

'The wrath of God on children of disobedience'

COVID-19 in the theology and ideology of the Westboro Baptist Church

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The arrival of pandemic diseases (of which COVID-19 is the latest, but not likely to be the last) could be understood, along with impending ecological disaster and global warming, to be the major existential threats envisioned by, and facing, our contemporary culture. This article focuses on the use made of the theme of COVID-19 in the theology and ideology of the Westboro Baptist Church – a Calvinist and Primitive Baptist church founded in Topeka, Kansas in the 1950s by Fred Phelps Sr (1929–2014). While numerically small, the church has become infamous through its practice of picketing funerals, and has been characterized as a hate group espousing antisemitic and anti-LGBTQ positions. Through a reading and analysis of sermons and other published materials from the Westboro Baptist Church, the article maps the motif of COVID-19 as it is used by a church whose members perceive themselves as the heralds of an angry God.

Introduction: death and disease as sites for cultural meaning

In the characteristic aphorisms of his classic of analytic philosophy – the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* – Ludwig Wittgenstein expressed the notion that ‘Death is not an event in life’ (6.4311). While assessing the ultimate validity of Wittgenstein’s claim is clearly beyond the scope of a dispassionate and methodologically agnostic study of religion, we will here stay within the disciplinary confines, looking upon death as a

cultural event. As observed in a previous study, ‘The inevitable decay of the physical body and the fact of death are universal to human existence and, as such, are prone to be focal points in the various religious systems humankind has constructed’ (Östling and Lewis 2017: 230); running the gamut from narratives about possible life after physical death to various culturally-conceived mortuary practices.

Epidemics, or pandemics, of infectious diseases offer, just as do other disasters, an opportunity to see this cultural coding writ large. As a canvas for human intentionality, epidemics can be said to show an apocalyptic or eschatological potentiality – attracting ideas and practices pertaining to a perceived coming upheaval of the present order of the world. Simon Dein has observed, ‘Pandemics indicate the fragility of life and the world, chaos, engender paralyzing anxiety that the world is dissolving, a sense of detachment and raise significant issues of meaning resulting in existential crises’ (2021: 6). The disastrous, as has been noted by Michael Barkun, is also conducive to the formation of millennialist responses (1974, 1986).

As historical events, diseases have on the one hand influenced the course of cultural history in significant ways

(Huremović 2019: 7), while conversely, the course of disease itself can be affected by cultural practice.¹ As observed by Frank M. Snowden, ‘the last 500 years ... in the West ... [have] been punctuated by the appearance of a series of catastrophic new diseases: bubonic plague in 1347, syphilis in the 1490s, cholera in 1830,² Spanish influenza in 1918–1919’ (Snowden 2008: 11).³ Similarly, during the latter half of the twentieth century, prominent emerging diseases, such as the Ebola haemorrhagic fever and HIV/AIDS – identified in 1976 and 1981 respectively (pp. 12–13) – have entered the scene. Writing in 2000, Nancy Tomes labels the contemporary cultural anxiety around emerging disease as a ‘viral panic’, where the threat of a post-antibiotic world is overshadowed, and where ‘The absence of effective “magic bullets” against viral disease agents only makes them seem more fearsome’ (Tomes 2000: 194). In the

- 1 We can here mention the spread of Kuru, for example, through the ritual practice of endocannibalism among the Fore of Papua New Guinea (Gajdusek 1977).
- 2 Cholera having appeared about a decade and a half earlier in South Asia (Jortner 2007: 237), giving it its occasional name ‘Asiatic Cholera’ (see e.g. Divett 1979: 6; Jortner 2007: 233).
- 3 The point Snowden is making in enumerating emerging epidemics is in response to a perceived ‘historical amnesia’ (Snowden 2008: 10), exemplified by the sentiments from the mid-twentieth century and the following decades as a sort of an anomaly. This period was, according to Snowden, characterized by an optimism that the end of diseases as we know it was nigh, relating how ‘the US secretary of State George Marshall declared in 1948 that the world now had the means to eradicate infectious diseases from the earth’ (p. 9) and that the ‘US Surgeon General William Stewart reported in 1969 that the time had come to “close the book on infectious diseases”’ (p. 11; see also Tomes 2000: 193).

most recent decades, the world has, for example, seen a limited outbreak of SARS (or Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), the swine flu in 2009 (caused by the same influenza virus as the 1918–19 pandemic), and Zika, the latter known for causing birth defects if contracted during pregnancy (Huremović 2019: 24–7). The formation of epidemics is of course not just contingent on the existence of the specific pathogens causing the disease itself, but on it being proliferated in a population.⁴ As observed by Barkun – drawing upon the work of the French writer André Siegfried – ‘Even in the case of plague ... disease spreads over space and time in a manner exactly corresponding to the manner and rate at which individuals move over the earth’s surface’ (1974: 202). In contemporary society, the spread of epidemic disease that historically has happened through trade routes, wars, and colonization, has been significantly speeded up through globalized networks of travel.

