

D.J. Louw

Prof. D.J. Louw, Research Fellow,
Department Practical and Missional
Theology, University of the
Free State.

(orcid.org/0000-0003-4512-0180)

djl@sun.ac.za

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THE AESTHETICS OF COVID-19 WITHIN THE PANDEMIC OF THE CORONA CRISIS. FROM LOSS AND GRIEF TO SILENCE AND SIMPLICITY – A PHILOSOPHICAL AND PASTORAL APPROACH

ABSTRACT

Within the corona crisis, the core question is: What is the impact of Covid-19 on the spiritual realm of meaning-giving, hoping and pastoral caregiving? How does it affect the realm of habitus and religious convictions, specifically when pastoral caregivers become involved? With reference to the human quest for wholeness in healing and helping, existing paradigms are critically analysed. What is meant by the aesthetics of Covid-19? A soulful movement within an aesthetic approach is discussed, i.e. from the ugliness of the pandemic to the beautification of the virus. Thus, the question is about the challenge how to grow and revisit the meaning dimension of life within a re-evaluation of the value of compassion. In this regard, the God-image of divine companionship, as framed by the ugliness of a "suffering God", is discussed within the parameters of the praxis of hope care in pastoral ministry.



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1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 brought about a crisis that touches every human being on earth. It brought about the turmoil of uncertainty and the dreadful anxiety that death is anew a reality demarcating all spheres of life. In the meantime, in order to gain control over the virus and to combat deadly infections, human beings are forced to stay at home. A total state of isolation is called a lockdown. We are facing the realities of life from behind the bars of isolation and loneliness. The future becomes unpredictable with really no informative answer to the questions: What lies ahead? For what purpose? Where to? These questions compel everyone to connect with the existential realities of life and the roots and foundations of our very being. The coronavirus is creating an existential crisis that penetrates the roots of our very being (ontic dimension). On the one hand, the existential reality of dread, despair and anxiety contributes to the pandemic and even pathological and irrational reactions. On the other hand, the quest for security (*geborgenheit*), meaning and hope prevails.

The following core problematic issues could be identified:

- Anguish: The fear of falling ill; anxiety due to death and dying.
- Helplessness, powerlessness an absolute form of paralysis. There is no vaccine available yet.
- Scientific confusion: We do not know yet and the virus could continue mutating into new deadly forms.
- Loneliness and the anticipatory fear of loss and stigmatisation – an identity crisis. Fear of social exclusion and being placed in quarantine because of being associated with the disease; the predicament of being locked down.
- The employment crisis: What about my job and income? Fear of not being able to work and of being retrenched.
- The economic crisis. How do we keep the economy going while degraded to a junk status by Moody? The impact of the virus on the inflation rate and the prospect of viable, sustainable economic growth.
- The burden on health facilities; avoiding approaching health facilities, due to the fear of infection during treatment and care; the risk factor in medical care.
- The impact on intimate relationships; domestic violence; concern about children of people engaged in essential work.
- The paradoxical clash of interests: A flourishing economy or the well-being of human life?

The identification of the core issues at stake focuses mainly on the shadow side of human existence: Dread, anguish, fear and uncertainty. But is there a bright side? Is the virus merely “ugly”?

The basic assumption is that the virus could also open up new opportunities for reframing values in life; repositioning, attitudinal change, prioritising commitments, reshaping fundamental ideas about the ultimate in life, readdressing perceptions and perspectives (perspectivism). Therefore, the focus on another scenario: Paradigms and the enrichment of human existence (I enjoy the beauty of myself: Soulfulness and wholeness). Thus, the core questions of the article: How does the virus impact on paradigmatic issues regarding the ultimate? What is meant by the aesthetics of Covid-19?

The paradigms one uses to interpret the impact of the deadly virus on the quality of life (the hermeneutical question), as well as the concepts and ideas determining one’s attitudes can also become intoxicated. One can call the destructive infiltration of one’s hermeneutical framework of interpretation a spiritual intoxication. Thus, the importance to revisit the realm of paradigms as well as the realm of intention and motivation (the conative dimension of habitus). We cannot predict what will befall us. However, we can prevent the virtue of compassion from becoming inflated to the extent that human beings become immune to the suffering of the other – the predicament of spiritual implosion and religious depletion.

In Christian spirituality and pastoral caregiving, the core religious question is who God is during the pandemic. Appropriate God images can promote human well-being. Skewed God images contribute to spiritual intoxication (religious pathology). We cannot lockdown God, but we can infect theological reflection and ecclesial paradigms. Thus, the following core questions.

How can the spiritual paradigm (the concern for human well-being, the endeavour of coping, attitudinal change and meaning-giving) (the philosophical dimension) supplement the economic paradigm (the febrile concern about economic growth, wealth, prosperity, employment, job creation) and serve as directive in the discovery of an aesthetic perspective on how to cope with the reality of fear and dread (anguish)? In his book *Slot van die dag. Gedagtes* (2017), Schoeman points out that this spiritual paradigm is about how a human being deals with meaninglessness and the realm of death and dying. The corona crisis is fundamentally about this question: Loss and the connection to the ultimate and the reality of dying.

