



BRILL

‘This is a Call of God ... or is it?’: Narratives about Humans, God and Eschatology in the Dutch Reformed Pietist Community during the COVID-19 Outbreak

Tobias Cinjee | ORCID: 0000-0003-3434-2300

MSc MA, lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
tobiascinjee@gmail.com

Hanneke Schaap-Jonker | ORCID: 0000-0002-0825-6188

PhD, endowed professor in clinical psychology of religion, Faculty of Religion & Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; rector Centre for Research and Innovation in Christian Mental Health Care, Eleos/De Hoop ggz, the Netherlands

Abstract

In this study, we examine which narratives were put forward by key figures of the Dutch reformed pietist community during the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse sermons and news articles from the period March–November 2020. We find, as expected, a dominant narrative of COVID-19 as God’s judgment, a calling to repentance and an event which emphasizes the need for prayer. Although the pandemic was seen as a call by God, the systematic origin of the virus (God/Satan/natural phenomena) remained rather ambiguous. More often it was stated that ‘everything falls under His providence’. The earthly origin of the virus remained mostly unaddressed, as well as eschatological interpretations, contrary to our expectations. We conclude that the main narrative is a general message of repentance, rather than a concrete theological application to the dynamic of the virus, its origins and its subsequent spread. In some cases, virus ‘jargon’ even was used as a tool just to further accentuate general tendencies of reformed pietist theology.

Keywords

COVID-19 – God representations – narratives – reformed pietists – pandemic

1 Introduction

During the COVID-19 outbreak, religious believers worldwide were suddenly confronted with a reality of uncertainty, suffering, the loss of community members and drastic regulations for holding worship services. The pandemic raised a lot of theological questions about the nature of the crisis, the most prominent question being: *‘where is God in all of this?’* (Lutzer 2011, 4). Various popular theological studies have explicitly asked this question and wrote about this in the months after the start of the pandemic (Lutzer 2020; Wright 2020). We know from previous literature that natural disasters affect the functioning and development of representations of God by individuals i.e. the way people represent God in their mind (see Aten et al. 2008). Especially in times of crisis, people wonder: who is God (... *“for me?”* ... *“at this point in time?”*). When people answer this question in their minds, they sharpen or concretize a certain representation of God.

It is essential to realize however that the roots of understandings of who God is, what God does, and how God is present in the midst of crisis; are not to be found in the individual believer only. People may make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of their own particular religious tradition, and may describe it for instance as mainly (or merely) the finger of God (Ex. 8:19), His chastening for the sake of the believer’s profit (Heb. 12: 10–12), or acts of Satan under God’s allowance (Job 2:3). Ministers and key figures in the religious community play an important part in describing the role of the Divine in occurring events, and in communicating this to the community members. In this regard, they use theological narratives, often embedded in century-long church traditions, that highlight certain representations of God.¹ Those representations are used to explain, for instance, why God forces or allows a disaster to take place. Biblical stories – and their explanations and applications – are put forward, that align with those representations, fitting within their main theological frame of thinking. In this study we will focus on theological

1 The term ‘narrative’ does not refer to a Biblical story, but to the (coherent) over all message in which such a story is embedded. This is for instance a sermon, which contains a theological understanding or reflection of a Bible text, both in its initial context, but also in its application to current day life.

understandings on the community level [key figures and ministers] as we believe it provides an essential first step in understanding how main theological narratives are applied in times of actual crisis.

We specifically explore which representations of God are communicated within the Dutch reformed pietist (*bevindelijk gereformeerde*) community in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.² Reformed pietists form a well-organized societal group, mainly based within the Dutch 'BibleBelt', with their own institutions such as a newspaper (*Reformatorisch Dagblad*), schools, a political party (SGP) and various institutions that may be characterized as typical *identity markers* (Klaver & Roeland 2010). There are approximately 300,000 reformed pietists in the Netherlands (1.7% roughly), forming a minority in Dutch society (Snel 2007 in Voorwinden 2009). Even though they are relatively small in numbers, they are often a source of public attention due to their unconventional views on themes such as euthanasia, abortion, vaccinations, sexuality and morality (Hijweege 2004). This group is often related to a representation of 'God as punisher': historically, reformed pietists regarded God to be actively concerned with wrongdoings by individuals and collectives in the world (Hijweege 2004). In other words: God may have used disasters to point towards people's sinful nature (see Servis 2004; Trilla, Trilla & Dear 2008). However, such a perspective is deemed controversial in modern secular society and entails resistance (see e.g. van der Galiën 2020). Now, in times of actual crisis, the question arises: is this notion still present and vital, and to what extent is it related to COVID-19? Hence, this paper intends to answer the following question:

Which representations of God, rooted in narratives from Christian theology, have been used by Dutch reformed pietist key figures and ministers during the COVID-19 outbreak?

