HOW TO THINK THEOLOGICALLY AFTER COVID19:
Some Reflections and Pointers on Jesus as Philosopher

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ABSTRACT

A number of religious and philosophical figures and traditions have arguably shown an inadequate response to the Coronavirus (Covid19) pandemic. Thinking through some problems and challenges, a basis in a broadly modernist, progressive, or liberal theology is outlined which it is argued may justify understanding Jesus as a philosopher. This is placed in the context of a Christian response that seeks to be in dialogue with a wider world, including those with no religious or different religious identities. The paper also explicitly speaks about a particular global communal theological discussion that prompted a number of its insights and responses.

Keywords: Atheism, Community, Coronavirus, Jesus, Illness, Interreligious, Modernist Theology, Philosophy, Post-colonialism, Religious Identity

INTRODUCTION

Theology, if it happens at all, does not happen in isolation. It happens in community. This may or may not be a church community. It may or may not be linked to intentional prayer.[1] It may or may not draw from what may be seen as traditional theological or ecclesial resources. I say this for two reasons. Firstly, the origins of this paper are communal, starting with a thought paper sent out by the Sri Lankan theologian Shanthikumar

1. Sweetman, Will, 'Sisyphus and I: Or, Theologians I Have Known in Three Decades as Religionswissenschaftler,' *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 32 (2020) 2-3, p.145-65.

Hettiarachchi[2] to a group of about seventy theologians and thinkers both in Asia and around the world. That, in these times of lockdown and social distancing, this community was entirely a virtual one is apt. My thoughts herein are inspired not just by my own inner voice, but responses and reactions from a range of thinkers to that initial impetus. Indeed, my first response was perhaps limited to asking how we speak, and it is the contributions of others who inspired my thoughts for what has become this paper. I draw both from their comments and some sources linked from them in what follows. As such, this online community is a key impetus in what I have written here. Secondly, against any notion of theology as relating to some higher transcendent power or deity, as 'god-talk', I would contend that what we actually see is simply the viewpoints of a particular social group within its own contextual setting (whether that be Roman Catholic theologians, Advaita Vedantin pandits, Pure Land Mahayana monks, or Calvinist pastors – recognizing that 'god-talk' may not apply to all of these). By social groups, I have in mind Rogers Brubaker's[3] notion of 'groups' as fluid, shifting, and contingent social endeavours for the borders of them are always negotiated in communities. The relevance of this latter point will be explicated in what follows.

In this paper, I will begin by setting out some thoughts about how we may begin thinking about responses to Covid19 and what place theology may have in this. This first section will be somewhat impressionistic as there are many potential lines that could be addressed in relation to this issue. It has an element of subjectivity in terms of what I will address but helps build a foundation for the following two sections. Next, I will

2. Hettiarachchi, Shanthikumar, 'Some Socio-political and theological areas to think through during the self- imposed Quarantine period.' Unpublished paper (20 March 2020). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340077266_Some_Sociopolitical_and_theological_areas_to_think_through_during_the_self-_imposed_Quarantine_period.

3. Brubaker, Rogers, 'Ethnicity without Groups,' *Archives Européenes de Sociologie*, 43 (2002) 2, p. 171-73.

address some more specifically theological questions, from a largely modernist perspective, but also taking account of the need to address those who do not align with religion and thinking beyond specifically Christian confines. Finally, developing from what has been said, I will ask how thinking about Jesus as someone who developed a 'compassionate spiritual philosophy' may be useful; for this felicitous phrase and inspiring me to think about Jesus as a philosopher, I express my debt to Noel Fernando, one of those in the community of discussion mentioned above.