Schoeman (2017:161) refers to Tolstoy: “The only absolute knowledge attainable by man is that life is meaningless.” Schoeman concurs with this statement and captures the essence of the crisis of facing death as the how of one’s response. The meaning of life resides in the how; *i.e.* how one lives life

within the vividness of “now”, this very moment (Schoeman 2017:155). This is where paradigms as the filters of the human mind come into play.

The second question is on the level of religion (religious and theological dimension): How can religion and theological reflecting on the how of God play a role in shifting pathological thinking (the total paralysis of helplessness and dread, spiritual implosion) to a paradigm of hopeful meaning-giving. Can religion be “beautiful” as well?

There is a close connection between “spirituality” and “religion”. Both could contribute to human wholeness. Both have indeed a stabilising and motivational (conative dimension) impact on people’s attitude towards painful events in life.

The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin term *religare* from *re* – again and *ligare* – to bind. Thus, religions talk of spiritual experiences as the re-binding to God (Puchalski & Ferrell 2010:22).

It is in this context that the theological question should be posed: How do we view God in this pandemic and what is the connection between God images and our schemata of interpretation and view on the connection COVID-19 and our daily perceptions regarding a lockdown setting? This question probes into the realm of perception and perspective.

If the scopic regime of the ‘arrogant eye’ is to be rejected in favour of fostering more intimate fellowship with visual artefacts, then an alternative approach is required that allows the emergence of a more intimate, loving gaze (Pattison 2007:19).

Moreover, in religion, this *loving gaze* is closely related to an iconic view on life and paradigms that shape daily observation.



A total lockdown. What lurks behind? When will the restrictions be lifted so that we can go on with our life? For how long?

Artist: D.J. Louw. Grandchildren of the author.

2. A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHIC PAUSE

In my reflection on this very unexpected event and unprecedented occurrence, suddenly three books came to my mind. I would say, they left a long-life impression and indicate a radical, spiritual turning point in my journey to maturity and the quest for meaning in life. They helped me change my paradigm when, at the age of 36 years, we received the news that my wife has breast cancer, grade 4, without any positive prognosis. I was devastated. I went to the library of the Medical Faculty and started to read everything on breast cancer. However, in vain, because appropriate facts and medical information cannot comfort and did not help me cope with my pain of possible loss.

The first book was prescribed in my matric year (1962): *De kleine Johannes* by Frederick Van Eden (1960). The book is about the different stages of life. It refers to imagination, *i.e.* our capacity to toy with different ideas regarding one's becoming in life or options for meaning-giving (fascination). The reference to imaginary thinking was presented by a character named *Windekind* – the whirlwind of creative thinking and fantasy. Then there was *Dr. Cijfer*, representing science and the quest for reason and verification. But always, in the background, lurks a shadowy figure, namely *Hein* (symbol of an approaching death). And when he stretched out his hand to Johannes, lying on his bed, the clock came to a standstill. Death is final. I was 17 years old and was overwhelmed by the fact that life is transient and I must die.

The second book was Dag Hammarskjöld's diary *Markings* (1993). Under the heading "*Night is drawing nigh*", he wrote:

The anguish of loneliness brings blasts from the storm center of death: only that can be really yours which is another's, for only what you have given, be it only in the gratitude of acceptance, is salvaged from the nothing which some day will have been your life (1993:29).

I become aware of the fact that, in the grace of life, lurks the dread of loneliness and the shadow of death. We are incapsulated by sheer nothingness. Our future is like a mirage, framed by dread. "Tomorrow we shall meet, death and I – and he shall thrush his sword into one who is wide awake" (Hammarskjöld 1993:2). He was Secretary-General of the United Nations and nicknamed "global peacemaker". Unfortunately, on 18 September 1961, after he had tried to intervene in the political turmoil of the Belgian Congo, he died unexpectedly in an air crash near Ndola, Northern Rhodesia. Meaning-giving always takes place within the void abyss of nothingness.

The third book was Henri Nouwen's *Reaching out* (1998). I always wrestled with the question: What is the human soul about? Nouwen did not answer

my question but opened my eyes to the fact that the “human soul” is not a quantifiable, substantial “some-thing”, captivated temporarily in a frail, mortal human body. The human soul is more about a qualitative indication of human identity and behaviour (*habitus*) within the networking dynamics of human relationships. In fact, the quality of our being human is determined by basically three movements: From loneliness to solitude; from hostility to hospitality; from the illusion of immortality (I will live forever) to the humility of “amen” – the realisation of frailty and vulnerability. Nouwen helped me understand that, in spirituality, three issues are at stake, namely solitude (identity of the human I); the gratuitous attitude of compassionate hospitality, and the realism of a “yes” to mortality and vulnerability.

In my reflection on the corona pandemic, these three topics in the aforementioned books are, to my mind, what COVID-19 is about: Death and dying; loneliness and anguish; solitude and meaning-giving (the realism of hoping).

It brings me back to the core question of this article: How should one view life and incorporate the corona pandemic into one’s daily attitude, in order not to become a victim of grief and loss? How can one rediscover the beauty and meaning of life? The most threatening question is not about death and dying; it is about life and flourishing. And this question brings one back not to money, jobs, economics, healthcare systems, masks and respirators, but to the ideas that shape life, *i.e.* the patterns of thinking and the categories that are used for a comprehensive understanding of one’s calling and purpose in life. We are, in fact, sojourners (*homo viator*), but without any destiny, we will become lost and strayed.

