



RISK AND SACRAMENT: BEING HUMAN IN A COVID-19 WORLD

by Ziba Norman  and Michael J. Reiss 

Abstract. In this article we examine the changing relationship to risk as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways this has, and may in future, alter sacramental practice, considering the radical effects this could have on traditional Christian practice. We consider the cultural trends that may lie behind this developing approach to risk, examining this in the context of an emergent transhuman identity that is technologically moderated and seeks to overcome risks of human mortality.

Keywords: COVID-19; *Homo transhumanus*; pandemic; risk; sacrament; transhumanism

For all our technological prowess, the vulnerabilities of embodied life cannot be fully controlled, yet it seems we are more anxious than ever to do just that. In a post-Enlightenment world, we are ill-suited to an acknowledgment of the limitations under which we operate and, it seems, equally ill-equipped to fully grasp the transcendent theological offerings of religious belief. Our perception of pathogenic risk, now impacting all aspects of our lives, has altered radically as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pathogenic risk was once a concern largely limited to specific environments, for example, hospitals and surgeries, and particular groups, for example, immunosuppressed individuals and the elderly; the new normal, however, involves weighing up the risks of contamination in almost every physical space into which we might enter. Indeed, government information campaigns in the United Kingdom warn us to “Stay Alert, Control the Virus,” suggesting that we can be in “control” and that it is somehow a failure if we allow any form of bodily breach. Such campaigns represent a new way of relating to disease or rather the potential for contracting a disease—some might argue that greater awareness of pathogenic risk was overdue and

Ziba Norman is an Honorary Research Fellow Associate at University College London, UK; e-mail: z.norman@ucl.ac.uk. Michael J. Reiss is Professor of Science Education at UCL Institute of Education, University College London, UK, and President of the International Society for Science and Religion; e-mail: m.reiss@ucl.ac.uk.

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entirely rational in a globally integrated world in which highly dangerous pathogens can be transmitted within hours from diverse corners of the Earth. More fundamentally, COVID-19 may prove to alter significantly our understanding of what it means to be human.

Although humanity has lived through the emergence of new diseases and pandemics before, COVID-19 is proving to be different to previous outbreaks of newly identified viral illnesses such as SARS, MERS, or HIV/AIDS. These differences have biological and social consequences. In the initial stages, as with the recently evolved viruses just listed, we had neither immunity nor medications proven to be effective against it. However, COVID-19 differs in a number of respects, including that it is highly contagious with almost everyone at risk of infection; in a few months, it has spread to every corner of the globe. None of us can truly see ourselves as outside its biological frame of influence, with the possible exception, though still unproven, of those who have succumbed to infection (whether or not they know this) and survived and those with natural immunity. Its mechanisms of action, at least initially, were poorly understood, and despite massive international efforts and research, many biological unknowns will remain for a considerable period.

This itself is a cause of fear that has prompted huge changes in the way in which societies operate, and with these, great changes to religious practices. It seems very possible that the unknowns regarding COVID-19 will leave a legacy that is likely to persist long after we have (hopefully) found effective means for combatting the disease itself, with a new approach to human embodied life becoming normative.

Even though the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a number of highly reputable professional societies and others warned of such an event, governments and others, with political powers and responsibilities somehow imagined (presumed) that we would be in control, that the WHO could provide, as in the past, sufficient warning for all of us to be spared the worst. This just isn't the type of thing was meant to happen in the twenty-first century; most of those in power imagined the warnings about zoonotic pandemics of unknown origin were overblown. And yet a pandemic, not unlike that described by science fiction writers such as Stephen King in *The Stand* and Dean Koontz in *The Eyes of Darkness* arrived, leaving most governments, multinational companies and individuals stunned and unprepared. Accommodating to the early stages of this new reality has brought with it a new approach to risk, which we suggest is culturally based and reflective of modernist societies that are data-driven; it is this combination of factors that is changing how we understand ourselves as humans.

