God and Pandemics

The Impact of “Pestilences” on Christian Believers in General and, in Particular, on Seventh-day Adventists

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Abstract

This article analyses the religious impact of a number of past pandemics. After providing a brief survey of major epidemics and pandemics in history—from the fifth century BC Plague of Athens to the Covid-19 pandemic that broke out in 2020—the religious impact of a few of these health disasters is examined: The Black Death of the fourteenth century, the Influenza of 1918-1920, the more recent HIV/AIDS pandemic and the current Corona (Covid-19) pandemic. Special attention is given to the Seventh-day Adventist response to the last three of these pandemics. The available data indicate that, perhaps contrary to expectations, the eschatological aspect of these pandemics, as “pestilences” that were signs of Christ’s imminent coming, was not the dominant element in the Adventist response. Looking at some of the conspiracy theories that accompany the Covid-19 crisis, it is found that at least some Adventists are also susceptible to such theories.

I wrote this article during the Covid-19 pandemic, while I was restricted in my movements as the country of the Netherlands was in what is now referred to as a lock-down—an English term that has been adopted into many other languages. It is a time when many Christians are asking questions about “God
and the pandemic,”¹ and many, more specifically, wonder whether the current plague, which at the time of writing has already killed a few million people world-wide, must be regarded as one of the “pestilences” which Christ predicted in His so-called Olivet Discourse, as one of signs that would signal His soon return to this world (Luke 21:11). In a Seventh-day Adventist context, this raises further questions, such as whether Covid-19 has intensified the eschatological awareness of Seventh-day Adventists in any measurable way.

First, however, a more general question calls for our attention. What has been the religious impact of past epidemics and pandemics? And how does the religious impact of the current health crisis compare with that of earlier global health disasters? Pandemics are, after all, rather regular occurrences – on average the world experiences a global pandemic about four times in each century (Wuthnow 2010, 143). Throughout history these crises have often caused panic and deep despair, as they drew people “closer to the prospect of death and compelled [them] to contemplate the meaning of life” (Chandra 2020). But they have also proven to be “moments of pause, renewed energy, and hope” (Ferngren 2020, 22–25). Has that also been true – and if so, in what way – for Seventh-day Adventist Christians, as they experienced the pandemics that hit the world since their denomination came into existence?

1. Epidemics and Pandemics² – Past and Present
Deadly epidemics were already known in Bible times, and are invariable characterized in the Scriptures as the result of divine interventions. The sixth plague, with its “festering boils” that affected humans and livestock, as part of God’s aim to break the stubbornness of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Exodus 9:9), definitely qualifies as an epidemic. And, to mention another Old Testament example: the sudden demise of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers during their assault on Jerusalem, at the time of the reign of Judah’s King Hezekiah (729–686 BC), has often been explained as an epidemic caused by infected mice (Horn 1960,

¹ Cf. the title of a little book by the prominent theologian Tom Wright: God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath (Wright 2020).
According to Isaiah 37:36, “the angel of the Lord” went out and struck the Assyrian army. Several scholars suggest that “angel of the Lord” is a biblical euphemism for an epidemic.

Records from classical antiquity report a number of epidemics and pandemics. The Plague of Athens, which occurred in 430–426 BC, may well have been a serious outbreak of typhoid, which claimed the lives of more than a quarter of the city’s population (Huremovic 2019). A historical account was provided by Thucydides in his History of the Peloponnesian War. A full-blown ancient pandemic, which occurred in the late second century AD, was the Antonine Plague of 165–180 AD. This is thought to have been caused by smallpox, and was introduced into the Roman Empire by troops returning from the Roman Parthian War. The total number of victims may have been as high as five million.

A century later another plague, named after Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, brought havoc to a large area around the Mediterranean. This pandemic, the cause of which remains unknown, reportedly killed some 5,000 people a day in Rome alone. St Cyprian wrote about the disaster in a Latin work entitled De Mortalitate (Cyprian 1885).

The Justinian Plague, which was described by various contemporary authors, is probably the earliest documented example of the bubonic plague. It spread widely, along caravan trading routes, throughout the Eastern-Roman world and beyond. It started in mid-sixth century and was followed by decades of new outbreaks during which the population in some areas may have been reduced by as much as forty percent (Huremovic 2019).

1.1 The Black Death
Several major pandemics occurred in medieval times, but for a number of centuries the most dramatic example of a horrendous global outbreak of the

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3 For historical issues surrounding Sennacherib’s various military campaigns, see Bright 1967, 267–271 and 282–288.
5 Book II, Chapter VII. An English translation was provided by Charles Foster Smith and published in 1956 by Heinemann (London, UK) and Harvard University Press (Cambridge, MA).
7 For an extensive list of epidemics/pandemics, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_epidemics. This article provides a wealth of bibliographical information.
bubonic plague remains the “Plague” or the “Black Death.” It originated in China in 1334, reached Rome in 1347, soon to spread all over the European continent, before moving into Russia and the Middle East. Due to its extremely high mortality rate, the Plague often annihilated entire communities. Today scientists understand that this pandemic was spread by a bacillus called *Yersina pestis*, named after the French biologist Alexandre Yersin (1863–1943), who discovered the culpable germ (History.com editors 2020). The bacillus travels through the air, but is also spread through the bite of infected fleas and rats. The number of victims of this plague remains unknown, but some experts put the death toll at about 75 million or even higher. If correct, this would mean that half of all Europeans died (Carlin 2019, 135). The plague had run its course by the early 1530s, but for centuries reappeared every few generations (History.com editors 2020). In 1665–1666 twenty percent of the population of London was killed in another terrible outbreak of the bubonic plague.

