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DOI: https://doi.org/10.38140/at.v43i1.7084

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2023
43(1):23-40

Date received:
10 February 2023

Date accepted:
28 April 2023

Date published:
30 June 2023

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

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OPEN ACCESS

Covid-19, racism, and the "state of exception": A theological ethical engagement with identity and human rights in an age of "Corona" and beyond

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the role that religion and politics play at the intersection with individual and social rights. Religiously informed political actors capitalised on fears and prejudices to further science denialism, normalise nationalist ideologies, and curtail human rights. In the United States of America, Brazil, and South Africa, it took the form of problematic political theologies. In many instances, a state of exception, as understood in the work of Giorgio Agamben, was enacted. Such actions often have biopolitical significance revolving around making political choices informed by religious beliefs that impact on individual bodies and social freedoms. This extends from individual bodies to societies. This research employs a qualitative literature approach to investigate the intersection of political and theological beliefs during the pandemic. It highlights the impact of populist political theologies on the erosion of democracy and human rights in countries that have highly religious populations. It is argued that these strategies reach beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

History is marked by events that change the ways in which persons conceive of themselves in both individual and social terms. To be truly human is, at some level, to develop an understanding of who one is by asking, "Who am I?" and, "How do I conceive of the 'other'?". These questions are most often asked in relation to specific historical and social contexts. After the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus from China to Europe, America, and the rest of the globe in late 2019 and beyond, a new set of social dynamics entered public discourse that has impacted on both individual and social identities.

The ensuing debate on identity has direct relevance for those of us who live in the majority world. Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians are already experiencing the violence of othering and its social, political, economic, and physical consequences. For some, it plays out in "vaccine inequality", and ever-deepening poverty because of global economic instability (Vaughan 2021:12-13). In other instances, the violence is much more direct as the bodies of Asians, Africans and Latin Americans are othered, excluded, and injured (Gover *et al.* 2020: 647-667).

These harmful realities can be credibly related to social practices that find their genesis in deeply held Christian beliefs among some Christians. Simply stated, there is a political theology at play. This article discusses the intersections of identity and human rights in relation to national and global biopolitics. It mainly refers to the emergence of a fierce form of identity politics related to American exceptionalism which is founded on certain forms of American evangelical Christianity (Du Mez 2020:80-84). Unfortunately, some of these evangelical Christian groupings and their beliefs are also finding a space among some African Christianities (Forster 2019a:1-9; 2021b:199-200). In large measure, this is based on political and economic patronage. It is proving to hold devastating consequences for some African Christian communities as they adopt problematic social views (identity politics and othering) and science denialism (conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 and vaccines), among others.

2. "THE OTHER PROBLEMATIC OUTBREAK": THE AMERICAN CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION AND EXCEPTIONALISM

The rapid spread of the coronavirus has presented the world with several significant problems. Many nations had become complacent about the possible dangers of dealing with a highly infectious virus in a world of easy global travel, frequent large public gatherings, and the construction of social

and economic life around "in-person" meetings (Lai *et al*. 2020:1-20; Wells *et al.* 2020:7504-7509). As governments scrambled to figure out how best to curtail the spread of the virus among their populations, other important contemporary problems began to surface. Some of the more prominently noted problems were how we would care for those persons who were infected with the virus (and the associated healthcare provision protocols and resources) (Haeder 2020:282-290), the unanticipated economic impact of extended "lockdowns" on national and global economies (Abodunrin & Adesola 2020:13-23; Carlsson-Szlezak *et al.* 2020:1-10; Kissinger 2020), and, of course, the geo-political factors associated with the closing of borders, the repatriation of citizens, and the interruption of international policies on trade and travel (Campbell & Doshi 2020; Diaz & Mountz 2020:1-8; Farrell & Newman 2020:1-4; Forman *et al.* 2020:577-580).

A central figure in much of the turmoil concerning these issues was the United States of America and their somewhat volatile and sensationalist President, Donald Trump.

> Public statements by President Donald Trump, whether Oval Office addresses or early-morning tweets, have largely served to sow confusion and spread uncertainty (Campbell & Doshi 2020:1).