To assess this, we will analyze media output by key figures and ministers in the RD (*Reformatorisch Dagblad*) newspaper in the period of March–November 2020. In addition, two bundled sermon-books were studied, written

2 We merely focus on the denominations which can be defined as 'reformed pietist' or 'strict Calvinist': we do not include the middle-orthodox or modern reformed churches. What we define as 'reformed pietist' are in Dutch often referred to as '*bevindelijk gereformeerden*' i.e. those churches and wings within churches which focus more on the personal 'appropriation of salvation' and 'separating preaching' (*the dividing line between the redeemed and unredeemed cuts through the church community itself, too*). Those communities range denomination-wise from the Restored Reformed Church to the conservative (Old) Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands.

by ministers of the community. They were the most prominent publications that contain interpretations of 'God's means' with COVID-19. The names of the studies are: *'This is the finger of God'* (Schot et al. 2020) and *'When the Lord calls'* (Breure et al. 2020). Furthermore, two letters by ministers (addressed to the youth of their church community and the local government, respectively) leaked out and were deemed rather controversial in public media response (Regio Online 2020). We wish to regard why they stirred so much controversy, by looking at their contents, and by comparing them to the *general narrative* of the sermons and news articles.

Our aims in this paper are twofold: (1) To establish the spectrum of different representations of God regarding disasters, based on systematic-theological literature, and hypothesize which narratives we expect to find in the Dutch reformed pietist community. (2) To gain insight into which narratives and God representations were used by key figures and ministers, by means of qualitative data analysis of textual and online output between March and November 2020. We regard to what extent our results are in line with the hypothesis.

In this way, we contribute to both the research field of theology in relation to natural disasters, and psychological studies into 'God representations'. Our scientific contribution starts by the grouping of components of God representations in distinct dimensions: an overarching theoretical framework, made up by different categories. As the framework will be based on a broad scope of the theological studies, it could be applied to other communities or data as well.

This study is relevant as it provides a first step in exploring which representations of God are actively put forward during a period of crisis in a part of society where God and faith are of utmost importance. We examine how key figures of the Dutch 'BibleBelt' communicate about God as an active agent, in the current day world. In a parallel study (not reported here), we explore how such representations are taken over and implemented by community members, as well as how interpretations of COVID-19 relate to processes of individual religious coping, meaning making and resilience.

2 Theoretical Framework

Before we go into our empirical results, we present the theoretical framework which informed our analysis and was built on the basis of: (a) theological-scholarly publications from Christian theology on religious narratives in times of natural disasters, which especially concern questions regarding why disasters occur and what God's role in it may be (b) popular theological literature written during the COVID-19 crisis, which also gained attention in reformed

pietist circles (such as the book of Wright 2020). In this way, a *systematic-theological overview* is given on a rather abstract and conceptual level, summarizing the main paradigms regarding the role of God in the manifestation of evil, disaster and disease (theodicies).

2.1 *Dimensions of God Representations*

In the literature, various representations of God differ in their positions on at least four main dimensions.

First of all, representations vary in the degree to which God is seen as an active agent (*D1: Agency vs. Passivity*). Religious traditions place God's role somewhere between the extremes of a Deist God and of a fully involved, deterministic God. Fretheim, in his work *Creation Untamed*, uses for these extremes the metaphors of the 'absent Landlord' vs. the 'absolute Monarch' (2010). Either God is (1) restricted in His ongoing supernatural involvement and can not prevent a disaster from unfolding, (2) willingly allowing it to unfold, (3) actively acting through a natural disaster or disease or using it as a way in the becoming of the world (Fretheim 2010). Others argue that God is actively responsible and involved in natural disasters but not in moral disasters (O'Mathúna 2018).

Another element to mention here is the role of Satan, for which different perspectives exist (Fretheim 2010; Lutzer 2011). If God is in control of nature, how does that relate to the role of Satan in Biblical disasters and diseases? Does God *decree* or does God *allow*? (Lutzer 2011). If Satan is literally involved as an active agent, this complicates what the role of God exactly would be. Lutzer therefore differentiates between *ultimate causes* and *secondary causes* (Lutzer 2011; 2020): God being the ultimate cause of a natural disaster, Satan being the secondary one, acting within the boundaries of God's divine providence.