Discussing how religions interact with disease and epidemics, Carl-Martin Edsman has identified a religious hermeneutics in reading history through a religious lens, as affected by the workings of the divine (1992: 113). While Damir Huremović might be slightly overstating its narrative salience in stating that ‘Throughout the Biblical context, pandemic outbreaks are the bookends of human existence, considered both a part of nascent human societies, and a part of the very ending of humanity’ (Huremović

- 4 Epidemics could be seen as one instance of Barkun’s general point of the role of human interaction in the spreading of disastrous events, ‘All manmade [such as wars] and some natural disasters depend on human beings to transmit them from person to person’ (1974: 202).

2019: 8); his position has some merit. From the scouring of Egypt by plagues in Genesis (12:17) and Exodus (e.g. 9:8–10; cf. Huremović 2019: 8) to the coming pestilences in Revelations (15:1), the visitation of diseases that God resorts to is featured recurrently in the biblical text.⁵ Biblical apocalypticism has been described by Paul Boyer as ‘protean’ (1992: 80), and thus highly adaptive to contemporary cultural currents. Through a literalist reading of text, ongoing epidemics can take on eschatological significance, showcasing divine wrath befalling the world (Dein 2021: 7–8; Huremović 2019: 10).

This ascription of significance can be seen in the reaction to the outbreak of the plague in fourteenth-century Europe, perhaps the epidemic disaster *par excellence*. As observed by Robert E. Lerner, ‘Indisputably, many in Western Europe took the plague to be an eschatological sign’ (Lerner 1981: 534; see also Dein 2021: 6); or by Michael W. Dols, ‘Many believed that the end of the world had come, plague being the apocalyptic rider on the white horse [Revelation 6:2]’ (1974: 275). Further, Dols argues that ‘the European Christian viewed the Black Death as an overwhelming punishment from God for his sins and those of his fellow Christians’ (1974: 272). Closer to present time, the cholera outbreak in the nineteenth century or the Spanish flu of the twentieth can be shown to have been seen in a similar light (Carton 2003; Jortner 2007; Phillips 1987; see also Dein 2021: 6). Discussing the reception of the first of these two epidemics among the followers of

Joseph Smith (1805–44), Robert T. Divett notes that ‘While cholera swept the Old World, millennialists in America watched for harbingers of the awaited second advent of Jesus Christ. Cholera fit the description of one of the ominous pestilences of every kind that were to be poured upon the whole world. When reports of the spread of cholera in Europe and central Asia reached the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, they joined other millennialists in proclaiming the pestilence to be the wrath of God’ (Divett 1979: 6–7). The cholera epidemic was one of several disasters in the early 1800s that came to be interpreted as heralding the coming millennium (Barkun 1986: 110–11), striking close in time to the public ministry of another progeny of New York state’s ‘Burned-over District’ – William Miller (1782–1849) and the Millerite movement, which culminated in the ‘Great Disappointment’ when the world did not come to an end in 1843 and 1844 (Barkun 1986). Just as with these earlier epidemic outbreaks, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has – as Simon Dein has observed in a recent publication (2021) – generated both religious and secular responses of an apocalyptic flavour. In the rest of this article, we will discuss how this has been used narratively by a small but well-known American congregation – the Westboro Baptist Church.

The Westboro Baptist Church

Founded in the mid-1950s by Fred Phelps Sr (1929–2014) in Topeka, Kansas, the Westboro Baptist Church has, despite its congregants⁶ numbering under a hundred, become renowned (or infamous) on a

5 This has not been lost on the members of the Westboro Baptist Church, who enumerate several instances of biblical plagues in arguing for their interpretation of COVID-19 as a divine punishment (Westboro Baptist Church 2020h).

6 This has similarly been observed by Joseph O. Baker and his co-authors in stating that it ‘is a small congregation relative to the attention they generate’ (2015: 43).



Figure 1. Westboro Baptist Church picketing a LGBTQ Workers Rights Protest in Washington, DC; October 2019.

world-wide scale through their practice of picketing funerals of dead soldiers and their vocal anti-LGBTQ rhetoric (Barrett-Fox 2016). Through this stance, coupled with their preaching, which accuses Jews of *deicide* in being responsible for the death of Jesus – a historically recurring trope of anti-semitism⁷ – the Westboro Baptist Church has been labelled a hate group. This position can be seen, for example, on an information page of the Southern Poverty Law Center webpage, describing the church as ‘arguably the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America.’ Interestingly, and perhaps at first glance somewhat paradoxically, the late Phelps Sr was, for a significant part of his life, a practising lawyer, specializing in civil-rights cases and discrimination against persons of colour. While Phelps’s legal career seems to have

7 On the development of this narrative in the early Christian churches, see Pagels 1996.

been marred by criticism for unethical conduct, with him eventually being disbarred, he was also commended for his work by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Baker *et al.* 2015: 43–4; Barrett-Fox 2016: 16–21).⁸ After the death of Fred Phelps Sr, the leadership and role as preacher has transformed and been taken over by several men who act as the ‘elders’ of the church (Barrett-Fox 2016: 168).

