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‘Saints informed by science’: Identifying productive science-religion narratives in times of Covid-19

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Abstract

This paper will offer a structured analysis of the perhaps surprisingly common religious narrative patterns that emerged in public responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. A constructive critique of these narratives, it will address insecurities over the place of faith communities in medical crises, to equip them to productively engage with, and communicate scientific knowledge.

Since the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, church responses have sought guidance in scripture and church history, invoking multiple framings of the novel coronavirus: punishment, a test, satanic temptation, a lesson in which isolation becomes the essence of the Passion, a war for the chosen people to fight – narratives that personify the virus in a conditional moral and spiritual framework, in which Religion has a performative role, as this paper will show. However, these narrative patterns have been just as commonly utilised outside religious circles, in which they have a long history.

This paper will, first, provide a structured overview of these narratives’ use in religious, scientific and political journalism. A case study on the use of ‘sacrifice’ and ‘war’ narrative, will, secondly, suggest in more detail the functions and pitfalls of this rhetoric. Finally, a comparison with how these same narratives operated, historically, in the highly influential ‘Cholera Sermons’ of Charles Kingsley. Thus, the paper will show productive narrative techniques in action, crystallising techniques for faith communities to enable them to communicate productively, and with confidence, in a scientific and social crisis.

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Narrative and metaphors are fundamental for how the world becomes understood. They are explanatory, and even formative of it and, in turn, determine our actions and interactions within it. Narratives, as Friedmann observes, 'do not happen, they are made' (Friedmann 2019, p.10). As a 'purposeful communicative act', they are consciously constructed towards a distinct intended effect: 'to engage and influence their audiences' cognition, emotions and values (Phelan 2007, p.203). And yet 'our conceptual system' shaped by metaphor and narrative is also 'not something we are normally aware of (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003 [1980]).

Scrutiny of the conscious and unconscious effects of narrative framing are crucial in a health crisis, in which these understandings can become a 'matter of life and death' (Rogers and Pearce 2013, p.67). A rhetorical approach 'attends to both an ethics of the told and an ethics of the telling' and provides guidance on both, how to communicate science in crisis, and why (Phelan 2007, p.203).

1. Types of Religious Covid-19 Narratives, and where to find them: Methodology and Data

With the Covid-19 crisis rapidly gaining more attention, the 'Science and Religion Narratives' research group of the ECLAS project became interested in the responses of faith communities to the novel coronavirus. From Mid-February, we monitored websites, blogs, and social media, as well as journalistic coverage returned by Google for the search phrases 'response to coronavirus', 'response to Covid-19' etc. in the US, the UK's four nations, and Germany, adding in specifiers, such as 'Christian', or 'in the UK', compiling a database, with searchable tags, containing 595 items.

This revealed a broad variety of responses, which, however broadly, fit into the following distinct narrative themes: (1) Punishment; (2) Temptation/ Virus-as-Satan (especially common in US-American creationist circles); (3) Responsibility; (4) Sacrifice; (5) Life-in-Death –sending a signal of hope, not to fear death; (6) Exceptionality/ 'Chosen People'/ 'Holy war' (especially prevalent in politicised US Evangelical environments, promising the virus will spare a selected people); (7) Prayer; (8) Over-reaction/ 'Hoax' (secular); and (9) Prophecy.

Although initially interested in religious responses, it became evident that many of the same narratives shaped narrative framings outside explicitly or implicitly religious settings, and thus came to dominate public and political discourses, especially in the UK in ways that highlight the narrative appeal of religious narrative in health crisis and science communication, but also their pitfalls.

This paper will look at the use of religious narratives and their public impact in two phases: mid-February to the 22 March (hereafter referred to as 'phase 1'), and from 23 March, the begin of lockdown in the UK, to the current date ('phase 2'). More than the logistical shift to lockdown, the determining factor for this division was a significant shift in narrative framing.

1.2. Coronavirus as Punishment?

The first phase, when the virus was mostly in Asia and some southern European countries, was characterised by disorientation and uncertainty. Initially, the most prevalent narrative feared SARS-CoV-2 as a punishment. This was also the most varied of the narrative framings, which we classed, according to their orientation, into, five sub-groups: (a) Blame (i.e., it is a punishment for a sin/of someone/of a group of people); a punishment to serve as (b) Warning/ Lesson/ Guidance; (c) Opportunity to learn from/ reflect upon Scripture (religious)/ History (secular); (d) Opportunity for Mission; and the non-open-ended one, considering the pandemic the (e) Apocalypse.