The radical changes we are now witnessing in the way we negotiate risk have profoundly affected religious practices, including sacramental Christian practice, integral to the traditional institutional Christian faith for some two millennia. In the Catholic tradition the seven sacraments are

baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing the sick, marriage and holy orders; in most Protestant denominations there are just baptism and the Eucharist; the Quakers and some other traditions hold that there are none. Whatever their number, most Christian denominations understand the sacraments as they were defined by Augustine: outward signs of an inward grace (Davison 2013).

As a result of COVID-19, major religious festivals—Pessach, Easter, Vaisakhi, Navratri, Buddha Purnima, and Ramadan—were all celebrated under lockdown in the spring of 2020. Sacramental forms of worship considered core to the life of the worshipping Christian community were halted entirely in many countries, in a way that wars and previous pandemics had never done. When the emperor Diocletian published his first edict against the Christians on February 24, 303, ordering the destruction of Christian scriptures and places of worship across the Empire, and prohibiting Christians from assembling for worship, there were many who continued to receive Holy Communion in secret. In 304, a group of 49 Christians, the Martyrs of Abitinae, were found guilty of the practice and tortured to death. One of those who hosted the services, Emeritus, was asked why he had violated the emperor's command. He replied "*Sine dominico non possumus*"—"without the Lord's Day, we cannot live" (Imbelli 2007).

Reactions to the suspension of regular corporate worship as a result of COVID-19 have varied from the stoical to the rebellious. In a number of countries, including France, Germany, and the USA, legal action has been taken by religious groups who believe their rights to worship have been violated illegally. The theological implications have become a source of anxiety for many, perhaps especially traditional Roman Catholic believers and clergy. For example, the sacrament of viaticum and the associated last rites, offered to those at the point of death, have been suspended because of possible contagion—seen by some as a direct clash between belief in the importance of the sacrament for the eternal life of the soul and the preservation of the body in this temporal life.

Even in Christian denominations that do not have as strong a focus on sacrament, there has also been a sudden sense of loss. It can feel as though the foundations on which the life of communities and beliefs have stood are being swept away, almost overnight. The very nature of the advice being given for social distancing makes sacramental practice contrary to governmental guidelines, and in some cases actually in contravention of the law itself. It is as if we have all been told "*Noli me tangere*" ("Do not touch me") in response to our cry "They have taken my Lord away." In the clash between what is considered necessary to control the spread of contagion and the routine of religious practice, the latter has become subservient to the former. Churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples are not considered essential, unlike supermarkets, pet shops, hardware stores, news agents, and dry cleaners—all of which have been permitted to remain open in the

UK. In some U.S. states, liquor stores and gun shops have remained open while places of worship have been shut for months.

The changes wrought by COVID-19 have been equally disruptive for those of a secular persuasion. The unbounded confidence that many placed in science, to keep them safe and secure, to keep the economy on track and the world as we know it in motion, for answers and assurances, has been weakened. The lesson from other global epidemics over the past 50 years is that they significantly reduce confidence in scientists and the benefits of their work (Aksoy, Eichengreen, and Saka 2020). An RNA virus, which bears considerable similarity to the common cold, is unravelling some of the structures on which our highly advanced civilization rests. And it is happening at great speed.

In the case of the believer and nonbeliever alike, these changes may offer an opportunity to recalibrate their understanding of both science and religion and may yet come to be seen as an opportunity for the essential interconnectedness of these two domains to be understood as it becomes ever more apparent that neither is sufficient in itself. The loss experienced by those who identify strongly with only one of these will perhaps lead to an awareness that both are required for the fullness of human life and a flourishing civilization and that such an accommodation is not just desirable but necessary for human advancement. We need both scientific insight and spiritual wisdom for human flourishing (Briggs and Reiss forthcoming).

