

SANITATION, VACCINATION AND SANCTIFICATION: A SOUTH-AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

In critical self-reflection from an African context on the pandemic, Covid-19 is first semantically re-baptised as *Christianity-On-Verges: Inciting Discussion*, with a subsequent discussion in broad outlines of the thematic foci of most recent South African publications on the pandemic. Next, the identified thematic foci are then related to an important Northern discourse on theologies of disaster as explored by the Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen. From the discussion in its insightful emphasis on disruptive communities and religious paradigm of resilience, the argumentative focus moves to a tentative formulation and prioritization of theological directives for academic scholarly engagement with the pandemic. Finally, theological directives are carefully and tentatively explored with sanctification as the chosen framework to integrate the identified challenges for disruptive communities and for the scholarly engagement with Covid-19.

KEYWORDS

South African publications on Covid-19, pandemic, vaccination, sanctification, hermeneutics, theologies of disaster

1. Introduction

“It is bloody scary” my friend remarked late at night whilst the two of us were pondering earlier this year over the pandemic. I quietly thought by myself: Yes, it is not only bloody scary at the moment on the African soil where we are at home, but also intensely traumatic. Traumatic as an increasingly thickening smog of deep vulnerability, disruptions, mental ill-health, uncertainties, cries and daily deaths that cloud our African land(body)scapes, fogging our relationships, discernments, actions and hopes.¹ The claws of Covid-19 – that do not make any calls of distinction nor show any hesitancy to destruct lives and relationships - have theologically forced me as Reformed theologian to semantically re-baptise Covid-19 for the moment as: *Christianity On Verges: Inciting Discussion*. The basic point is: What do we make theologically from a Christian perspective of the “bloody scary and traumatic” moment? In my forced critical self-reflection on the pandemic, I will firstly sketch in broad outlines the South African context – in relation to the broader context of the African continent – on which the pandemic is peaking along. Secondly. I will engage with South African theological publications on Covid-19, identifying the most important dimensions that we in my opinion have to take up and face. Lastly I will relate our South African / African context to the broader international context, and carefully and tentatively explore theological directives – with sanctification as integrating concept - for our contextual engagements with Covid-19.

2. Our vulnerable and wounded African context and reactions

2.1 The African context

Africa's² peoples, just less than 1.4 billion in numbers³ and stretched over 54 countries, are deeply religious, mostly (more than 80%) Christian in their (cultural) expression of religiosity whether Catholic, Protestant, Charismatic or a kind of (new) contextual / traditionally established expression of identifying with Christianity on the soil of Africa.⁴ Although it is a resource rich continent, it is presently the world's poorest inhabited continent. Politically – with some countries ravished by instability and violence whereas others for various reasons are more stable⁵ - and socially, - hosting half of the world's extreme poor, African countries are struggling to find their socio-economic way in the continent's post-colonial era. South Africa too is struggling heavily to find its political and socio-economic feet in the post-apartheid era since 1995 and to come to humanitarian and societal terms with the devastating scars that its apartheid history left on its people. In Africa, South Africa has the highest standard of healthcare with Mali being the worst.⁶ However, South Africa has at the same time (since 1982) the highest number of people (close to 8 million) living with HIV/Aids in the world. HIV/Aids is not anymore the only pandemic that we have to face. Covid-19 reached Africa in mid-February 2020 (first cases in Egypt and Nigeria) with the first case on 5 March 2020 in South Africa.⁷ The African statistics for Covid-19 infections and deaths (though not completely reliable) currently totals more than 7mil (220mil worldwide) cases and close to 180 000 (4.5mil worldwide) deaths, whilst in South Africa the respective totals are 2.7mil cases and 80 000 deaths at the time of writing. In Aug 2021, less than 2% of African peoples have been vaccinated, whereas close to 6mil people (just more than 10%) have been fully vaccinated in South Africa. What are the reactions to the pandemic and specifically to vaccination for Covid-19?

2.2 Some reactions

The public reactions to the Covid-pandemic⁸ and vaccination (and for that matter also to the regulations on sanitation, the wearing of masks and social distancing) differs widely for many different reasons. We have a spectrum from "Vaccines are from the devil", "Covid-19 is but a bad flu" and a social indifference to serious pleas to get the vaccine in societal programmes (government and private institutions). At the same time, many people find themselves locked down in uncertainty whether or not to be vaccinated. Interestingly, there are no clear correlations between religious positions and viewpoints that various people hold on the one hand and their respective attitudes towards Covid-19, sanitation protocols, and vaccinations, on the other. From this brief introductory remark on vaccination, I will firstly turn to the question: What are some of the most important academic-theological interpretative trajectories in South Africa?

Within South African academic circles,⁹ a broad spectrum of issues have been raised on the relentless ongoing pandemic over the last two years. Perhaps of all the discussed contributions to follow, I have found the publication by the *South African Journal of Science*¹⁰ with its strong interdisciplinary emphasis most promising. With its provocative formulation of "More eyes on Covid-19",¹¹ it seeks perspectives from history, economics, philosophy, ethics, anthropology, linguistics, religion studies, political science, law, sociology, and education - although the contributions as such are disappointingly brief. The motivation for the publication is highly laudable, since it

argues that “more eyes” of perspectives from the social sciences and humanities are needed in addition to the prominence that the views of the epidemiologists, virologists and immunologists have enjoyed up to this point. Indeed, in the further discussion to follow on various contributions, it is a serious shortcoming.