The framing of the novel coronavirus as punishment presumes a (personified) agency consciously deciding to send a punishment, after weighing the status quo, and finding it wanting, suggesting a moral dimension, and a linear causal relationships to the pandemic. This is a linear

narrative – which, as *Forbes* noted, most commonly manifested itself as ‘punishment for fill-in-the-blank’ (Bruce, 2020).

Many religious commentaries aligned the current pandemic with scripture passages with an apparently similarly linear smiting of those violating God’s word, will and the law of his Creation, with pestilence (e.g. Leviticus 26:14-24, Exodus 7-11, Revelation 6, Numbers 14:12). Thus, the *Times of Israel* framing ‘Coronavirus outbreak is divine punishment for gay pride parades’ (Staff, 2020), was characteristic. A more complex variation appeared in a YouTube comment with 366 upvotes on a popular US evangelist pastor’s video:

I saw an amazing quote about the Coronavirus situation; it was basically saying how this virus has removed our idols (sports, Disneyland, etc.) so that now we can turn our eyes back to the Creator. Powerful words 🙏🙏’ (‘Revelation Angel’, 2020).

Although this response was particularly common among orthodox groups of the three Abrahamic religions, and thus seemingly isolated within a particular milieu, it gained significant reach beyond it. American Evangelical ‘megachurches’ and their influential pastors, such as Rev Ralph Drollinger, who ‘leads a weekly bible study group for members of President Donald Trump’s Cabinet’ (Sopelsa, 2020), or celebrities with a large social media followings, such as Kourtney Kardashian, made such stories (ironically in the circumstances) ‘go viral’. This, in turn, led to increased coverage by traditional news media, internationally, especially tabloids (e.g. ‘Kourtney Kardashian thinks the coronavirus pandemic is punishment from God for “evil”’, *The Sun*, 18 Mar 2020; *The Sun* has an average daily circulation of 1.2m), giving this narrative increased public currency in which boundaries between religious and secular spheres blur: Christian definitions of sin become conflated with personal, cultural and political values.



Fig. 1: Counterfeit Extinction Rebellion post on Twitter

An equally ‘viral’ example in a secular setting, illustrates how their framing of religious narratives thus functions in a parallel way. A counterfeit Twitter account, imitating the environmental action group Extinction Rebellion (Fig. 1), stating ‘Earth is Healing. Humans are the Disease!’ (@XR_east, 24 Mar 2020). It was one example of a host of similar pieces from across the political spectrum conceived of Covid-19 as a rightful punishment for ecological, fiscal, and moral transgressions, some more contemplative, encouraging political reorientation, especially in environmentalism. But more extreme versions elicited strong criticism for their narrative echoes of

ecofascism: a philosophy in which political, scientific and religion were deliberately conflated to sustain a ‘totalitarian form of government that requires individuals to sacrifice their interests and even their lives to the well-being and glory of the state’. In Ecofascism the death of those ‘polluting the land’, Nature, in which divinity was purely immanent, is condoned. This highlights how ‘virulent strains’ of ideology can continue to run through ‘political culture’, through the historical baggage of narrative and language, when blamed, and chosen people are situated within a religiocised, moral Nature, knowable through science (Joshi, 2020; Levinovitz, 2020; Zimmermann, 2008; Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1996).

The appeal of this narrative is clear: it reduces a complex threat to explainable chains of causation, provides clarity and orientation, and structures, organises a chaotic, unfamiliar situation.

Familiar Biblical narratives provide an even more potent orientational framework. However, this narrative solution provides only short-term relief, which can lead to long-term complications, as a case study of another narrative theme will show.

2: Phase 2: Are we really fighting a war against the coronavirus – and should we be?

This question became of critical importance, when shortly after the begin of the lockdown period the twin narrative themes, 'sacrifice' and 'war' began to dominate the Covid-19 discourse. Headlines were littered with metaphors of warfare: evoking the 'sacrifice' of health workers, framed as 'heroes' in the 'war' against the coronavirus. Health workers likened their experience of PPE shortages to 'going to a battle without the complete armour'; the papers their deaths to 'heroic sacrifice'. Even where the word 'war' was absent, metaphors were combative: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, emerging from his own illness, called the virus devilish, and an 'invisible mugger' (Johnson ii, 2020). In a rare out-of-the-ordinary address, even the Queen 'invoked the Blitz spirit', and 'recall[ed] WWII song' concluding 'we will meet again' (Mills, 2020; *Telegraph* 2020; Elizabeth II, 2020). Sing-alongs of Vera Lynn's eponymous song were subsequently arranged by the BBC for the VE Day street parties on 8 May.