Against this backdrop, we examine the possible origins and implications of this new understanding of risk and counterbalance it with the role of sacramental practice in the preservation of the distinctiveness of Christianity. To explore the possibilities for reconnecting these two more fully, we offer some insights and an analysis of sacramental practice and, through this, examine what may be at stake if it were to be sidelined in a post-COVID-19 world. In doing so, we will examine the theology of disclosure and consider the concept of interruption in history, on which the entire Christian story is based, from the Incarnation onward. We begin by considering what may be leading this changed relationship to risk.

HOMO TRANSHUMANUS: RISK PERCEPTION

Transhumanism is a movement that argues we should make full use of technology to enhance humanity through surgical and other interventions to increase our intelligence and other features. The movement has some of its roots in science fiction (e.g., Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) and, to this day, some of the most insightful analyses of what it is to be human and of the risks and potential benefits of becoming *Homo transhumanus* continue to be explored through science

fiction, whether in novels (e.g., Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and its successors) or films (e.g., *Avatar*, *Elysium*, *Lucy*, *RoboCop*).

By now there is a burgeoning academic field of transhumanism with its own journal, *Journal of Posthuman Studies*, and increasing links with other academic fields. Notable theological contributions, after the remarkable, early, and controversial *The Phenomenon of Man* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (written in the 1930s but only published posthumously in 1955), have been made by Celia Deane-Drummond and Peter Scott (2006), Ronald Cole-Turner (2011), Michael Burdett (2015), and Jacob Shatzer (2019). Central themes explored in this literature include the place of human hope in the search for perfection, technological dreaming, visionary approaches to technology, utopias, the Incarnation, human identity, and God's promises.

One way of understanding transhumanism is to see it as an attempted response to risk—the risk of getting old, the risk of not being smart enough, the risk of becoming diseased, and the risk of dying. There are many different approaches to risk, and though some of them may be able to explain partially what we are observing now in the time of COVID-19, it seems as if new premises are being adopted, ones that are suggestive of a different understanding of ourselves in embodied human form.

Are these transhumanist ideas altering the premises on which we have operated to date? Is this now happening at an accelerated rate as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic? Is a new archetype emerging, one in which the primary consideration of all good is associated with the maintenance of the body? And what might we identify as some of the hallmarks of *Homo transhumanus* that are pertinent to our response to COVID-19? We propose the following as relevant identifying characteristics:

1. The body as a machine to be maintained and augmented
2. Reification of data, with quantification of information replacing qualitative judgments
3. Comfortable in virtual spaces
4. Inability to accept death, accompanied by an oscillation between fear of extinction and confidence at its avoidance
5. Expectation of control, with a reluctance to accept the normal risks associated with being human.

The speed of change in daily life and the pervasive use of technologies so readily embraced may be traced to a largely unacknowledged, emergent transhuman identity. In the broadest sense, this considers death a kind of misfortune, a relic of our evolutionary history that can, or soon will, be controlled and is marked by a merging of humans with machines and their technology (cf. the cyborgs of Haraway 1991). It places less reliance on

the need for physical contact, even as the body has become sacred, though not in a religious or sacramental sense of the term. Achieving immortality in cyberspace is an example of the way technology is being used to alter our understanding of death, through uploading one's memories, so that these persist should one die, and avatars being used to assist those who are grieving (Bourke 2018). Even our four-footed friends are being replaced by robotic counterparts (Nalewicki 2020).

Events have revealed just how closely connected we have become in virtual space; the connectivity offered by our technologies is being adopted everywhere to enable both social and economic activity to continue, while reducing physical contact to levels unimaginable at any other time in history. The changed relationship to risk, in combination with the availability of technologies that enable us to interact virtually, we suggest, will be transformative. It isn't difficult to imagine virtual reality replacing travel to actual destinations or Zoom marriages and graduations becoming commonplace. Virtual safaris have become vastly more popular as a result of lockdowns and there are wildlife benefits from less human disturbance. COVID-19 is acclimatizing us to these new kinds of life in a virtual reality, moderated by our technologies.