For all their notoriety and visibility in the media – being, for example, the subject of three documentaries by the British journalist Louis Theroux (2007, 2011, 2019) – there seems to be a scarcity of academic

8 In discussing the purported coexisting anti-racism and anti-LGBTQ stance of the Westboro Baptist Church, Barrett-Fox notes the church bases these positions on their biblical interpretation (2016: 20). In a news release from January 2020, they write: ‘Racism is sin! So are pride and adultery. Repent from them all!’ (Westboro Baptist Church 2020a).

studies on the group itself. Breaking this pattern of neglect is the fine 2016 monograph *God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right* by Rebecca Barrett-Fox, upon which this essay will draw.⁹

Theologically, the Westboro Baptist Church is aligned with Primitive Baptism. This is an alignment that Barrett-Fox has observed is not mutual – other American Primitive Baptist churches disallow any connection (Barrett-Fox 2016: 48, 129–33). Primitive Baptists, according to Joshua Guthman, ‘settled on the appellation “Primitive” in order to signify their direct descent from the primitive church – that is, the church gathered around Jesus nearly two thousand years earlier’ (Guthman 2015: 6). In the case of the Westboro Baptist Church, this perspective is effected in its self-perception of being ‘the only contemporary group that accurately understands and lives out God’s commands’ (Barrett-Fox 2016: 43).

In the history and development of Christian denominations in the United States the 1700s and the early 1800s were the scene of two periods of religious revivals known as the First and Second Great Awakenings (see FitzGerald 2017: 13–47). While the Puritan immigrants had espoused the theology of John Calvin (1509–64) – described by Guthman as ‘the nation’s oldest Protestant creed’ (2015: 15) – revivalist fervour would challenge this position as it pertains to humanity and its relation to the divine (FitzGerald 2017: 14–15), drawing upon ‘Enlightenment ideas about free will and the power of reason’ (p. 16). Primitive Baptists formed during the Second Great Awakening of the

early 1800s in response to the development of more evangelical and missionary strands of Baptist denominations (Guthman 2015: 12–14). Part of this divide between the Evangelical¹⁰ and the Primitive is based in theological disagreements in drawing on the theologies of John Calvin or Jacobus Arminius (1559/60–1606), amounting to different views concerning the nature of divine grace and the role of individual choice of the believers (Barrett-Fox 2016: 49; Howe 1972: 307–8).

Being Primitive Baptists, the Westboro Baptist Church are Calvinists, even being described as adhering to a form of ‘hyper-Calvinism’ by Barrett-Fox (2016: 12). As such, they theologically adhere to the five points of Calvinism,¹¹ as listed by the mnemonic acronym TULIP: (i) total depravity, (ii) unconditional election, (iii) limited atonement, (iv) irresistible grace, and (v) perseverance of the saints (Barrett-Fox 2016: 53–66; Westboro Baptist Church 2018). Arminianism, on the other hand, in the words of Th. Marius van Leeuwen, has become ‘the designation for a theology that doesn’t put in the forefront the “total depravity” of man and his absolute reliance on divine Grace, but the human capacity to answer positively to God’s offer of salvation, and the capacity to approach, at least partially, the mysteries of faith by reason’ (2009: xix).

9 However, see also Baker *et al.* 2015; Barrett-Fox 2011; Pimentel and Melander 2019.

10 In a broad sense, Evangelical Protestantism can include Calvinist theological positions; see e.g. FitzGerald 2017: 637.

11 Also known as the ‘five points of Dort’ after the 1618–19 synod in the Dutch town of Dordrecht or Dort (Howe 1972: 306–7; van Leeuwen 2009: xvii). The convening of the synod, while urged by Arminius, ultimately resulted in Arminian theology being proclaimed as heretical (van Leeuwen 2009).

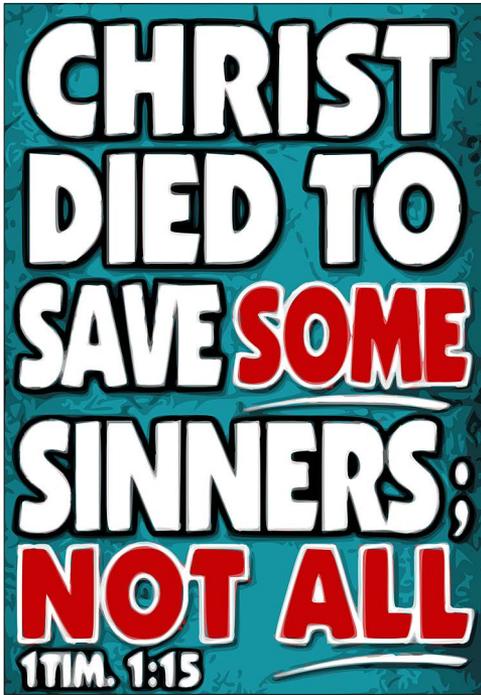


Figure 2. Westboro Baptist Church sign drawing upon the notion of limited atonement.