It has since come to light that the Trump administration was aware of the dangers that the spreading virus posed to their and other populations across the globe, but did not alert the public because they feared the internal political consequences that it may have had for the President who was still in the middle of the widely televised first impeachment process (Woodward 2020:section 20). In a recorded telephone conversation with the Presidential biographer Bob Woodward, on 7 February 2020, Trump described the virus as "deadly stuff … You just breathe the air and that's how it's passed" (Roberts 2020:1).

The American government's response to the rising pandemic is an instructive example of the political externalisation of the Trump administration's racist and xenophobic tendencies. Trump's use of the hashtag #ChineseVirus and his frequent reference to it as the "Kung Flu" have been shown to have caused numerous instances of racist and xenophobic attacks against American citizens of Asian heritage and citizens of Asian countries (Devakumar *et al.* 2020:1194; Fernando 2020:660; Pei & Mehta 2020). This prompted the popularisation of the slogan, "My ethnicity is not a virus" (Hvistendahl 2020).

In an address to the America people, Donald Trump spoke of the necessity to impose a travel ban from numerous Asian and European nations to the United States of America (excluding the United Kingdom) as "the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history" (Shoichet 2020:n.p.). By labelling the coronavirus as "foreign", Trump

was engaging in a form of "othering" that Serhan and Mclaughlin (2020:n.p.) describe as both racist and xenophobic, as "[t]he other problematic outbreak", since it would soon spread throughout conservative American news media and enter popular culture. Trump conflated the notion of othering Asians with his political strategy of other Latin Americans. His anti-immigrant rhetoric was presented to safeguard American identity, well-being, and health. On 10 March 2020, Trump mentioned that it was even more important to build the "Border Wall" with Mexico to keep "undesirable" persons out of the United States of America. Of course, Trump is not the only national leader to have engaged in such "othering" rhetoric. Many other political leaders have made similar statements about so-called "others", in order to garner support for their political actions (Serhan & Mclaughlin 2020; Wells *et al.* 2020:7504-7509).

> Right-wing parties in Europe, for example, have latched onto the outbreak to reiterate their calls for tougher immigration restrictions – Italy's far-right leader Matteo Salvini was among the first to exploit the virus for his own kind of pandemic populism, erroneously linking the outbreak to African asylum seekers and urging border closures (Serhan & Mclaughlin 2020:n.p.).

Of course, this is not the first time in history that such "othering" tactics have been used. Devakumar *et al.* (2020:1194) rightly note that "throughout history, infectious diseases have been associated with othering". Nükhet Varlik, of Rutgers University, offers a pointed example where, "Jewish populations were accused of deliberately poisoning the wells and causing the plague [in the mid 1300s]", which led to large numbers of Jews being "killed, buried alive and burned at the stake" (Shoichet 2020). Commenting on Trump's reference to the coronavirus as a "foreign virus", Varlik concludes that it is

> dangerous for the present (because it informs policy and response), but also for the future because it leaves a legacy behind.

She further notes that such rhetoric is not sensible, since when it comes to a disease of this nature, "[w]e're all in this together" (Shoichet 2020:n.p.).

These examples show that identity politics plays a significant role in the construction of the self and the other. Such views of identity are predicated upon notions of "exceptionalism" (Fukuyama 2018:129). The "in-group" believes that it is somehow an exception to the political, social (or even medical) construction that is common to all. American exceptionalism is a particularly powerful, and not so subtle, contributor to identity and politics. Its deep social psychological roots can be traced to social and theological narratives in the myths of the founding of the United States of America.

> American exceptionalism is the longstanding belief that the United States is an inherent force for good in the world. The ideology emerged from the dominant narration of the founding of the United States, often termed the American Revolution, as a great leap forward for humanity (Haiphong 2020:200-201).

Pally's *Commonwealth and covenant: Economics, politics and theologies of relationality* (2016) offers, to my mind, one the finest presentations of the emergence of contemporary American identities. Pally (2016:44) traces the historical emergence of "distinction-amid-relationship or separability-amid-situatedness" in her book (see Buhrman 2017:127). What is characteristic of American identity is the way in which personhood is constructed in relation to God and others. Americans, and America, have internalised the belief that they are historically exceptional, and that their endeavours for liberation from authoritarianism built upon the foundations of rugged individualism, a frontier mentality, God-ordained progress, the establishment of a form of "Western civilisation" built on democracy, liberty and freedom, present the apex of human history (Haiphong 2020:201). This theo-political identity is nowhere more prominently expressed than in the common idiom, "God bless America".