3. PARADIGM SHIFTS WITHIN THE CONFUSION OF WHATSAPP AND THE TURMOIL OF THE FOURTH REVOLUTION

To be frank, over the past six weeks, the media and WhatsApp took over my life. Through the many emails on the coronavirus and prevention measurements, I became lost. I started to feel totally overwhelmed and confused by the turmoil of messages, speculations, news updates and WhatsApp clips.

Due to what has become a current custom (an online habit), I googled to get to the roots of a WhatsApp stance on the virus. As web, WhatsApp responded to the corona crisis with the following heading: *Coronavirus – Use WhatsApp to stay connected with your community and trusted sources of information* (Corona crisis 2020). This WhatsApp heading helped me realise that, whether we like it or not, we are already in what is called the fourth industrial and technological revolution – the total digitalisation of life. Church,

university, classroom, school, meetings, conferences, all of these had to move from local venues to online venues. Perhaps, after this crisis, life will never be the same again.

To my mind, three inevitable but also irreversible paradigmatic shifts are taking place.

3.1 Networking thinking

There is no doubt that we are no longer captured by a linear mode of thinking – from past to present into future. The worldwide web is now dictating human relationships by means of data and information. In fact, thinking (the philosophy of the 21st century) is about networking thinking. We are becoming a global human race of interconnectedness. In the positivistic era of the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), we were ushered into sheer rationalism by the Cartesian slogan that dictated the “new world”: I think therefore I am. We headed straight into the industrial revolution. And now, we are pushed forward by the virus to face the realities of the digital revolution. The new slogan is: Please stay connected – I am interconnected, therefore I am. The virus emphasises the fact that we are all exposed and connected to the threat of infection. In this regard, WhatsApp has become our “helper” and “saviour”.

WhatsApp helps you connect with those who matter most. Here are some of the ways you can use WhatsApp to look after friends and family, stay up to date with the latest official health information, and share information responsibly. If you're new to WhatsApp or just need a refresher, here is a step-by-step guide on how to get started (WhatsApp 2020).

Immediately, the following message appears:

Connect with local, national, and global organizations. Turn to trusted sources, like the World Health Organization or your national health ministry, for the latest information and guidelines (WhatsApp 2020).

The interconnectedness of online-networking is not accidental and quite naïve. It is deeply driven by the urge to control, to get clarity and to detect reliable sources, in order to cope with the crisis. The quest for trustworthiness, reliability and appropriate information have become vital issues in detecting the impact of the virus on human life. With this quest for reliable sources, we are back to the emphasis on verification and facticity.

Think about the messages that you receive, because not everything you are sent about coronavirus may be accurate. Verify the facts with other trusted official sources or fact checkers. If you aren't sure something's true, don't forward it (WhatsApp 2020).

It is very interesting to note that most of the WhatsApp online messages focus more on statistics, medical information and the economic implications and less on the impact on the human mindset (the spiritual realm).

In the case of South Africa, the country currently faces three interrelated problems. These are the public health threat from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic and health effects of the lockdown, and a range of intractable economic problems not directly due to the current pandemic. These include high unemployment, low economic growth and falling per capita income (The Conversation Covid-19 Online 2020).

To capture the gist of my argument: The coronavirus pushed us with the rapid avalanche of fear (anguish) into the so-called fourth international revolution. For the past decade, we were in a transitional stage, oscillating between the technological revolution and the dawning of the digital revolution. Schwab (2016:1) emphasised this shift very aptly when he stated:

We are at the beginning of a revolution that is fundamentally changing the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope and complexity, what I consider to be the fourth industrial revolution is unlike anything humankind has experienced before.

According to Butler-Adam (2018:1), we are experiencing a “fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital and biological domains”. According to Mohapi (2017), the fourth international revolution blends various digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT) and Big Data into our lives in a manner that makes it impossible to differentiate where digital starts and where the physical world stops.

“Now everything we do – every online purchase, e-prescription and tweet – adds to the digital tsunami known as Big Data” (Grunwald 2014:34). Instead of Orwell’s Big Brother in 1984, lurks Big Data. The Internet pushes thinking into the philosophy of simulation beyond existing borders of reality; it creates opportunities for a new understanding of *meta*-physics (cyberspatial *meta*-physics), as well as the philosophy of “Great Optimization” (Grunwald 2014:35) of networking knowledge.

The paradigm shift is from the “democratisation of people” to the “democratisation of information” (Grunwald 2014:34). The Roman philosopher Seneca was concerned about information overload nearly 2,000 years ago: “What is the point having countless books and libraries whose titles the owner could scarcely read through in a lifetime?” (Grunwald 2014:33).

In 1685, the French scholar Adrien Baillet warned that the continuing of “multitude of books which grows every day in a prodigious fashion”

could prompt the kind of collapse that befell Seneca's civilization, leading to Visigoth-style barbarism (Grunwald 2014:33).

Homo spectans, in its different modes of *meta*-probing, is currently captured by the vista of cyberspace. For, as Thomas (in Karaflogka 2002:200) suggested

cyberspace has the potential to not only change the economic structure of human societies but to also overthrow the sensorial and organic architecture of the human body, this by disembodiment and reformatting its sensorium in powerful, computer-generated, digital spaces.