Whilst these changes might be considered a natural development, perhaps even positive—less travel to distant places means fewer CO₂ emissions—we cannot but recognize that such developments present a challenge both to the ways in which we have traditionally expressed ourselves as humans and to our relationships with others. And it is, at its core, based on fear, and a new way of calibrating risk.

John Adams, a risk theorist, explains that there are different approaches to risk, and acknowledges there are many different theoretical frameworks. On the one side, we have the scientific and managerial (“hard”) approaches that attempt to quantify risk; on the other, we have (“soft”) approaches that understand risk as culturally constructed, where issues like the control that I believe I have over the risk are of central importance—so I may be far less afraid about the chances of my dying as a result of my cigarette smoking habit than I am about my chances of dying from COVID-19, even though a statistician would argue that the chances of the former are far greater than of the latter. In his best-known book, *Risk*, Adams discusses how agreement on these approaches isn't achievable: “I have no illusions that my effort to bridge the divide between the “hard” and “soft” approaches to risk will satisfy everyone—indeed cultural theory warns that everyone will never agree about risk” (Adams 1995, xi).

It seems though that we are reaching a higher degree of convergence than one might have thought possible in respect of the risk of pandemic. Opinion polls in many countries have indicated that the majority even of those who anticipate that the response to COVID-19 will have a detrimental effect on them personally, for example, on their finances

or family life, have been willing to comply with stringent limitation on their freedoms. In the UK, lockdown regulations were supported by some 93% of the population when first adopted on March 23, 2020 (Smith 2020a). By June 2020, support in the UK for government actions had slipped and there were big international variations in the percentage of people “who think the government is handling the issue of coronavirus “very” or “somewhat” well”—with the top two places of 22 countries surveyed occupied on June 1–2 by Vietnam (97%) and Malaysia (93%) and the bottom two by Mexico (40%) and the United States (41%) (Smith 2020b).

Adams utilizes the archetype *Homo prudens*, describing him as the zero-risk man “[s]triving continually, if not efficaciously to avoid accidents. Whenever he has an accident it is a ‘mistake’ or ‘error’” (Adams 1995, 29). But, post-Adams, is there a new archetype emerging: *Homo transhumanus*? In this new archetype, death is not acknowledged as a necessary part of the cycle of life; in a sense, the approach is an extension of Adams’s *Homo prudens*: one of zero-risk of death itself. Of course, a zero-risk result is in practice impossible, though we are somehow led to believe, through the rhetoric, that this is the aim; the reality is that we are talking about the medical prolongation of life not immortality (Reiss 2003). There is an implicit understanding that asks us to attempt to control as many variables as we can to eliminate risk, leaving the poor human to contend with a dizzying amount of data when taking even the most mundane decisions, such as leaving one’s own front door. Data, our android friend in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, would be easily suited to making such calculations, but we humans are simply not.

Mary Douglas, the well-known anthropologist who co-authored works on risk with Aaron Wildavsky (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983), explains the phenomenon of culturally mediated approaches to risk and differentiates them from psychological phenomenon:

[t]he psychologists who analyzed public opinion polls simply assumed one basic kind of human person with personality quirks which accounted for changes in attitudes to risk. Adding the cultural element meant looking for organizational pressures on opinion. It meant not treating attitudes to risk as free-floating psychic items liable to change capriciously, but supposing that attitudes to the long term, or attitudes to loss and gain, would be affected by the social environment. (Douglas 1996, xxviii)

Transhumanism is, in these terms, a new social environment which is changing our relationship to biological risk and therefore our understanding of ourselves as humans in embodied form.

