

# Western theistic religions and infectious illnesses

**By Stephen Pattinson**

Western theistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) hold that an omnipotent God's good providence and will rules all things on earth, including illness and deliverance from illness.

Illness is therefore either directly or indirectly the will of God or caused by some entity that is against God, for example the Devil or demons. (Of course, these entities are themselves in some way agents of God if God is seen as omnipotent and creator of all and everything.)

Within this overall providence, theists try to find explanations for God's meaning, purpose and will that preserves the fundamental goodness of God. Technically, this is called theodicy, explaining the existence and nature of badness or evil in a world supposedly created by a good and omnipotent deity.

Humans find it difficult to accept that there are no causes or meanings for events. So they formulate action guiding myths, narratives and explanations.

There are broad families of explanation:

1. Illness is a way of testing humans and their societies to see how they respond.
2. Illness is a way of helping people learn and grow towards God by eliciting from them responses, for example, compassion and care. It is thus educational.
3. It is a way of specifically punishing humans individually or collectively for the bad things (sins) they have committed so they change their ways

More liberal rationalist believers are likely to reject crude versions of 1 and 3 and maybe to have some space for 2. 1, and especially 3, are very popular with more fundamentalist believers.

A minority religious view held by liberal intellectual believers would be that illness has nothing to do with God's direct providence and action. It is just a naturally occurring and arbitrary thing that can afflict all by chance. It therefore has no direct meaning or purpose. Though it can elicit religiously significant responses such as compassion and care.

Responses to illnesses then follow similar families of explanation:

1. If God is punishing us, then we need to accept this, repent, and change our ways, perhaps trying to placate God, perhaps by fasting, by praying, by acts of charity and compassion. God may then relent and take illness away.
2. If God is testing us, then we need similarly to respond directly to God as well as being compassionate to others.
3. If God is inviting us to learn, grow and respond, then we need to do just that.

In relation to medical/religious responses, the following are common attitudes. Among more fundamentalist believers:

1. God has caused this so only God can remove or heal the illness. Medical means are secondary, unnecessary or even futile.
2. God looks after God's own, usually taken to be religious believers, so they need only use religious remedies and means such as prayer and laying on of hands to respond effectively.

3. God will directly heal and protect those who he has chosen and there is nothing that can be done to change his will to either heal or allow to be diseased.

Among more liberal rationalist believers there is more place for indirect and complex responses:

1. God has given humanity reason and non-religious natural and scientific remedies such as medicine and healthcare, so believers should use and support such responses, not least because they embody practical compassion and care.

In practice, though I have distinguished between liberals and fundamentalists, many believers and indeed non-believers sway between these explanations and responses consciously and unconsciously.

For example, those who argue that Covid-19 is a product of globalisation enabling interspecies contamination and rapid spread, thus violating some version of a kind of natural order implicitly intended by “God” or “Gaia”, are really using a version of illness as punishment in response to violation of what is intended by providence myth/explanation. Human hubris produces a negative response.

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