Due to technology and the introduction of the Internet, the options opened by virtual reality are contributing to the fact that *homo spectans* is overwhelmed and fascinated by cyberspatial metaphysics; the *pro*-spection of the World Wide Web sets free the dynamics of hope online (Louw 2016:Chapter 8). This kind of hope online is closely connected to the information revolution of the High-Tech Era, which is also called '*the answers age*': "The answers business is the future" (Grunwald 2014:35). From floppy disks and compact discs to flash drives and the cloud, we live in an age of *Great Optimizing*,

[w]here we can program home appliances to optimize energy usage, where Amazon and Netflix can mine our purchasing histories and those of similar customers to recommend other books and movies we might like, where crowdsourcing services like Chowhound and Waze harness the power of the hive mind to prevent us from wasting money on bad restaurants or wasting time in bad traffic (Grunwald 2014:35).

Human beings become focused on the beyond of cyberspace, networking webpages, the liminality between the seen and the unseen, and the mysticism of interface. The facelessness of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp become a secure hiding place for a *meta*-physics of psychic curiosity online. This world of *homo digitalis* shapes a digital profile with options for a new kind of anonymity, with the facelessness of "smart mobs" (Han 2013:20); the so-called empire of the multitude; an interconnectivity through and from singularity. But now, suddenly, the coronavirus unmasked the pretention of the High-Tech era as the age of information and giving answers, namely, that there is virtually now an instant answer to the impact of the pandemic on the future of our being human.

3.2 The realm of unpredictability

We have to admit that the strict logic of cause-and-effect (the causality treadmill) made place for *unpredictability*. It made place for what Taleb (2010) calls the *Black swan syndrome*. *The impact of the highly improbable*. The

coronavirus proved the validity of Taleb's presupposition, namely that we can no longer predict life like weather forecasting. Taleb reasons that, to limit praxis to merely practice, functionality and factuality, is to live in the illusionary bubble of positivistic arrogance. He calls the limitation of praxis to merely empirically informed data, "*epistemic arrogance*" – the hubris concerning the limits of our knowledge (Taleb 2010:136). We overestimate what we know, and underestimate uncertainty, by compressing the range of possible uncertain states (*i.e.* by reducing the space of the unknown) (Taleb 2010:140). Knowledge, even if it is functional and operational, refers to networking ideas that represent significance. It is, therefore, a "*scientific mistake*" to link validity to rational causality, with its basis in the evidence of "*because of*", without taking into consideration the factor of randomness and the highly improbable. In this sense, the coronavirus enters 2020 as a highly unpredictable *black swan* (there were always only white swans and, very suddenly, one fine day, there was also a black swan).

3.3 The soulfulness of solitude

Suddenly we realise that we are no longer in control of life. In fact, we have to face our vulnerability. We have to change the spiritual paradigm of life. At stake, right now, is the challenge to reframe our patterns of thinking; *i.e.* to move from action to being, from manipulation to contemplation, from critical analyses to silent contemplation.

Søren Kierkegaard pointed out that there are two characteristics of being that we can never delete or avoid: the interplay between fear, anxiety and anger, and severe doubt. The fear of loss and rejection can be viewed as the most fundamental indication of spiritual and existential pathology. Kierkegaard called it dread. For him, dread is the strange phenomenon of sympathetic antipathy; we fear dread and, thus, develop in anger, an antipathy, but at the same time, what we fear, we desire (Kierkegaard 1967:xii). Without a spiritual dimension and bounded to merely dread, as determined by an experience of bottomless void, life becomes empty, exposed to fear and trembling. Human beings become captives of emptiness and destructive anger (Kierkegaard 1954:30).

In fact, we are back to the very timely warning by Martin Heidegger after World War II, that the basic feature of life is the fact that being in this world is structured by death. The most definite border and demarcation of life is death and dying. Thus, the reason why Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit* (1963) asserts that life should be understood within the limitations set by death.¹ Borders

1 "Der Tod im weitesten Sinne ist ein Phänomen des Lebens. Leben muss verstanden werden als eine Seinsart, zu der ein In-der-Welt-sein gehört" (Heidegger 1963:246).

are necessary, because they set off (*Abgrenzung* – lockdown); they define particularity and articulate demarcation. For Heidegger, the only reasonable and mindful response to death and dying is care (*Sorge*).

Existential dread stems from an unarticulated disposition determined by the despondency of non-hope (*apelpizō*): The existential resignation before the threat of nothingness. The antipode of hope is, therefore, not merely despair, but hopelessness as the disposition of indifferentism, sloth, and hopelessness (Bollnow 1955:110). The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel called this desperate situation of dread without a meaningful sense of future anticipation, unhope (*inespoir*), with the ultimate threat of destructive resignation (*désespoir*) (Marcel 1935:106).

It is interesting how many commentators on the pandemic suddenly turn to Victor Frankl's book *Man's search for meaning*. It was Frankl's (1975:153) viewpoint that logotherapy must supplement psychotherapy:

By the use of logotherapy we are equipped to deal with philosophical questions within their own frame of reference, and can embark on objective discussion of the spiritual distress of human beings' suffering from psychic disturbances.