RISK, LONGEVITY, AND THE VIRTUAL AS NEW NORMAL

The new approach to risk, with its presumption that it may be possible to avoid it altogether, may be rooted in quests for ever greater longevity, which are a pervasive aspect of twenty-first century Western culture, with natural, physical death seen as a kind of misfortune that must be avoided or, in the case of uploading one's memories, managed through cyber immortality, referred to above. Early (indeed, still extant) technological attempts at immortality relied on crude freezing, leading the Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees, to remark, in his 2010 Reith Lectures, "For my part, I would much rather end my days in a Wiltshire churchyard than a Californian refrigerator" (Rees 2010).

Humanity+ is a movement and platform for these transhumanist ideas. Its founder Zoltan Istvan's 2019 campaign for the Republican Party's nomination in the 2020 U.S. presidential election is evidence of the first inklings of a political movement (Humanity+ 2020). This new conceptualization of risk, we suggest, may be related to the widespread existential presumption, in an age of increasing secularity, that if (when) our mortal life comes to an end, we lose much more than simply a few additional years—it is our existence that terminates. It is this largely unacknowledged change to the way individuals view themselves *sub specie aeternitatis* that may explain why alterations to daily life in a time of COVID-19, with its threats to life, have been so readily adopted, and supported by so many. And this can be considered a cultural change, the slow, incremental changes to behavior observable before now, currently fast-forwarded by the pandemic. Death is increasingly seen not as a pathway to "a better country" (*Hebrews* 11:16) but as extinction.

The technologies humanity has developed, and is increasingly updating, are becoming the masters of our social space, and even seen as vehicles for our salvation, in a kind of secularized eschatology. The development of COVID-19 Apps for tracking even chance and transient encounters—at any other time in human history ones that would pass silently, unrecorded and lost—will now become part of the data that we can collect in an attempt to manage our fate through a sort of citizen science, crowdsourced model. The approach is seductive in that it leads to a belief that somehow all variables can be controlled, if only they could be traced and known, a resurgence of the optimism of Francis Bacon that science would allow us to achieve dominion over nature. These tools may be very useful, even necessary, if the reproduction rate for COVID-19 is to be kept to below 1 without even longer lockdowns being imposed. Our point is not to dismiss the importance of such tools, but rather to point out how the presumption that so much can be known, indeed must be known for us to remain safe, shapes emergent conceptions of risk and, ultimately, how humans and human civilization evolve.

It would perhaps be difficult to overstate the implications that a new approach to risk in the light of COVID-19 may have. Economic and social structures could change radically, in some case predictably; it is difficult to imagine that the previous, apparently inexorable growth in international travel will continue, whether for work (virtual alternatives may not always work quite as well but they are far cheaper and will now be seen as safer) or for holidays (the days of cheap flights may be numbered and it is difficult to see cruise ships being as popular for at least some time to come). But in some cases it seems more difficult to forecast consequences; it might be that multigenerational families become rarer, for fear of the risk of living together, or it might be that they become more common in those countries where people often relied on care homes for elderly relatives, given the high mortality rates in such homes in many countries, and the fact that they may become even more expensive now.

If this new approach to risk is emblematic of an emergent posthuman identity—marked by a myopic focus on the body as fragile and always in danger—it will certainly change the way we experience pleasure. COVID-19 has seen a big jump in sales of human-like sex robots (e.g., Merrifield 2020) and as these become more (hyper)realistic, it seems likely that their popularity will only increase—they may not meet Martin Buber’s “I-thou” criterion but, for some people, they are easier to (not) talk to, fail-safe and come with no risk of sexually transmitted infections (cf. Danaher and McArthur 2017) or issues to do with consent.