THOUGHTS THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL

Hettiarachchi's paper raised in my mind two initial questions: how to respond, and who to respond to? I address them together in what follows, though more implicitly than explicitly. It would be easy to make some glib or platitudinous theological responses: trust in a protecting biblical God that all shall be well, prayer and intercession as solutions to our predicament, or the community of the Church as providing a place of hope. However, for reasons to be outlined, none of these responses seemed to me to be adequate. Moreover, speaking from my own context of privilege - living as an academic in Singapore (with a British background), although being close to the outbreak and an early centre of the virus' spread - I struggled to think about how to respond knowing that many of those most affected were the poorest and most vulnerable.[4]

Moreover, having seen the abject failure of various religions (or, rather, particular teachers or traditions) in terms of denial, claiming that 'my deity' would protect me and my group in mass rallies or gatherings, or in suggesting that prayer and intercession would take the place of science in delivering us from this disease, it was my thought that a religious response, the words of theology, could hardly be credible. Of course, a

4. World Service, 'Can Africa Cope with Coronavirus?' *BBC World Service* 'The Inquiry' (9 April 2020). Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cszl36.

modernist theological response is very different to such 'fundamentalist' (taking on board the problematics of that term) religious responses, but in a public theology speaking to the world at this time, an overtly theological response seems to me suspect. Certainly, there has not been much evidence of good leadership coming from the churches and other religious institutions at this time.

It is important to note the way that the virus has challenged, or raised to the surface, some of our attitudes and societal expectations. A very perceptive piece by Arundhati Roy[5] has challenged some of our perceptions of privilege and global inequality, for she has noted her disbelief at watching the USA's lack of preparedness and equipment as doctors in New York in particular make stark choices as to who lives and who dies. The 'First World' has certainly shown its crumbling corners and dark underside, and it should come as no surprise that, again in the U.S.A., African Americans are dying in the highest proportions. Meanwhile, racism and xenophobia have raised their ugly heads in references to the 'Chinese virus' being repeated by certain politicians and media outlets. But such virulence against China has not simply been the lot of populist politicians, with respected theorists and philosophers weighing in, such as Alain Badiou.[6] Europe, and the West's, sense of superiority to, and security against, the rest of the world has been shown to be much misplaced.

Nevertheless, the continued arrogance and failure to realise this is exposed. Again, when we have seen theorising on this, for example even from such an august thinker as Giorgio Agamben, it has been argued that

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5. Roy, Arundhati, 'The pandemic is a portal.' *The Financial Times* (4 April 2020). Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.
6. Xiang, Zairong, 'COVID19: on the epistemic condition.' *Open Democracy* (6 April 2020). Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/covid-19-epistemic-condition/?fbclid=IwAR0Z6SzEAYFG3xZnozJ2MVOY3d3nD9gxtoEXRBi921BWKZEF67Ypj99yN6k.

we have seen philosophy and theory failing us, for Agamben tells us that coronavirus concerns are 'invented' and he arguably measures the effects of the epidemic only against a 'normal' life of privilege.[7] If even such illustrious figures as Badiou and Agamben fail to grasp what stands before us, then what to say? The failings of more secular thinkers are no excuse for theologians, often prey to the same prejudices and lack of insight, to pontificate. Although the work of hospital chaplains could be noted as exemplifying moral courage in the midst of despair,[8] could we not say the same about the (secular, atheist, non-religious?) doctors and nurses, not to mention countless other volunteers providing medical aid and supplies? This is not to decry such courageous pastoral care, or the comfort it can bring at such times, but today we also have Humanist chaplains on the front line, and any priority for religion's place is insecure.

Against the face of the virus, I do not hold out hope for theology to be at the frontline when it comes to many of the issues. For instance, medical staff may face moral injury and trauma, for they are being asked to 'play god' and decide who lives and who dies in a time when their usual supplies are pushed beyond their limits;[9] though for many in the world ventilators and masks were never plentiful, or even available, in normal times. Again, theology will not make us immune to the psychological changes and challenges faced at this time.[10]

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7. Shani, Giorgio, 'Securitizing "Bare Life"? Human Security and Coronavirus,' *E-International Relations* (3 April 2020). Available at: https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/03/securitizing-bare-life-human-security-and-coronavirus/

8. Weiss, Bari, 'The Men and Women Who Run Toward the Dying,' *The New York Times* (3 April 2020). Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/opinion/coronavirus-hospitals-chaplains.html.