The following main foci in South African academic theological publications grappling with Covid-19 that I thematically identify, are: the doctrine of God; hermeneutics and use of scripture; theodicy; anthropology; ecclesiology; pastoral care; technology; mission; morality, theology-science debates, and concrete societal issues. Brief summarising notes on each must suffice:

- **Doctrine of God.** In most of the recent publications, the doctrine of God is either explicitly emphasised as being the most important issue of faith and faith communities to address given the present circumstances or implicitly implied as the most determining interpretative factor for sensemaking of the present circumstance. The biblical scholar Francois Tolmie and the systematic theologian Rian Venter present in their collaborate article two perspectives.¹² As biblical scholar, Tolmie raise the following issues: the richness of biblical traditions, the influence of social location on the interpretation of the pandemic in the light of the Bible, the importance of the emphasis on lament, the reluctance to interpret the pandemic as a punishment from God, the importance of the interpreter’s view of God and the emphasis on the way in which the ‘new normal’ should be approached. As systematic theologian, Venter highlights the nature of doing theology, the role of the symbol of the Divine, performativity of sense-making, the Trinitarian confession, an emerging new self and the importance of an ethic of responsibility. In their analysis of sermons that were preached in the Dutch Reformed congregations in March 2020, Steyn et. al. confirms the strong focus on the role of the Divine.¹³ In an insightful public engagement by means of narrative enquiry, Tanya Pieterse and Christina Landman from the University of South Africa focus on people’s religious views on the origin and meaning of this invisible threat in order to establish how this pandemic impacts on people’s belief systems.¹⁴ By means of three themes - COVID-19 is an act God, COVID-19 has nothing to do with God and God remains in control amidst a devastating pandemic - they insightfully present how COVID-19 reactivates an earlier 20th century debate (on “who” and “why” questions). In that debate, actions and events are intellectualized to rationalise cause and effect and at the same time, philosophical theodicies are deemed to limit our critical reasoning. In my own contextual-theological grappling with the pandemic, I also take the God-question as a fundamental issue of faith. I argue in “God’s spirit (of wisdom) has been sent into the world, not Covid-19” that at the core of the sensemaking engagement lies a different image of God, namely a dynamic image of God framed and informed by theology-science discourses that has to replace a static image of God.¹⁵
- **Anthropology.** The practical theologian Johann Meylahn focus on the global socio-economic and political effect of the drastic global lockdown measures as radical decision as the truly novel about the virus’ causes and effects.¹⁶

The question he pursues is the basic anthropological question, namely of being human in the time of Covid-19. He rephrases argumentatively his question to “what can one do?” Meylahn responsively explains:

Well, do the only thing that probably can be done: be human. Create fictions to your own and others’ benefit. Create *poiēsis*, a good fiction, maybe even an inclusive fiction, a quality of life fiction, but do not forget that it is a fiction. Be creative by creating a new polis, a new city; create a new politics that seeks to be as inclusive as possible, remembering that it is not possible to be all-inclusive.¹⁷

At the core of his response lies the constitutive importance for seeking alternative and better symbolic-imaginary systems for being human when the current system is showing cracks.¹⁸ For the philosopher Bert Olivier, the present Covid circumstances offer an opportunity for us as humans to deeply reconsider and revise our relationship to nature, but also the vast implications for our common future on earth. It is a radical opportunity – not to be missed - to accept self-responsibility for the current state of (eco)affairs!¹⁹ Philosophically aligned with Olivier is the Covid-engagement of the philosophers Anne Verhoef, J. du Toit and P. du Preez. With reference to the work of Martin Heidegger, and focusing on the existential and technological challenges that accompany the pandemic, they postulates that the pandemic has forced us to think about our existence more authentically, away from the “fallenness” of the ontological structure of *Dasein* in its everydayness. For them the crisis proffers the opportunity to reconsider what authentic existence, technology, and embodiment entail amidst COVID-19, and for the future.²⁰ With Verhoef, the systematic theologian Bernice Serfontein focus on embodiment, but then from an evolutionary anthropological perspective.²¹ She argues that Covid-19 as “invisible stranger” is not only interrupting our daily lives, but is also highlighting in a new and acute way the vulnerability of the human race and exposing the injustices embedded in social structures all over the world. To Serfontein the question is whether the evolutionary story of *Homo sapiens* might offer us insights on how to successfully navigate the multiple challenges that COVID-19 unmarks and also brings forth. She answers the question affirmatively from our evolutionary history (within the context of niche construction theory) in which our unique capacity for imagination and creative collaboration made us successful as a species. To Serfontein it is these very capacities for imagination and cooperation that might facilitate us in successfully imagining and thereafter living the new “abnormal”.