Through the five points of Calvinism, humanity is seen as by itself to be irredeemably sinful: ‘Every human being was born in sin and is inclined to sin per Adam’s curse; it is a part of our very nature and the reason why we need a Savior!’ (Westboro Baptist Church 2020k). Being predestinarians, through the idea of the unconditional election, God is seen as having elected those destined for heaven before the creation itself. Coupled with this is the notion of the limited atonement, that Christ’s sacrifice only atones for the sins of the elect (see Figure 2). Further, the status of being among the elect is seen as being effected by the grace of God in an infallible manner. The divinity chooses who are to be saved, and the elect can never be lost¹² (Barrett-

12 This can be contrasted with the Arminian position where accepting salvation is

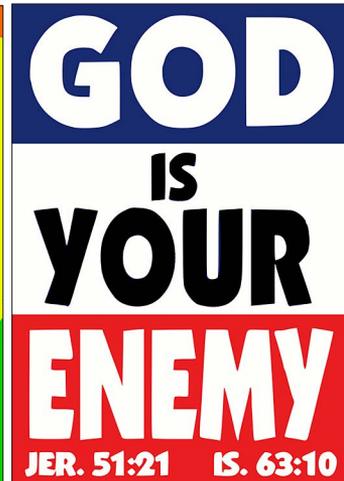
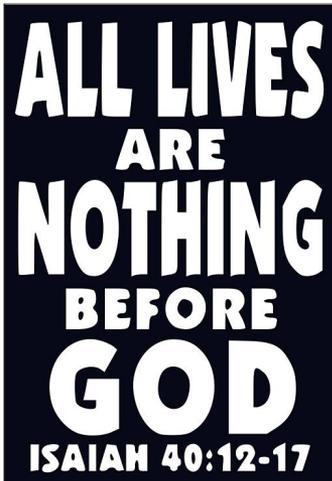
Fox 2016: 53–66; Westboro Baptist Church 2018). In the theology of the Westboro Baptist Church, the elect are seen to be an absolute minority, and thus most humans are irredeemably predestined to eternal punishment in hell:

A definite and relatively small number (i.e., a remnant) of Adam’s race are unconditionally ELECTED to be saved, and each has his name eternally written in Heaven; and a definite and vast majority of the whole of Adam’s race do NOT have their names written in Heaven, and are predestined to spend eternity in Hell. All this was fixed in the Savior’s mind, and was the cause of His rejoicing. Furthermore, the fact that this doctrine (Unconditional Election of some to be saved, and most to be lost) is mysterious, hidden, abstruse, recondite, obscure, and not easily understood – added immeasurably to the Savior’s joy. Virtually the whole of mankind spend their lives under the silly, mistaken notion that God is desperately trying to get every individual of mankind saved and come to a knowledge of the truth – when the exact opposite is true. (Westboro Baptist Church 2007c: 2–3)

COVID-19 and other ‘GodSmacks’

As part of their perceived vocation in spreading the word of God, commanding repentance from sin, the Westboro Baptist Church has also, besides their practice of picketing, a presence online. While they have had several websites promoting parts of their doctrine (as observed by

contingent on the choice of the believer, and where salvation itself can be lost (FitzGerald 2017: 637).



Figures 3, 4 and 5.

Barrett-Fox 2016: 83–4), they seem now to have consolidated it all on their main hub <www.godhatesfags.com>, making The Internet Archives' Wayback Machine a necessary tool for historical research. Among these discontinued sites we can find <www.beastobama.com>, promoting the idea that the former US president is the Antichrist,¹³ and <www.godhatessweden.com>. This latter example focuses the group's ire against Sweden for having indicted a Pentecostal pastor for preaching against homosexuality – labelling the King of Sweden an 'anal-copulator', and a 'King of Sodomite Whores' (2005a); it also thanks God for the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami: 'Unconfirmed numbers of Swedes are dead as a result of the tsunamis which ravaged Thailand and the other lush resorts of that region, and thousands more are unaccounted for, either still

13 The page states 'Barack Obama is the Antichrist, and is leading doomed america [*sic*] to her final destruction and the destruction of the world!' (Westboro Baptist Church 2009, see also 2008; Barrett-Fox 2016: 83). In naming the Antichrist, the Westboro Baptist Church is partaking in a recurring theme in American religious history; see Fuller 1996.

rotting in the tropical conditions or buried, as they deserve, as asses in mass graves (see Jeremiah 22:19). Scarcely a family in Sweden has been untouched by the devastation. Bible preachers say, THANK GOD for it all!' (2005b).