His presupposition is that, instead of the “will pleasure”, the “will to meaning” is the primary motivational force in human beings (Frankl 1975:154). For Frankl, *logos* denotes meaning and focuses on future, attitudinal values. Thus, his emphasis on “man's search for meaning”. The question is not what the meaning of life is to me, but what kind of meaning can I offer to the other (Frankl 1975:153-154).

With reference to the three paradigmatic shifts and the challenge to reframe the corona crisis from a spiritual perspective, I address the following “soulful directives”:

- The movement: *From loneliness to solitude* (the foundational dimension of identity (*idem*) – the quest for continuity in discontinuity. Personal identity and maturity are basic in taking a constructive stance in the pandemic.
- The movement: *From loss and grief to silence and contemplation* (the reflection, philosophical dimension on the meaning of life and quest for hope). In order to perform this movement, the spiritual appeal to move from *action* (exercising of power by means of aggressive intervention) to *being* (the realm of attitude) coincides with the first. Within the “Being vs. Doing” debate, there is a growing contention that the moral value of being is not reducible to, or dependent on doing; that the measure of an agent's character is not exhausted by, or even dependent on the values of the actions which s/he may perform. It is even argued that the most important

moral traits are what may be called “spiritual” rather than “actional” (Louden 1984:232).

- The movement: *From the ugliness of the pandemic to the beauty of the virus* (the aesthetic dimension). Thomas Aquinas argued that life is framed by three constituencies, namely integrity (*integritas*), harmony (*consonantia*), and clarity (*claritas*). The implication is that the value of life comprises more than morality (the link between identity and ethics). Life is framed by a spiritual realm – the transcendent realm and the aesthetic dimension of human existence. According to Thomas Aquinas, integrity (*integritas*), harmony (*consonantia*), and clarity (*claritas*) can be described as the principles of beauty. They can also be interpreted as signs of hope, wholeness, proportion, and luminosity (Skawran 2012:3). In this movement, the emphasis is less on the ethical question (good and evil; right and wrong), and more, to my mind, on the most fundamental question: What is appropriate (meaningful) and what is inappropriate (meaningless, in vain)?

3.3.1 Movement one: From loneliness to solitude (the being dimension of identity – the quest for continuity in discontinuity)

Loneliness is closely related to the fear of loss and rejection. It is about the lack of intimacy and the longing for a sense of belongingness and connectivity. Loneliness can easily lead to either incurvated forms of anger that eventually explode in aggression and violent forms of destructive behaviour. One needs to attack an object, and in terms of scapegoating, create a guilty person to deflect anger. The other tendency is to fall back into modes of total passivity, presenting self-pity and melancholia. This mood swing eventually can lead to the syndrome of *I-am-merely-a-victim*. One becomes a victim of hopelessness and helplessness. The latter could lead to destructive coping skills such as manipulation. We start to abuse the other, in order to focus attention on our own bleak and desperate situation.

However, besides loneliness and isolation (being locked down), there is a bright side in being deprived of all the “luxuries” (perhaps crutches?), which we accepted as necessary and normal (quite evident) such as communication, buying food, driving elsewhere, visiting friends, walking in nature, partaking in sports, flying, going overseas. Suddenly the airports are closed, and the tourist industry is in jeopardy. The bright side is about the enrichment and soulfulness of solitude.

In solitude, we are prepared to face our uniqueness. At stake, is individuation and the understanding of identity and self-worth. The latter is

determined by different levels of maturity and the challenge of how to go about with a sense of care for the other; concern about oneself: Who am I?, and reaching out to the other with responsibility, accountability and a sense of trustworthiness and loyalty – the humane act of hospitality.

Solitude boils down to the quest for identity. “Identity”, derived from the Latin *idem* indicating the same, captures the idea of continuity. Identity presumes a continuity between the human I and behaviour, hence, the importance of congruency. Congruency happens when the self is a true reflection and portrayal of the conduct and experiences of the human I (Möller 1980:94). Congruency is about remaining faithful to oneself, communicating authenticity and truth (Heitink 1977:69).

Identity poses the question about the coherence factor in human behaviour as well as the quality of human responsibility. It is not so much a knowing quality and function of the human mind/reason: *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), but a being quality. It entails more than the feeling or doing functions within human behaviour. Identity refers to the dynamics of human responsibility within the systemic realm of human relationships: *respondeo ergo sum*: I am responsible and respond-able, therefore, I am. Identity is less about substantial characteristics (a fixed entity) and more about a relational dynamic (a process of growth).

Erikson (1959:55-100; 1974:95-141) describes the development of a healthy personality in terms of a life cycle compiled of different stages. Important in Erikson’s epigenetic approach is Stage 1: Infancy and the mutuality of recognition: Basic trust (confidence) versus basic mistrust, and Stage 8: Adulthood (mature age): Integrity versus despair, and disgust. In our response to the crisis, it will be important to revisit the foundation of our identity. The decisive question is whether identity is merely about an inner psychic condition of self-assertiveness or whether identity is also directed by the external spiritual dimension of trust, *i.e.* trusting in an external source that can sustain stability and continuity.

In an identity crisis (and the corona crisis is indeed about an identity crisis), it is decisive to revisit internalised norms and values. Augsburg (1986:145) perceives values as the core factor in motivating people: “Humans are evaluating beings.” According to Meissner (1987:123), values form an integral part of personality:

The value system represents an organized system that serves an integrative and directive function within the mental apparatus, thus indicating a high level of psychic activity.

