorne is endlessly acute on the psychology of shame. Melville grasps so well the attractions of positing a deity (Christian, pantheist, pagan) yet resolutely refuses to endow any deity with control over Nature. Stowe’s prophetic fury about slavery marches hand in hand with her racialization of good and bad religion. Alcott is confident that cultivating domestic values will result in proactive love of neighbor that can in fact overcome disparities of all sorts, including income. So each author melds her or his form to a distinctive position on religious thought and practice. The emergent conversation was as urgent and rich then as it is now.

READING LIST:
Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter or A Romance
Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or The Whale
Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Life Among the Lowly
Louisa May Alcott, Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy

“One of my favorite things about this teaching experience is that its enrollment includes our MA and PhD and MDiv students—a kind of snapshot of the School.”

RICHARD A. ROSENGARTEN
The coronavirus pandemic has raised countless ethical questions: How do we balance restricting freedoms with protecting others, how do we ethically distribute vaccines, should we force people to get vaccinated—or should we ask healthy people to get infected with COVID-19 in the name of science? The “Big Brains” podcast brings stories from the people behind the pioneering research and pivotal breakthroughs at the University of Chicago. A recent episode featured Laurie Zoloth, the Margaret E. Burton Professor of Religion and Ethics and Senior Advisor to the Provost for Programs on Social Ethics. In the podcast, Professor Zoloth discusses a range of ethical questions related to the pandemic. We’ve provided an excerpt below. To listen to this or other episodes, or to subscribe, visit news.uchicago.edu/podcasts/big-brains

**Laurie Zoloth:** The kind of emphasis that likes to live in the practical, tangible world, likes to apply these ideas. So I don’t just present a menu of available options. I like to be the person that recommends, “Here’s the option that I think is the best course.” Over and over as human beings, we’re forced to make choices. And the choices are hopefully not just based on feelings or on an aesthetic sense. They’re based on our sense of what it is to be a good human being, what it is to live in a good world. And so over and over again, we’re confronted with this question, “What is the right thing to do? What is the right act?” And then we have to justify it because we’re rational creatures and we have to give each other reasons for how we act.

**Laurie Zoloth:** Everyone’s saying, “Okay, how do you live within a system that’s essentially unjust?” And the only way to do it and still maintain some sort of moral worth and moral compass is over and over to point out the injustice, to fight against it as hard as you can, to demand change.

This is one of the few times in human history where everyone on the planet has actually been affected by the same set of circumstances and has had to face some of the same realities. And it’s an extraordinary moment for humans to figure out, what do we do now? And when you speak to people all over the world, you’ll see the same sorts of questions coming up over and over again.

**Big Brains:** How do you balance restricting freedoms with protecting others? How do we distribute a vaccine in an ethical way when there’s so many competing needs? These are all questions that Zoloth has been grappling with.

**Laurie Zoloth:** The ethics of vaccine distribution, Zoloth says we first need to build an ethical framework, an argument to justify one action over another. And as a leading scholar on Jewish studies, one natural place for Zoloth to start is with religion.

**Laurie Zoloth:** Many, many religions have this notion that we are all fundamentally equal because we are children of a powerful God, of Allah, or of the God of the Torah, or the God of Christian Scriptures in which we are created beings that are essentially equal. And that essential equality, that essential human dignity and human worth means that we need to share what we have, the abundance of this world, equally and fairly. And with attention to vulnerability, and attention to the poor. So this notion that we have an essential duty comes out of our sense that, it’s what we call bootlegged in from religion, into modern political science. But you can turn to Greek philosophy. You can turn to American constitutional law. You can turn to other systems, other stories, other narratives and be a very good ethicist as well.

And that cacophony of voices and arguments and sources and traditions is one of the things that gives our discipline its strength, I think. So we talk about a basic decent minimum that societies should be organized to provide. And one of these basic decent minimums is education. Another one is healthcare. Societies should be organized to provide this basic decent minimum for each other, for one another, out of that sense of duty. And that reciprocity really does remind many of our public policies, and that’s where it comes from. To live outside of the sense of duty to another is sort of a horrifying prospect.

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And many, many people in science and in government and in policy with the capacity to enact decisions, do turn to ethics and do turn to us and say, “What are the ethical implications? Let’s have someone in here who can think through those ideas.” And that’s how we end up, not just me, but all of my colleagues end up in places like the CDC and the NIH, thinking about how science is unfolding.

**Big Brains:** How do you balance restricting freedoms with protecting others, how do we ethically distribute vaccines, should we force people to get vaccinated—or should we ask healthy people to get infected with COVID-19 in the name of science? The coronavirus pandemic has raised countless ethical questions: How do we balance restricting freedoms with protecting others, how do we ethically distribute vaccines, should we force people to get vaccinated—or should we ask healthy people to get infected with COVID-19 in the name of science? The “Big Brains” podcast brings stories from the people behind the pioneering research and pivotal breakthroughs at the University of Chicago. A recent episode featured Laurie Zoloth, the Margaret E. Burton Professor of Religion and Ethics and Senior Advisor to the Provost for Programs on Social Ethics. In the podcast, Professor Zoloth discusses a range of ethical questions related to the pandemic. We’ve provided an excerpt below. To listen to this or other episodes, or to subscribe, visit news.uchicago.edu/podcasts/big-brains

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**This interview has been edited for length and clarity.**
Mark M. Lambert is a PhD candidate in Theology. His work draws upon historical theology, medical ethics, and medical history in an effort to understand and approach stigmatic illness. We spoke with Mark about his work and its relevance to the present day.