As can be seen in the quotation above on God's punishment of Sweden, and as will be discussed further below, the perceived sin that seems to take the most prominent position in the theology of the Westboro Baptist Church is the act of same-sex sexual relations (cf. Baker *et al.* 2015: 44). In discussing preaching as perceived by the Westboro Baptist Church, Barrett-Fox has observed that members 'identif[y] its purpose as the glorification of God' (2016: 43). This is done in what can be described as a maximal-offensiveness approach to public ministry, offering spectators 'a kind of theatrical, theological shock to their system that forces them to confront Westboro Baptist Church's message and reveal, either by agreeing or disagreeing with the church, their status as elect or non-elect' (p. 85). In this, sexual slurs, such as 'fag', are used in what Barrett-Fox has called a 'politics of disgust' (p. 31). This can be seen in one of the church's parodies of popular songs,

turning Lee Greenwood's 'God Bless the U.S.A.' into a critique of what is perceived to be a doomed nation: 'I'm ashamed to be an American, where the fags can freely roam / They spread their filth around this land, every pervert calls it home / So I'll gladly stand up – with a picket sign – and proclaim God's word today / Cuz there ain't no doubt about this land – God hates the USA' (Westboro Baptist Church 2007a). This form of language is also used in discourse on more specialized matters, such as their critique of Arminian theology: 'Most Arminians are fags and fags are Arminians' (Phelps and Rankin 2002). Further, by being purposefully offensive, the church can ride the media in spreading their words (Baker *et al.* 2015: 54; Barrett-Fox 2016: 80), making any media reporting on their activities 'a conduit through which God's message passes' (Baker *et al.* 2015: 53).¹⁴

This approach can be seen in drawing upon the contemporary Black Lives Matter iconography, for example, in proclaiming that 'All lives are nothing before God' (see Figure 3);¹⁵ but perhaps even more clearly

14 However, from the perspective of the Westboro Baptist Church, offending anyone is not a goal; the aim rather is to preach the word of God as it is written, leaning on a highly literalist exegesis: 'we take language that is in the Bible and we preach it. Did God destroy Sodom down to ashes with fire and brimstone or not? We preach hell fire. The language of our signs come straight from the Bible and you know it does!' (2020n: 4) Similarly, in a segment from Louis Theroux's *America's Most Hated Family in Crisis* (2011) an upset onlooker at one of the church's pickets asks them why they think they can speak for God, only to get the blunt reply 'because we can read'.

15 In a newsletter from 31 May 2020, the murder of George Floyd is commented on: 'As the COVID-19 total death count reaches over 103,000 in the United States of America (more than any other country *by far*),

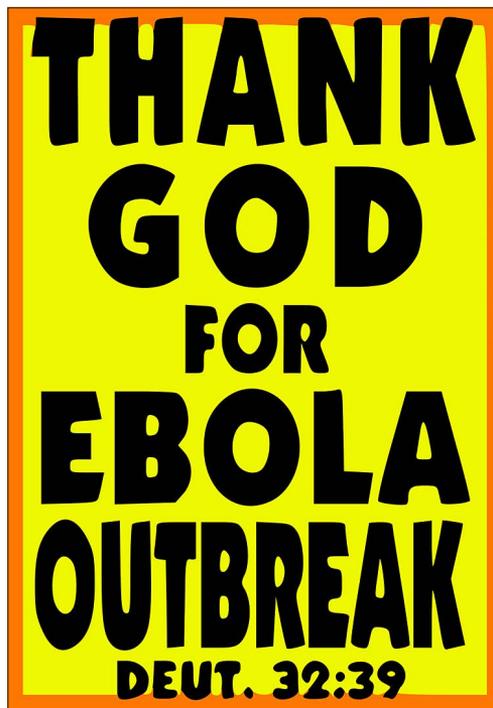


Figure 6.

in their propensity to publicly proclaim rejoicings in various disastrous events of a greater or lesser scale. In this, the Westboro Baptist Church has, for example, thanked God for the 9/11 terrorist attacks (see Figure 4) (Baker *et al.* 2015: 50), claiming God to be 'America's arch Enemy and Terrorist' (2007b: 3) (see Figure 5), and targeted sites of deadly school shootings with their pickets (Baker *et al.* 2015: 50). Similarly, diseases such as Ebola (see Figure 6) and cancer¹⁶ (see Figure 7) are theologically linked to a wrathful God.

the Lord continues to take your peace as the national guard is summoned to contain a riotous tumult raging in Minneapolis, Minnesota over the brutal murder of George Floyd' (2020m, emphasis in original).

