

Any Light in Darkness? A Theological Reflection on Covid-19

Gerry O'Hanlon SJ

Gerry O'Hanlon SJ is an Irish Jesuit, theologian and former Director of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice who has written extensively on Church reform and on the role of the Church in the public square. His latest book is *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2019, revised edition).



Deserted College Green, Dublin

How much longer will you forget me, Yahweh? For ever?
How much longer will you hide your face from me?

(Psalm 13:1 Jerusalem Bible)

OUR PREDICAMENT: THE INDIVIDUAL SEEKING MEANING

At the dawn of Western literature, in the *Iliad*, Homer tells the story of King Agamemnon who angered the gods through his arrogance. Apollo responded by causing a plague to erupt among the Greek army besieging Troy. In our more secular age, we do not need recourse to mythical stories about the gods to explain an outbreak of a novel coronavirus named Covid-19. We understand that disease, epidemics and, occasionally, pandemics are not exceptional in human history. Bacteria and viruses predate humans and, in the evolutionary tussle which characterises our world, outbreaks of infection naturally occur.

Nonetheless, especially in the case of a once-in-a-century outbreak (at least in our part of the world), we are shocked. Apart from the enormous disruption at the macro-level to

industry, commerce, trade, transport and so on, with knock-on consequences for global and national economies and employment, there are the personal and communal effects. The reality of illness, death and bereavement is present for many. We think of the surreal sight of funerals with few mourners. We marvel at the demanding and selfless service of front-line staff, be they in hospitals, at check-outs in supermarkets, on public transport or on the streets collecting and emptying our bins. There has been the reality of confinement for all. The not being able to “come and go” as we like. Restrictions on meeting loved ones. The inability to plan. Mounting uncertainty, boredom, and anxiety. Fear sometimes morphing into terror and even panic; weighing heavily on our mental health. Empty streets are replete with an eerie silence, albeit the clear sounds of birdsong. Our sense of life suspended. Many of us have now had an experience of what Pope Francis likes to call “the peripheries”¹ – what life is habitually like for so many migrants and asylum seekers, residents of direct provision, the homeless, and prisoners.

¹ The use of the term ‘periphery/peripheries’ by Francis dates back to Aparecida and his time in Argentina. See Massimo Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2017), 34–35, 155, 156 & 296.

We look to find learnings for the future in what is happening. Commentators have noted how our prized autonomy—so characteristic of the individualism of modernity—is suddenly revealed as somewhat threadbare. Indeed Boris Johnson, of all people, has gone on record repudiating the infamous “there is no such thing as society” aphorism of Margaret Thatcher. Terms like solidarity and the common good have gained new currency.²

More concretely, we witnessed in Ireland the almost overnight development of a single-tier health system in response to the public health crisis, referred to as ‘Sláintecare on speed’.³ World-wide there has been a reduction in air pollution due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the decrease of human activity, a reduction likely to lead to many fewer premature deaths.⁴ Indeed the overall improvement in environmental conditions globally and the prospects of meeting carbon emission targets have led many commentators to press for a more permanent change in ways of living and working, and have opened a renewed space for a hearing of the *Laudato Si’* encyclical of Pope Francis.

Now, as the incidence of the virus continues to wax and wane, we are taking tentative steps towards a return to a new normal. There has been, however, a certain wariness about this, extending to how we feel about one another. There is an awareness, too, that perhaps our shock can be an opportunity to break free from the gravitational pull of a return to business as usual and imagine a different future, where housing and health care, climate change and bio-diversity are valued as public goods and issues that we want to address.

Many commentators too, even in this secular age, have, like our forbears, addressed the human need to seek for a deeper meaning in this crisis. They have noted that we must not expect from science any more than a pointing to the kind of natural breakdowns, damage and what seems like random absurdity that are all part of an evolving universe, what Lonergan

in another context referred to as our world of “emergent probability”.⁵ Some have turned to the literary world, deriving meaning in the fiction of the likes of Camus, the poetry of Eavan Boland, or the thoughts of Viktor Frankl in his classic work *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Sooner or later this trail of enquiry leads to talk of intelligibility and meaning, and then of love, and then, inevitably, the religious question arises. Supposing God exists, what role does God have in all this – on the sidelines like the deist God of the Enlightenment, or present and engaged, but then why so seemingly ineffective? Is God all-powerful? Does the answer change if we foreground instead the idea that God is all-loving?