Clearly, this constitutes a theological claim. It is an expression of a form of civil religion that is deeply political in nature. It presumes that the "God" of this statement is uniquely aligned to the aspirations, ideals, and commitments of the American political apparatus where the "Kingdom of God" is uncritically subsumed into the economic progress of the "American dream" and the global enforcement of American social values and political ideals – particularly the establishment of American democracy around the globe (Chapp 2012:39-60, 104-130; Brocker & Berg 2013; Forster 2021a, 2021b:199-245). In his article, "The evangelical-capitalist resonance machine", Connolly (2005:869-886) draws clear links between the emergence of American evangelical beliefs and contemporary American economic and political values.

The internalisation of such beliefs appears to form the basis upon which Donald Trump and his supporters, who are mainly evangelical "patriots", have pushed back against common measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. These include measures such as wearing masks, maintaining social distance, acting in ways that responsibly protect vulnerable persons from infection, and minimising unnecessary social, economic, and public engagements that may bring persons into contact with one another. Participating in such activities has become a political marker. In supporting *Fox News* host, Tucker Carlson, Trump recently claimed that parents who make their children wear face masks are engaging in "child abuse" and should be reported to the authorities and publicly confronted (Pengelly 2021).

Perry et al. (2020:405) note that, during

> the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans' behavioral responses were quickly politicized. Those on the left stressed precautionary behaviors, while those on the (religious) right were more likely to disregard recommended precautions.

Citizens, whose political and religious views are characterised as belonging to the "right",

> were more likely to feel the mortal threat of the pandemic was exaggerated by the news media, businesses and social activities should resume as quickly as possible, and that mask-wearing should either be voluntary or avoided as a useless or even freedom-encroaching practice (Perry 2020:405).

Perry *et al.* (2020:406) go on to say that these contentions focus not only on politics, but specifically on the intersections of religion and politics. Studies have shown that

> Americans who were more religious or religiously conservative (e.g., evangelicals) were more likely to distrust scientific and media sources over the [advice of the] President, [which had the consequence that they were] less likely to social distance, wear masks, or otherwise take recommended precautionary measures, while more secular Americans were more likely to follow these guidelines.

What is particularly interesting in this regard is the kind of political theology that informs these partisan views. The theological position adopted by conservative American evangelicals seems not to reflect upon theologies of health, sickness, or disease, but rather stem from an overarching political theology that is focused on a form of American Christian Nationalism. As will become evident, this is an important characteristic when it comes to the state of exception and biopolitics to be discussed later in this article.

American Christian nationalism is

> an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture (Whitehead & Perry 2020:ix-x).

These groups' political commitment to the American nation is based specifically on theological views of American political and theological exceptionalism expressed in statements such as "America holds a special place in God's plan", and that the significant economic and political "resources of the United

States indicate that God has chosen that [*sic*] nation to lead", and specifically that the "Success of the United States is … a reflection of divine will" (Leon McDaniel *et al.* 2011:205-233; Perry *et al.* 2020:406).

A tacit political theology that underpins contemporary American politics deeply influenced Donald Trump and the Trump administration's engagement with the coronavirus pandemic. This is evidenced by a tendency to place Christian nationalist commitments over scientific and medical evidence related to the spread and seriousness of the coronavirus (Perry *et al.* 2020:406-408). It further extends beyond anti-scientific thinking about this disease, to viewing the "supposed other" (who is viewed as the source and carrier of the disease) as undesirable to the national aims of prosperity, and the political and economic expansion of the United States of America (Devakumar *et al.* 2020:1194; Serhan & Mclaughlin 2020). Perry *et al.* (2020:414) contend that these views are

> powerfully shaped by Americans' desire to see 'Christian' (read: white, native-born, culturally conservative, Christian-identifying) values institutionalized in American civic life and policy.