➤ **Hermeneutics and Scripture.** I have already mentioned the work by Tolmie and Venter. What needs to be stressed here again is the fundamental importance that they put on the location and situation of the interpreters in their sensemaking of the pandemic here and now in the reading of Scriptures, as well as the hermeneutical acknowledgement of the diverse richness of the biblical traditions themselves. This hermeneutical sensitivity is found in Serfontein in his “Introducing a re-reading of Lamentations through the lens of trauma studies: The challenge of the COVID-

19pandemic".²² Hermeneutically he sees many similarities between the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation in Jerusalem as lamented in Lamentations. From an understanding of lament as "meaning-making literature", he is of the opinion that it sometimes represent the only fitting response to the incomprehensible reality of pain and suffering. When confronted with mystery, doubt and despair, it is precisely this literary genre that defies cheap answers. Therefore Serfontein is convinced that Lamentations can help readers through the process of trauma therapy as it opens the wound and helps the individual to connect with the bigger community in trying to make sense of it all and to involve others in the pain. The same hermeneutical emphasis is found in "Engaging Old Testament prophetic literature in traumatic times of loss and grief" by the Old Testament scholar Willie Wessels in his exploration of prophetic literature (specifically Isaiah and Jeremiah). For Wessels, the books present compelling cases of loss and grief, and he hermeneutically attempts to identify similarities between the experiences of the people of Judah and our current experiences of loss and grief because of the pandemic. However, not only does he focus on the reality of loss and grief but at the same time on the positive role of prophetic words of comfort and hope.²³

- **Ecclesiology.** Worship and (the faith) community are the foci of Barney Pityana, Hilton Scott and Rantsoa Letsosa in their respective articles "A Theological Statement on the Coronavirus Pandemic. Living the Faith Responsibly", "Worship in a post-lockdown context: A ritual-liturgical perspective", and "What has the beast's mark to do with the COVID-19 vaccination, and what is the role of the church and answering to the Christians?"²⁴ In his article, Scott confines himself to the concern over the effects that the lockdown will have on worship services when churches are in a position to open their doors to the public once more. For him, lockdown represents a liminal phase so that we have to reflect on a post-lockdown context and therefore on a post-liminal phase. The key characteristics for this phase should be inclusivity and Ubuntu. Letsosa's main concern is his article is to unmask conspiracy theories and especially the controversial fallacy in which vaccination was linked with the beast's mark. To Letsosa the question is simply what the voice of the church is in this regard? It is the very same question that the practical theologian Jacques Beukes addresses in which he challenges the traditional discourse and believers' current understanding and praxis of being church.²⁵ In his article, Pityana addresses a much wider scope in relation to the challenges (public health, socio-economic livelihoods) faced by faith communities and the (broken, suffering) contexts in which they find themselves. He pays special attention to the God question, the meaning of the divine and on how God manifests the Good during dark times as well as the moral life of the Christian community given the challenges. The concluding issue of moral life of Pityana's article is the main focus of Etienne de Villiers in his "The church and the indispensability and fragility of morality revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic". For him the pandemic underlines not only the indispensability of morality but also its fragility.²⁶ The challenge for the church in the context of the pandemic is to provide moral guidance

(although it does not have a good track record) but also moral guidance on life after the pandemic. In his “Transversal modes of being a missional church in the digital context of COVID-19”, the missiologist Buhle Mpofo examines the link between religion and digital media from the vantage point that Covid-19 configured traditional missional and liturgical spaces in ways that locate the agency of the marginalised at the centre.²⁷ He highlights how COVID-19 configured Christian mission as it disrupted power dynamics through religious digital spaces that emerged as a new way of reimagining a missional church. A last contribution worth mentioning, is “The Bible, faith formation and a virus – Exploring the influence of a pandemic on faith formation content and practices for children and teenagers” in which the practical theologian Lyzette Hoffman focusses on the faith formation of teenagers and recommendations regarding different ways to engage with children and teenagers and involving them in ministry.²⁸

- **Theology-science discourses.** Although in my opinion the theology-science discourses represent surely one of the most important dimensions of the current Covid-19 engagement, very little attention has been given in scholarly articles to the relationship with science, and its significance for theology. There are very good reasons – and bad reasons as well – for the present situation of ignorance, distrust and extreme hostility towards the sciences within the African context. Promising post-distrust exceptions are the already mentioned work of Serfontein who engages with our evolutionary history, focussing on our unique capacity for imagination and creative collaboration that in her opinion might facilitate us in successfully imagining and thereafter living the new “abnormal”.²⁹ Also very promising is the not yet published article “Theology, Philosophy of Biology and Virology: An interdisciplinary conversation in the time of Covid-19” by Rian Venter.³⁰ He rightly and insightfully argues that Covid-19 has brought about very complex challenges to such extent that it can only be carried on through interdisciplinary approaches. As interdisciplinary conversation partners he engages and negotiates as theologian with the fields of virology and philosophy of biology. Regarding the former, the conventional association of viruses as mere pathogens is countered with an appreciation of their age, abundance and evolutionary impact. Regarding the latter, thinking about viruses from this field exploratively opens up the metaphysical consequences. Transpiring from his engagement in careful theological reconsideration of merely equating viruses with natural evil, he identifies the notion of equivocity³¹ as a fundamental description of reality. From the notion of equivocity, he argues that in his opinion this ontological insight does justice to contemporary virology and to the sense of Mystery in theology and the Christian doctrine of creation. In my own work in which I take the theology-science discourses as of fundamental importance, I explore as theological conversation-specialist “neglected” images of God – such as the “silent God” – as interpretative revisionary movement from a static to a dynamic understanding of the God-image.³² Aligned with the revisionary movement runs the anthropological exploration of human responsibility, and especially the deep gift of wisdom from our evolutionary history. Of contextual importance within theology-science discourses, is the

publication “Who may heal? A plea from traditional healers to participate in treating Covid-19” by the philosopher of religion Jaco Beyers.³³ Against the problematic South African background that the traditional healers acting as basic health providers objected to not being asked to participate in governmental activities dealing with the virus, Beyers investigates the differences between the healing and biomedical paradigms as two separate ways of presenting healthcare during the Covid-19 pandemic. What is of extreme contextual importance of his contribution, given the extensive distrust towards “Western science as racist rest”³⁴ is his grappling with the bias of science *versus* indigenous knowledge, as a basis for knowledge on health matters that is not acknowledged in society. In the same vein, the New Testament scholar Zorodzai Dube argues in his “Jesus: The infected healer and infectious community – Liminality and creative rituals in the Jesus community in view of COVID-19” from ideas concerning infectious diseases in antiquity that the Jesus movement provides lessons for the church and society in a time of Covid to reach out to people who are considered infectious and burden to main society.³⁵