9. BBC, 'Coronavirus: Why healthcare workers are at risk of moral injury,' *BBC News* (6 April 2020). Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52144859.

10. Robson, David, 'The fear of coronavirus is changing our psychology,' *BBC Future* (2 April 2020). Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200401-covid-19-how-fear-of-coronavirus-is-changing-our-psychology.

Reflection on the virus may well be prompted not so much by theological resources, but sociological and theoretical ones. As the Malay historian Farish A. Noor has noted, we can speak about: 'The virus scare as a mirror to ourselves and our society'.[11] Since Susan Sontag's[12] classic work on illness as metaphor, there has been a reflection on the way that disease is a cipher for our prejudices. While the terms are used variously, we will follow here a clear distinction used by the British theologian Alan Race[13] in the communal discussion that inspired this paper (his response paper is also a blog for Modern Church): disease is the physical affliction; illness is the way that this is socially constructed and imagined, in Sontag's terms it is the way it becomes a metaphor. This very much reflects a number of points raised above. The notion of the 'Chinese virus' clearly epitomises xenophobia, which postcolonial analysis shows is often tied into imagination of a primitive Asia read in colonial or neo-colonial terms.[14]

Amongst all of this, does theology still have a role? I must thank the British sociologist Paul Weller for sharing a reflection by the Sri Lankan cognitive psychologist and theologian Sanjee Perera to the communal discussion, in which, as a Good Friday meditation, she shares how she turned from theology in the face of suffering but later found her secular sociological and psychological frames likewise inadequate.[15] She speaks about the need for a 'wounded healer', offering us, I believe, a soteriology of a *soter* rather different from those of the classical tradition in its

11. Noor, Farish, A., 'The virus scare as a mirror to ourselves and our society,' *The Straits Times* (10 February 2020). Available at: https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/cartoons/the-virus-scare-as-a-mirror-to-ourselves-and-our-society.

12. Sontag, Susan, *Illness as Metaphor, and AIDS and its Metaphors*. New York, NY: Picador, 1990 (1977, 1988).

13. Race, Alan, 'God is to be found in the virus,' *Modern Church* (4 April 2020). Available at: https://modernchurch.org.uk/god-is-to-be-found-in-the-virus.

14. Noor, op. cit.

15. Perera, Sanjee, 'Walking in Gethsemane,' *SCM Press blog* 'Walking in Isolation' 12 (10 April 2020). Available at: https://scmpress.hymnsam.co.uk/blog/theologyinisolation-12-waking-in-gethsemane.

mainstream formulations.[16] Perera certainly does not ask us to simply trust in protection from on high as a simple answer. She tells us that 'only a broken body mangled by death can speak to our anguish,' while suggesting that what we find 'in Gethsemane is a wounded healer on his knees'.[17] But, even with this, I would suggest that if theology will have a role it will be a down-the-line reflection. There may be a comfort in one who is broken or suffers alongside us, an idea found not only in Christianity,[18] but I think that while this may offer some pastoral comfort we need to revise how we speak going forward. We have seen bad leadership, we have seen countries closing in and looking out for their own,[19] and toxic forms of religion in denial about the virus and claiming that faith alone or that '*my god*' will keep *me/us* safe. These have been about the 'small' group of the 'I' or 'mine', and not about the 'inter'-connections. We may hope, for some good may come from the virus in certain ways,[20] that it will promote a wider reflection on how we live, what we believe, and how we behave. I am not a utopian and do not believe that, in the longer term, we will treat our planet or our fellow humans better as a result of this virus. Humans are fickle - sinful, proud, and full of the three fires - and we will soon forget. But, some people, in

16. This plays upon the dual connotations of *soter* (soteriology) as healer and saviour, prioritising the former over the later against mainstream theological soteriological tradition which have tended to shift focus to a transcendent/supernatural need for 'release' from our bodies, fallen selves, and state of being-in-the-world by a divine intervention, rather than to see how we may be mended/healed in our bodies, 'fallen' selves, and state of being-in-the-world. On some issues around thinking of "materiality" in religion see (Hedges, Paul, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021a, p. 209-31).