How does a scholar of religion become interested in leprosy?
I started out interested in the history of the Crusades, an interest stimulated by a study abroad trip to the Middle East where the consequences of this moment in time remain vividly present. But I was drawn to the singular figure of Baldwin IV, the sixth crusader king, who despite suffering publicly from leprosy was still esteemed enough to be buried in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The occurrence was incompatible with everything I (thought) I knew about medieval leprosy. The more I discovered about leprosy during the Middle Ages, the more I became intoxicated with the intricacies of medieval Christianity and its shockingly nuanced attitudes towards a disease as complex as leprosy.

Most surprising, I increasingly detected uncanny continuities between historical responses to leprosy and more modern diseases, particularly HIV/AIDS. Thus, although I’ve left my fascination with the Crusades behind, my interest in the recrudescence of historical paradigms continues. Still, I never could have imagined I would end up writing an entire dissertation on the topic of leprosy.

In my dissertation project, I argue that the historical theologizing of leprosy alongside sacraments such as the Eucharist provides key ethical insights for how religious communities today approach stigmatic illness, e.g., HIV/AIDS, mental illness, even COVID-19. My sources are as diverse as premodern Franciscan treatises, biblical commentaries of Protestant reformers, and personal letters of Father Damien de Veuster regarding his work at the leprosy colony on Molokai, Hawaii.

Despite spanning from the 13th century to the 19th, my sources are united by the universal experience of illness. They also reveal a persistent theological preoccupation with questions of perception or what the presence of disease reveals about divinity. And in one of my more surprising findings, I demonstrate that medical knowledge was historically a vital part of the epistemological repertoires of theologians. Moreover, this engagement with medical theory could critically augment theological inquiry with consequences for the ethical constitution of communities and even the contours of public health policies.

What might be leprosy’s lessons for our COVID-present?
Working on the project while a global pandemic was unfolding has been quite jarring: leaving aside all of the shared anxieties-anger-struggles etc., the pandemic has presented, there’s been times when I have seen the affirmation of the relevance of my work. Other times, I have wanted a little less of my life to be consumed with thinking about disease and illness. But three things have really stood out. During the spring and summer, I was finishing a chapter on John Calvin, immersed in the Protestant reformer’s writings about medicine. He and fellow reformer, Martin Luther, both harbored immense esteem for the medical arts and against the backdrop of recurrent plague outbreaks, harshly criticized the Christians who openly dismissed medical advice. While I was writing this chapter I was reading about churches in Chicago that brazenly flouted health measures—not to mention what was occurring on the national scale with the former president’s support.

In a talk recently, I noted that owing to its prominent profile in the Bible, the medical community has never had an interpretive monopoly on leprosy: this disease has always possessed a public, easily manipulated profile. Because of this, leprosy has often become entangled with racial politics. This was certainly the case in Molokai, Hawaii where the policies of mandatory segregation overwhelmingly affected the indigenous Hawaiian population. But leprosy also became instrumentlalized in early American, xenophobic rhetoric about Chinese immigrants (particularly in San Francisco), and more recently, in the political right’s fearmongering about South American migrant caravans. I was saddened and outraged to see this toxic pattern repeat with respect to COVID-19 and the recrudescence of blatant racism against Asian Americans.

There are obvious resonances between leprosy, where sufferers were historically separated and marginalized, and our contemporary experiences with COVID-19. To just reflect on the example of Father Damien, who worked at Molokai and was later admitted as a patient after he contracted leprosy himself, how he theologically conceived of community changed by necessity and (what I find especially fascinating) he was forced to adapt how he conceived of and performed certain sacraments owing to the realities presented by leprosy. In parallel fashion, we’ve observed how communities of faith have had to reimagine their conception of community and to adapt how they perform certain rituals. But Father Damien provides us with two further insights. The first: Damien’s experience of leprosy—and especially how he’s remembered—was quite different from the experience of his indigenous co-sufferers by virtue of racial status. That is something that has also been painfully true of COVID and a reality that deserves even greater vigilance on our part. Second: Damien, much to the chagrin of his religious superiors and the colonial Board of Health, become stubbornly passionate about advocating for improvements to Hawaiian health policies pertaining to leprosy. In fact, Damien was unafraid of appealing to his religious authority—and growing celebrity—if it meant securing better medical care for the residents of Molokai. This pandemic has exposed and been exacerbated by many of our societal ills, but now the notion that healthcare is a matter of personal, private responsibility is painfully foolish and unethical. Hopefully, more Americans have realized that public health affects, well, everyone. After the pandemic has passed, I hope in turn that academia, theologians, and communities of faith will recognize public health debates as deserving their attention.
Craft of Teaching to Expand

The University of Chicago Divinity School is pleased to announce a generous bequest from the estate of the late John C. Colman that will enable a significant expansion of the Craft of Teaching in the Academic Study of Religion program, the School’s pedagogical training program for doctoral students. The expanded program will be named The John C. and Jane Colman Program in the Craft of Teaching, Leadership, and Service, and will support students in all of our degree programs as they seek to put their disciplinary formation to work in the world.