The second dimension (*D2: Punisher vs. Comforter*) is about the degree to which a disaster should be regarded as a punishment (of either general or particular sins, by either individuals or collectives). Disasters in the past have been regarded as an active punishment of God for particular sins; the bishop of Zamora famously called the Spanish flu a "*consequence of sin and lack of gratitude*" (Trilla, Trilla & Dear 2008). Some authors have critiqued this approach, as humans often interpret things in light of what they believe God wants to say (Fretheim 2010; Lutzer 2011; Wright 2020). Furthermore, authors note that within the Bible itself, by no means all disasters or diseases are directly related to sins. God judges through the created moral order (acts have consequences, sin creates snowball effects), human beings may suffer by the becoming of the world, as natural disasters are an integral part of the design of God's creation (Fretheim 2010). God can also be seen as a punisher of human sin in a more general sense. Original sin brought about death and destruction,

and in this broken world with a path of decay, disasters simply do happen (O'Mathúna 2018).

The third dimension (*D₃: Moral vs. Natural*) refers to moral evil and natural evil. Questions about God's role in the manifestation of evil (theodicies) have differentiated *moral evil* (suffering as a result of human actions) and *natural evil* (suffering caused by nature) (O'Mathúna 2018). But in the case of COVID-19 those two are very intertwined. Human failure to engage in healthy interaction with animals (i.e. the unsanitary conditions on the wet market in Wuhan), brought about the encounter with a virus that otherwise would never have jumped to humans (Shereen et al. 2020). In addition, the spread of misinformation, the silencing of doctors and whistleblowers, as well as unlimited intercontinental traveling, brought forth more disaster. Those may be seen as examples of the 'snowball effect' that sin created (Fretheim 2010). Human choice seems to be at the basis of the disease spread and may very well be addressed theologically (Wright 2020).

A fourth dimension (4) comprises the extent to which disasters should be regarded in the light of the end of times (eschatology) (*D₄: Brokenness vs. Hopefulness*). An event like COVID-19 could be seen as a wake-up call (O'Mathúna 2018), either as a direct message or punishment of God, or as a general insight in the brokenness of the world. It can grant believers a longing for a better world to come (Revelations 21). But, interpreting current events as very concrete realizations of the eschatological visions in the Book of Revelations, may in the near future be revealed as having been incorrect (Wright 2020).

2.2 *God, Humans and Eschatology in Reformed Pietist Theology*

We will now briefly examine some characteristics of the theology within the Dutch reformed pietist community, and describe what categories of the four dimensions we expect to be of main importance.

First, we know that in the community, there is a large focus on God's providence (Hijweege 2004), sovereignty (Voorwinden 2009), and the role of predestination (Hijweege 2004). The role of God as agent is, to refer to the image used by Fretheim, closer to an actively involved God than an 'absent Landlord'.

Second, within reformed theology, in comparison to other branches within Christianity, there is a stronger focus on the Old Testament, which is seen as integral part of Scripture and as part of the full revealed word of God from 'cover to cover' (*Tota Scriptura*) (see van den Brink & Smits 2015). This means there is also a focus on God representations which are rather prominent in the Old Testament, such as God being a Judge and Ruler, reacting to the unwillingness and stubbornness of the people of Israel. Within the community, natural

phenomena and disasters have historically not been merely described rationally, but were also granted a theological and sometimes eschatological interpretation (Hijweege 2004). Both the sinfulness of the individual and sins of the collective or nation are reasons why God would send his punishments, for example: secularization and moral decay.

Third, the orthodox theology is *‘pietistic’* in practice. This attitude is especially rooted in the *Nadere Reformatie*, which lays strong focus on the presence of Reformed doctrine and personal sanctification in all domains of life (see Brienen et al. 1986). There is an emphasis on grief about sin and experience of guilt before God, and to lead a holy life in accordance with God’s law. Hence, we expect that these people have clear moral views on the implications of their own behavior, and, thus, will relate the pandemic to human wrongdoing in their interaction with God’s creation.

Fourth, a punishment in the form of a Mondial crisis may serve as a warning or wake-up call to repent for those sins, and be seen as ‘a footstep of the coming Christ’ in the light of the end of times (e.g. Overeem, 2014).

In conclusion, we believe the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be regarded as a:

H1. Wake-up call from an active agent God (who somehow used COVID-19 in His Divine plan)

H2. Punishment for certain collective or individual sins

H3. Crisis caused by moral human wrongdoing in their interaction with the natural world

H4. Message in light of the end of times (‘or a footstep of Christ’). See also Table 1:

TABLE 1 Scheme of dimensions and hypotheses

Dimension (D)	1. Agency vs. Passivity	2. Punisher vs. Comforter	3. Moral vs. Natural	4. Brokenness vs. Hopefulness
H for reformed pietists	H1. Wake-up call from an active agent God (who somehow used COVID-19 in His Divine plan)	H2. Punishment for certain collective or individual sins	H3. Crisis caused by moral human wrongdoing in their interaction with the natural world	H4. Message in light of the end of times (‘or a footstep of Christ’).