16 'Every time a woman dies of breast cancer, or a man, men get it too, we call that a GodSmack' (Theroux 2011).

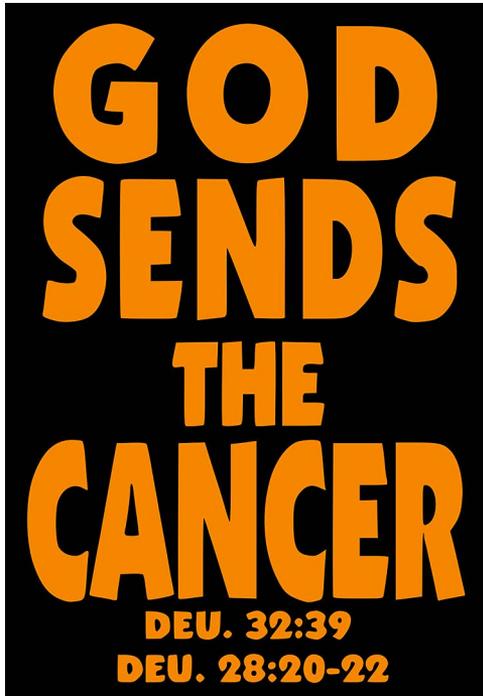


Figure 7.

The celebration of disasters and calamities ties into the concept of a ‘God-Smack’. As Barrett-Fox has observed, GodSmacks are perceived as ‘acts of God that contribute to human suffering and so reveal God’s hatred toward the world, illustrating the absolute predestination of all things for the purpose of sorting the elect from the damned, as believed by hyper-Calvinists’ (Barrett-Fox 2016: 107). This can be seen in the weekly blog posts the church posts on its webpage, commenting on recent events and read through the lens of impeding divine punishment. An excerpt from, for example, the 22 March 2020 post reads:

This week more soldiers died ... also LEOs [Law Enforcement Officers] died ... they all took an oath under the laws of Doomed America! TEN total! They are calling it the Great Coronavirus Crash of 2020 ... God

has caused them to create new words and metaphors to describe His Great Works! As various idols clatter and crash to the ground under God’s smiting rods, none were heard so loudly this week as when the Mormon’s false god the golden angel Maroni’s [*sic*] trumpet (on the top of their Salt Lake temple) was dislodged by a mighty earthquake ... GodSmack! (Westboro Baptist Church 2020e)

As the COVID-19 pandemic was in its early stages, the Westboro Baptist Church appropriated it as yet another significant event, heralding the doom God has destined the world (see Figures 8 and 9). Using their online platforms, the virus began being featured (as seen above) in their weekly blog posts, in their short *Signs of the Times: Shining Bible Light on Current Events* news releases, and in their sermons, which are published both in audio and textual outlines. The first mention, as far as I have been able to ascertain, is from a news release on 26 January 2020, juxtaposing the virus with the then ongoing fires in Australia:

In addition to the still raging fires appointed to the inhabitants of Australia, The Lord of Hosts has yet again unholstered His ever-expanding arsenal of weapons and has leveled it squarely at the head of humanity as China and her inhabitants struggle to contain an aggressive strand of coronavirus. There are not enough curfews, travel bans, disposable gloves, or plastic face shields in the world to stop God from whetting His glittering sword and striking through the inhabitants of the earth. (Westboro Baptist Church 2020a)



Figure 8. Westboro Baptist Church sign commenting on COVID-19.

For 2020 as a whole, a total of 53 sermons (including one wedding) have been published online. Out of these, 12 (or 23 %) have at least once mentioned the theme of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic (7 out of the 12 sermons were published during the first half of the year, capitalizing on the early momentum of the pandemic). As we have touched on above, theologically the Westboro Baptist Church espouses Calvinist principles of total predestination; from such a perspective, any and all events can take on divine significance, as preordained by God, and the potential for eschatological significance can easily be attributed to current calamities. At the same time, looking at the statistics, it is clear that while the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been an important recurring theme, it has not been the only topic touched upon in their sermons or news releases. Rather, as we are perceived to be living near the end of times, COVID-19 is indicative of *one* of the scourges to be brought upon the world by God – as can be seen in the blog post quoted above. In the following, we will discuss some recurring themes that emerge from an analysis of the Westboro Baptist

Church writings on COVID-19.

With the self-perception of being ‘yet permitted and blessed with the job of sounding the warning’ (2020i: 23) – in the image of biblical prophets claiming that ‘the judgement of God is coming and the destruction of this people/world is imminent (like Noah preaching the flood is coming or Jeremiah that Nebuchadnezzar is on the way)’ (2020f: 5) – the Westboro Baptist Church discourse on the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic can be said to revolve around three interconnected themes: (i) a rejoicing in the majesty of divine judgement, (ii) the necessity to repent from sin, and (iii) the rebellious nature of humanity.