The latter boils down to the following realistic approach to life:

Yet values have their roots in the basic driving forces of human nature, namely, narcissism, aggression, libido, and the basic instincts that provide the motive power of life (Meissner 1987:213).

It all boils down to the level of the conative, namely the drives and virtues that frame our motivation to continue with life.

Kreeft (1986:192) argues that virtue is necessary for the survival of civilisation, while religion is necessary for the survival of virtue. Without moral excellence, right living, goodness, purity, chastity and effectiveness, our civilisation is on the road to decline. Civilisation needs justice, wisdom, courage, and temperance.

It is indeed true that Aristotle's and Homer's understanding of *arete* differs from that of the New Testament. The New Testament not only promotes virtues such as faith, hope, and love, but also views humility (the moral for slaves) as one of the cornerstones in the formation of a Christian character (MacIntyre 1984:245). MacIntyre's (1984:249) conclusion is of paramount importance to the debate on the interplay of values and virtues and applicable to the quest for stability during this time of uncertainty regarding the eventual outcome of the virus. In both the New Testament's and Aristotle's comprehension, despite differences, virtue has this in common: It empowers a person (the courage to be) to attain that characteristic essential for attaining meaning and significance (*telos*).

The equivalent in Scripture for a courage to be (*fortigenesis*) is *parrhēsia*, i.e. a courage that is not a human quality, but a quality that comes from God and Christ (Ps. 8; 1 Thess. 2:2) (A stance and ontic position in Christ, due to the eschatological reality as founded by the cross and resurrection of Christ). *Parrhēsia* is a pneumatic function as part of the fruit of the Spirit, as well as the praxis consequence of the healing of salvation. It provides the spiritual energy to bounce back in life under difficult circumstances.

3.3.2 Movement two: From loss and grief to silence and contemplation (the philosophical dimension on the meaning of life and quest for hope)

Culture as a humane environment describes the human endeavour to find meaning in life. Geertz (1997:46) describes culture, as embedded in historical contexts, a system of meaning, expressed in symbolic forms. These symbolic expressions describe ways and means whereby people try to shape their environment into a system of meaning. Culture, therefore, signifies a knowledge of, and attitude towards life. In this regard, culture can be called a structured strategy for survival; a sense of belonging to a social group; a system of expressed ideas or concepts; an indication of general behaviour,

and patterns for daily living (Kraft 1996:39). These patterns refer to both patterns of meaning assignment and patterns of response to meaning (Kraft 1996:37).

In *Religion als Deutung des Lebens*, Gräß (2006:52) connects the religious factor in our being to the need for self-actualisation and meaningful self-expression (*Selbstdeutung*). Self-actualisation articulates our human quest for meaning. The fundamental experience and feeling of being grounded (at-homeness, *Geborgenheit*, *Gegründet- und Gehaltseins*) points for him to the religious factor in our lives. It is the need for a basic existential trust (*Grundvertrauens ins Dasein*), and the need for a continuity that can reveal meaningful direction, purposefulness and significance in life. In this regard, religion serves as a source for self-actualising and a sense of continuity.

For Berger, religion is related to our basic need and quest for meaning (in Drehsen *et al.* 2005:262). The social and public reality is an attempt to establish a network of meaning, which Berger calls *nomos*. In this regard, religion provides a general impetus for meaning which implies a kind of "sanctification of the cosmos" (*Religion als heiliger Kosmos*). Religion surfaces within the experience of our human limitations; it is a kind of border experience when human experience is exposed to threat. Everyday experiences are then translated and articulated into a comprehensive cosmic system that, in its normative direction, becomes a holy cosmic network. The current tendency is to reduce religion to the more private sphere of life.

In Christian spirituality, meaning-giving is closely related to religious experiences and the content of faith. Christian spirituality probes into transcendence and the ultimate. This anthropological presupposition dovetails with what Brümmer (2006:26) identified as the meaning of Christian faith:

I have long been convinced that the primary function of religious belief within human life and thought is to bestow meaning and significance on our life and our experience of the world.

For him, meaning is a contextual issue embedded within living contexts. It is not a fixed proposition.

I have therefore always found unsatisfactory the kind of natural theology that tends to reduce religious belief to a set of propositions divorced from the context of life, and then to prove the truth of these propositions without first attending to their meaning (Brümmer 2006:26).

Hope challenges us to proceed to the future. It is not based on wishful thinking (tomorrow it will be better) but on the fulfilled promises of the gospel (*promissio*). Christian hope is about a new state of being based upon the theological principle of the faithfulness of a living God. A crisis, even as in the

case of the deadly coronavirus, cannot rob Christians of their new being in Christ as founded by a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), and a theology of the resurrection (*theologia resurrectionis*). These two theological notions are the pillars for expressing meaningful life; they are about what we call the beautification of life through and by the means of compassionate being-with the suffering other. Christian hope is about the promotion of human well-being and spiritual wholeness.

In the publication *Making health care whole*, Puchalski and Ferrell (2010:3-8) advocate for the integration and re-introduction of the realm of spirituality into palliative care. By “*whole*” is meant the interplay between meaning, spiritual and religious sources of coping with pain and suffering. It focuses on growth, the establishment of caring relationships as source of comfort, and the enabling of patients to find enhanced meaning in life that is more profound and gratifying than life prior to illness. Pain and physical symptoms should, therefore, be assessed within the parameters of existential and spiritual issues, in order to improve the quality of life and to promote health-related behaviour.