3 Methods

3.1 *Data Description*

For this study, we analyzed a) articles in the RD (*Reformed Daily*) newspaper between March and November 2020, b) two bundled sermon-books and c) two letters by ministers.

3.2 *Procedure*

We searched for news articles concerning the pandemic, in relation to theological interpretations. We did so by means of searching for the combination ['corona'+ 'God'] in the newspaper's website search engine. We found, per 30 November 2020, 297 articles, from March 2nd onwards, in which this combination of terms could be traced. We conducted manual search in all those articles [ctrl+F 'God'] to examine to what extent theological understandings were truly directly linked to COVID-19. We found a total of 148 articles, of which most contained only one or two sentences in which God is somehow mentioned as a presence or source of comfort during the pandemic, for instance: *'how can you survive those times if you don't trust God?'*³ We further narrowed down to articles in which theological understandings of the pandemic took a more central or substantial role (more than just a sentence), and/or which were written by key leaders and ministers from the community. We excluded articles which discussed theology merely in relation to obedience to the government or about vaccination in relation to God's providence. We finally have a total of 72 articles, which we placed in a NVivo datafile, wherein the following attributes were manually ascribed: article title, author, date, date changed, genre, series. For content analysis, we furthermore excluded 18 articles, that, after further inspection, only referred to historical cases of disasters, or that could not have been ascribed more than one code in our code scheme. Finally, we analyzed a dataset containing 55 articles.

We added in our NVivo data archive 6 contemplations from a bundled sermon book (Breure et al. 2020). We also included 7 sermons, held in March 2020, from another bundled sermon book (Schot et al. 2020). We manually ascribed in NVivo the attributes 'title', 'minister', 'date', 'church denomination', and 'source'.

3 RD1 (all the sermons and news articles were coded in our original dataset, we added identifiers to all quotes that refer to those sources).

We added two letters by ministers from the community, namely rev. Kort and rev. Agteresch (Regio Online 26 March 2020; Regio Online 31 March 2020). We added in NVivo the attributes 'title', 'minister', 'date', 'church denomination', and 'source'.

3.3 *Coding the Dimensions*

We approached our data using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. (1) We started with a general coding scheme based on our theoretical framework. (2) We expanded the categories within each dimension, if we encountered (after having tried out coding on a small subset) that not the whole spectrum of categories within that dimension was covered. Therefore, we put in each dimension the category 'other' under which new subcodes were added. (3) Also, we further subdivided certain categories if deemed appropriate. (4) A dimension X (**is it about us or them?**) was added to cover 'to whom the message of a minister/key figure applies', and was further subcategorized: to who does 'us' or them exactly refer (the church, the nation?). (5) Also, we added categories which comprise of the explicit *rejection* of a statement covered by another category. For instance: when it is clearly stated that COVID-19 is *not* caused by collective sin of the masses, or that Satan does *not* use the virus for his benefit. (6) We added a dimension about the relational characteristic between the human (hearer/reader) and God: '*what should their attitude towards God become like?*'. This part was not adequately covered by our theoretical dimensions, as those were established on the level of systematic-theological theory and not in their dynamic application in spoken or written word, with a sender and a receiver. We coded inductively in this dimension. (7) Finally, we added a dimension **Other** under which we separate three main codes: 'questions', 'themes' and 'Biblical references'.⁴ The coding scheme is available on request.

4 Results

4.1 *Descriptive Results: Themes*

A few themes turned out to be used most frequently, see Table 2:

4 Only the main Bible texts which are contemplated about in a sermon or meditation were coded.

Also, some themes were interwoven and were often mentioned in combination with each other. For instance the themes of vulnerability and malleability (8 files with overlap), can be traced in a quote containing elements of both: *“Only together with Him, we will get it under control”*⁵ as a critique on the Dutch government slogan *‘only together, we will get COVID-19 under control’*.

We too coded the main Biblical references in the sermons and contemplations in the RD newspaper (19 in total), and found 16 references to texts from the Old Testament and 3 from the New Testament. Throughout articles, references to texts from the New Testament were also made, but as starting point in ‘establishing the narrative’ there seemed to have been a focus on parallels with the Old Testament, and not to, say, the eschatological visions from the book of Revelations.