17. Perera, op. cit.

18. Hedges, Paul, 'The Body (*Sattva*) on the Cross: A Comparative Theological Investigation of the Theology of the Cross in the Light of Chinese Mahayana Suffering Bodhisattvas,' *Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36 (2016) p. 133-48.

19. CNA, "Accused of 'piracy', U.S. denies diverting masks bound for Germany,' *Channel News Asia* (6 April 2020). Available at: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/accused-of--piracy---us-denies-diverting-masks-bound-for-germany-12614422.

20. Harding, Andrew, 'How coronavirus inspired a gangland truce in South Africa,' *BBC News* (8 April 2020). Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-52205158/how-coronavirus-inspired-a-gangland-truce-in-south-africa.

some places, will want to think better about this. Theology may be one discipline that can offer some small inspiration to those seeking it. Not through a theology of triumph, or of 'my (small) god' but a theology that is interreligious, inter-communal, inter-being, intersectional, and interconnected.

A THEOLOGICAL BASIS

I will make a claim that will display, perhaps, my own theological inclinations, that we cannot believe in an intercessory deity, one heavily critiqued through the modernist tradition.[21] This is certainly in line with the critique I have raised above about problematic manifestations of religion that have asserted their 'faith' against the scientific evidence and the reality of the virus. But, very explicitly, I do not want to simply have a theological answer that speaks into the ecclesial space nor just to Christians. Theology must be in dialogue with increasing numbers who no longer believe in any deity, or even if they have spiritual beliefs do not adhere to a particular religious tradition.[22] I have also, above, stressed the need for an 'inter-' perspective, and would particularly emphasise the need for an interreligious conversation in this respect.[23] Such a theological response should steer clear of specific claims of faith, and speak to a wider constituency, though it may challenge us beyond our everyday conceptions. Race reports that when 'John Robinson, preached a final sermon before his death from cancer in 1983 he declared that "God is to be found in the cancer as in everything else"'.[24] We should not seek, as

[21]. Badham, Paul, *The Contemporary Challenge of Modernist Theology*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1998.
[22]. Hedges, Paul, *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2017.
[23]. I would argue that this must also be an intersectional response, aware of the need to look at many marginalised voices and the way that oppression and discrimination often meets at many points of these (Kim, Grace Ji-Sun and Susan Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018).
[24]. Race, op. cit.

Perera[25] suggests, a deity of Arcadia, but one of Gethsemane. That is to say, whatever the divine or deity may be is in what we may term the horizontal, the person-to-person and everydayness of our lives, not the vertical, the transcendent and miraculous realm of 'faith' and 'belief'. In the terminology of the American theologian Carter Heyward, we find the religious realm in 'godding' where 'God' is not a noun but a verb. Invoking Dorothee Soelle, Heyward tells us that 'the role we are called to play, again and again, [is] to *go with* one another in the radically mutual, interdependent world and creation that we share'.[26] Mary Daly has also used this language, and stresses in particular the move towards doing in such a perspective when she says: 'Why indeed must "God" be a noun? Why not a verb - the most active and dynamic of all'?[27] It is a theological stance which emphasises activity in the world, indeed one in which human action as much - if not more - than contemplation of the divine or expectations of divine intervention takes precedence; this may bring to mind also Martin Buber's classic reflections on dialogue and the I - Thou[28] where the human to human interaction takes place as though only you may act for you stand before another in their human need. Such a theological outlook sees religion not as a privileged space of contemplation, but as only one voice amongst others in our common being together. Arguments have recently been made that Christian public theologians should stand alongside those of others religions and those of no religion in seeking the common good.[29]