A global pandemic may be particularly bewildering for us because we live in a secular age where, as Charles Taylor noted, we inhabit an “immanent frame”⁶ of reference which leaves us poorly equipped at a public level to discuss issues of ultimate meaning. We have to a large extent lost our literacy about religious matters; we are unfamiliar, as the late Nicholas Lash often pointed out, with the grammar and syntax of speech about the divine.⁷ At its best, this immanent frame allows us autonomy and freedom, transparency and respectful democratic inclusion in a neutral space that is only possible “if reference to religion and the transcendence of God is excluded or maintained privately.”⁸ The disenchanting world of modernity has at its heart a perception of the cosmos as impersonal “in the most forbidding sense, blind and indifferent to our fate.”⁹ It is true that post-modernity has, in different ways, argued for a “re-enchantment” of our world, but it often does so at the cost of the reduction of knowledge to personal opinion, within a relativism which is dismissive of what it sees as the tyranny of objectivity.

² Thatcher shared the quip in an interview with *Woman’s Own* published on October 31, 1987.

³ Aoife Moore, ‘Emergency Legislation Debated in the Dáil Described as “Sláintecare on Speed”’, *Irish Examiner*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-30990309.html>.

⁴ Kai Chen et al., ‘Air Pollution Reduction and Mortality Benefit during the COVID-19 Outbreak in China’, *The Lancet Planetary Health* 4, no. 6 (1 June 2020): 210–12.

⁵ Bernard J.F. Lonergan, *Insight*, 3rd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 123–28, 171–72.

⁶ After Taylor, scholars have deployed the idea of an immanent frame to describe that view of the world where there is no sense of a cosmic order and no ‘supernatural’ beings, so anything which happens is only explicable through the physical world we perceive. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539–93.

⁷ Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008).

⁸ Graham Ward, ‘Christian Hope Facing Secular Fatalism’, *Doctrine and Life*, no. 70 (2020): 2–16.

⁹ Dermot A. Lane, SJ, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020), 34.

But there are signs that a contrite Modernism has begun to see the sense of re-admitting religion to the public square. Thinkers like Jurgen Habermas have argued for the necessity and usefulness of the religious focus and discourse on what is missing, in particular on issues of suffering and failure. The currency of post-secularism has gained validity as a more open secularism, flowing in harmony with the more generous liberalism at its roots. This post-secular stance recognises its own limits and fosters an awareness of the ability to find allies for its progressive instincts among the ranks of believers.¹⁰ It is in this context of building bridges rather than erecting walls that I turn to a more explicitly theological consideration of the crisis we face, hoping that non-believers and people of goodwill will feel welcome as partners of the conversation.

OUR EXPLORATION: MEANING AND FLOURISHING

Let me begin by just mentioning two major areas of shared interest between believers and non-believers. First, there is the pursuit of human flourishing. Here, one can easily see that there is a vast amount of common ground between all participants in this search, be they religious or not. The great faiths of the world, including the different strands of Christianity, have all developed ethical traditions and doctrines which can be sources of shared reflection and action with non-believers as people pursue flourishing, individually and corporately. The Catholic Social Teaching tradition fits within these categories and stands as a rich and long-standing source of critique of the culture of individualism and autonomy associated with the neoliberal economic paradigm which seems so desperately deficient in the light of Covid-19. Catholic Social Teaching has countered the diminished ethical vision of neoliberalism for decades, proposing instead robust notions of the common good, effective solidarity and a preferential option for the poor. This critique has culminated recently in Pope Francis' environmental manifesto, *Laudato Si'*, where he calls for an "integral

ecology"¹¹ and an "ecological conversion" informed throughout by engagement with secular scientific evidence.¹²