- **Societal issues and challenges.** Given the extensive vulnerabilities and social woundedness of the South African context, and for that matter of the broader African context in various different ways, it is surprising that although most publications do mention the unmasking of societal inequalities and marginalisation due to Covid-19, as well as the increased severity of contextual issues such as oppression, gender violence, racism, corruption and criminality, very few actually directly take on these very challenging issues. There are a few exceptions. The practical theologian and activist-urbanist Stephan de Beer is a gripping exception in his “Homelessness and Covid-19 in the City of Tshwane: Doing liberation theology undercover – A conversation with Ivan Petrella”. Not only does De Beer delve deeply theologically into the identified issue, namely homelessness, but also from a practical viewpoint.³⁶ From his reflective and complementary two-lens approach, namely that of the “undercover liberation theologian” (in conversation with Ivan Petrella) and a deliberative theory of public administration, he traces ways in which people of faith/theologians participated in the City of Tshwane (Pretoria) through means other than explicit theological discourse. The first lens opens our strategic eyes for “making space, making plans, making known and making change” whereas the complementary second lens subverts suspect models of theological education, suggesting that it is in losing ourselves in the messiness of public processes and multiple solidarities with the poor, that the unfree might experience freedom, and liberation theological goals might find concrete expression. The practical theologian Marinda van Niekerk in her “Dignity, justice and community as a baseline for re-interpreting being church in a Corona-defined world” also focuses on the issue of homelessness, and specifically endeavours to connect their practical environment to the experience of and thinking about church in a Corona-defined world.³⁷ In the same theological vein of marginalisation, the missiologist Buhle Mpofu in his “Mission on the margins: A proposal for an alternative missional paradigm in the wake of COVID-19”, proposes a critical

paradigm to identify missional areas that have received scant attention from the church.³⁸ Buhle, acknowledging the current disrupted traditional practices and exposed missional blind spots, seeks to find ways in which alternative modes of doing mission in the context of COVID-19 present a solution against tendencies which marginalise and exploit the poor. The church historian Johan van der Merwe in his “Poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to the church” examines the devastating effect (especially poverty) that the COVID-19 pandemic has on communities in South Africa.³⁹ In his descriptive and practical approach, he shares his view on how the church as an agent of change is in the perfect position to make a difference by means of Local Ecumenical Area Networks.

- **Trauma.** Constructively addressing and managing deep and wide societal and personal trauma, is in my opinion the most immediate important aspect of the Covid-19 multi-various challenge. I will call it: affective management.⁴⁰ Apart from the already mentioned contribution of Serfontein on Lamentations and trauma, the topic is scarcely addressed except for side-line comments on its importance. Two exceptions are worth of mention, namely “COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa: Addiction, Christian spirituality and mental health” by the psychologist Lea de Backer who undertakes in which an interdisciplinary approach to healing is undertaken where psychology and Christian spirituality collaborates.⁴¹ Not only is collaboration also of importance in “Grieving during a pandemic: A psycho-theological response” by Mookgo Kgatle and Puleng Segalo, but especially their focus on communal grieving in contrast to individualised grieving in order to cope with pandemics such as COVID-19.⁴² Given our cognitive-affective biological make-up, and the extreme challenges to our mental health under these relentless and unearthing conditions, I would plea for all sectors of our society (especially scholars) to not only put “more eyes” on the traumatic dimensions and implication of the Covid-19 challenge, but to put “more eyes together” so that it can be managed in a supportive, healing and directive manner.

Given these scholarly reactions within the South African context, the question becomes how the reactions relate to and can be integrated into the broader international scholarly discourses.

3. Broadening and integrating scholarly reactions

Moving from the African context⁴³ to the broader international context, many publications are worthy of discussion. Too many.⁴⁴ However, providing an overview of international scholarly discourses on Covid-19 falls outside the scope of my contribution. For me the most important academic scholarly alignment from Africa with Western / Northern discourses on which I would like to focus briefly, is the work on the theologies of disaster by the Danish theologian Niels Henrik Gregersen.⁴⁵ The short article on “Positive Lost and Tragic Memory: On the preservation of community” (2017) was written more than two years before the Covid-19 pandemic, but its content has striking (prophetic) significance for our communal experiences of the pandemic, especially for a way forward, beyond being trapped as victims of disrupted communities. I limit myself to the most important dimensions that he raises on

theologies of disaster and subsequently I will relate its significance to the African context. My deep (self-critical) motivation comes from a remark almost two decades ago by the Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen who provocatively warned: “Much of Evangelical spirituality and theology, especially in its popular, devotional form, is a misguided effort in whitewashing the walls of our world with sentimental talk about God’s love”.⁴⁶

If ever there was a *kairos* that our misguided efforts were brutally exposed and unmasked, it is in my opinion now in the Covid-19 time to act in deep self-critical discernment of our whitewashed walls, especially in our (South) African context where our societal walls have not only been theological whitewashed, but also in a dehumanising manner culturally (white)washed. At the same time the African context germinates constructive movements forward which require our attention. I return to Gregersen.