Such a theological stance can offer its own insights, drawing from the

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25. Perera, op. cit.
26. Heyward, Carter, *Saving Jesus from Those who are Right: Rethinking what it Means to be Christian*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999, p. 131.
27. Daly, Mary, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1973, p. 33.
28. Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, (trans.) Walter Kaufmann. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970 (1923).
29. Pirner, Manfred, Johannes Lahnemann, Werner Haussmann, and Susanne Schwarz, (eds.), *Public Theology, Religious Diversity, and Interreligious Learning*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

perspectives of multiple traditions without resorting simply into insular imagined confessional boundaries. Certainly, following Brubaker and with an interreligious lens, we see that our groups are shifting. While some may see themselves both bounded and united (for our out-group shapes our in-group) by an intra-religious confessional identity vs. other confessions (e.g. Methodist vs. Coptic, etc.), by a singular religious identity (e.g. as Christian vs. Buddhist, etc.), by a religious versus non-religious identity (e.g. believer vs atheist, etc.), or any other permutation, we need to be aware of the provisional nature of these borders.[30] From this perspective, to use a well-worn phrase, we should not seek to preach about a Christ of Faith, but to speak of the Jesus of History. Yet, it will not be enough to talk about what we may with probability know about a particular Rabbi named Yeshua who probably lived in the early decades CE before being executed by the Romans for treason.[31] For an interreligious theology that speaks to a spiritual ground shared in our godding, it may be useful to speak of Jesus as a philosopher.

Before moving to reflecting on Jesus as philosopher, it is perhaps worth reflecting further on this paper as a work of theology and what is not included herein. In many ways, I eschew a high Christology and much doctrinal baggage, which will immediately make this work less appealing to certain - and indeed significant - demographic who may be a potential audience. My theology herein is modernist and draws from social scientific and philosophical resources, which from a Tillichian perspective draws it within a theology of correlation, and so may also be said to make

[30]. Brubaker, op. cit., See Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*. London: SCM Press, 2010; Hedges, 2021a, pp. 140-62. and Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Anti-Semitism in Global Context*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021b.

[31]. Vermes, Geza, *The Passion*. London: Penguin, 2005. For some wider reflections on the Jesus of history and the problems of how Jesus has traditionally been presented, see Hedges, Paul, 'White Jesus and Antisemitism: Toward an Antiracist and Decolonial Christology', *Current Dialogue* 72 (2020) 5.

it quite traditional.[32] With this said, I address myself to a particular audience, which is not to deny that other readings of Jesus also have their place. For instance, perhaps some interreligious interlocutors may wonder what Jesus is presented here if it differs from that of the "traditional" Christian standpoint.[33] Importantly, much of what I say below about Jesus as a philosopher could also be developed by thinking of Jesus as a prophet. Noting this, I consider it imperative to view Jesus within his Jewish context, and my aim here is not to remove him from that (which it has been argued happens very much with traditional high Christology and traditional doctrinal formulations, which may even be anti-Semitic.[34] Rather, we are thinking Jesus today in alignment with him as a human teacher which draws from his first century Jewish context.[35]

JESUS AS PHILOSOPHER

I believe we will find wisdom in thinking of Jesus as a teacher of a 'compassionate spiritual philosophy'.[36] What I present here is not

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32. Paul Tillich develops what he termed a theology of correlation to justify his usage of existential philosophy and contemporary thought in his own theological work (Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vol. combined set. Welwyn: James Nisbet, 1968, p. 67-68). However, as Tillich noted while he had named his method it was not new, for theologians had always drawn from the thought world and contemporary concepts of their times, whether this had been – to use various examples – Justin Martyr in writing in the dialogue style, Augustine of Hippo in adopting Neo-Platonism, or Thomas Aquinas in utilizing Ibn Rushd's adaptation of Aristotelianism (often termed Averroism, noting that it was more Ibn Rushd [often known as Averroes] than Aristotle's thought). As such, I could argue that by eschewing much "high theology" my work here may even be quite traditional by remaking itself within a contemporary context as theology has always done, and in ways attuned to the knowledge of the modern world.