Secondly, the pandemic has prompted many – regardless of their confessional commitments – to seek out deeper meaning to the events we are enduring. This search may not terminate at a religious conclusion, but it invariably touches on religious questions. Covid-19 confronts believers with what has been called the question of theodicy: how does one justify the existence of a good God when there is so much evil in our world? This question – which is at the centre of the Book of *Job* in the Hebrew Bible – is one where the non-believer appears to have the upper hand. One thinks of Ivan in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* whose perfectly appropriate outrage at innocent suffering, especially of children, is so hard to reconcile with the existence of an all-powerful and good God.¹³

And yet, do we not ordinarily take meaning and purpose for granted as we live our daily lives and plan for our future and that of our children? Is this sensible if all meaning we find or construct or otherwise encounter is overcome by suffering and death? And how are we to account for our human experiences of beauty, truth, goodness, self-sacrificing love, justice, with their intimations of a more eternal sense and meaning, without God?¹⁴ Believers need to listen carefully to the objections of non-believers in order to purge their own necessarily limited and sometimes seriously erroneous images of God. Yet non-believers must see that no argument or proof is yet decisive on matters of deep meaning. The pandemic prompts all of us to give an account of the hope that is within us.¹⁵

These two important areas are of shared interest, if not always of shared agreement, among participants in any conversation looking

¹⁰ Michele Dillon, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 12; Gerry O'Hanlon, SJ, ed., *A Dialogue of Hope* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2017).

¹¹ Pope Francis, 'Laudato Si': Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home' (Vatican, May 2015), §10 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

¹² *Laudato Si'*, §217.

¹³ "... I just most respectfully return him the ticket." Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (London: Vintage, 2004).

¹⁴ I note an interesting comment by Benedict XVI in his Encyclical *Spes Salvi*: 'I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, in any case the strongest argument, in favour of faith in eternal life'. See Pope Benedict XVI, 'Spes Salvi' (Vatican, 2007), § 43, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

¹⁵ 1 Peter 3:15, author's translation.

“Believers need to listen carefully to the objections of non-believers in order to purge their own necessarily limited and sometimes seriously erroneous images of God.”

to make sense of our present crisis. I want now, however, to explore what a more theologically-centred narrative of God in the age of a pandemic might look like. As believers engage these conversations about flourishing and theodicy, their stories rotate around God. My hope is that non-believers will feel welcome participants in this conversation.

OUR RESPONSE: FLOURISHING AND LAMENT

Theology and spirituality must engage with what is real if they are to avoid the ever-present temptation of abstract spiritualising. One of Pope Francis’ most utilised aphorisms is that realities are greater than ideas.¹⁶ In our present context, then, we need to take seriously the experience of mourning and lamentation, of loss, personal and communal, that is at the core of our Covid-19 anguish.

In a helpful reflection on the idiom of lamentation in the Bible (and most prominently in the Psalms), North American theologian Bradford Hinze identifies different features of the genre.¹⁷ It is a cry for God to listen and respond; it offers testimony to personal and collective suffering in the form of complaint, grief, frustration and despair; it expresses the pain of unfulfilled aspirations or intentions; it gives evidence of an ache, tension, rage, dissipation of energy and numbness. Lament is the response of a people who are suffering what Walter Brueggemann has aptly described as “disorientation.”¹⁸ The driving forces behind the literary form of lament are two basic questions: why and how long? It involves a triadic relationship – the I

or we who laments; God, as the one addressed; and “the other”, identified as the enemy, who is held responsible for the reason for the lament. The lament involves a struggle with these relationships and “with the limited and distorted views of self, community, others, and even God revealed in situations of suffering.”¹⁹

