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In the early 1990s, I began work as a HIV-AIDS counsellor in London, UK. At that time the virus was touted as a potential plague that would impact upon millions around the world. Additionally, nobody knew for sure whether it was contagious or not, so every time we went to visit an infected person we had to wear PPE from head to foot. Even though the virus was associated predominantly with members of the Gay community, it was a scary time for everybody.

The pharmaceutical companies were in hot pursuit of a cure (vaccine), and in 1991 it came in the form of retroviral drugs, particularly AZT. For millions of infected people it improved their living conditions, but it was not a cure. In fact, 30 years later we still don’t have a cure for HIV-AIDS, and, each year around the world millions continue to die of the disease.

While awaiting the magical cure, a range of alternative remedies were being explored, particularly among those of us with an interest in holistic health care. Of particular significance was the story of an infected group in California, USA who allegedly had full-blown AIDS, but were continuing to live quite normal lives. Many of them were influenced by the emerging field of *psychoneuroimmunology*. Instead of waiting for the cure, they opted to focus on boosting human immunity, individually and collectively. They gave special attention to three key elements: quality diet, quality relationships, and quality resources to manage stress.

In the small project in which I was involved (Route 15), we encouraged our infected members to adopt such practices. Initially, we met with noted scepticism, but in time won over some. However, once news of the retroviral drugs came through, interest in the holistic approach rapidly waned – even among ourselves. Everybody wanted the quick solution, despite some nasty side-effects when AZT was first administered. The holistic approach rapidly faded into the background.

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THE NEW NORMAL OF COVID 19

I see several parallels with our current situation as we seek a resolution to Covid 19. All hope is postulated on the vaccine. In fact, many people seem to be assuming that it will deliver a complete cure, when in fact it won't. It will help us to contain the virus, and return to "normal" living – until another major crisis will hit us and it will be the same all over again.

The notion of a "new normal" has been around for some time now. Basically, it translates into a set of external behaviours: social distancing, frequent hand-washing, respiratory hygiene, wearing masks, avoiding large crowds, restricted movements. The emphasis is entirely on *external performance*. No attention is given to *inner* dispositions, attitude, and outlook. Virtually nobody, is stating or emphasising the importance of boosting immunity, the long-known best defence against illness and disease.

Essentially, we build up our immunity-resistance by wholesome diet, daily exposure to nature's nurturance, healthy exercise, fulfilling relationships, empowering work, good stress management, avoidance of toxins (e.g., smoking). Additionally, a medical practitioner who adopts a holistic approach can be an invaluable resource.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

In March-April 2020, when virus rates first began to escalate, a range of insights surfaced on the possible *causes* of Covid 19. Nobody seems interested anymore, despite overwhelming scientific evidence, that this is yet another human-induced (dare we suggest, human-invented) disease, requiring a solution far beyond what our over-medicalized world can offer.

Our human inter-relationship with the natural world is a particularly acute factor. Ever since the first recorded cases in China, which likely originated in the wet markets of Wuhan, we evidenced a spread of a virus along a trajectory that is well understood, first documented by the American scientist, David Quammen, in his 2012 book, *Spillover*. When humans treat other creatures – animals, mammals, birds, etc. – as mere objects for our benefit, we often end up undermining our own health and integrity. We have seen it with HIV-AIDS, MERS, SARS, and Ebola. And yet we cling on to the old normal! When are we going to wake up and treat these other organisms as *companions* of earth's ecosystem, and not mere objects for our human benefit?

Already in this year of 2020, over 100 scientific papers document the deleterious effects of our human exploitation of natural resources, particularly regarding forests and wet-lands. In

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the words of the Indian physicist cum anti-globalization activist, Vandana Shiva: “Science is informing us that as we invade forest ecosystems, destroy the homes of species and manipulate plants and animals for profits, we create conditions for new diseases. Over the past 50 years, 300 new pathogens have emerged. It is well documented that around 70% of the human pathogens, including HIV, Ebola, influenza, MERS and SARS, emerge when forest ecosystems are invaded and viruses jump from animals to humans.”

Once again, we the exploiters, end up being among the greatest victims of our own ravaging of nature’s biodiversity.

MEDICALIZED ADDICTION

As a species, we also face a deep internal crisis on the co-option of our health-care by mega-corporations. The allurements of a vaccine (cure) is actually the outcome of a fiercely subtle form of indoctrination that has been pervasive for several decades now. It is documented in some frightening detail by the Irish consultant, Dr. Seamus O’Mahony, in his 2019 book, *Can Medicine be Cured?* We are all the gullible recipients of powerful lobbyists primarily devoted to the health of their macro-economic systems and not to the well-being of human beings.