The original program was made possible by the vision and support of John C. and Jane Colman, engaged Chicagoans whose generosity has touched many lives. Mr. Colman served as President of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, and in 1995 received the Julius Rosenwald award, the Federation’s highest honor, in part for his work with refugees from the former Soviet Union. He was also president of North Shore Congregation Israel, the first Reform synagogue in the North Shore. Deeply interested in the role of religion in public life, John C. and Jane Colman have long been engaged with the Divinity School. Before endowing the Craft of Teaching, the Colmans endowed the Marty Center Dissertation Seminar. Their new bequest doubles the resources of the Craft of Teaching, and represents a remarkable commitment to the future of all of our students and our School.

“John and Jane dedicated a great deal of their lives to the betterment of this nation and of the world,” said Divinity School Dean David Nirenberg. “Whether working to solve problems with the international monetary system or to meet the needs of refugees from the USSR, John brought extraordinary intelligence and care to the needs of others. We are fortunate that over their decades of association with the School, he and Jane conveyed that same generous care to thinking about the needs of all of us who study and teach about religion in Swift Hall.”

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“John worked with six distinguished deans and felt strongly about the exciting and beneficial tasks of the scholars in Swift Hall specifically, and the vital role of religion in public in general,” said Jane Colman. “He believed deeply that focusing attention on leadership and service in higher education was crucial to the formation of scholars and scholarship itself. Through John’s bequest I am delighted to continue his lengthy dialogue with the Divinity School.”

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he coronavirus pandemic has thrown scholars of religion and theology for a difficult loop. That is true both for more humanistic scholars of religion and theology and for more doctrinally oriented ones.\(^1\) If ever a virus went not just global, turning from an epidemic into a pandemic, but also viral, manifesting itself through bouts of governmental concern and individual panic on the internet, the coronavirus did. As scholars of religion and theology, we have found ourselves dumbfounded in result. While we serve as a sounding board for human responses to the pandemic, we also feel called upon to address the intellectual quandary with which the pandemic confronts us professionally, showing us powerful (having caused it in some way) and vulnerable (being victimized by it) at once.

The question now is whether we should accept this catastrophe as having thrown us off the precipice into a religion-less void or whether there is an appropriate religious line of questioning that can take us from a situation of nature in disarray to one where we can see nature as meaningfully imbued with the divine.

**BEYOND THEODICY**

In the past, humanistic religion scholars and more doctrinal theologians displayed different reactions to such crises. If theologians did not interpret any natural disaster as a divine warning or punishment for sinful conduct, they took it as the occasion for a theodicy, a justification of divine goodness. This was insightfully done by David Bentley Hart’s *The Doors of the Sea. Where was God in the Tsunami?* after the 2004 tsunami in Thailand.\(^2\) The parallel between the tsunami and God’s frightening command of nature in the book of Job was not lost on Hart whose book is riddled with biblical references. Whether Leibniz’s Enlightenment view of a “best possible world” that lies behind Voltaire’s scathing parody after the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, or Hart’s Christian one after the 2004 tsunami, theodicies tend to analyze a disaster by theologically framing...
large, there is a Christological aspect to their sacrifice. But no vicarious atonement can stop the rage of the pandemic, as long as no vaccine has been found.

The above sketch shows that traditional religious-theological responses to natural evil are inadequate to deal with the current pandemic. Insofar as we cannot frame or isolate this pandemic, as we are instead forced to socially distance and isolate ourselves, the virus and the socio-economic crisis it has unleashed force us to redefine the work of theodicy. Because the pandemic results from both natural mutations and human actions, it defines the separation of evil as either natural or moral. What seems to be needed is a fundamental update of the religious task on nature that bridges these classical bifurcations (natural-moral, nature-culture) through a deeper discernment of nature as religiously meaningful. Insofar as Christianity equates nature with biblical creation and defines the latter as the object of both God’s creative act and humanity’s stewardship, since according to Gen. 1:26 humanity is created in God’s image, Christians have tended to see nature as passive and non-agential, which makes it an empty canvas vis-à-vis the particular questions that the pandemic poses before us. For, does the pandemic not show us that nature’s otherness is not reducible to the controllability of objecthood and humanity cannot simply replace God’s role of omnipotent creator?