Hinze notes that this posing of liminal questions calls all (including God) into account. Realities like pity and anger, retribution and remorse surface in a way that confronts the mystery and hiddenness of God, and can produce not deadly toxins but a truer form of love-in-action and a more purified understanding of the identities of self, others, and God. He notes too that it is easy to suppose that the New Testament, with the coming of Jesus, is characterised by the absence of lament. However, this is not so. Hinze cites as central Jesus’ cry on the cross in Mark and Matthew, echoing Psalms 22:1-2, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” (Matthew 27:46, NLT), as well as Paul’s conviction that “the whole creation groans” (Romans 8:22, NASB) in the birth pangs of new life on our planet. The one who laments on the cross, Hinze goes on to say, “is suffering the consequences of responding to the laments of the people of God.”²⁰

Finally, Hinze considers the longstanding Christian tradition known as the “dark night of the soul” to describe how we often find ourselves at a profound *impasse*. In this state, life feels as if it has reached a dead-end where there is no way out, possibilities have narrowed to nothing, and the individual experiences crushing alienation, facing the prospect of psychological disintegration, breakdown, and self-deception. Hinze observes that we can draw the implications for communities and collective awareness: Christian sources equip communities when they find themselves forced to question their own identity, direction, effectiveness, and value.

During these periods of *impasse* there is a darkness and death that can, nonetheless, be the redemptive seedbed for hope and fertile soil for the power of God to work in

¹⁶ Pope Francis, ‘Evangelii Gaudium’ (Vatican, 2013), §231 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

¹⁷ Bradford E. Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 76–89.

¹⁸ Consider: Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms, A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 51–58.

¹⁹ Hinze, *Prophetic Obedience*, 77.

²⁰ Hinze, 79.



the imagination, to bring about a new social imaginary.²¹ Our positive response to these difficult situations will be aided approaching our crisis in a stance of lament.²² To assess the situation we are faced with in this manner is a kind of “discernment of spirits” that is characteristic of the Ignatian tradition in which the positive potentiality of desolation is explored. In this way we can seek to avoid an indulgence in anger for its own sake and, instead, tap into its potential to generate constructive responses to injustice.

This scriptural and theological reading of lamentation clears ground on which we can acknowledge the horror of what is unfolding before us with Covid-19 in this surreal time of exile, when so many personal and social landmarks and points of reference are deleted or obscured. By avoiding easy spiritualising and settling for the notion of religion as “the opiate for the masses”, the next step is to follow hints for underlying meaning and hope. It remains to explore these more positive possibilities.

OUR THEOLOGY: LAMENT INTO A NEW HORIZON

For Christians it is the figure of Jesus who reveals who God is. Far from being distant and uninvolved, Jesus shows that God is with us. This is literally the title given to him in the Christmas stories recorded in the Gospel: *Emmanuel* – God-with-us. The Christian claim is that God takes on human form (Incarnation) in Jesus. He is “like us in all things but sin.”²³ Jesus is in solidarity with us through suffering. He presents the mercy of God to us in bodily form. And, *crucially*, he is one who dies through *asphyxiation* and *respiratory problems*. The events of Good Friday take on new meaning as we are haunted by this virus. His family and friends were denied the chance to grieve as well; the authorities intervening in the disposal of his corpse. The women who discover the empty tomb were, after all, engaged in a foray to try to honour his body in the culturally appropriate fashion.

After his death his followers came to believe that this fascinating, mysterious, very human figure they had known and loved so well had been resurrected by the power of God;

²¹ Hinze, 84–85.

²² Such an approach is proposed by Kevin Hargaden in his theological account of the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger: Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age: Confronting the Christian Problem with Wealth* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 176-181.

²³ Pope John Paul II, ‘Catechism of the Catholic Church’ (Vatican, 1992), §467 https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

“Jesus is in solidarity with us through suffering. He presents the mercy of God to us in bodily form. And, crucially, he is one who dies through *asphyxiation* and *respiratory problems*.”

that his life, suffering and death had been representative and substitutionary in a way that definitively sealed God’s plan of salvation for humanity and all creation (a new heaven and a new earth); that he was in fact God; that God at the deepest level was Trinitarian, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.²⁴ These followers only came to be known as Christians years later, in part because they were as surprised by this turn of events as we would be. The entire intellectual history of the Christian churches unfolds from claims that can be expressed in a handful of words but take millennia to interrogate.