3.3.3 Movement three: From the ugliness of the pandemic to the beauty of the virus (the aesthetic dimension)

For Steve Jobs, the man behind Apple and their iMac, life and the meaning of life evolved around the concept of work – “not just work, but non-stop work, no-other-life work” (Blumenthal 2012:136). However, vision and hope for a successful computer business was surprisingly built on the concept of beauty (technological aesthetics). “But Jobs, true to his original vision for Apple, believed there was room for beauty and art amid technology and commerce” (Blumenthal 2012:198).

In his autobiography, the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (2008:19) wrote about his experience as a prisoner of war (1945-1947): “War stories are not tales of adventure. They are stories about destruction and death.” He recalls how they sat in the trenches and “cracked” lice, which proliferated more quickly than they could kill them. One day, when he was nearly at the brink of despair, while they were pushing a goods truck, he suddenly stood in front of a blossoming cherry tree.

I almost fainted with the joy of it. After a long period of blindness without any interest, I saw colours again and sensed life in myself once more. Life began to blossom afresh (Moltmann 2008:27).

The aesthetics of a blossoming cherry tree became an icon of hope.

Frankl (1975:27) wrote about his experiences in a concentration camp. He awoke from the sleep of exhaustion on his second night in Auschwitz. He was roused by music.

Suddenly there was a silence and into the night a violin sang a desperately sad tango ... The violin wept and part of me wept with it, for on that same day someone had a twenty-fourth birthday. That someone laid in another part of the Auschwitz camp, possibly only a few hundred or a thousand yards away and yet out of reach. That someone was my wife.

In her Diary, Anne Frank (2008:150) calls this possibility to transcend the ugliness of reality by the imagination of something beautiful, the art of life. To imagine that the inedible food in her plate was nice, she managed to cope with the reality of hunger. Beauty distorts, twists ugliness.

Very surprisingly, in his novel *The idiot*, Dostoyevsky proclaimed the goodness of man and the playfulness of our being human. Goodness then not as a substantial category innate to character, but goodness as qualitative category of relationship. Dostoyevsky connects the celebrating view on the goodness of life to a divine enjoyment and playfulness. To Dostoyevsky (1973:253), "God's rejoicing in man, like a father rejoicing in his own child" is the fundamental idea of Christianity. This spiritual notion of divine rejoicing is the difference between being an idiot or a wise human being, between devastating nausea and meaningful living. Hammarskjöld (1993:77) very aptly remarked: "A landscape can sing about God, a body about spirit". This cosmic singing (rejoicing) and spiritual interpretation can be called an aesthetic vision and view on life. It was the intention of the novelist George Elliot to convey an essential humanist vision of life to a largely orthodox Christian context. She steered away from dogmatic Christianity. By reading Ludwig Feuerbach's *The essence of Christianity*, she discovered "the moral duty of benevolence" (Elliot 1973:17); thus her "doctrine of sympathy" and her sensitivity for the aesthetics of life.

In 1992, Dissanyake wrote a book entitled *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*. Her basic assumption was that art could be regarded as a natural general proclivity that manifests itself in culturally learned specifics such as dances, songs, performances, visual display, and poetic speech. Art makes life special, because making art involves taking something out of its everyday and ordinary use context and making it somehow special – the ordinary becomes extraordinary. Matzker (2008) relates aesthetics to the act of mediation within the tension between subject (impression and interpretation) and object or the implicit idea as related to an object or something perceived and observed. To mediate is always a sign for something (Matzker 2008:10).

To my mind, a human being is essentially *homo aestheticus*. There is an innate need for creative imagination (contemplation); *i.e.* the making of transitional objects as means of overcoming loss and the limitations set by suffering and vulnerability. The human being as *homo aestheticus* refers to visionary anticipation and artistic appreciation within the quest for meaning and the creative attempt to signify and decode the markings of life.

In suffering, metaphors and symbols play a decisive role in the disclosure of meaning and hope. It is, therefore, the task of a pastoral hermeneutics to assist human beings in their restless search for meaning (*homo viator*); the attempt to decipher texts within contexts, in order to detect signs of hope. The praxis of hope is about *signification* (meaning disclosure), *anticipation* (future orientation), and *comfort-giving* (affirmation of being). This is what is meant by the beautification of life in pastoral caregiving. Beautification is about the praxis of hope care in the pastoral ministry.

4. THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM SHIFTS IN A COMPASSIONATE PRAXIS OF HOPE CARE

It is further argued that a praxis of hope in pastoral caregiving, in order to be valid and not be accused of eluding the existential realities of life, should deal with an understanding of God in pastoral theology. The God image that should be promoted in caregiving to people exposed to vulnerability and dread implies the following theological paradigm shifts:

- From the notion of an apathetic God to a *com*-passionate God. Thus, the importance to reflect on the combination between *paraclesis* and the pathos of God as displayed in the mercy of God (*oiktirmon*) and the moving passion of God (*ta splanchna*) – the praxis of God and the connection: *Hope and compassion (the spirituality of comfort)*.
- From the notion of an immutable God to a suffering, weak God. Thus, the imperative to reflect on a *theologia crucis* and its connection to the forsakenness of God – the praxis of God and the connection: *Hope and meaning in suffering (the spirituality of whereto and purposefulness)*.
- From the notion of a *pantokrator* (all-powerful, *omni*-potent God) to an all-empowering God. Thus, the need to reflect on a *theologia resurrectionis* and its connection to our hopelessness and helplessness in the face of death, and our need for overcoming dread – the praxis of God and the connection: *Hope and parrhesia (the spirituality of “inner strength “and encouragement)*.