For Gregersen “theologies of disaster have to recognize exceptional disasters in the framework of a general human exposure to vulnerability, while engaging in the formation of human and religious resilience”.⁴⁷ Carefully acknowledging the knowns, the known unknowns, and unknown unknowns, Gregersen wants to pursue from a phenomenologically sensitive theology the question on how do we live with disasters and with all the tragedies felt and witnessed?⁴⁸ Disasters (such as earthquakes, hurricanes etc) are seen as relational event that arise in the interaction between nature and society. It entails a loss – no thing proceeds as it used to - that strikes and interrupts wider parts of a society but carries many personal tragedies within it. Tragedy, in distinction to disaster, is for Gregersen a heart-breaking, unbearable personal loss with severe social consequences.⁴⁹ And tragic memory respects the intensity of the deeply felt loss.⁵⁰ Both personal tragedies and socially widespread disasters are “out of bounds, abnormal, and uninvited”.⁵¹ Both robs us of a “good life”. It is against the background of a good life that we, having to do with flourishing as well as vulnerability, can experience “positive loss” in our lives. For Gregersen, it is important that we as theologians acquire, what he calls “post-secular forms of theological reasoning”.⁵² Gregersen subsequently introduces at this point what is called the resilience paradigm.⁵³ Following a report⁵⁴ on disaster risk reduction by the United Nations, he describes it as follow: “Resilience means the ability to ‘resile’ from’ or ‘spring back from’ a shock”. He then makes the all-important statement: “Seeing a community as vulnerable calls for an engagement to heal the wounds. Talking about resilience calls for a self-organized restoration of the society struck by disaster”.⁵⁵ The crucial question is now: What is gained in the shift from a vulnerable paradigm to the resilience paradigm? Whereas the former paradigm lays clear the needs of a society (eg: existing inequalities), but not how it may be addressed, the latter paradigm sees those that suffer as something more than victims, as sufferers who can adapt and contribute to the restoration of a community or society.⁵⁶ Can we then talk about religious resilience, thus making use of a purely social scientific paradigm developed by organisational sociologists? Up to this point of development, disaster studies have not only neglected the contributions of the natural sciences, but have also neglected the importance of culture and religion. Whereas cultural resources and the significance of social capital has gained integral importance in the ongoing development of disaster studies, religion will have to make its indispensable voice heard, simply because disasters are most often still interpreted in religious terms, and because of its societal positioning for effectively helping out. As religious groupings are helping out, they will have to ensure that the traditional and secular popular act-of-God theology is not repeated and continued. It springs from perspectives of God’s punishment or revenge that is unbiblical. The task of those

helping out is “to *clarify* the situation as it is, and build bridges towards the future in which the affected people will be living after the disaster”.⁵⁷ In strong religious tones, Gregersen states that “(a) Christian witness must here be concerned with God’s nearness to the victims and the survivors, and with opening doors in the lives of the survivors without neglecting the wounds and memories that are part of the experience of loss and tragedy”.⁵⁸

Gregersen concludes his exposition on religious resilience in soft evangelical words on the significance of community, on God as community and as Ground of communities, and of the importance of the central Christian concepts of faith, hope and love. After all, Christianity is a religion, a place that recognises the conditions of vulnerability, whilst adding that in the midst of vulnerability, God is present. Moreover, as Christian communities, we do not only speak about God, but also to God to find and show new ways out of dark situations and to restore community.⁵⁹ From Gregersen’s remarkable (prophetic) emphasis on community and religious paradigm of resilience, I return to an interpretative and concluding alignment with my African context and the tragic Covid-19 disaster.

4. Identifying and proposing directives

How can the complex, extreme fluid and in many ways wounded African context be describe, and how could it be constructively and meaningfully approached by academic (theological) scholars in Covid-19-times? In my observations and evaluative remarks to follow, I will take as my vantage point the constitutive importance of community and the movement from community to the self (and self to community) and finally to sanctification as contextual religious resilience.

There is an African saying: “It takes a village to raise a child” (John Mbiti). At the heart of the saying, lies the deep anthropological concept of Ubuntu (“I am because you are”). Ubuntu is part of the Zulu phrase “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” that literally means: a person is a person through other people. The heart of being human (being a self) is community, and its heartbeat is being religious. Therefore, if disasters and tragedies strike, the hearts of communities are wounded and broken. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic is leaving scars peak after peak, wounds and socio-economic destruction – and not only in its wake - but over and above deep existing scars (HIV/Aids pandemic; poverty; oppressive inequalities etc). In playful reference to the African proverb on the raising of a child, it can now be said: It will take numerous villages to bring about communal healing. Villages? There are now villages, town and cities. The South African socio-economic, political and cultural contexts have developed intensely and widely since the turn of the previous century so that it today represent deep layered mixes of African and Western philosophies, ideologies and lifestyles. Its apartheid history has left even deeper scars and wounds that have not healed over the last almost three decades since 1994.⁶⁰ Thus, apart from the deep societal divisions, tensions, inequalities and marginalisation, Covid-19 has relentlessly rubbed salt into its open and unhealed wounds over the last two years. To oversimplify the complex context for the sake of the argument there are thus two identifiable sensemaking movements: from (understandings of) community to selves, deeply embedded in indigenous knowledge systems. And then: from (objectified) selves to community, deeply embedded in Western/ Northern thought traditions in the South African contexts. In any foreseeable future, the two movements will have to constructively engage with each other to find ways of togetherness and restoration in the creative celebration of pluriversality.