33. I would note Catherine Cornille's "Conditions of Dialogue" as a case in point, where she suggests that to be an acceptable dialogue partner one should, she argues, be seen to be placed and committed within one's own tradition (Cornille, Catherine, "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Cornille, Catherine. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, p. 20–33). However, there are critiques of the Western and Catholic framing from which she works. (Hedges, 2021a, p. 337-40).

34. Hedges, 2020.

35. Hedges, 2021a, p. 104-11.

36. Fernando, Noel, 'Email correspondence' (10 April 2020).

intended as a historical representation of Jesus' teachings; for the record, I would see him as a Galilean rabbi of the countryside speaking into a situation of economic and colonial oppression, one in which the metropolitan elites were complicit, speaking of a prophetic liberation with apocalyptic expectations centred around temple restoration. Rather, here, my aim is a constructive theological engagement with his recorded teachings and the narratives inspired by his memory in ways that speak to our current situation. I am reading him for today with insights which may exceed or even go against those he expressed.[37] Or, I should say, those the redactors of his biographies expressed. It is, I would posit, no more an imaginary construction than traditional Christology that blended Jesus' memory with a Hellenised worldview.[38] While I will consider Jesus in his context, which is important, my aim is not necessarily to read in a strictly historical way.[39] To clarify: I am offering an argument about how we may read Jesus today rather than how he thought about himself. Furthermore, here, I am simply exploring some seemingly relevant motifs and examples rather than sketching anything like a full picture of Jesus as philosopher. In this context, I suggest, that to remove what may seem theological "baggage" in speaking of him may appeal to a wider audience beyond Christian borders (to make it an inter- discussion). Hence, rather

37. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepl. 2nd ed. London: Sheed and Ward, 1979, p. 162, 170, 357.

38. Ehrman, Bart, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014, p. 85-128.

39. While a literature exists linking Jesus with Stoic philosophy, this seems both an untenable hypothesis and is not where I wish to take this discussion (Phillips, Thomas, 'Was Jesus a Bad Stoic?' *SBL Forum*, 2004. Available at: http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=334.) My stance also differs from Don Cupitt's argument that Jesus was primarily an ethical philosopher. (Cupitt, Don, *Jesus and Philosophy*. London: SCM, 2009). He was surely in the Israelite prophetic tradition. Again, linking in another part of the communal learning, Leonard Swidler has suggested that Jesus may be likened to a peripatetic teacher (Swidler, Leonard, 'Email correspondence', 10 April 2020). Certainly, I would argue that in Jesus' own context "rabbi" or "prophet" are both better epithets than "philosopher" but I do not use these as I am reading him for a particular contemporary audience.

than speaking of him as a prophet, I use what may seem the more neutral term of philosopher.[40]

Jesus was certainly not an erudite theorist, but a philosopher of homespun wisdom and parables. This is exemplified in this saying: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18: 3-4 RSV). Speaking to his disciples, Jesus wanted us to disavow concerns about apparent spiritual righteousness or standing. The greatest in the kin-dom of heaven (to borrow from Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz) may not be those we expect. This, I argue, is a key issue when we think in interreligious, and beyond religious, terms. It reflects a spirituality that is not specifically theistic and so may resonate widely and, arguably, offers psychological advice to avoid excess stress about that we cannot change (cf. Matt. 6: 27).

It is, of course, not to suggest quietude and the Parable of the Good Samaritan must sit alongside it (Luke 10:25-37). This also suggests that righteousness is not indicated by religious garb, standing, piety, identity, or theological correctness but in the concern for our neighbour, in acts of godding. It is the relational and horizontal side-by-sidedness of the everyday where we show our compassionate spirituality. Our response is in action rather than words. Indeed, our acts of compassion must be to those outside our community and to the needy (cf. Matt. 25: 31-40). When we see those stigmatised, in Jesus' case often lepers, we must overcome