**NATURE’S OTHERNESS:**

**AGENT AND ALLY**

To sketch out an alternative approach to what I call nature’s otherness, I will focus on nature’s unique position as mediating between humanity and the divine. While this mediation does not make nature itself divine, insofar as its analysis involves the divine and places nature in the center, it makes dealing with nature at heart an issue of religious and theological interpretation, just as it involves at heart also an anthropological reading. Conversely, leaving God and humanity out of nature’s analysis cannot but yield an irresponsibly impoverished sense of nature. I will first focus on nature’s agency. Both in the current pandemic and in the crisis of climate change, it is imperative that humanity become attuned to nature’s agency, and to the fluctuations of its give and take rather than abdicate responsibility or surrender to apocalyptic panic. For this section I draw on the late antique Christian thinkers Boethius and Maximus the Confessor, who give us different takes on nature’s role as a cosmic force and religious conduit. In the next section it is we who must be respecting nature’s otherness by seeing her as ally. I draw on modern thinkers Emerson and William James to flesh out a sense of the universe as animated, as signaling things to us that we would do well to heed for our continued well-being. The idea of nature as our ally forces us to cultivate a chastened sense of human selfhood, a new aesesis, not in a Weberian innerworldly sense of mastery but rooted in a wider religious world-awareness that I consider an indispensable step in trying to overcome not only the chasm between human nature and culture but also that between nature and culture that has done our world so much harm. I consider the idea of nature as ally particularly promising for the development of a richer theology of nature.

**PREMODERN NATURE IN BOETHIUS (477–526 CE) AND MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR (580–662 CE)**

**BOETHIUS**
The Christian Roman senator and philosopher Boethius and the Byzantine liturgist Maximus the Confessor offer us two different models of an agent-neutral nature with direct impact on human lives. Boethius is best known for his *Consolation of Philosophy*, written after he fell into disgrace with the Ostrogothic Emperor Theoderic and, his political fortunes upended, was imprisoned while awaiting death. While the *Consolation* is customarily read as a philosophical dialogue in which Boethius is interrogated by an allegorized Lady Philosophy,10 the Middle Ages treated it as a Christian, revelatory text, although Boethius never invokes the Bible. In their allegorizations of nature, medieval poets model Lady Nature on Boethius’*Lady Philosophy*. If we adopt this medieval reading, we see that Philosophy does not just teach Boethius the wisdom of ancient philosophical schools, but reconciles him to his impending death by showing him the providential pattern of the cosmos.

In a poignant exchange in Book II, Lady Philosophy engages in role-playing with Boethius. Posing as Lady Fortune, she provides Boethius with a teachable moment when, under questioning, he admits he entered this world without fame and riches. Just as he eagerly went up on Fortune’s wheel, admiring that what he acquired was really on loan from her, so he must go down with her as well. Restored to her own identity, Philosophy summarizes, “Good fortune deceives, but bad fortune enlightens,” as she has made Boethius realize who his friends are.

What follows is a poem that captures the dynamic reign of the universe, a providential bond that is cosmic as well as social:

Even as the world with steadfast trust
keeps its regular turns
and warring potentials
keep their perpetual truce,
And Phoebeus draws forth
the rosy day with his golden chariot—
Such that Moon-Phoebe rules
the nights that Evening brings,
Such that the aedid sea constrains
its surges at a firm limit
Lest lands wandering
strive for broader bounds—
The Love that rules over the lands and sea
and commands the sky
binds that cycle of events.
If that Love released its control,
whatever now loves mutually
will make war immediately,
And the machine that all now in companionable
trust impel with beautiful motions,
it would vie to break.
That Love likewise holds together
peoples yoked in holy alliance,
And it fastens marriage’s mystery
with chaste forms of love.
It also dictates its justice
to faithful companions.
O happy humankind,
if the love with which heaven is ruled
would rule your hearts!

In the middle line of the poem Boethius identifies Love as binding the cycle of natural events. The cosmic bond of love, reflective of Platonic eros, arranges the elements and fixes the tides, while it also unites the people in treaties and marriage. The poem ends with a plea for humanity to mirror the loving reign of nature in their hearts, later beloved by Dante, which bears out my point that Boethius’ philosophical consolation amounts to a cosmic reconciliation. With nature distinguished from fortune as well as from fate, Boethius recognizes that its providential harmony manifests the ordered wisdom of a loving creator.
In Boethius’ poem we have the bird’s eye perspective that Augustine lacks, as for Augustine nature is accessible only serially, through the six days of biblical creation. Observing it entire, Boethius lets Philosophy depict nature here as an active, immanent force that exudes divine love. Encompassing the universe, love’s cosmic reign stretches wide but also deep into social institutions. Nature’s loving agency unfolds as a set of providential ramifications of God’s single creative act.