In the USA, for instance, there is 1 (one) pharmaceutical salesperson for every 2.3 medical doctors. The goal of this hard sell, is not the improvement of human immunity, which requires people themselves becoming the primary carers of their own health but, rather, the creation of an insidious co-dependency depriving millions all over our world of a more authentic sense of their own self-worth, and the accompanying responsibility to attend to their own well being, and that of others, by living more *wholesome* lives.

WHAT HAS RELIGION TO OFFER?

And when will religions and churches dare to ask the suppressed ethical and spiritual questions? For millions the world over, medical healthcare has become the new religion, the new wellspring for salvation and redemption. The “vaccine” is the new resurrection from the dead – and the hope of eternal salvation. And what millions don’t seem to realize is that lurking within the new salvation is the same apocalyptic beast/dragon that inhabited the old panacea.

The scripture scholar, Wes Howard-Brook names it with prophetic clarity (in his book, *Empire Baptized*, 2016). The human immersion in creation, as outlined in the opening book of the Bible (God saw that it was good). is rapidly displaced by the voracious hunger of Empire. By the end of the book of Genesis

even God himself is deeply entangled in domination and violence. Throughout the entire Bible the pursuit of Empire undermines Creation, and people's participation in its evolving dynamics. Christianity dragged Jesus into the imperial quagmire, seriously undermining Jesus' own vision to destroy Empire forever through the empowering vision of the Kingdom of God. And from the fourth century onward, the imperial vision of Constantine continued to haunt Christianity.

Now with the religious imperialism badly deflated (millions are walking away), the apocalyptic beastdragon lurks within the new religion of our age, that is, within medicalized health-care itself. *This new face of Empire is made of the pharmaceutical companies.* They swing the lead, they hold the power, and they use deceptively powerful advertising to sale their salvation. Even our governments are at their mercy.

Sadly, therefore, the new way to salvation, is actually a repeat of the old way. Empire is central to both, and the raw pursuit of imperial power is what distracts us all from our authentic place as Earthlings, who are meant to be deeply integrated within God's creation (as *Laudato Si* highlights). Without that integration, healthy human immunity stands no chance of flourishing.

TOWARDS A NEW THEOLOGICAL NORMAL

During the pandemic all major religious buildings were closed and services were transmitted virtually. The services were delivered according to standard rites, using traditional language and rituals. For the greater part, these services appealed to those of devotional disposition and helped to relieve anguish and loneliness. Moreover, such alternatives to Church-going had little impact on most people, nor did people feel guilty because they could not attend Church. Religion was extensively side-lined and seemed at a loss to offer a new normal.

Consider the following statement as an *invitation* to a new religious normal: "To understand the human person theologically, we must learn to begin anew and love the dust that we are. The implications of that starting point are humbling, for they unsettle classical conceptions of human separatism and speciesism that we as humans have fabricated to distance ourselves from the rest of the community of creation. ... A renewed personhood emerges, one that is not threatened by our creaturliness or insecure about our animality. Rather, these truths of our existence as creatures of God form the foundation of all that follows in our Christian theological anthropology."¹

1. Daniel P. Horan, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood*, 2020. p 43.

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This theological vision embraces a “new normal,” vividly reminding us humans that we are Earthlings, first and foremost, that God created us as Earthlings, and seeks our collaboration and creativity at that level. Only when we reclaim a more integrated relationship with the earth itself, respecting its creative dynamics, and working harmoniously with all other beings that share the web of life with us, do we stand any chance of living healthily. Without such an organic, earth-based adjustment, all the vaccines on earth are not likely to bring long-term healing and wholeness.

A vaccine is an old normal in a world where ever more drugs are needed to keep us healthy and alive. In several cases, antibiotics don't work anymore. *A vaccine is a short-term – and short-sighted - solution, not a long-term hope.* Empowering humans to build up immunity – their own and that of all others – by living more in harmony with the earth itself, offers a more hopeful and empowering future.

The liturgy. The liturgy is not a book that we read, a ceremony that we perform, an illustration of some principle that we believe in; it is a deed that we do that makes present the time and space of God's redeeming act, the rescue operation, involving the three Persons of the Trinity, here and now. And this Mystery, in the predominantly Pauline sense, “means, first of all, a deed of God's, the working-out of an eternal divine plan through an act which proceeds from His eternity, is realised in time and the world, and returns once more to Him, its goal in eternity”.

– Mark Patrick Hederman, *Living the Mystery* (Dublin: Columba Books) p.137.