This framing had become dominant by 2 April, when an episode of *BBC Question Time* showed, it was being deployed strategically, not only by politicians or the press, but also by clerical actors, in ways that clearly illuminated especially the cultural framework of this analogy particularly in the UK. Besides the CEO of the Royal College of Nursing, Donna Kinnair, and Labour politician Yvette Cooper, guests on the episode of *Question Time* included Secretary of State for Health, Matt Hancock, and Archbishop of York, Rt. Revd. John Sentamu. It was the Archbishop, commenting on the UK's response to the Covid-19 crisis, who was first to use the war metaphor and who set the tone for the episode. He used, 'We are at war' three times; and asked the Health Secretary to be 'more of a Lord Kitchener'. The archbishop suggesting that the (non-metaphorical) army should take charge, with Hancock to 'command the files'. This framing appeared to act code-like, when Hancock responded in kind, stating he 'will not cease from this fight' (*Question Time*, 2020).

Both lines evoke a specific cultural narrative and orientational framework for the current moment of crisis, by recalling the familiar words of two choral pieces composed during World War I by Hubert Parry: 'Command the [beauteous] files' from 'My Soul there is a country', and 'I will not cease from this [/mental] fight' from 'And did those feet in ancient time (Jerusalem)'. Both pieces regularly feature in clerical settings, but, more prominently, in National celebrations. Such celebrations also feature patriotic songs as 'The supreme sacrifice' (O Valiant hearts) or 'Greater Love Hath No Man' associate the theme of sacrifice to the death of Christ, thus through their use in the current health crisis, extending this comparison to health workers, situating their deaths in a framework of Christian moral and virtue, which thereby become fully aligned with military morals and virtues.

Popular songs as Parry's or Lynn's, primarily serve 'social functions', providing 'ways of managing the relationships between our public and private emotional lives; it shapes popular memory and organizes our sense of time; and it creates collective identity' (Frith 1987, p.133). The war framing, and with it that of sacrifice, was, similarly, much perpetuated by the papers praising the war metaphor for its perceived advantages: providing comfort, by 'bring[ing] people together'. However, as the punishment narrative showed, narrative and metaphorical conflation in health crisis, with moral or patriotic narratives can be problematic – it should not be surprising that this framing, too, has been polarising, and, as communications research has, on the current crisis, and beyond, has shown, counterproductive.

2.1. 'Healing without waging war': a perspective from the communication sciences

Numerous pieces by medical professionals pleaded for war metaphors to be abandoned. In the UK, one read 'the health service is [...] not staffed by heroes'; 'forget medals and flypasts' and 'increasingly bombastic proposals for honouring our "sacrifice" are beginning to feel more burdensome than uplifting', stated another. In the US, Adina Wise wrote 'militarised diction to describe doctors' sense of duty conflates and confuses the reality of our responsibilities':

Regardless of the patient's ailment, the provider was not putting their own life at risk. A wartime mindset demands death, suffering and sacrifice in the service of one's country. [...] War is dangerous by definition, but danger should *never* be inherent in the hospital. (Wise, 2020)

The overwhelmingly positive connotations of wartime heroics sits, at best, uncomfortably alongside such voices of health workers, whose sentiments are corroborated by a vast amount of data on the use of the war metaphor, especially in medical crisis, assessing it overwhelmingly sceptically, as 'ironic, unfortunate and unnecessary' or even dangerous (Nie et al, 2016, p.1).

This springs from a point, made by Lakoff and Johnson, which Wise even cites in her article: 'The heart of the of metaphor is inference... [and] because we reason in terms of metaphor, the metaphors we use determine a great deal about how we live our lives' (Lakoff and Johnson in Wise, 2020). In short: the narratives through which we frame the science of a risk or crisis determines our actions much more than the science itself.

Cancer and HIV research have highlighted 'war metaphors create an artificial win-lose dichotomy' and by 'obligating' a fight, may encourage the pursuit of 'futile or harmful options', stigmatising hesitancy, periods of contemplation or retreat (Perykoil, 2008, p.842). They transpose 'military virtues', such as courage and perseverance, into contexts in which they have no currency, projecting options which medical reality does not recognise: virtue cannot alter the nature and course of a disease (Nie et al 2016, pp.8;4; Segal 2008; 2012). Juxtaposition with framings of health crises and personal illness narratives in African and Asian, Nie et al show, war metaphors expose the 'Western preoccupation with progress through dominating nature, quite contrary to the [...] view of peaceful coexistence', or the 'balance' in historical approaches to the Humours (Nie et al 2016, pp.3;17).