**MAXIMUS**

Born a few decades after the Justinian plague, Maximus the Confessor shows us an altogether different view of nature’s agency, in which Platonic eros is replaced by the salvific impact of Christ’s incarnation.11 In bringing out the role of Christ, Maximus returns us also to the importance of scripture. Yet he does not foreground it at the expense of nature, but engages both simultaneously. In *Ambigua 10.17*, Maximus comments on the Transfiguration, a gospel episode which shows Jesus Christ radiant in glory on a mountain top with Moses and Elijah, while the disciples Peter and John look on.12 In commenting on the effect on Moses and Elijah, while the disciples Peter and John, they (Peter and John) were also taught that the disciples of this momentary anticipation of the Messiah wear it. **They** (Peter and John) and, second, of creation which at that moment became bright, clear, and transparent to them…. and, second, of creation itself…. snow appearing in the variety of the different forms that constitute it, all declaring the power of the Creator Word, in the same way that a different view of nature’s agency, in which Platonic eros is replaced by the salvific impact of Christ’s incarnation. 

When a millennium after Maximus modernity ushers in a more scientific era, nature’s agency becomes increasingly divorced from the divine.13 Among the many changes brought about by the scientific study of nature is its diminished importance in religious legitimacy, which has led to what we may call the death of nature. Thus, Karl Barth, a Swiss neo-orthodox Protestant theologian battling the forces of Nazi Germany, emphatically opposed natural theology, embracing God’s revelation in scripture as the exclusive route to salvation. Driven by the ecological crisis, secular thinker Bruno Latour has recently criticized nature’s abrogation of nature’s legibility.22

In oblique alignment with Lynn White’s analysis of “But nature has put into our hands two keys, by which we may test the feelers, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, or force an arbitrary moral distinction upon us, not only for animals but for plants, too.”23 In James, who later on amends his earlier definition. As Pope Francis lauds St. Francis: “The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”24

White’s turn to St. Francis also alerts us to the deeper problem of mainstream theology, from which St. Francis’ biographer Bonaventure would step away, as casting theological and scientific analysis into a scholastic, second-order language from which all religious affect is drained.25 Boethius and Maximus are altogether freer and more imaginative in expressing themes related to the theology of nature, such as providence, love, and the garments of Jesus Christ as symbols for nature and scripture. Seeing nature as both religious and anthropological I want to read nature holistically, and abolish any unnecessary dichotomies. It is by becoming attuned to nature that we open ourselves up to seeing it as our ally. But mainstream theology does not offer many resources for a theology of nature, let alone one that it considers nature as our ally. In my quest for more imaginative modern thinkers, I will therefore turn to American thinkers R. W. Emerson and William James. Long neglected, they have recently become rediscovered for their viable impetus to creative religious thought.26

**MODERN NATURE IN R. W. EMERSON (1803-1882) AND WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910)**

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Taking them up in reverse historical order, I first turn to James as my modern counterpart to Boethius and next to Emerson as my modern counterpart to Maximus.

**WILLIAM JAMES**

William James seems an apologetic choice for a view of nature as ally, since he is known to define religion in terms of the religious subject in *The Varieties of Religious Experience.*

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, as far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.27

In some ways James gives us the solitude that Boethius might have felt, even if the language of experience and feeling is decidedly modern. But individualistic experience is not all there is to religion in James, who later on amends his earlier definition. Were one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul.28

It is this latter statement that points us to nature as ally.

Building on the above two Jamesian ingredients of religion, namely individual solitude and the belief in an unseen order, a third step points our bow James analyzes the cosmos not just as religious but also relational. In his earlier essay, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” James argues that faith creates its own verification to the point that a cosmos with the thinker’s reaction to it will always be different from without it, meaning that this reaction, let’s call it one’s faith, affects the whole in which it is imbedded. At the end of the essay James addresses the question whether we live in a moral or an immoral universe. “But nature has put into our hands two keys, by which we may test the locks: if we try the moral key and it fits, it is a moral lock; if we try the immoral key and it fits, it is an immoral lock.”29 While this answer seems to force an arbitrary moral distinction upon us, not unlike the arbitrary way in which James asks us to take religion in the opening of *Varieties*, it masks a deeper call for discretion. It is in alignment with that discretion that he says that “the ultimate philosophy must not be too strict-laced in form,” but over and above the realm of propositions (read, the scholastic approach) there must be left “another realm into which the stifled soul may escape from pedantic scruples and indulge its own faith at its own risk…”30 While James accepts that not everyone is religious, he says that for those who are the universe is a storyed one, with faith authenticating one story as a place of belonging.

“I consider it more important that the legibility of nature in modernity involves religion alongside science.”

WILLEMien OTTEN
Lacking Augustine’s and Maximus’ patience to wait for the eschaton, Emerson demands an original relation to the universe right here. He does not as a matter of personal choice but through a collective human embrace of nature as providing us with exclusive access to the divine. It seems fair to say that our acceptance that life is grounded in nature is what ultimately constitutes religion for Emerson.

Second, given the above it is no surprise that nature in Emerson displays a metaphysical surplus value, through which it utterly vanquishes the nature-culture divide. As Emerson states in his essay “Nature”: “If we consider how much we are nature’s, we need not be superstitious about towns, as if that terrific or beneficent force did not find us there also, and fashion cities. Nature who made the mausoleum, made the house.”