The attempts to make sense of all of this constitutes the Christian tradition, stretching from Mark and Paul in New Testament times up to the present day. One such attempt has been that of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.²⁵ Balthasar argues that in Jesus, different strands of humanity’s intellectual search come together. The classical Greek pursuit of the unity of the transcendentals of Being – that which is beautiful is good and is also true – is brought into close conjunction with the Hebrew notion of glory (*kabod, doxa*).²⁶ He shows how in the Hebrew tradition, glory meant something weighty, impressive, powerful and splendid. That which was glorious was that which overwhelmed us, drew out our respect, awe and worship. Glory denoted that experience many of us have felt in the most treasured moments of our life when we realise with a feeling close to fear that we find ourselves on somehow holy ground, in a time and space set apart from ordinary existence.

24 See: Lane, SJ, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue*, chaps 3 & 4.

25 Gerry O’Hanlon, SJ, *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

26 This reconnection of truth, goodness and beauty by Balthasar is taken up by Pope Francis as the metaphysical premise of his own sociology and politics in his emphasis on the common good as the synthesis of the transcendentals and the goal of engaged citizens. See Borghesi, *The Mind of Pope Francis*.

The Christian conception of this experience is counter-intuitive because it insists that humanity reached its glorious perfection not in a figure who amassed great power but in one who “emptied himself” of his divine status to become not just human but our servant, and to the point of accepting death on a cross on our behalf (Philippians 2: 5-11, ESV). This theology of *kenosis* (meaning self-emptying) means that beauty (the transcendental equivalent of the biblical glory) now embraces not just a perception of a form that is pleasing and an enrapturement and captivation by it, but of a form that can be ugly, hard to look at, but beautiful because it is suffused by love. It is a function of our secularised age that so few people recognise the subversive intent of the primary visual representation of Christianity – the cross is a torture device deployed by a military superpower to oppress and terrorise a colonised people, but in the hands of the early Christians it became a symbol of self-sacrificial, non-violent human solidarity. Traces of this original revolution persist in our contemporary language. The popular phrase of Italian lovers, *ti amo da morire* (*I love you to bits, to death*), is personified by the life and death of Jesus Christ.

And so, Balthasar argues, we are captivated by the beauty of Jesus because he is the icon of God’s love, which is not self-serving but other-focused. This is not an abstract claim, but the very nature of God’s being – that’s the implication of saying God is Trinity: God was focused on the other even before there were others in existence because God is in God’s self a unity-in-diversity. This love overcomes evil and destruction, not by the interventionist *Deus ex machina* device of Hollywood hacks, but by the long-suffering, patient respect for our freedom and for the rhythms of the natural universe now held within the embrace of a love

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Hans Urs Von Balthasar

that is the origin and end of our lives. In a time when we feel suffering, it matters that the Christian conception of God is one that bears the cost of our freedom and nature's profligacy.

In this light, we come to see that talk of God's *omnipotence* in the abstract is always misleading. Omnipotence, in the Christian tradition, is a characteristic of love. Love wins, but the victory is costly and it takes time.

Despite, then, the seemingly intractable nature of our difficulties in this life, and those in particular of this present period, the constant refrain of the Christian scriptures is "do not be afraid." And so, despite outward appearances, we are told that 'blessed are those who mourn' because 'for it is when I am weak that I am strong' (2 Cor 12:10).

This, however, is not some kind of masochistic cult glorifying suffering and weakness, much less an infantile dependence on God. Rather, the New Testament, and the life of Jesus himself, reveals a God who wants us to have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10),²⁷ both individually and collectively, but to do so while being in solidarity with one another and in relationship with God.