4.2 *Dimensions in the Empirical Data*

4.2.1 D1: Agency vs. Passivity

We found that in the **Agency vs. Passivity** dimension, the most frequent category was that ‘God “rules all things” and that things will never go beyond His control’ or beyond God’s divine providence (27 files). Less often we found that God was seen as an active agent who actively ‘sent’ the pandemic down to us (13 files). Yet, in the other dimensions we saw often referrals to COVID-19 as a *‘call to repentance’*: God points towards our sinful life. One very specific narrative tool that was used, but mainly in sermons, was perceiving the pandemic as the ‘finger of God’, in reference to the ten plagues in Exodus 8:19. It is a concrete manifestation of the notion that ‘God wants to tell us something’.

It was said that, sometimes, God makes use of causes such as Satan or natural phenomena: *“Our sinfulness is, at the core, the cause of God’s punishing hand. It falls under His providence, but is also used by Satan”*.⁶ The exact relationship between God and Satan remains rather ambiguous, as the following quote also suggests: *“The Lord rules the world and sickness and the devil. The last one implies that the Lord can involve the devil The Lord has His own way and means, from ordeal and judgment and the honor of His Name. The devil has his own goal: the destruction of God’s church.”*⁷ Interestingly, although God is not directly named as the ‘sender of COVID-19’, the pandemic is yet often seen as ‘God’s call’, so what does that say about how God’s involvement in the world is regarded?

⁵ RD₂.

⁶ SERMON_{1.1}.

⁷ SERMON_{2.1}.

4.2.2 D2: Punisher vs. Comforter

The overall questions that were asked a lot were: *Will we learn from the crisis? Is it a judgment? Why is it happening to us? Why don't we interpret it?* It was stated that God's judgments could be in the benefit or advantage of the faithful, but a punishment for the wicked. In 3 cases, a text from Ecclesiastes 9:2 was referred to: *All things come alike to all: One event happens to the righteous and the wicked [NKJV]*⁸ The pandemic is named a judgment for our sins (34 coded references in total) and a 'call' (25 files). Some authors even suggest that it is therefore something that we should be undergoing instead of praying for its ending: *Therefore, do not pray the judgments away*,⁸ but this perspective was seldomly found in the data (3 files). What is interesting is that the *judgment* is often seen as having to do with *us*, whereas *us* is most of the times defined as the people in a particular church community or the Church in general. God 'points the finger' towards *our* sinfulness ('God's judgments start in the House of God', 1 Peter 4:17): *God regards the sins of His children. The Lord does not condone sin. God's children do not sin cheaply.*⁹ In other articles, the importance for Christians to go out and spread the message of God's call to repentance is mentioned (the theme 'importance to testify', in 12 files), while in most cases, it is left out: there is a strong focus on going back to one's own self and contemplating their own sin instead of pointing to others. The call for repentance can be divided into different 'phases' or 'gradations', starting by the self and expanding to the other and the collective: *We cannot answer this question [what God has to say to us with his call: the virus] for church and country, if we have not contemplated it ourselves 'Hear, O my people, and I will speak' [Ps 50:7 NKJV].*¹⁰ or vice versa: *The Lord visits the pride of China. The Lord visits the pride of the Netherlands. The Lord visits the pride of me.*¹¹ Other authors were rather skeptical about the probability of a nationwide return to faith: *It seems as if our people have become insensitive for the spiritual things.*¹² The pandemic was labeled as God's judgment, related to either collective sins (concrete sins or general sinfulness were found in a similar amount of files), or general sinfulness of all individuals.

8 SERMON1.2.

9 SERMON1.1.

10 SERMON2.1.

11 SERMON1.1.

12 RD4.

4.2.3 D3: Moral vs. Natural

The Natural vs. Moral dimension got, by far, the least coverage, as the horizontal 'earthly' cause for the pandemic remained mostly left unmentioned. An extension of this Natural vs. Moral dimension is traced back elsewhere, in the combination of the themes 'vulnerability' and 'malleability' (COVID-19 shows us that we are only tiny humans without power over the world ... *isn't it ironic that amidst all [evil] forces, a tiny virus has such an impact*¹³). Yet, it remains striking that an 'obvious' narrative is left out: the fact that concrete moral sins led to the enfoldment of the pandemic (only in 6 files).

4.2.4 D4: Brokenness vs. Hopefulness: Eschatology

In the data, COVID-19 was seldomly seen as an explicit message in light of the end times (12 references), and sometimes only very implicitly (as one of the many judgments before the Last Judgment: 8 references). This is a remarkable finding; there seems to be caution to regard current events as a very concrete sign of the coming end times (this was in some articles also actively discussed and related to conspiracy theories).¹⁴ If a reference was made, it was often subtle: *"God's creation is in labour pain. In crises in the midst of this suffering creation we can see the birth contractions of the Kingdom. In this way, for centuries, we can hear the footsteps of Christ approaching."*¹⁵ The eschatological perspective is in a minority, although the more general longing for His coming Kingdom in light of the brokenness of this world had a stronger emphasis. In that case, the brokenness of our own lives, nation and broader context was strongly accentuated.