As metaphors determine action and behaviours, 'risk communication messages inform the public psychological and behavioural responses to risks, and as a result, help determine subsequent likelihood of disease [...] and survival' (Rogers et al, 2007). War metaphors, which can galvanise populations into action, and frame this as virtuous and desirable, can thus act counter-productively, when they 'bring the nation together' in street parties and associated group activities, when scientific advice dictates 'social distancing' and 'staying at home'. The expectation of death, in a profession that aims for healing, and the projection that battle can change illness outcome, suggests possibilities science does not support, silences the suffering. Furthermore, terms like 'world-beating solutions' and 'bringing the nation together' suggest a national competition, and assumption of rightful dominance, when a global solution, collaboration, and shared strategy is needed, acting, ultimately, divisively (HC Deb 20 May 2020, 2020; Johnson i, 2020). 'You cannot sing Rule Britannia to a virus', another Medic concludes (Okwonga, 2020).

In addition, the positive effects evoked by the narrative's use have been shown to be short term, as well as creating long-term problems. While positive assessments concluded that it appealed to 'common sense' and no longer 'being treated like children' – the opposite is in fact the case (Hickman, 2020). Research highlighted that the shift in narrative framing, from a relatively diverse set

of metaphors, to that of war and sacrifice, which coincided with the period of a steep rise in death rates (Fig. 2), followed the strategy of reassurance, which presumes a blanket response of panic, irrational behaviour, and non-compliance in the face of emotional hardship, such as, in lockdown, the isolation from friends and family. Rather than science-led, it is a pre-emptive strategy, combating reactions which evidence generally does not support (Rogers and Pearce, 2013; Drummond and Fischhoff, 2020).



Fig. 2: Covid-19 deaths per day in the UK, covering phase 1 and 2 (Google)

Putting first the combating of presumed, and existing, anxiety arising from the unfamiliar, by evoking familiar slogans and shared cultural artefacts, may seem ‘logical on the surface’, but ‘considerable evidence’ of past and present research suggests, ‘does not work’ (Wessely and Daniels, 2020).

Reassurance offers transient false comfort that rapidly fades; when unwarranted, it promotes distress – particularly in relation to health-related anxiety. [...] When it is accompanied by facts from a credible source, reassurance can be effective. But this is not what is being offered at the moment. In the absence of this, reassurance will rarely change behaviour or ameliorate distress, but might do the opposite... [and] elicit fear. (Wessely and Daniels, 2020)

The most crucial hallmark of successful risk communication, besides transparency, and consistency, is trust. As war rhetoric, used to create sentiments of familiarity, or as ‘crowd-pleaser’, can in the long term lead to increased anxiety, and damage trust in those communicating science in public, when optimism is not backed up by data that supports it, it will thus lead to decreased levels of compliance (Rogers and Pearce, 2013; Drummond and Fischhoff, 2020; Wessely and Daniels, 2020; Bish et al, 2011; Pearce 2020). This has already become evident from UK data (Cartwright and Rose, 2020). Further, marketing research showed there was decreased public preference for ‘fighting talk’ during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ulquinaku, 2020). This makes a strong case for alternative narratives – which, history shows, the use of scripture in comparable pandemics can offer.

3. ‘Such were the laws of God and Nature, and always had been’: Covid-19 as Natural Disaster

Although numerous comparisons have been drawn to historical and fictional epidemics, the Cholera epidemic in mid-Victorian Britain, its familiar setting and comparable communication channels, offers a particularly suitable comparison – and with it the communication strategies adapted within it by cleric and scientist Charles Kingsley.

Charles Kingsley’s cholera sermons were, from a modern perspective perhaps an unlikely best-seller, but, alongside his public lectures and journalism on the subject of cholera, and public health more widely, they were a significant platform for conveying the scientific and sociological research to diverse – including non-expert, audiences. Kingsley’s framing may at first sound familiar, when he opens his First Sermon on the Cholera: ‘We have just been praying to God to remove from us the

cholera, which we call a judgment of God, a chastisement.’ But he then takes a different turn: ‘God punishes us, as I have often told you, not by His caprice, but *by His laws* [...] the laws themselves harm us, when we break them and get in their way.’ He addresses, and holds to account governments and their sluggish response at the time, and their ignoring scientific advice, even commissioned by them, more than a decade ago, as ‘the Sanitary Commissioners, proved to all England fifteen years ago, that cholera always appeared, [...] where there was [...] bad air, crowded bedrooms, bad drainage’ – ‘such were the laws of God and Nature, and always had been’ (Kingsley, 1852; my emphasis). Subsequent sermons strike a similar tone, reminding audiences that God appears to his prophets in, what would now be called natural disaster – literally, in the proverbial ‘earthquake, wind and fire’, and especially when sought dominance over it, had forgotten how to peacefully coexist with it – in a similar way in which modern HIV and cancer research have promoted.