This is not only an expression of belief in "divine protection [against infection by the coronavirus], distrust of scientists and the news media, and a devotion to Trump", it also works through "authoritarian and boundary defending mechanisms" (Devakumar *et al.* 2020:1194; Serhan & Mclaughlin 2020). The consequence of the latter is clearly linked to both racist and xenophobic tendencies, where the "outsider", the "other", is stigmatised as unclean, diseased, not civilised, and indeed a threat to a "white, native born, culturally conservative, Christian" America (Jappah 2013:321-322; Perry *et al.* 2020: 414). From a political perspective, it serves to magnify a tendency towards unjust "scapegoating", "discrimination", and the magnification of "exclusion" and inequalities (Devakumar *et al.* 2020:1194). Those of us who constitute "the other" experience this dehumanisation daily via the media, through travel restrictions, through funding mechanism, inflexible bureaucracies, and in unreflective prejudices that surface in conversation and correspondence.

The dehumanisation of the "other", the curtailing of their rights, and the empowering of such beliefs and convictions through economic and political policy is a form of biopolitics that impacts on human rights. Central to this contention is the notion that "human rights are outcomes of relations of power … where some must be denied rights for others to have them" (Persaud & Yoder 2020:62). This has the consequence of reducing some human beings to "bare life" (*zoe*), as is discussed in the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1998; Foucault & Ewald 2003; Foucault 2007; Foucault *et al.* 2008). These notions are discussed in the ensuing section.

3. BIOPOLITICS AND THE STATE OF EXCEPTION IN MODERN SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

In contemporary societies, human rights go beyond mere judicial rights. Rather, they are centrally related to the notion of "state sovereignty" (Agamben 1998:par. 1.1), since the granting or the denial of human rights are intricately connected to constellations of power that operate within contemporary political formations (Persaud & Yoder 2020:62). According to Foucault (quoted in Agamben 1998:240), "the classical theory of sovereignty, the right to life and death, was one of sovereignty's basic attributes". In this regard, the right to life or death are inherent rights, as in the Kantian categorical imperative (*i.e.* morally universal). Yet, they are also enactments of social power,

> where some are designated as the deserved whom [*sic*] must be protected, against the 'damned,' [upon] whom the power of the state shall be brought to bear (Foucault, in Agamben 1998:240).

As a result, "the lives and deaths of subjects become rights only as a result of the will of the sovereign" (Agamben 1998:240). The sovereign does not "give life" as such, but rather withholds the "right to take life" (Agamben 1998:240).

In this schema, the intention of biopower is to "make national populations available as resources for capitalism and war, consistent with the rise of the modern nation-state" (Persaud & Yoder 2020:63).[1] The state uses a set of strategies to create and uphold a set of cultural and social imaginaries. This is, in short, what Agamben (1998:168) identifies as a "state of exception". A "state of exception" is a state in which a sovereign (either an individual, or a collective) sets up certain "exceptions" to common rights and freedoms, supposedly for the sake of a greater good. Vosloo (2008:9) views such actions as having biopolitical significance, since they seem to revolve around making political choices that "have a direct impact on the human body and its freedom". Of course, this extends from the person's body to the person's identity, and from individual bodies to societies and social identities. Over the past year, the notion of a state of exception seems to have been normalised in the vast majority of societies worldwide. Citizens of democratic nations, Christians, and members of Churches seem to have accepted that their rights and freedoms and those of other persons can be summarily curtailed without significant recourse or concern.

According to Selina Palm, an academic from Stellenbosch University, such abuses become possible because we uncritically adopt cultural norms and practices that emerge from our religious beliefs, which are, in turn, formed

1 As mentioned earlier, Connolly (2005) draws direct links between American evangelicalism and contemporary notions of human rights and capitalism in his article.

by our cultural imagination (Le Roux & Palm 2018; Palm & Eyber 2019:4-7). Oxford University theologian, Graham Ward (2018:10) describes the cultural imagination as

> the subconscious within which we move and from out of which we try to make sense, even cope, with all of our collective experience.[2]

He asserts that the cultural imagination emerges from our history and identity. But since it is dynamic, it also shapes our identity and, through our values, choices, and actions, our history. The cultural imagination informs our "politics, religion, economics and all the relations that bind and oppose us, one to another" (Ward 2018:10). *Who* and *what* we are as human beings, both as individuals and in relationship to one another and the rest of creation, is the "stuff" that makes up all of our inner and outer lives. It is both deeply private (forming who we believe ourselves to be culturally and religiously), and yet it finds very clear expression in our social identity (which forms our public and political lives). What we believe, either knowingly or unknowingly, shapes our living, indeed our whole lives. It has personal and political consequences. Charles Taylor, the prominent Canadian philosopher, calls this a form of modern "social imaginary". By this he means,

> the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor 2004:23).