4.2.5 Other

We added a dimension capturing the essence of *what our attitude should be towards God*, which partly overlapped with some of the themes in our data. Not only the theme 'humility' came back often, but also 'trust in God', which mostly accounts for those who have already a bond with Him through faith: the true believers. The theme 'humility' overlaps with certain faith attitudes such as: *kneeling before God/becoming small for Him (6 files with overlap)*, *acknowledging that He wants to say something with this pandemic (5 files with overlap)*, but also the *need to take shelter in Gods realms/flee to Him (7 files with overlap)*. They may all reasonably be seen as fragments of the more general '*call to repentance*' theme. Whereas the need to flee to God was found in a lot

¹³ SERMON1.3.

¹⁴ RD5, RD6.

¹⁵ RD7.

of articles, there was another aspect which was mainly covered by ministers from the right wing¹⁶ of the reformed pietist community: namely the need to recognize our damnation, and acknowledge that God's judgments are just and that we deserve them (in 10 files).

4.3 *Additional Results*

4.3.1 Virus Jargon as a Toolkit

What we saw often in the sermons was that the 'virus' was used as a starting point to convey the more structural 'call to repentance' message to the hearers, exemplified by for instance the use of contrasts with the virus ('there is a greater danger than the virus itself', in 5 files, namely sin): *"And then to realize that there is a far greater threat than the coronavirus. And it is about your soul! Soul lost is all lost"*.¹⁷

Also, the rhetoric around COVID-19 could be used to provide metaphors for the structural narrative that is provided in church. We saw references in sermons to the 'virus of worldliness', the 'virus of pride', the 'virus of sin', but too a metaphor of quarantine as the 'secret closer of prayer', or a parallel with the biblical figure of Elisabeth who 'spent months in quarantine'. But, also more suggestive themes came back that held certain connotations regarding the COVID-19 vaccine: *"There are many measures that can save our bodies. But there is only one Measure which can save our souls. And that is the beloved blood of Christ."*¹⁸ *"... The Lord does not afflict wholeheartedly, but so that we seek Him and serve Him. The question is then: do we, in church, also want to go back to the 'old normal' and do we ignore God's calling by merely trusting a vaccine?"*¹⁹

4.3.2 The Two Controversial Letters

The two controversial letters that led to a lot of stir in popular media, contained rather concrete narratives. (1) The letter by Rev. Kort can be summarized, based on the coding, as a call to repentance for general sins by the collective, which are both about us (us being: the nation), and about 'them' (secular leaders in society). Moreover, it highlights that we need to flee to God, who punishes our sins with the virus. There is a need for prayer in society. (2) The second letter by Rev. Agteresch can be summarized as a need for prayer, the need to flee to God, the interpretation of the virus as a judgment in light of the coming Last Judgment, but also as a punishment for specific individual sins. This last

16 (1) Reformed Congregations, (2) Reformed Congregations in the Netherlands.

17 SERMON1.4.

18 SERMON1.4.

19 SERMON1.2.

finding was something which we have not seen this specified elsewhere in our data. The link is laid, although as an exemplar, between very specific sinful acting of children and God's punishment for the collective: "... before Jesus returns, He sends, just alike the king first sends his servants, firstly the coronavirus to punish us. Why? The Lord wants you to pray. The Lord wants you to break with wrong things. The Lord wants you to not attach so much value to your pretty material goods. The Lord wants you to not waste your time behind the computer. The Lord asks for your whole heart".²⁰

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we examined which narratives and God representations were used by key figures and ministers within the Dutch reformed pietist community, during the COVID-19 pandemic. We expected the COVID-19 pandemic to be regarded as a: (*H1*) wake-up call from an active agent God (who somehow used COVID-19 in His Divine plan), (*H2*) punishment for certain collective or individual sins, (*H3*) crisis caused by moral human wrongdoing in their interaction with the natural world and a (*H4*) message in light of the end of times (or a 'footstep of Christ').

Given our results, we can conclude that COVID-19 was often labeled as a wake-up call or a 'calling' (First part of *H1* confirmed), although it is more so seen as a calling to repentance in a general sense than in a concrete sense with regards to the earthly origins and development of the COVID-19 crisis (*H3* not confirmed). God's active agency in the crisis is not made obvious and often remains rather equivocal, although it is emphasized that He 'rules all things' and everything falls under His providence (second part of *H1* is only partly confirmed). Furthermore, the narrative of 'punishment' is related to general sinfulness of the individual, emphasizing the need to be humble before the presence of the Lord, and that only He can save us or provide us comfort. (*H2* partly confirmed, focus mainly on collective sins or general individual sinfulness). Finally, we did find very few explicit references of COVID as a message in light of the end times (as was formulated in *H4*).