Kingsley translated his campaign against the poor management of the cholera-crisis into metaphor and allegory in his *Water Babies*, itself a re-writing of the Moses-story, in its tale-within-a-tale, The History of the Great and Famous Nation of the Doasyoulikes, which the protagonist receives – as Moses - on stone tables, through a great mountain. A nation moves too close to a volcano, becomes complacent towards its danger in a long period of it lying dormant, next offers sacrifices to it as a deity, or demon, once it begins to emit smoke, but puts comforting narrative before science, and is decimated by its outbreak (Kingsley, 2014 [1862-3], pp.124-9).

Kingsley’s framing of cholera as (an avoidable) natural disaster can provide solutions for the current, and future crises. One critic of the government’s rhetoric, for instance, compared coronavirus to flooding: ‘The virus is as open to reason as a rising sea level’ – which is a relatable metaphor, in scripture and lived experience, and one that supports and transposes, rather than undermines the science-based behavioural advice around Covid-19 (Okwonga, 2020). A river that floods, has no character: that it floods is its nature, which, in turn is knowable through science. Moreover, managing a flood does not prioritise reasoning with it, or bravery in face of such danger, when, as Wise stated with reference to the dangers posed to health workers by missing PPE, they should have been avoidable. Thus, the flood metaphor also manages expectations towards individuals and government (Wise, 2020). Individuals may be advised to distance themselves from dangerous waters, whose paths may be unpredictable to non-experts (as the aerial spread of a virus), to not hinder or overwhelm emergency services (‘Protect the NHS’). And it manages, and seeks assurance on expectations towards government, such as prevention and preparedness: for instance, laws preventing construction of housing in flood belts (a form of ‘social distancing’ from a source of risk), and adequate flood defences, acting between human life and life-threatening waters, as PPE shielding from virus (*National Risk Register of Civil Emergencies*, 2017). The protection of lives, and neighbours, and knowledge of the means to do so, appeal both to science and Christian virtues – to honour Creation, and the moral obligation to abide by Gods laws, and not to fight them, or assert dominance over them, but aspire to balanced coexistence.

This puts into sharp relief, nationally and internationally, the choice of ‘fighting talk’, such the rousing “Stay Alert” slogan and its five-level alert system, which in *National Risk Register* aligns the threat posed by the novel coronavirus with that of terrorism (the only other 5-level-alert scenario), rather than with Natural Disasters, such as flooding or severe weather, which come with a 4 or 3 level warnings. The press was also curious about nations that had abstained from war language, most prominently Germany (e.g. Paulus, 2020; Chadwick, 2020, Freedman, 2020). Their Finance Minister Peer Steinbrück rebuffed the war-metaphor used by a journalist, clarifying the ‘Corona crisis is not a war – we are dealing with a Natural Disaster’. The German press has consistently referred to the containment of the virus as ‘Eindämmung’ – ‘constructing dams’ to stop the spread (Jaworska, 2020).

Steinbrück is a former high-ranking member of the military who comes from an area known for being badly affected by flooding – and the feats of engineering it produced to contain it. It is poignant that, out of the two experiences available to him, he consciously chose one over the other.

Clerics, as Kingsley himself suggested, have a duty to become good science communicators out of honour for God's creation, love of truth, and altruism. Such duty also proceeds from a duty to listen and give a voice to the weak, so not to employ narratives that silence them. Religious leaders can easily offer reassurance and moral guidance, without undermining scientific advice on risk management, once they consider the suitability of the metaphors and narratives scripture provides in abundance, and the consequences for orientation, action and reassurance that they bring in consequence. Thus, they will also set models for those outside of religious contexts who emulate them, re-invigorate and preach science-and-religion narratives for the current, change behaviours for the good of mankind and environment – of benefit beyond Covid-19: a sacrifice of a different nature, but one that requires no death, but a spiritual and intellectual reorientation – which Kingsley understood as a rebirth.

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