Taylor employs the term "imagination", since it is often a clearer expression of how persons believe their lives are structured, in terms of both their identity and their interactions. The social imaginary is expressed in social norms and structures that operate largely unquestioned by much of the population. These include values that shape national identities, ethnic identities (and prejudices), and include aspects of social legitimacy (such as dominant political views or religious convictions). The "imaginary" can be understood as an "unspoken" set of shared beliefs and values that makes living with others in society possible (Taylor 2004:23).

The establishment of the social imaginary often starts as an ideal held by a small group of like-minded people – often educational, economic, or social elites. Yet because these views tap into pre-cognate aspects of shared identity and value, and elites often have access to the means to disseminate their views, they soon come to hold common currency. As a result, they often move from the elites to find wider resonance, being adopted within a whole society. The instances of American exceptionalism presented in the previous

2 Some of these aspects are discussed in greater details in Forster (2019b:85-106).

section are examples of this notion. This general acceptance and consequent structuring of the social imaginary is the "social" aspect of the social imaginary. It is a shared imagination (a creation of thought or aspiration) that takes on social status and gains social legitimacy. Ward (2018:208) comments that,

> [i]n the social imagination, religion and power are inseparable; the sacred and the profane, the public and the private, are merely conceptual distinctions – they don't pertain to the way life is lived in and through the imagination, somatically, affectively, and relationally.

This is an important point – dualistic categories that are mistakenly considered to be ontological (sacred and profane, public and private, and so on) are nothing more than social constructions. They are tacit agreements between persons and communities that have taken on structural form through their widespread acceptance, often being beyond question or reproach.

Ward (2018:209) goes on to note that, in the religious and political spheres (what we could identify as social movements structured around specific social and cultural imaginations), the social actors most often mobilise "what was already there in the cultural imagination and order social life accordingly". In other words, powerful social actors seem to tap into the social imaginary of individuals and communities to shape their identity and form, or ill-form, persons, communities, and societies according to their political, economic, and social will.

4. ETHICS, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE STATE OF EXCEPTION?

Globally, only a few Christians are aware of the prevailing cultural imagination and social imaginaries (myths, beliefs, social structures) that have shaped their beliefs, identities, and social lives. As we are exposed to radically diverse, even challenging, social realities through globalisation and social media, we may find it increasingly difficult to navigate our identity and social lives in ways that are morally consistent and theologically responsible. Jennings (2010:sections 185-187) notes that,

> … Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination. I think most Christians sense that something about Christians' social imaginations is ill, but the analyses of this condition often don't get to the heart of the constellation of generative forces that have rendered people's social performances of the Christian life collectively anemic.

Of course, this is not only a reality among contemporary Western Christians. It applies, in different ways, to all Christians worldwide, throughout Christian history. But we are focusing specifically on the contemporary Western context (particularly that of American evangelical Christianity), where the cultural imagination has been accessed and manipulated so that it has "rendered people's social performances of the Christian life collectively anemic" (Jennings 2010:sections 185-187). In such contexts, it is the task of the Church, and so by proxy that of the Christian theologian, to critically evaluate and engage the cultural imagination and the social imagination.

Bedford-Strohm (2011:123-137) identifies this as the "prophetic" task of the public theologian. Smit (2017:84) further explains that Bedford-Strohm's understanding of the prophetic task claims that

> theology should somehow be critical, in opposition, resisting, warning, critiquing, opposing what is already happening in public life, and for most this is an aspect that belongs inherently to the gospel and therefore to the role of the church and the task of theology.