In rejoicing, the ‘worldwide plague of Lord Jesus Christ’ (2020o: 2) in all its ramifications is described as ‘an amazing work of God’ (2020f: 6), and that ‘when this is all said and done, virtually every human on the planet will have been impacted by this amazing, microscopic work of God in one way or another’ (2020b). As one of the many weapons of divine wrath (2020c) the COVID-19 pandemic is seen squarely as directed by the hand of God, as can be seen in a sermon from 8 November 2020: ‘The U.S. is approaching 10 million cases and 240,000 deaths since last January. The world is approaching 50 million cases and 1.2 million deaths. I have a news flash for you – WE ARE NOT FLATTENING THE CURVE! The Lord is on the move!’ (2020n: 1). Observing the Calvinist principles of predestination, the ongoing pandemic is following ‘its predetermined, preordained, path’, and, ‘In the council halls of eternity past, the Lord God set all things in array and established all the coming and goings of every creature until the end of time’ (2020j). As such, those who are to be spared the ongoing plague, and those who are to succumb to it, were all chosen by God for this, before even the world was created.

At the same time, a recurring feature is the importance of repentance from sin. The present society has fallen from the perceived standards of God: ‘It is fitting that this coronavirus is hitting the so-called “greatest generation” particularly hard. It is fitting because they changed the ancient landmarks. They made divorce, remarriage and adultery generally popular and normal, they permitted, condoned and encouraged fornication, homosexuality and idolatry. They embraced alcohol and drugs and so much more sin and rebellion’ (2020i: 7). Drawing upon scriptural analogies (see Barrett-Fox 2016: 26–7), in the present situation ‘the God that destroyed Sodom & Gomorrah ... is alive and well!!!! He has opened up His immense storehouse of wrath and fury and has unleashed the Coronavirus (COVID-19) on this adulterous and sinful generation’ (2020h). The notion of repentance from sin is further

differentiated from vain attempts to flatten the curve, as when commenting upon recent recommendations from Dr Anthony Fauci on the importance of social distancing: ‘Yes! But a better strategy would be to put away proud sin and humble yourself under the mighty hand of God’ (2020i: 17–18), not ‘look to ... [the] false goddess “Science” for a solution’ (2020c).

While preaching the necessity of repenting from the perceived sinfulness of the world, the discourse of the Westboro Baptist Church holds it as highly unlikely that humanity will change its ways, as rebelliousness is part and parcel of its nature (2020i: 13–14). This perspective can sometimes take, at first glance, unexpected directions, as can be exemplified by a sermon commenting on the refusals of many of their fellow Americans to follow governmental instructions on how to handle the ongoing pandemic:

As the government lockdown orders across the U.S. have continued, people have become increasingly rebellious and openly defiant – refusing to stay home unless absolutely necessary ... It is not relevant if you don’t want to stay home. It is not relevant if you think the government is wrong. It is not relevant if you think you know better. OBEY. In those that seek to serve the Lord, obedience to those who have rule over you on this Earth shows an understanding that the Lord placed those persons over you, and your obedience to them is obedience to God! ... Each would rather serve themselves and their lusts than consider the health and safety of their fellow man. (Westboro Baptist Church 2020l; see also 2020d: 5; 2020g)

Westboro Baptist Church

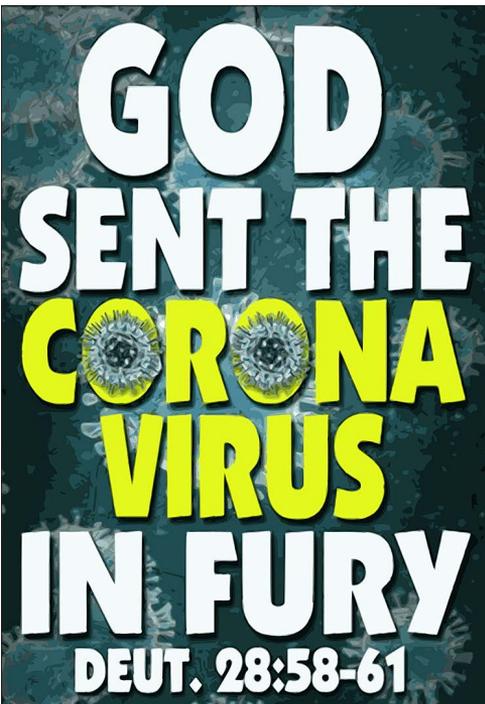


Figure 9. Westboro Baptist Church sign commenting on COVID-19.