What Latour calls the instability of nature is in Emerson the avowal of its unbounded capaciousness, by virtue of which nature can harbor both the religious and the anthropological aspect in its fold. It is relevant to point out that, notwithstanding the demise of the parallelism of nature and scripture in secular modernity, nature in Emerson retains a lingering scriptural echo. This comes out in such interjections as “All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a more gospel?”1 While such comments are few and far between, and do not betray a commitment to historical Christianity, they make clear that the divine resonance of nature lies just beneath the surface. It is up to us to scratch that surface.

Third, Emerson is a deeply circular thinker, meaning that he avoids both niggardly restoration and the linearity of progress. As he tells us in the essay “Circles,”

The natural world may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprise us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed. These manifold tenacious qualities, this chemistry and vegetation, these metals and animals, which seem to stand there for their own sake, are means and methods only—as words of God, and as fugitive as other words.12

What is significant about the Emersonian circle is that it is neither geyering nor cyclical; it is never fully closed. Leading to ever greater openness, unfolding into ever greater generalizations, circular life marks Emersonian temporality or onwards, thereby putting hope on our horizon.

CONCLUSION

To recover nature’s religious role in the context of the pandemic, my plea is not just to retrieve nature’s religious agency but to treat and respect nature as our ally and listen to its otherness. Since nature mediates between humanity and the divine, it behooves us to take its role seriously. Rather than prejudge nature, either by Jamesian assurance, apocalyptic terms or by striving for blind control over it, we should watch, observe, exercise caution, then strike with precision when opportunity presents. The mark of a good preacher, says Emerson, is “to convert life into truth.” As our truth-driven theologies have failed to see nature’s animating intelligence leading to a destructive cynicism that denies a role for religion altogether in thinking about nature, it may be more worthwhile to move on the Emersonian circle, knowing that “Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides.”

Williemien Otten is Professor of Theology and the History of Christianity and the Director of the Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion.

NOTES

1 Note that I do not separate scholars of religion and those of theology per se but see more of a dividing line based on the degree to which scholars in either category are ideologically invested. My appeal is to those less ideologically inclined.


3 For relevant background reading on theology, which Leibniz had used as a title in 1710, see Thomas W. Tolley, The Evil of Theology (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 221–255 and Nicholas T. Wright, History and Forthcoming. Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology. The 2018 Gifford Lectures (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 3–41.


5 Idem: I no longer wished individual things to be better, because I considered the object: superior things are self-evidently better than inferior. Yet with a sourer judgement: I held that all things taken together are better than superior things by themselves.


8 Conf. 116.22, transl. Henry Chadwick, 116: “I inquired what wickedness is; and did not find a substance but a perversion of will away from the highest substance, you O God, toward inferior things.”

9 The anthropological aspect is what will lead us to bring up the natureculture divide later in the essay.

10 This is especially the case in Alan of Lille’s allegorical poem Plant of Nature (ca. 1125), which had some influence on Chaucer. See further George D. Economou, The Goddess Nature in Medieval English Poetics (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2002), 28–52.

11 I am grateful to Michael J. Allen for this translation of Beatitudes, The Consolation of Philosophy II, 1. 8.

12 The Justinian plague raged in the 540s and was recurring through the mid-550s, killing between 25 and 500 million people and precipitating the fall of the Roman Empire.

13 See Matthew 17:8–9; Mark 9:28–36.


15 Idem, 195.


17 But see the comment by Lynn White Jr.: “From the 15th century onward, up to and including Leibniz and Newton, everyone, in effect, explained his motivations religiously. That is, he avoided both nostalgic restoration and the destructive cynicism that denies a role for religion altogether in thinking about nature, it may be more worthwhile to move on the Emersonian circle, knowing that ‘Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides.’”


22 See Laudato Si, end of section II.


25 William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 54 (James’s Italian); 57–60.

26 James, Varieties, 51.


28 Idem, 86.

29 Idem, 89.


33 See “Nature” in CW I. 108.


36 “Divinity School Address,” in CW I. 186.

37 “Circles,” in CW I. 2.188.

We are pleased to welcome the following scholars to Swift Hall.

**YU XUE** will be joining us next year as Visiting Professor of Buddhism. Professor Xue is currently a Research Fellow at the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies, Director of the Center for the Study of Chan Buddhism and Human Civilization, and Director of the Center for the Study of Religious Ethics and Chinese Culture, Chinese University of Hong Kong. Professor Xue specializes in Buddhist studies as well as Buddhist-Christian dialogue in modern China. Professor Xue’s publications include *Buddhism, War, and Nationalism: Chinese Monks in the Struggle Against Japanese Aggressions, 1931-1945*; *New York and London: Routledge, 2005; Socialism Transformation of Chinese Buddhism, Hong Kong*; *The Chinese University Press, 2014*, as well as more than 100 research papers. Professor Xue is also the Chief Editor of the International Journal for the Study of Chan Buddhism and Human Civilization.