The church and the theologian have a responsibility to critically evaluate the structures, decisions, values, and formulations of contemporary life in light of their understandings of the Gospel of Christ and the values of God's Kingdom. Of course, one of the challenges of this characteristic of public theology is that the church and theologians are frequently divided about the truth of the Gospel and the values of God's Kingdom. For this reason, rigorous theological reflection is necessary to critique not only society, but also the church and Christian beliefs, since each is a constructed social system that is an expression of both a social and a cultural imagination (Koopman 1998:165). This article illustrates that a critical engagement with cultural and social values can expose the ways in which religion (and the theologies that constitute religious beliefs and practices) can function as the moral "software" that allows the "hardware" of political dehumanisation to function in society (Raheb 2018:103-105). Such evaluation and critical engagement with the subtle, yet dominant, informants of identity and culture can expose and challenge the destructive, dehumanising, and indeed sinful aspects of our common life.

Palm uses the image of a tree to show how one can approach notions such as racism, xenophobia, or gender abuse that are based on ill-conceived political theologies (see Le Roux & Palm 2018; Palm & Eyber 2019). The leaves, branches, and roots of the tree are all interconnected. The leaves and fruit are more visible; the branches are structural and less obviously visible, and the roots beneath the surface are the unseen system that feeds the rest. The perpetration of violence against Asian, African, and Latin American bodies is a visible and tangible expression of malformed political and social values.

When the well-being of one community such as nation, race group, gender, or persons in a specific economic class is placed above the well-being of others, we can identify and name the presence of exceptionalism – these are the leaves and fruit (social practices) of our racist and xenophobic tree. They are identifiable in our social practices – the hoarding of vaccines, the exclusion of African, Asian, and Latin American bodies, and so on. However, they rely on the existence of social and cultural imaginations, the branches (social norms) of our racist and xenophobic societies, that regard White bodies and Western knowledge systems as dominating political, economic, and social structures. The values, ideas, beliefs, and histories accord exceptional status to some, while denigrating others. This is evidenced in the racist language of leaders such as Donald Trump, but also in the laws and policies used by nations to deal with migration and migrants in exclusionary ways that betray a belief that there is no ultimate solidarity between all human beings. Such social norms are shaped by our beliefs about ourselves and others; these are the roots (beliefs) of our individual and social identities.

Of course, such a theological taxonomy is neither linear, nor static. The metaphor illustrates that the deeper our roots (beliefs) are established, the stronger our branches (social norms) will be. Moreover, the more established our roots and branches are, the more commonly our leaves and fruit (social practices) will flourish. Public theologians are deliberately inter-contextual, multilingual, and transdisciplinary in nature. Their reliance on insights from the social sciences (political science, sociology), the humanities (philosophy, history), and the natural sciences (medicine) allows for a broader interrogation of beliefs, social norms, and social practices.[3]

At times, this challenge will require the deconstruction of sinful beliefs; at other times, it may require exposing harmful practices, and at other times, it may require calls to reconsider abusive and exclusionary laws and policies that destroy creation or dehumanise human beings. Constructively, it may also require nurturing of beliefs and practices that honour God's will in society and creation, leading to structures that foster human dignity and ecological justice, which find expression in everyday practices such as hospitality, care, and solidarity. This is the work of every Christian. Yet, it also requires particular focus and work from academic theologians.

3 For a discussion of the various characteristics of contemporary public theologies, see Forster (2020:15-26).

5. CONCLUSION

This article considered how the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the misshaping of contemporary notions of human identity and, in turn, threatened human rights, particularly those of Asians, Africans and Latin Americans from the "majority world". The Trump administration's handling of the coronavirus pandemic served as a case study to explicate the beliefs, social norms, and harmful practices associated with religiously informed political exceptionalism. It highlights the importance of a critical understanding of the role that the cultural and social imaginations play in the formation of individual and social identity. Furthermore, it showed how forms of historically and theologically informed exceptionalism have led to the current context of racism, xenophobia, and science denialism in the United States, and the impact of these on individuals in other parts of the world. These values find expression in a form of biopolitics that reduces human living to "bare life". This, in turn, makes allowance for the removal of rights and freedoms through the enactment of a "state of exception". The conclusion of this line of reasoning is that a form of critical public theology is necessary to deconstruct the harmful cultural imaginations and social imaginaries that underpin many instances of racism and xenophobia that are being witnessed during, and in the aftermath of the spread of the coronavirus.

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Keywords	*Trefwoorde*
COVID-19	COVID-19
Racism	Rassisme
Biopolitics	Bio-politiek
State of exception	Staat van uitsondering