The 'main overall narrative' can be summarized as: '*COVID-19 confronts us humans with how small we are and how the world around us can get into chaos due to a tiny virus. The pandemic should be seen as a call or judgment of God, and must lead to true repentance of sin and redemption through a way of humility, prayer and (a return to) true faith.*'

²⁰ LETTER1.

That the true origin of the virus (be it God, Satan, or merely natural phenomena) was often described vaguely, suggests that ministers and key figures were rather cautious to render a description of causal inference between God and the pandemic. Still, there was large consensus that God uses COVID-19 *somehow* to tell us something, that we should be humble before His presence and recognize His power and/or judgments. The *call to repentance* theme seemed to relate more strongly to a general perspective of faith and trust in God than about the 'here and now' of life in the midst of the pandemic. Ministers and key figures tended to stay away from directly relating concrete individual sins to the pandemic, and in the cases such a connection was made, it was mediated by God's intervening hand. The relation between specific sins and the pandemic was either abstract or concretized on a higher-than-individual level (the nation, the church).

We wonder why ministers and key figures chose to opt out from a concrete narrative on the earthly origin of the virus. There would for sure be parallels with a *secular* narrative which is prominent in certain circles: *'we (humans) were the cause of the virus' spread, now we deserve the "punishment" of the pandemic which we called upon ourselves, and now we must repent by changing the way we organize the world.'* Maybe ministers and key figures avoided such a narrative as it: (1) lays a strong focus on human's ability in influencing what goes on in the world (which contrasts with reformed pietist's focus on human's nullity and incapacity), (2) would barely differ from the secular narrative; it stays on the horizontal level and it would be hard to address God's role in it. Yet, we may ask whether questions of sin and repentance, addressed by ministers and key figures, fitted in with questions that arose in the minds of community members who struggled to make sense of the crisis.

We found few explicit eschatological interpretations of the pandemic. This may have to do with the fact that eschatological interpretations were also sometimes related to the realms of conspiracy thinking, but this is something to explore in our parallel study, and in future research (which may also take into account psychological concepts like denial and delusion as ways of coping). It could however also indicate that a straight forward eschatological perspective does not play a central role in current day reformed pietistic faith (if it is not made explicit in those times of crisis, when would it?). We too wonder how the reformed *Tota Scriptura* principle relates to the rather strong focus to Old-Testament texts. Do they provide better options to deal with or interpret current events? Or does this focus prove a conscious selection by authors, who highlight certain representations (God as Ruler, God as Judge) over others?

Besides our main results, we found some additional insights: when the crisis endured, virus jargon and parallels were used as tools to further convey the

general message of repentance. Furthermore, the two letters by ministers discussed the country, the 'other', and a collective return to faith far more explicitly than the general tendency we found in the overall collection of articles and sermons. They may have been seen by media outlets as representative 'snapshots' from texts within the reformed pietist community, but, as we have seen in the data, those plotlines are atypical or at least not a main focus in most of the articles and sermons. Especially the very concrete link between specific individual sins and COVID-19 as a judgment of God is quite exceptional.²¹

Although we looked into news articles over a range of multiple months, we only analyzed sermons from the month March, and could unfortunately not see how perspectives in preaching evolved over time. Yet, we believe that we have provided a good general overview of how key figures and ministers have been making sense of the COVID-19 crisis and through which terms and narratives they conveyed a message to community members. Our results show that traditional narratives of calling and punishment are communicated in quite the same way as before the crisis, which reflects the strong beliefs and convictions that constitute the theological 'proprium' of the reformed pietist group. From a psychological perspective, this not only reflects (a need for) belief in a just world (Lerner 1980) – effectively avoiding to endure psychological fear and pain – and longing for purification and dedication (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez 1998), but also shows that meaning making systems function quite conservatively: people favor assimilation of new information to the global system over accommodation of that system (Park & Folkman 1997). Sociologically, re-establishing or reiterating the common narrative may function as a means to 'keep the community alive' and its story intact. We hope to expand on such dynamics in following research, wherein we will use this current study as a basis to examine the intertwined theological, psychological and sociological aspects of narratives and meaning making.

Our current study can also be used as a pilot to study other religious communities in times of crisis, and to examine which narratives and representations are prominent. In a parallel study, not reported here, we interviewed people from the community, but also confronted them with quotes by key figures and ministers, and asked them to react and reflect. We think that that study will complement this one, its religio-psychological approach, rather than a systematic-theological one, can bring in new insights.