**WILLIAM SCHULTZ** will join the Divinity School faculty as an Assistant Professor. Professor Schultz is a historian of American religion with an interest in the intersection of religion, politics, and capitalism. Schultz is currently finishing his first book, *Jesus Springs: How Colorado Springs Became the Capital of the Culture Wars* (under contract with the University of North Carolina Press), which explains how the confluence of evangelical Christianity and free-market capitalism transformed the city of Colorado Springs into the epicenter of a Christian movement that sought to reshape American politics in the late twentieth century. His new project, *The Wages of Sin: Faith, Fraud, and Religious Freedom in Modern America*, uses cases of financial fraud between the 1920s and 1990s—ranging from spiritualist prospectors to Jesuit priests—to explore how Americans have struggled with thorny questions of religious authority and authenticity. Prior to joining the faculty, Schultz was a lecturer in the Department of History at Princeton University, where he taught courses on modern United States history. He received his PhD in History from Princeton and served as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania’s Andrea Mitchell Center for the Study of Democracy.

**KRIS TRUJILLO** joins us as an Associate Professor. Professor Trujillo’s research is situated at the intersection of religious studies, literary studies, and the study of gender and sexuality. An Assistant Professor in Comparative Literature, his work interrogates the affective, embodied, erotic, and communal aspects of the devotional practices that structure the production of theology, theory, and literature. His forthcoming work, “Jubilee of the Heart,” combines readings of premodern theological texts with modern theories of practice, performativity, and ritualization in order to provide an account of the relationship between mystical poetry, the monastic practice of singing the Psalms, and the desire for God. His next project, “Queer Theory against the Apophatic: Mysticism, Medieval History, and the Latinus Response to the AIDS Crisis,” investigates how queer Latinx theorists, writers, and artists retooled medieval Christian mysticism in response to anti-gay religious rhetoric during the early decades of the AIDS pandemic.

**Divinity School scholars have been selected for the Neubauer Collegium.**

Taylor and Venkatkrishnan both joined the faculty in 2019. Professor Taylor’s research focuses on gender and emotion in premodern religion in South India; her work is informed by theoretical developments in the study of gender, affect, embodiment, and animality. Professor Venkatkrishnan’s research concerns the social history of intellectual life, not only in early modern India, but also in the modern scholarly study of Hinduism. The next issue of *Criticism* will feature a conversation between Professors Taylor and Venkatkrishnan on South Asian studies at The Divinity School.

For more information on the Neubauer Collegium visit neubauercollegium.uchicago.edu

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**POSSIBILITIES**

*The Collegium explores new possibilities for humanistic research* by fostering an environment in which new forms of thinking emerge and thrive. Research projects sponsored by the Collegium bring together scholars and practitioners whose collaboration is required to address and solve complex challenges. Projects at the Neubauer Collegium launching in July include “Entanglements of the Indian Past.” The researchers for this project include, at the Divinity School, Assistant Professors Sarah Pierce Taylor and Anand Venkatkrishnan. The other two members of the team, Andrew Ollett and Whitney Cox, hail from South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC). The research team will run a three-year series of interdisciplinary workshops to chart a future course for the study of the Indian past. The project will focus on three important issues—caste, materiality, and historicity—pairing each issue with a pivotal moment that shaped the course of Indian historiography.

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**The Neubauer Collegium**

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We are pleased to welcome the following scholars to Swift Hall.

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**The University of Chicago has long championed collaborative research as a promising strategy for addressing complex questions. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit last year, it was not clear how this form of inquiry might need to adapt. What new strategies would humanistic scholars adopt to share, develop, and test new ideas online? While challenges for research collaborations remain significant, this year’s projects show an ongoing commitment to collaborative inquiry across disciplines. Projects at the Neubauer Collegium launching in July include “Entanglements of the Indian Past.” The researchers for this project include, at the Divinity School, Assistant Professors Sarah Pierce Taylor and Anand Venkatkrishnan. The other two members of the team, Andrew Ollett and Whitney Cox, hail from South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC). The research team will run a three-year series of interdisciplinary workshops to chart a future course for the study of the Indian past. The project will focus on three important issues—caste, materiality, and historicity—pairing each issue with a pivotal moment that shaped the course of Indian historiography.*
The Divinity School is pleased to announce the second Anthony C. Yu Junior Faculty Fellowship recipient, Assistant Professor Erin Galgay Walsh.

"It is such a gift to have the opportunity to focus on my work and think about future projects, and I am so grateful to Barbara and Mike Urbut for their generosity," said Professor Walsh about receiving the fellowship. "I am honored to continue the legacy of Anthony C. Yu right here at The University of Chicago, which has provided me an intellectual home, wonderful colleagues, and students who inspire me."

Over his distinguished career, Professor Yu made wide-ranging contributions in work which engaged Chinese religions as well as classic texts of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. His scholarship created a dialogue between Eastern and Western traditions in religion and literature that defined his comparative approach in the field. His seminal achievement, a new English translation of Journey to the West, appeared in 1983 to wide acclaim; Professor Yu continued to work on the text, and released an updated second edition in 2012. In addition to his academic contributions, Professor Yu, with his wife, Priscilla, were well-known for their generosity and attentiveness to colleagues and students, regularly hosting gatherings and inviting students to cultural activities in the city, and maintaining warm relationships with advisees after they had left Swift Hall.