It seems clear that what COVID-19 is doing is largely to accelerate trends already in process, whether the ones we have considered here or more familiar ones frequently discussed in the media (the move to on-line shopping, more working from home, etc.). One might say we were prepared, ready to take the path, and that the pandemic only hastened the processes. As we all know, the technologies we had adopted in the twenty-first century had already brought changes to the way we interacted socially, through such social media as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Reddit and the various video conferencing Apps—Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, FaceTime, and so on. To give one final example, Fitbits are a clear example of how our new understanding of the body is being shaped by our technology, relaying real-time information about blood pressure, temperature, our physical activities, and sleep patterns. The body, as part of this emergent transhuman culture, is becoming a machine that can be optimally calibrated, with a degree of self-regulation that Foucault could only have imagined (Foucault 1975). But COVID-19 is not only accelerating these trends, it is disrupting the ways we work, socialize, and relate to one another.

SACRAMENTAL SPACE

There is a rapidly expanding literature on COVID-19 and religion but most of it is to do with issues of public health and whether religion helps or hinders (Barmania and Reiss 2020; Wildman et al. 2020). Our focus here is rather on the implications of COVID-19 for the sacraments. Christian religious and sacramental life holds the body to be sacred, to be cherished, and enjoyed, though this is never viewed as an end in itself. This concept of the body as an end in itself, however, appears to be one of the main factors in the approach to risk which has emerged so acutely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The secularists, and even those who practice religions that are not dependent on sacramental practice, view the risks involved, for example, in celebrating the Eucharist within a worshipping congregation, to be unnecessary, even reckless, during a time such as this. To understand the disruptive qualities of this new approach to risk, and the effects it may have on Christianity in a transhuman context, we begin with an analysis of the sacramental rituals.

Sacramental rituals have been described as effecting a kind of interruption—the term “interruption” being used to express the piercing of our temporal reality that allows for a connection between the visible and divine (Boeve 2003, 412). “Interruption” expresses an understanding of sacrament, where sacrament is not viewed merely anthropologically. A reductive anthropological understanding fails to do justice to Christianity, inasmuch as it treats sacrament as a magical practice and does not fully acknowledge this interruptive quality, characteristic of Christianity in its narrative tradition as well as in ritual and sacramental practice. To understand the importance of this interruptive quality is key to appreciating the significance of the diminishment of the sacramental, and its importance in understanding ourselves as fully human, capable of transcendence expressed and experienced through ritual practice. Boeve goes further, describing “interruption” as a concept to express the point at which “continuity and discontinuity meet each other” (Boeve 2003, 412), suggesting that merely holding the Christian narratives at the more general anthropological level is to miss what Christianity is, as expressed in revelation: “God who has made Godself known in history through Jesus Christ” (Boeve 2003, 412).

By way of example, looking at the historical aspects of Christianity, the Easter festival is viewed as categorically different from other spring festivals because it is “radically transformed by a perception of history in which history is divinely interrupted” (Boeve 2003, 413). Easter is thus moved out of a secular anthropological realm, expressing what makes Christianity so very different. Sacrament can be seen as the visible and repeatable manifestation of that interruptive quality, which is integral to the narrative on which Christianity is based. Though sacramental practice may appear

to some to be purely a human construct (and therefore easily suspended in a time of pandemic, just as we can do without a professional haircut for a few months), the many aspects of Christianity when viewed in concert makes such a separation of the quotidian and the transcendent impossible.

The words “sacrament” and “mystery” themselves invoke what has been described as a “transcendent reality, invisible in itself, but manifested in ways that belong to the earth” (Schillebeeckx and Willems 1968, 1–2). For many Christians, sacramental acts allow for the mundane and the transcendent to conjoin. Such acts are not simply perceived as symbolic; in particular, almost all Eucharistic prayers contain an anamnesis, a liturgical statement which not only reminds congregants of what happened at the Last Supper but enables them to participate in its memorial reenactment, whether this is understood as the real presence of Christ in the consecrated elements or more figuratively. Any nontheologically informed anthropological analysis of these rites as rituals that fails to appreciate their significance for those participating in them and only focuses on the visible part of what is happening fails to understand their significance. Exactly the same point, of course, holds for an analysis of baptism that sees water only as a symbol of washing and for an analysis of a wedding that sees the exchange of vows and rings as being no more important than the bride’s dress or the party that follows the wedding.