Concluding discussion

In his historic overview, Huremović observes a propensity during great pandemics to search for sinners or scapegoats, ‘frequently singling out minorities or women, who have either borne responsibility for incurring divine wrath or else have spread the disease in other ways (2019: 15). Looking at the Westboro Baptist Church track record, it would not be surprising if same-sex sexuality were to be singled out as a prominent sin, in a similar fashion.¹⁷ As was observed by Baker and his co-authors during their research on the group, ‘Members believe that terrible events reflect God’s anger at increasing acceptance of homosexuality in the world in general, and in the United States especially’ (2015: 51). In this, the Westboro Baptist Church is partaking in what Frances FitzGerald has described as ‘a staple of Christian right rhetoric since the 1970s’, in ‘Predicting that “secular humanists” would bring God’s wrath on the country’ (2017: 466–7; see also 619).¹⁸ At the same time,

17 It is indicative, as observed by Baker and his co-authors (2015: 62) of the status of homosexuality as ‘last safe group to hate’ (Cobb 2006: 6), that while the Westboro Baptist Church public ministry against homosexuality and funeral picketing began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was much later through targeting dead soldiers that they would rise to notoriety (Baker *et al.* 2015: 44). While the Westboro Baptist Church shares an outlook on homosexuality with conservative Christians in general (p. 62) – as observed by Whitehead and Perry, ‘support for same-sex marriage is highly correlated with Christian nationalism’ (2020: 132–3) – it is their way of preaching and especially their attacks on national symbols that have drawn most criticism from other conservative Christians (Barret-Fox 2016).

18 A well-known example of this rhetoric can be found in the statement by the founder of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell

the Westboro Baptist Church has denied any simple, single link between the wrath of God and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – instead listing all perceived iniquities: ‘It’s ALL the gross, awful, unrepentant idolatry, sin and sin enabling for which this wrath of God abides upon the children of disobedience as a plague’ (2020f: 5–6). In this final section, we will very briefly look at how the notion of the elect and non-elect is played out in Westboro Baptist discourse as pertaining to the pandemic.

In the last sermon of 2020, published on 27 December and describing the losses incurred by COVID-19, the Westboro Baptist Church observed:

This plague of God Almighty, seemingly kills indiscriminately. It kills Jews and Catholics, Muslims, and Hindus. It kills Lutherans and Presbyterians, Universalists and Southern Baptists. It kills Mormons and Episcopalians, Buddhists and Jehovah Witnesses [*sic*]. It kills Methodists and Pentecostals, Congregationalists and Orthodox. It kills Sikhs and Satanists, agnostics and atheists. We are thankful to the Sovereign God that reigns in heaven that we serve, that He has not yet afflicted us with a death in this place or even a serious illness, though we deserve it. And despite all this death, there is no repentance on the landscape. We hear a lot of excited

(1933–2007), who, on Pat Robertson’s *The 700 Club* television show, put parts of the blame for the 9/11 attacks on those who ‘have tried to secularize America’ (FitzGerald 2017: 466). The interview can be read in an appendix in Bruce Lincoln’s *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (2003: 104–7), which also offers an extensive analysis of the text (pp. 233–50).

words and emotions from the sorrowful loved ones of those killed, but it has not translated into repentance. (2020 0: 2–3)

As Rebecca Barrett-Fox keenly observes, through their doctrines of absolute predestination and depravity, the Westboro Baptist Church does not see sinners as falling away from God by their own doing. Rather, as everything is preordained by God, being a non-repentant sinner is indicative of non-election: ‘Because of total depravity, humans cannot be good enough to be chosen for salvation; only by being chosen for salvation can they be holy’ (Barrett-Fox 2016: 73; cf. Baker *et al.* 2015: 51). From this logic, ‘Homosexuality [or any other perceived sin] becomes evidence, not the cause, of God’s damnation’ (Barrett-Fox 2016: 74). At the same time, as Guthman observed on the Primitive Baptists, ‘Even after their conversions, Primitives suspected themselves to be aliens to God and strangers to his grace’ (Guthman 2015: 8); so while the Westboro Baptists might express gratitude at being spared, they also see the totally depraved humanity (including themselves) as deserving every GodSmack sent upon us. Similarly, preaching is not here ultimately seen as a way to change the hearts of others, but to preach the perceived word of God. Anyone who was to repent by their words would thus, from their perspective, be one of the elected in the first place (Barrett-Fox 2016: 74–76).

As stated in the introduction to this article, pandemic diseases offer an opportunity to see the cultural events of death on a large scale. Through the Westboro Baptist Church, we can see the logic of the eschatological significance of disaster played out in contemporary society. At the same time, we also see a religious group which juxtaposes

the ongoing pandemic with any form of calamity that might fit their pattern of an angry God: ‘God Almighty, the Consuming Fire, the Jealous God ... has a never-ending armory (storehouse and treasury) of weaponry to wage war and win. His armory includes offensive and defensive weapons. These weapons are instruments of His wrath and vengeance. His armory is so vast that His enemies cannot even imagine what His weapons are. It is hard to fight a war, when you do not understand the capability of your opponent’ (2020 0: 5). ■



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