21 RD8.

Literature

- Aten, J.D., M. Moore, R.M. Denney, T. Bayne, A. Stagg, S. Owens, S. Daniels, S. Boswell, J. Schenck, J. Adams, and C. Jones. (2008). God images following hurricane Katrina in South Mississippi: An exploratory study. *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 36(4), 249–257.
- Breure et al. (2020). *Als de Heere roept: luisteren naar Gods stem in de coronacrisis*. Lunteren: Drukkerij AMV.
- Brienen, T., Exalto, K., van Genderen, J., Graafland, C., & van 't Spijker, W. (1986). *De Nadere Reformatie. Beschrijving van Haar Voornaamste Vertegenwoordigers*. Den Haag: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum.
- Fretheim, T.E. (2010). *Creation Untamed (Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic): The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.
- Galiën, P. van der (10 March 2020). *Reformatorisch Dagblad: coronavirus is straf van God*. Retrieved on 16 February 2021 from: <https://www.krapuul.nl/samenleving/zorg-2/gezondheid-2/2745832/reformatorisch-dagblad-coronavirus-is-straf-van-god/>.
- Hijweege, N.M. (2004). *Bekering in bevindelijk gereformeerde kring: Een psychologische studie*. Kampen: Kok.
- Klaver, M., & Roeland, J. (2010). Protestantisme in beweging: Evangelisch en reformatorisch in vijf vergelijkingen. In *Evangelisch en reformatorisch: Een wereld van verschil?*, 33–52. Goudriaan: De Groot.
- Lerner, M.J. (1980). The belief in a just world. In *The Belief in a just World*, 9–30. Springer, Boston, MA.
- Lutzer, E.W. (2011). *An act of God? Answers to tough questions about God's role in natural disasters*. Carol Stream: Tyndale House.
- Lutzer, E.W. (2020). *Pandemics, plagues, and natural disasters: What is God saying to us?* Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- O'Mathúna D.P. (2018) Christian Theology and Disasters: Where is God in All This?, 27–42. In: O'Mathúna D., Dranseika V., Gordijn B. (eds) Disasters: Core Concepts and Ethical Theories. *Advancing Global Bioethics*, 11. https://doi-org.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92722-0_3.
- Overeem, C.J. (16 January 2014). *Eindtijdsignalen*. Retrieved on 30 January 2021 from: <https://gereformeerdebond.nl/download/CAwDEAwUkBEVg=&inline=0>.
- Park, C.L., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the context of stress and coping. *Review of general psychology*, 1(2), 115–144.
- Pargament, K.I., Smith, B.W., Koenig, H.G., & Perez, L. (1998). Patterns of positive and negative religious coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, 710–724.
- Regio Online, Editorial (26 March 2020). *Schokkend: uitgelekte brief aan kinderen – “veel bidden, want Corona is straf van God”*. Retrieved on 12 October 2020 from: <https://>

- www.regioonline.nl/binnenland/schokkend-uitgelekte-brief-aan-kinderen-veel-bidden-want-corona-is-straft-van-god/.
- Regio Online, Editorial (31 March 2020). "Bizar: Krimpense predikant voorziet dood alle Nederlanders." Retrieved on 12 October 2020 from: <https://www.regioonline.nl/binnenland/bizar-krimpense-predikant-voorziet-dood-alle-nederlanders/>.
- Schot, A. et al. (2020). *Dit is Gods vinger. Themapreken: Coronavirus*. Goes: de Ramshoorn.
- Servis, M.E. (2004). Protestant Christians. Handbook of spirituality and worldview in clinical practice, 63–76. In: Josephson, A.M., & Peteet, J.R. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of spirituality and worldview in clinical practice*. Arlington: American Psychiatric Pub.
- Shereen, M.A., Khan, S., Kazmi, A., Bashir, N., & Siddique, R. (2020). COVID-19 infection: Origin, transmission, and characteristics of human coronaviruses. *Journal of advanced research*, 24, 91–98.
- Trilla, A., Trilla, G., & Daer, C. (2008). The 1918 "Spanish flu" in Spain. *Clinical infectious diseases*, 47(5), 668–673.
- Van den Brink, G., & Smits, J. (2015). The Reformed Stance: Distinctive Commitments and Concerns. *Journal of Reformed Theology*, 9(4), 325–347.
- Voorwinden, P. (2009). Bevindelijk gereformeerde patiënten en psychotherapie. *Psyche en Geloof*, 20(2), 119–129.
- Wright, N.T. (2020). *God and the pandemic*. London: SPCK.