40. I noted above (my thanks to one of my anonymous reviewers for highlighting this) that removing some of the theological Christian baggage may make Jesus less appealing to some interreligious audiences, who may want to speak to what is seen as traditional Christian thought. Indeed, speaking of Jesus as a prophet would certainly make a direct link to dialogue with Muslims as it reflects their understanding (see Hedges, Paul 'Hospitality, Power and the Theology of Religions: Prophethood in the Abrahamic Context', in *Interreligious Engagement and Theological Reflection: Ecumenical Explorations*, (eds.), Pratt, Douglas, Angela Berlis, and Andreas Krebs. Bern: Peter Lang, p. 155-74.). Again, it would link Jesus to his Jewish origins, but many Jews would be wary of seeing him as a prophet, though it does at least remove the more problematic language of 'messiah'. But there is no reason that notions of philosopher may not also be appreciated by both these groups as one way of envisaging Jesus, as well as potentially speaking beyond religious borders and to other groups.

the prejudice associated with illness. In the story about the alleged adulteress (John 7:53 - 8:11), Jesus responds with compassion that breaks down stigma and prejudice. Like a child, perhaps, it is an act of not judging. As the narrative is related to us:

> Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again' (John 8: 6-11).

I quote this at some length because it is intriguing and powerful. Powerful in showing the compassion and non-judgemental attitude; intriguing because who is this philosopher who bends down to write with his finger on the ground? But, also, is it a direct challenge to us about what we think is righteousness and justice? In this sense, almost without words, it is Socratic in breaking apart what we think we know and asking us to build our ideas again from the ground up. It also offers a rebuke to the powers that be and to those who have (claim) authority. It is also a compassionate philosophy. I have offered here only a few thoughts on how we may read Jesus as a philosopher, but ones which I believe both speak directly to our current situation with Covid19, and also help show how Jesus' compassionate spiritual philosophy may be envisaged. I should note that my aim is not primarily apologetic, to show Jesus as a relevant teacher of wisdom for our times, to persuade others to follow him, or to speak to Christianity's unique path. Rather, it is to show potential resources for a joint search for the common good and to bring to it afresh resources from a thinker that many have found inspirational.

This, I argue, is the kind of theology which may be useful in the aftermath of Covid19 and in our contemporary times. Though it certainly does not deny those resources which call upon the broken Jesus, which Perera and others have spoken of, in as far as these give agency to the marginalised and provide a liberative vision.[41] Let me expand, though, on what I see the Jesus as philosopher perspective adding.

We may see the passage cited above from John as prophetic philosophy. Who do we point the finger at? Who do we blame? Let us think about, for instance, the racism that has abounded during the Covid19 crisis, and how the Western world has stood on its high horse. In response, our philosopher asked 'who is without sin' (failings)? Certainly few, if any, come out of this scenario well. Does this mean that we do not attribute blame for the spread of Covid19? No! Jesus the philosopher was certainly a critic of the powers that be, and in our story challenges us to rebel against prevailing social norms and hierarchies that may have a vested interest in pointing fingers at victims so we do not look at their own failings. I will leave it to readers to think of what may be the contextually relevant examples in their own situations. But to reiterate, a key part of the passage from John is a direct rebuke to the powers that be, and so we may draw directly from Jesus as a prophetic figure speaking truth to power as we contemplate him as a philosopher for our times. Here we do not see philosophy simply as contemplation on abstract ideas, but a prophetic philosophy that is ready to challenge authority and which is based in a deep compassion for the oppressed, the poor, the destitute, and those to whom blame is all too often affixed as we (our societies, our leaders, ourselves) ignore our own complicity in systems of oppression and find scapegoats for 'our' failings. The healing (soteriology) of such a philosopher does not rely upon seeking divine and transcendent answers, but in our interactions in this world at both the personal and the structural level.

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[41]. Rajkumar, Peniel Jesudason Rufus (2017), 'Asian Ecumenical Contributions to Theologies of Justice and Peace,' *The Ecumenical Review* 69 (2017) 4, p. 575.