For the academic scholarly South African contributions that have been reflected in my overview, it implies at least the following evaluative criteria or directives⁶¹ of which I see as the most important:

- Does the contribution entertain “more eyes” (and ears – and all our other senses⁶²) on the identified issues? That is the necessary requirement of interdisciplinarity. And with interdisciplinarity comes the crucial disciplinary discernment of the hermeneutical acknowledgement of a “multi-focal”⁶³ approach in our sensemaking of the pandemic.
- Does it acknowledge the pluriversal context in which it is reflecting? That is the contextual given of an epistemological pluralism.
- Does it reflect hermeneutical sensitivity not only as interpreter (Where am I / we speaking from?) but also for the contextual relevance (for whom is what important and why) of that which is being interpreted?
- How does – from the connectedness of all that is – the integrative significance of religion-science discourses find expression¹ in taking on the identified issues.⁶⁴ But also: how is the practical face of the sciences (that is, technology) recognized and managed in its contextual agency?
- How is affectivity in its constitutive role in the two sensemaking movements and their conversational encounter (explicitly / implicitly) valued, integrated and managed?

For the directives to open ways of togetherness and enrichments to ensure a “good life” for all, they should be pursued as religious resilience framed as sanctification. For me, sanctification entails the willingness, the attitude and courage to “render each other worthy of respect” (sanctification). To render each other worthy of respect so that vulnerable selves and disruptive communities themselves and together can “spring / bounce back”. Such spring back / bounce back is infused by an unwillingness of being victims, and to remain sufferers. And to sanctification, the double vision of the Christian witness can (affectively) add in “bloody scary” and “traumatic” moments, not only the bloody message of the cross, but also all related rituals that captures and symbolises that very message (such as the Eucharist). Such message proclaims (and lives) that the cross, (cosmologically and evolutionary) stands for and embraces all vulnerabilities, hurts, wounds, disasters and so also of human sin before and in the nearness of God. In its dialectical relationship of evangelical significance with the resurrection of Christ, the cross is a message of healing, comforting, and openness for a (restorative) future as the breath and spirit of religious resilience in contexts of disruptive communities and wounded selves.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In the same dramatic-traumatic tone, Pieterse & Landman write: “We are now all part of a horror movie, playing in slow motion, where we feel like inexperienced actors, without a script, in a surreal world”, see Pieterse, Tanya & Landman, Christina (2021). “Religious views on the origin and meaning of COVID-2019”. *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (3). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6283>

² Africa as term can be understood as demographic entity (that is, as continent) or as an ideological reality with specific functions in the grammar of both colonial and post-colonial language. See Tinyiko Maluleke (2005), “African Religions”, Ford, David (ed). *Modern Theologians*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. I used it in the first sense.

³ Africa, the world’s second largest continent, represent close to 17% of the world population.

⁴ Veldsman, Danie (2021). Gazing upwards, inwards, and around with reasons of our hearts: on religious experience, in: Van der Westhuizen, Henco (ed). *Doing theology in South Africa*. Leiden: Brill (Forthcoming).

⁵ Taylor, Ian (2018), *African Politics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/acrade/9780198806578.001.0001.

⁶ See <https://www.legit.ng/1350099-top-10-african-countries-improved-healthcare-systems.html>.

⁷ Since the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the world according to Bucher & Mall was warned that there was no cure for this complex disease. Its signs and symptoms are highly variable, often reflecting a spectrum of diseases organs and systems in the body, each affected to differing degrees. See Bucher, Martin & Mall, Anwar Suleman (eds) 2021. *Essential facts about Covid-19: the disease, the responses, and an uncertain future. For South African learners, teachers, and the general public*. ASSAF. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/assaf.2021/0072>.

⁸ The South African government took the coronavirus pandemic that began in China late 2019 and spread all over the world, seriously and took immediate steps to halt the spread of the virus. The measures entailed an immediate lockdown (from 26 March 2020) with a number of interventions (such as wearing of masks, hand washing, social distancing, curfews, banning of gatherings and sale of alcohol and cigarettes).

⁹ In the following broad overview, I have mainly focussed on a Special Collection on Covid-19 that was published in *HTS Theological Studies* (2020), although other important publications are also mentioned.

¹⁰ SAJS 2020. Covid-19: Perspectives from the humanities and social science. *South African Journal of Science* 116 (7/8). <https://sajs.co.za/issue/view/809>.

¹¹ The formulation by Jonathan Jansen (SAJS 2020:4) is a reference that he makes to the American infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci who appealed for caution “until we have more eyes on the problem”.

¹² Tolmie, Francois & Venter, Rian (2021), “Making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic from the Bible – Some perspectives”. *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6493>.

¹³ Steyn, M., Wepener, C. & Pieterse, H (2020), “Preaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa: A grounded theoretical exploration”. *International Journal of Homiletics* 4, 1–20.

¹⁴ Pieterse, Tanya & Landman, Christina (2021), “Religious views on the origin and meaning of COVID-2019”. *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (3). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6283>.

¹⁵ Veldsman, Danie (2020), “God’s spirit (of wisdom) has been sent into the world, not Covid-19: A contextual systematic-theological perspective”. *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6222>.

