

Religion in a Time of Covid

Research undertaken over the last two decades shows a global decline in religion with an increasing number of people finding that faith no longer gives them a source of strength or support that it once did. At the end of 2019 the world was faced with a pandemic that would affect every aspect of society and their daily lives. The young, old and families were isolated from one another as the government introduced a worldwide lockdown. For many, religion provided a community to rely on during the pandemic however the endless suffering that the virus caused also meant that scepticism in God increased. Although, millions lost loved ones due to the virus, the pandemic also had several unintentional consequences such as an increase in domestic abuse and, particularly due to the lockdowns, a rise in mental health problems, which may have also contributed to people's loss of hope in the God of Classical Theism.

In the United Kingdom alone there have been 19.4 million cases and 163K¹ deaths. The suffering, heartbreak, and grief this pandemic has caused is endless and this makes one question God's existence. The God of Classical Theism refers to a divine power who is omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipresent. However, according to Epicurus, the existence of evil and suffering proves that there is no God of Classical Theism. Mackie, through the logical problem of evil, links this to his inconsistent triad. Empirical observation proves that evil and suffering exists- if God were omnipotent, he would have the power to prevent evil and if he were omnibenevolent, he would want to prevent it however the existence of evil suggests he is either malevolent or does not exist.

Covid 19 has created a perpetuating cycle of never-ending suffering for individuals in terms of contracting the disease itself or losing loved ones from the virus, and therefore many people's faith in God has arguably declined. However, William Rowe with the evidential problem of evil argues that the God of Classical Theism can exist at the same time suffering does and this is because he believes that God does not stop evil, which serves a greater good, or which, if stopped would cause something worse. So, arguably faith in God was not lost over the course of the pandemic because many trusted their saviour and believed he had a plan: for example, perhaps the pandemic was created by God to allow humans, who have become so distant and technology oriented, to spend time with family and grow morally and spiritually. Nevertheless, the pandemic has caused endless suffering and so arguably even theists found it difficult to reconcile their belief in an omnibenevolent God and continue the belief that this suffering can and will serve a greater good as this has not yet been witnessed. Overall, Mackie posited a theoretical framework to demonstrate why people have lost their faith in God and moved away from religion. Despite Rowe's attempt to provide an answer to why people

¹ (JHU CSSE COVID-19 Data and Our World in Data, 2022)

should not reject religion, evil and suffering has occurred many a time in the form of war, natural disasters and viruses and one cannot experience this much suffering and still believe that God wants the best for his creations, when so many innocent people are dying.

Moreover, Mackie's inconsistent triad also suggests that God's existence would help those suffering mentally, however coronavirus led to so many people's feelings of personal hopelessness. The pandemic led to a national mental health crisis and a surge in domestic abuse. Mental health issues increased significantly particularly due to separation from family and friends, and physical and emotional distancing caused by preventative measures. The length of the pandemic potentially had a demoralising effect on people, who at first put their faith in God, but as new variants came out, and months went on, and exams were cancelled in two academic years, people began to lose motivation and thus hope in God. Moreover, domestic abuse also surged during the pandemic: the Domestic Abuse Line reported a 61% increase in calls in 2020: *'across the whole of 2020, 81% described being controlled by their partner, 58% had been subjected to physical abuse, 24% were being stalked or harassed and 40% were subjected to economic abuse.'*² Considering the pandemic lasted for over two years those who suffered from domestic abuse may have felt disheartened, especially considering many victims used life outside of the home as their escape to talk to family, friends and feel a sense of normality. However, being trapped in the house due to lockdown restrictions took this escape away and therefore the hope that they would escape their abuse was minimised. Overall, the increased feeling of hopelessness which the pandemic caused led people away from God; a God who is omnibenevolent would not want his creations to suffer mentally or physically.

Although, the feeling of hopelessness can cause people to reject God and his intentions, it can also cause people to affirm their faith in God as the void that the pandemic left can be filled by religion. Many theists would argue that the pandemic was brought as a test of faith for God to see whether we questioned his path and predestination for us. The result was that many people did lose faith, however others also gained it- as God, for many, was the only source of hope in the tragic times of the virus. In the Bible, Peter 4:12-13 stated *"Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."* Although the *'fiery trial'* was portrayed as a hardship and wrong for God to put humans through, despite his omnibenevolence, Peter showed that the outcome of the trial was positive, and *'glory'* was *'revealed'*. This suggests that the pandemic reflects the trial and although we are currently

² (Calls to domestic abuse helpline in England up by 60% over past year, 2022)

suffering, glory will eventually be revealed if we trust his plan and intentions. Philosopher, Pascal argues that a rational person should live as though God exists and seek to believe him despite the constant suffering people go through, so he would agree with the theory that the pandemic is perhaps a test from God to see those who keep their faith in God and those who reject it due to loss of hope that their saviour will protect them and their loved ones. And so, although, many religious people rejected God during the pandemic, many people's faith in God became stronger than ever due to the hope that the virus will eventually serve a greater purpose than humans can even imagine.

Additionally, religion may have eased the journey that was the pandemic, by providing people with online services and support rooms used to pray, talk and see family, friends and their religious community. These online services created social cohesion and united individuals who before may have felt alone and hopeless but due to the community felt optimistic and content. Before the pandemic most religious people came together every Sunday to attend their local place of worship and pray to the divine above. However, during the pandemic, people were effectively trapped inside their homes for the greater good and as a replacement many online services were held. However, some religions continued their religious festivals for example many Muslims made an attempt to celebrate Ramadan socially distanced, also in Judaism a minyan requires 10 men however lockdown restrictions, only permitted 6 people to gather and this meant that some religious customs could not continue during the pandemic. When places of worship reopened it showed people the power of coming together physically, sharing a faith and being there for each other. For example, in 2020, on Christmas day, many Christians who would typically go to Church, joined online servers to do what they would usually do but through a screen- this shows the supremacy of religion and community. However, these community religious groups were also significant (particularly in the United States), in creating large scale anti vaccination movements. These showed that religion during COVID could not only create positive changes, but also utilise people's anxieties and newfound community to argue against scientific developments.

In conclusion, the argument that religious feeling did decrease during the pandemic is strong. Although, many religious groups had a significant role to play within local communities, as a whole, they could not counteract feelings of personal helplessness during lockdown. For many Christians, the pandemic raised the issue of Mackie's inconsistent triad and the problem of evil. The length of the pandemic exacerbated these feelings and therefore, although religious groups may have played a significant part for some communities, individual religious believers may have been more likely to lose faith.