For many Christians, sacraments are viewed as transformative (not merely functional); thus, to be deprived of them, however pressing the reasons, even in a time of pandemic, will be deeply disruptive. This is perhaps particularly the case for funerals (even if these are not seen formally as sacraments) as these, unlike weddings, baptisms and the Eucharist, cannot be postponed more than a week or two. At the time of writing (June 2020), COVID-19 has already meant that hundreds of thousands of people, secular and religious alike, have had dismal funeral services where only a handful of relatives, friends, and others have been able to be present, with no one supposed to give anyone present a hug or other physical support, unless they are from the same household. The spaces within which funerals are taking place are fractured as those present participate more individually (sometimes virtually) and less communally.

Sacrament, through its inherent materiality, offers the possibility of interruption into the temporal realm, in ways that are impossible to describe with language alone. Attempts have been made to move beyond both historicism and rationalism, in search of a new means of describing the sacramental space. Robert Sokolowski, who writes on the theology of disclosure, suggests that there may be a “third way” of relating to Christian experience. Much of Christian experience, and the manifestation of Christian belief, emerges out of the experience of absence and the presence that is found within it. The Eucharistic sacrament is an enactment that brings the absent sacred into presence. In this sense, it is interruptive of the

temporal; on this reading it is essential, linking the historical narrative to the mediating presence of Christ, present for the believer through sacrament (Sokolowski 1994).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are reports of congregations in which sacramental practice, particularly the Eucharist, has gone underground. This may contravene public health regulations—as the Black Lives Matter protests in May and June 2020 contravened public health regulations. But then, for all that physical health is a good, few people with any spiritual sensibilities see it as the overriding good. The language of Dom Gregory Dix’s writing on the Eucharist may be dated, but the core message remains:

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on Earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of Earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the Earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna; for the repentance of Margaret; for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheater; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonization of St. Joan of Arc – one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei* – the holy common people of God. (Dix 1945, 744–45)

If Dix had lived long enough to witness the Apollo 11 mission, he might even have added a mention of Buzz Aldrin’s celebration of the Eucharist on the Moon (even if strictly speaking it wouldn’t fit into Dix’s own Eucharistic theology). The celebration occurred before Armstrong or Aldrin even set foot on the Moon’s surface, and before the words “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” were transmitted around the world. The event has even resulted in the addition of a yearly celebration, known as Lunar Communion Sunday, and celebrated at the Webster

Presbyterian church, where Aldrin and many of his fellow astronauts worshipped (Cresswell 2012).

CONCLUSION

The human being in embodied form exists in a state of perpetual risk. This is true for all organisms; the difference for us is that we are aware of this and an acceptance of death is part of this. The pandemic we now face is changing the way we relate to risk, particularly biological risk, and this has a disruptive quality. COVID-19 is furthering our integration with technology, characterized by an emergent transhuman identity that seeks to surpass bodily limitations and, ultimately, even death itself. Sacramental practice presents a direct conflict with the taking of biologically appropriate measures to stem the spread of COVID-19. While this may be necessary at this particular moment, if in the longer-term Christian practice were to become separated from its sacramental roots, it would radically alter Christianity as it has been understood for two millennia.

The Incarnation itself opened humanity to the transcendent through the physical manifestation of Christ; the material and the transcendent are thus linked, united in one whom Christians see as fully human and fully God. The Trinity itself provides the fullest realization we can grasp of this interrelationship, perichoretic in its expression. Thus, sacrament holds open the mysteries of Christianity, which cannot easily be separated from the sacramental. The current time, characterized by an ever greater merging between humans and machine, and a blurring of boundaries between the virtual and the real, offers a moment to reflect on Christian mysteries, as we ensure our technological civilization avoids hubris and remains open for the fullest realization of human life, with its capacity to participate in the transcendent.

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