¹⁶ Meylahn, Johann-Albrecht (2020), “Being human in the time of Covid-19”. *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6029>.

¹⁷ Meylahn, Being human in the time of Covid-19 (p. 4).

¹⁸ Meylahn, Being human in the time of Covid-19 (p. 3).

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- ¹⁹ Olivier, Bert (2020), "Die Covid-19-pandemie: 'n Geleentheid tot besinning oor die mens se plek in verhouding met die natuur?". *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe* 60 (4).
<http://ojs.tgwsak.co.za/index.php/TGW/article/view/212>.
- ²⁰ Verhoef, A.H., Du Toit, J., Du Preez, P. (2020), "Being-in-the-Covid-19-world. Existence, technology and embodiment". *Acta Theologica* 40 (2). <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/4983>.
- ²¹ Serfontein, Bernice (2021), "Being A Change Agent In A Post-Covid South Africa. Imagining a new 'abnormal' amidst COVID-19: Seeking guidance from evolutionary anthropology and theology". *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (3). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6519>.
- ²² Serfontein, Johan (2021), "Introducing a re-reading of Lamentations through the lens of trauma studies: The challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic". In *die Skriflig* 55(1), a2688. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2688>.
- ²³ Wessels, Wilhelm J. (2021), "Engaging Old Testament prophetic literature in traumatic times of loss and grief". *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6441>.
- ²⁴ Pityana, Barney (2020), "A Theological Statement on the Coronavirus Pandemic". *Religion and Theology* 27 (3-4), 329-358. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15743012-02703006>; Scott, Hilton R. (2020), "Worship in a post-lockdown context: A ritual-liturgical perspective". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6112>; Letsosa, Rantoa (2021), "What has the beast's mark to do with the COVID-19 vaccination, and what is the role of the church and answering to the Christians?". *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6480>.
- ²⁵ Beukes, Jacques W. (2020). "To be or not to be? A missional and practical theological perspective on being Church without walls amidst coronavirus disease 2019: A challenge or an opportunity?". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1) a6115. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6115>.
- ²⁶ De Villiers, Etienne (2020), "The church and the indispensability and fragility of morality revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6180>.
- ²⁷ Mpofo, Buhle (2021), "Transversal modes of being a missional church in the digital context of COVID-19". *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6341>.
- ²⁸ Hoffman, Lyzette (2021), "The Bible, faith formation and a virus – Exploring the influence of a pandemic on faith formation content and practices for children and teenagers". *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6512>.
- ²⁹ Serfontein, "Being A Change Agent In A Post-Covid South Africa".
- ³⁰ Venter, Rian (2021), "Theology, Philosophy of Biology and Virology: An interdisciplinary conversation in the time of Covid-19. *Verbum et Ecclesia* (Forthcoming).
- ³¹ With the notion of equivocity, Venter emphasizes that the way reality functions, it allows for more than one interpretation. Venter, Theology, Philosophy of Biology and Virology: An interdisciplinary conversation in the time of Covid-19 (p. 8)
- ³² Veldsman, "God's spirit (of wisdom) has been sent into the world, not Covid-19".
- ³³ Beyers, Jaco (2020), "Who may heal? A plea from traditional healers to participate in treating Covid-19". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6169>
- ³⁴ See Veldsman, Danie (2020). "Science", in: *African Public Theology*, edited by S. B. Agang, 175-187. Carlisle: Langham Publishing. Veldsman, Danie (2021), "Doing theology and science in the contemporary South African context", in: Van der Westhuizen, Henco (ed). *Doing theology in South Africa*. Leiden: Brill (Forthcoming).
- ³⁵ Dube, Zorodzai (2020), "Jesus: The infected healer and infectious community – Liminality and creative rituals in the Jesus community in view of COVID-19", *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1) a6189. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6189>.
- ³⁶ De Beer, Stephan F. (2020), "Homelessness and Covid-19 in the City of Tshwane: Doing liberation theology undercover – A conversation with Ivan Petrella". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6209>.
- ³⁷ Van Niekerk, Marinda (2021), "Dignity, justice and community as a baseline for re-interpreting being church in a Corona-defined world". *HTS Theological Studies* 77 (4). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6482>.
- ³⁸ Mpofo, Buhle (2020), "Mission on the margins: A proposal for an alternative missional paradigm in the wake of COVID-19". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6149>.
- ³⁹ Van der Merwe, Johan (2020), "Poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic: A challenge to the church". *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6221>.
- ⁴⁰ Human affectivity entails moods, emotions and feelings. I strongly support any anthropological interdisciplinary approaches that acknowledge the constitutive importance of affectivity for "being human". From our evolutionary history and our biological make-up, the affective-cognitive dimension of being human

has vastly been pushed to the fore as representing perhaps the most important dimension not only from our history of “becoming human”, but of our sensemaking in and of “being human”.

⁴¹ De Backer, Lea M. (2021), “COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa: Addiction, Christian spirituality and mental health”. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2135>.

⁴² Kgatle, Mookgo S & Segalo, Puleng (2021), “Grieving during a pandemic: A psycho-theological response”. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v42i1.2260>.

⁴³ At this stage, I can identify very limited scholarly theological publications within the broader African context.