This is a God who knows that because suffering can be so hard and we can be so self-contained, we (like Jesus himself in the desert) are tempted to rely excessively on our own autonomy. Jesus himself asked for the "cup to pass", he felt abandoned by God on the cross, and yet the 'yes' of his radical trust (into your hands I commend my spirit) persisted and

²⁷ One thinks of the phrase of Irenaeus towards the end of the 2nd century AD – the glory of God is the human being fully alive. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), bk. 4, chap. 20.

resulted in that epoch-changing event of the resurrection. It is through faith in his life, death and resurrection that someone like Martin Luther King can say that "unearned suffering is redemptive"²⁸ and that Paul can imagine a role for all of us, through grace of course, in what is 'lacking' in the sufferings of Jesus Christ for his church and for our universe (Colossians 1:24, ESV). Christianity is not a result of abstract theorising arriving at a conception of deity, but a tradition that emerges out of the still-live question of how to make sense of the experience – beginning with those we now call apostles – of a humanity which loves with a quality that is truly divine. When our search for meaning in the age of pandemic wanders into hypotheticals distant from actual practices of love, it will quickly reach an impasse. The search for flourishing and meaning are pursuits mapped out by love.

And so, with Balthasar, Pope Francis can insist that "only love is credible"²⁹ and he never tires of basing all his injunctions to ethical endeavour, missionary activity, and church reform on the foundation of our encounter with Jesus Christ. Time and again he repeats the remark of Pope Benedict that "... being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction".³⁰

CONCLUSION: THE CORPORATE CONVERGENCE

For believers, the persistent temptation is to spiritualise, to hypothesise, to abstract away from lived reality into the neater world of ideas, separating Sundays from the rest of the week, the church building from the rest of our lives, to regress to a notion of meaning that puts all our eggs into the basket of the next life. There is inevitable risk in testing Jesus' insistence that the Kingdom of God is *now*. But this is a test believers cannot shirk. Since its revolutionary return to its own sources during the Vatican II meetings, the

²⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 219. For a careful engagement of this provocative idea, consider Rufus Burrow Jr, *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2014), 189–90.

²⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glaubhaft Ist Nur Liebe* (Einsiedeln, 1963).

³⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, 'Deus Caritas Est' (Vatican, 2005), §1, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.



An Empty St. Peter's Square During Way of the Cross, April 2020

Catholic Church has ceaselessly pressed our shared responsibility for our world now.³¹ The Covid-19 crisis has given us an opportunity, through the lament and disorientation that we are experiencing, to re-imagine our situation and to re-engage in our efforts to create, with God's unfailing help, a new and better world.

Non-believers and people of goodwill will have their own take on what is happening. Considering recent history on this island, they may not welcome input from Christian sources. But this is a crisis that implicates us all and it wise to reject light from no quarter, especially as we must all pull together to survive this challenge. There are too many areas of overlapping consensus to keep the confessed believer separated from the convinced unbeliever. For example, the secularist axiom of the dignity of every human being, upon which universal human rights are based, receives foundational support from the Christian belief that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God.³² But these kinds of mutual learnings are only possible if there is sustained and respectful dialogue. A dialogue in which points of difference and commonality will emerge in a manner which a pluralist liberalism at its best is accustomed to accommodate.

³¹ Lane, SJ, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue*, chap. 5.

³² What is more, as has been argued, mankind is created in the image of a Trinitarian God whose inherent relationality implies that the human person, far from being only an individual, is intrinsically relational, social, and political.

One such point of convergence might be the beautiful poem of the late Eavan Boland entitled *Quarantine*. In it she tells of a couple setting out from the workhouse "... in the worst hours of the worst season of the worst year of a whole people," walking together, "she was sick with famine fever and could not keep up. He lifted her and put her on his back," but "in the morning they were both found dead. Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history. But her feet were held against his breastbone. The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her." Boland goes on to observe and conclude:

There is no place for the inexact

Praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body

There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847


Also what they suffered. How they lived.

And what there is between a man and woman.

And in which darkness it can best be proved.³³

We can all be moved by the beauty and nobility of this image of what it is to be human. But in this time of lament, the believer can also read it as a pointer to the glory of divine love personified in the crucified and risen Christ, source of hope, joy, and our motivation for a better, more just world.

³³ Eavan Boland, *Code* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2001).



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