Compassion gives meaning to life. Dostoyevsky (1973:263) concurred with the assumption that without compassion life becomes an unbearable toil. Compassion makes life bearable.

Compassion would teach even Rogozhin, to give a meaning to his life. Compassion was the chief and, perhaps, the only law of human existence.

Within a theological paradigm, compassion could be called the poetics of love and the aesthetics of God in suffering. In order to expand on the notion of *homo aestheticus* from the perspective of the poetics of God, I would like to link the meaning question to a theology of *oiktirmos*.

Different languages have different words to express the meaning of compassion as co-suffering. Davies (2001:234) points out that among these we can cite the Latin word *commiseratio*, the Greek word *sumpatheia*, and the German *Mitleid* (in Afrikaans *medelye*: To suffer with). Other concepts that are used to express a kind of pathetic mode of care include: *clementia*, *misericordia*, *humanitas* and, sometimes, *pietas*, the Greek *eleos* and *oiktos*, the English “mercy” and “pity”, and the French *pitié* (Davies 2001:234). While compassion points more to “fellow-suffering” as suffering with, mercy in the Bible implies a kind of rationality informed by principles and values to express righteousness. Mercy also implies a juridical component (Davies 2001:246).

With reference to the impact of appropriate God images on how human beings can cope meaningfully with the miseries of life, the theological challenge is to start speaking of God as a *compassionate companion* within the corona crisis. We should then also take into account the practical consequences of a spiritual praxis of hope care, namely to accept that we ourselves, within the unique meaning of the human soul (*nēfēsh*), should also act in a compassionate way, *i.e.*

to understand that undergoing the dispossession of self, entailed by compassion, is to align our own ‘being’ with God’s ‘being’, and thus, performatively, to participate in the ecstatic ground of the Holy Trinity itself (Davies 2001:252).

Ta splanchna reveals God as a presence, “a Companion, ‘your God’” (Hall 1993:147). In praxis-thinking, it is not the task of the church to demonstrate that God must *be*, but to bear witness to God’s *being-there*, *being-with*, and *being-for* the creature. According to Hall (1993:155), the test of the church’s God talk at any point in time is about the contextual authenticity of being the body of Christ.

Within the framework of a Christian spirituality, the beauty of God's compassionate being-with is portrayed within the aesthetics of ugliness. Facing the ugliness of a suffering God is to face, within the ugliness of suffering human beings, the beauty of comfort: Divine compassionate being-with (*God as wounded healer*).



The Catholic Church found it crucial to render the Bible and the narratives alive and pertinent. In the late Middle Ages, large-scale religious plays were enacted both inside and outside the church building. Dramatic effects in pictures and sculptures were used to impress churchgoers as profoundly as possible. In this case, the naked Christ projects radical humility: *Christ as wounded healer*. Ca 1500-1530. Permission: National Museum, Copenhagen. Photo: D.J. Louw.

5. CONCLUSION

As a spiritual category, hope is the laughter of the human soul when anguish seems to be the only option. By laughter as a spiritual category is meant the humour in Christian faith: "Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). The humoristic laughter of faith is the knowledge and epistemology of hope, namely that death is conquered by the resurrection of Christ. In this respect, the Christian version of hope cannot bypass the reality of suffering. Compassion, service (*diakonia*), and hospitality are the instruments that accompany hope in finding its way back to the existential realities of human sorrow, pain, anguish and non-hope. Thus, the importance of a praxis ministry of hope care. Hope care implies the following:

- Hope care as pro-missioning witnessing: The intention to reach out to others in their suffering and pain and to struggle for the renewal of all things.
- Hope care as confident faithfulness: The guarantee for trust despite disorientation and disintegration.
- Hope care as mutual support: Edification within the fellowship (*koinōnia*) of believers.
- Hope care as the comfort of *ta splanchna*-compassion: The courage to be, to endure and to accept.
- Hope care as vindicated by divine truth: Divine confirmation and a guarantee, promise for Life.

From a Christian point of view, hope is a new state of mind and being (soulfulness) in light of the future as *adventus* – being as affirmed by the faithfulness of God and resurrection of Christ; an embodiment of kenotic love, despite the nothingness and annihilation of death; a display of the fruit/charisma of the Spirit, and a vivid expectation of the coming of Christ (*paroesia*).

What is meant by the beauty in the corona crisis? Beauty is not about “pretty”. Beauty encompasses a painful awareness of sorrow, transience and the notion that life is vulnerable, mortal and perishable, but framed by the perspective of compassionate hoping.

A personal witness: The virus has beautified my space of lockdown; it is creating the spiritual space of contemplation of who I am. It is constantly challenging me to respond to the question: *Whereto?* The lockdown cut me down to size – *the simplicity of solitude*; being as trusting, distracted from dependency from wealth, importance, and achievements.

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