There are however a few that are very much in line with the already mentioned dimensions of South African publications: Isiko, A.P. (2020), “Religious construction of disease: An exploratory appraisal of religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda”. *Journal of African Studies and Development* 12 (3) 77–96;

Philemon Chamburuka and Ishanesu Gushathe (2020) from Zimbabwe, “An exegesis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–35) and its relevance to the challenges caused by COVID-19”. *HTS Theological Studies* 76 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i1.6096>. “Fighting COVID-19 in Nigeria: Leadership and collaboration in Numbers 12:9–16” by Favour C. Uroko and Chinyere T. Nwaoga. *Verbum et Ecclesia* 42 (1).

⁴⁴ In Tolmie & Venter, a number of international scholarly contributions (Walter Brueggemann, Ying Zhang, John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay, N.T. Wright, and Peter Lampe) are discussed. Christopher

Southgate also discusses the work by Brueggemann, but what I find extremely helpful is his discussion from a theology-science perspective of approaches to the compatibility of the virus with affirmations of the world as the good creation of a loving God. See Southgate, Christopher (2021), “Explorations of God and COVID-19”,

Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith 73 (10) 23-32. <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/124773>. The article by Mirjam Schilling (2020), “Virocentric perspective on evil” insightfully integrates theological and scientific perspectives, see *Zygon* 56 (1). 10.1111/zygo.12669. In the very recent work of Jason Sexton, “The Critical

Study of Religion and Division in the Age of Covid-19”, he insightfully reflects (with very useful literature listed) on the very nature of our academic work in a time like this. See Sexton, Jason. S (2021), “The Critical Study of Religion and Division in the Age of Covid-19”. *International Journal of Public Theology* 15 (2) 157-176.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341652>. Useful also is the coherent structure that Günter Thomas (2020) employs in his discussion of theologising in his “Theology in the shadow of the corona-virus crisis”, published in the *Zeitschrift für Explorative Theologie*. <https://doi.org/10.21428/fb61f6aa.7fb2004b>.

⁴⁵ Gregersen, Niels Henrik (2017), “Positive loss and tragic memory: on the preservation of community.

Theologies of disaster”, *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 56 (4) 361-372. Gregersen and the Norwegian systematic theologian Jan-Olav Henriksen have published articles on “Endangered selves and societies” which are also very insightful for the discussion, see *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 2017, 56 (4) 331-335; “Resilient selves: A

theology of resonance and secularity”, *Dialog* 2020 59 (2) 93-102 and Jan-Olav Henriksen, “The Endangered Self as a Challenge to Religion”, *Philosophy, theology and the Sciences*, 2019, 6 (1) 84-96

⁴⁶ Karkkainen, Veli-Matti (2002), “Evil, Love and the Left Hand of God: The Contribution of Luther’s Theology of the Cross to an Evangelical Theology of Evil”. *Evangelical Quarterly* 74 (3) 215-234, (p. 231).

⁴⁷ Gregersen, “Positive loss and tragic memory: on the preservation of community. Theologies of disaster”, (p. 361).

⁴⁸ Gregersen, (p. 362ff).

⁴⁹ Gregersen, (p. 363).

⁵⁰ Gregersen, (p. 364).

⁵¹ Gregersen, (p. 364).

⁵² Post-secular forms of theological reasoning entails for Gregersen, following the work of the Danish philosopher of religion Knud Løgstrup and the Swedish systematic theologian Gustaf Wingren, a reasoning that is embedded in in the domain of shared humanity. It is a form of reasoning that shows an openness of “shared experiences for religious interpretation, while being attentive to diverging routes of a more confined secular approach to life, and a more encompassing religious view of reality that goes beyond mundane experiences of ordinary life”, (p. 366).

⁵³ Gregersen, (p. 366). Gregersen refers to the older paradigm, namely that of vulnerability, and says that in large numbers over a wide spectrum of scientific literature this change can now be observed.

⁵⁴ According to the UN report on the International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction that was published in 2009, the “resilience of a community is respect to potential hazard events is determined by a degree to which the community has the necessary resources and is capable of organizing itself both prior ant and during times of need”, Gregersen, (p.366).

⁵⁵ Gregersen, (p. 368).

⁵⁶ Gregersen, (p. 367).

⁵⁷ Gregersen, (p.368).

⁵⁸ Gregersen, (p.368).

⁵⁹ On a strong pastoral note, Gregersen states: "Religious language opens the door to deeper realities beyond all insurmountable walls, all technological progress, all social reform, and all too-straightforward self-help strategies", (p. 371).

⁶⁰ In South African history, the date of 1994 is a watershed date since that year saw the transition from South Africa's National Party government (who had ruled the country since 1948) and had advocated the apartheid system for most of its history, to the African National Congress (ANC) who had been outlawed in South Africa since the 1950s for its opposition to apartheid.

⁶¹ The criteria or directives entails for me the question: Do the scholarly contributions serve the South African context in which they have been written and engage with? What criteria can be formulated to make such a judgement? The final verdict I leave with the reader.

⁶² For this emphasis, see the important and beautiful contribution on carnal hermeneutics *Touch* by the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney in a time of Covid-19. Kearney, Richard, *Touch. Recovering our most vital sense*. New York: Colombia Press.

⁶³ See Christopher Southgate with regard to his three lens approach as an illuminating and insightful hermeneutical example. Southgate, Christopher (2021), "Explorations of God and COVID-19". *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 73 (10) 23-32. <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/124773>

⁶⁴ Given the distrust in many societal circles towards the sciences in an African context, this is no easy task.