

Religious Dimensions of Pandemics



The Deeper Meaning of Illness by Dr. Rachel Wheeler

Illness often induces a crisis of faith. When a new kind or severity of illness confronts us, that spiritual crisis is also an epistemological crisis. It shakes the foundations of our knowledge. Our inherited ways of thinking cannot make sense of what we are experiencing.

I learned this from my scholarship long before I learned it personally through my own confrontation with illness. My research focuses on Native peoples' encounters with Christian missionaries in the eighteenth century. People, whether individuals or communities, rarely change religions or adopt dramatically new religious practices when things are going well. But when crisis lands, spiritual experimentation soon follows. Native peoples who turned to Christianity generally only did so once their community had reached a breaking point. By some estimates, the new diseases brought with Europeans resulted in a mortality rate of up to 90% within the first half century of contact. Obviously, such epidemics resulted in extreme stress: the loss not only of family and friends, but also storehouses of knowledge and labor that sustained community. In desperation, some Native peoples appealed to the God brought by Europeans to confront the diseases brought by Europeans.

When I faced a health crisis of my own in recent years and found little help through conventional Western medicine, I became an exile. What I understood as a physiological problem unleashed an epistemological crisis as well. The medical framework I had put my faith in had no answers, and proved unable to make sense of my experience, let alone heal me. For years, this profound sense of alienation led me in desperation from one alternative healing practitioner and modality to another, at one point spending way too much money on a "medical intuitive" who told me to eat steak and iceberg lettuce. I did finally find something that worked (it wasn't the steak!), but the path was not a straight line.

After years of feeling terrible and consulting doctor after doctor, I was told that I had been exposed to Lyme disease. I was thrilled to finally have an answer. But that answer did not bring healing. Instead, it left me feeling invaded by an enemy I could never hope to expel even if I escalated the weaponry, thus risking serious collateral damage.

It was another alternative practitioner (who is also an MD) who helped me reframe my thinking, telling me the goal was a mutual non-aggression pact. He said there was no reason I couldn't live quite happily as host to this organism, and most importantly, that my body had the knowledge to do this, it just needed a spark to reignite its healing powers. I got better. My restoration was not about eliminating the disease, but finding an epistemological framework that allowed me to reframe my relationship to it as host rather than victim.

With the coronavirus pandemic, many people are experiencing similar feelings of helplessness in the face of a novel threat. No one has the acquired immunity that might protect us, and our medical system is being overwhelmed, with no agreed upon answers. Many of us are spending anxious days over-consuming news in hopes that we will see that someone has made sense of this epidemic and can narrate our way into an "after."

The anxiety that comes from not knowing is already pushing people to desperately cling to premature promises of a cure. I understand that desperation. But the deeper question that medicine cannot answer is how to heal – how to restore a sense of wholeness as we learn how to live with a virus that has revealed the many ways our society is broken.