"Professor Yu's legacy of research and pedagogy continues to enrich the Divinity School community," said David Nirenberg, Dean of the Divinity School, of the appointment. "This fellowship continues to provide our early-career scholars with support and resources during a critical time in their career."

DURING THE PANDEMIC-RELATED SHUT-DOWNS, DIVINITY SCHOOL STUDENTS ORGANIZED MANY MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED INITIATIVES, too numerous to list. At Swift Hall, a student-organized book drive collected over 200 books, most of which were distributed to book boxes in West Lawn and Oak Park. Those book boxes are administered by a nonprofit organization, Neighbor to Neighbor Literacy Project (learn more at neighborliteracy.org). The student in charge of the drive, Héctor M. Varela Rios (PhD Candidate, Theology), reported that some books were “too UChicago” for the neighborhood book boxes and will be donated to a library later this spring. And Grounds of Being, our student-run coffeeshop, found itself in possession of milk and other perishable goods which had to be distributed or tossed. Pictured here is College student and Grounds of Being worker Hana Eldessouky.
A year ago, American religious practice pivoted dramatically, as congregations closed their doors and began to offer services like preaching, prayer and meditation—even hospital bedside visits—virtually. Since then, worshippers have mourned the loss of holy spaces and communal practices, especially during holy seasons like Passover, Easter and Ramadan, and on other occasions when the community normally assembles in solidarity, such as to bless a marriage or to mourn the death of a loved one.

Despite this, people of faith have also been rediscovering powerful truths about human existence and reliable resources for courage and compassion in ancient narratives and practices that were themselves forged in times of human suffering and exile. Without access to the buildings and programs that have identified and sometimes constrained them, many religious communities are redefining themselves and their purposes in more expansive, active ways: cultivating networks that transcend time and space; fashioning portable ritual practices to sustain individuals and families in their homes; and reconfiguring inclusive and accessible worshipping communities in a variety of forms, from online small groups to outdoor sessions.

Most significantly, innovative faith communities are beginning to reclaim the work of caregiving that was essential to their spiritual practice before it was professionalized or relegated to the clergy: sharing the hard work of caring for one another through phone trees, small groups and prayer; supporting the elderly and the vulnerable in their neighborhoods through networks of mutual aid; advocating not only for those in need, but for those essential workers who bear more than their share of the burden of an ever-expanding demand for care; and attending with renewed urgency to the integrity of human interdependence and the healing of our planet.

Respondents did value religious freedom: more than three-quarters said that religious freedom was extremely, very, or somewhat important to them personally. But they apparently did not see that freedom as in conflict with public health. If we were to administer the same survey today, after religious freedom and public health have been posed in sharper anti-thesis, we might get different answers—with ongoing implications for public health.

Pandemic theodicy came to my attention via another survey with the same collaborators. Again, there is nothing new about the linkage. Here is King Edward III of England, using theodicy to explain the plague in 1348, “Terrible is God towards the sons of men, and… those whom he loves he censures and chastises; that is, he punishes their shameful deeds in various ways during this mortal life so that they might not be condemned eternally.” Older than the hills, but fresher than the grass. In March 2020, the month that the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, the share of internet searches for prayer surged across the globe, among adherents of every faith, to the highest level ever recorded in the (short) history of Google Trends. And in early May, with much of the United States in “lockdown,” our survey on COVID and religion in collaboration with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs found plenty of evidence for contemporary COVID-19 theodicy.

Or rather, we found evidence of multiple theodicies. When asked about the coronavirus, sixty-three percent of Americans agreed that through it “God is telling humanity to change the way we are living.” And fifty-five percent thought that God would protect them from infection. Both these views are characteristic of theodicy. But there were important differences between the respondents: White evangelical Christians proved much more likely (sixty-seven percent) to think that God will protect them from infection, whereas black (seventy-eight percent) and Hispanic (sixty-five percent) Americans are much more likely to think God is demanding change. Perhaps we should speak of at least two pandemic theodicies in contemporary America, one more satisfied with the moral and social status quo, the other more critical.

COVID did not cause this divergence, any more than it caused the racial, economic, and political divisions that these distinct theodicies may reflect. Still, we have much to learn, both about our societies and our faiths, from reflecting on the many different religious reactions to the virus’ suffocating weight. As the pandemic waters slowly recede, they will reveal a religious landscape both familiar and estranged. As students and scholars of religion we should not be in too much of a hurry to forget our reactions to the traumas of this terrible year, lest we fail to gain from them one of the few consolations they have to offer: the consolation of having learned something about ourselves and our societies.

DAVID NIRENBERG
DEAN OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
AND DEBORAH R. AND EDGAR D. JANNOTTA
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR

To read more about the surveys discussed in Dean Nirenberg’s letter: https://divinity.uchicago.edu/apnorc