1.2 Smallpox
One of the great successes of humankind’s fight against deadly diseases was the eradication of smallpox by the early 1980s. During its long history smallpox left a deadly trail on all continents. In the twentieth century alone it killed nearly 300 million people – three times more than all the wars in that period (Oldstone 2010, 53). Some authors mention even a far higher number of victims. Over the centuries, smallpox has had a tremendous geopolitical impact (ibid., 53–72). Its history “is interwoven with the history of human migration and wars” (ibid., 56). It goes back to ancient times and the earliest hints of the disease were found in some Egyptian mummies that date from the twelfth century BC. As the centuries rolled by, smallpox left its marks all over the ancient world and many parts of Asia. The great Islamic expansion across North-Africa and the Iberian peninsula in the sixth to eight century spread smallpox across Africa and Europe (ibid., 59). Colonization exported the disease to the Americas and other continents, “across oceans by mariners as well as over land routes by armies and caravans” (ibid., 63), in the process often eliminating entire indigenous populations. By the seventeenth and eighteenth

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8 Carlin puts the number at 500 million: Carlin 2019, 54.
9 For the timetable of smallpox virus control, see pp. 94–99.
centuries smallpox was the most devastating disease in the world, also playing a significant role in American colonial and post-colonial history (ibid.).

Although variolation (Variola means smallpox) may already have been practiced in China in the first century, it did not become a common method to stem smallpox until the eighteenth century. Variolation was a method of inoculating individuals with material from an infected person to immunize them against smallpox. This was later replaced by a smallpox vaccine. Some Christians considered variolation to be an unchristian practice. The modern resistance by a substantial number of people against vaccination is not something new, for eighteenth and early nineteenth Britain already had its campaigns by anti-vaccinationists (ibid., 75‒79). On the European continent opposition against smallpox inoculation lasted even considerably longer (McNeill 1998, 255‒256).

1.3 The Spanish Flu
Seven waves of cholera struck the world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although a cholera vaccine was created in 1885, pandemics continued for a considerable time, and even now cholera remains a threat when sanitary conditions are seriously compromised. However, the Influenza of 1918 is often regarded as the first truly global pandemic, with a staggering number of victims that may have been as high as 50 or even 100 million. This, however, remains a rough estimate, as many regions in the world, especially in Africa and Asia, did not yet have adequate death records. In other parts of the globe the reporting was also far from accurate. The spread of the influenza around the globe was facilitated by massive troop movements. Improved highway systems and a network of railroads allowed the disease to further spread from the main ports to many localities.

Unlike the virus in most influenza pandemics, this particular strain of influenza affected large numbers of young healthy adults. It was a major factor in the outcome of the First World War. The Spanish Flu contributed significantly to the halting of the advance of the German armies in France in 1918, and to bringing the end of World War I in sight (Oldstone 2010, 306). This influenza pandemic became popularly known as the Spanish Flu, not because the disease originated in Spain, but because this country had remained neutral in the First World War and had uncensored reporting of the havoc this rapidly spreading lethal virus (ibid., 309).
1.4 Since the Influenza of 1918

In the “pandemic century,”10 between the Spanish Flu and the Covid-19 pandemic that struck the world in 2020, other global contagious diseases created major upheavals and caused an enormous amount of suffering and death. For a long time, outbreaks of diseases like measles or poliomyelitis continued to exert a high death toll, before they were brought under control. The extremely contagious Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which first surfaced in 2002, and which had a high mortality rate, caused global concern but was relatively soon under control. The appearance of the “Bird Flu” set off another global scare. The first documented case of the transmission of avian influenza (H5N1) from birds to humans was in 1997 (Honigsbaum 2019, 172). In a number of countries many millions of (potentially) infected poultry were destroyed, in order to reduce the risk for humans. In retrospect, earlier limited outbreaks of bird flu were found to have occurred, and some experts warn that there is a great risk in the future of an extremely dangerous bird-flu pandemic (Oldstone 2010, 326). The H1N1 (Swine Flu) pandemic of 2009 infected ten percent of the global population, with a death toll that has been variously estimated from about 20,000 to as high as over half a million (Huremovic 2019).


But, besides smallpox, perhaps the most notorious pandemic in the period between the Spanish Flu and Covid-19 was (and is) the plague of HIV/AIDS (ibid., 135–166). It was characterized by Huremovic, a prominent New York psychiatrist, in these sobering words: “HIV/AIDS is a slowly progressing global pandemic, cascading through decades of time, different continents, and different populations” (Huremovic 2019). It is generally believed to have developed from a chimpanzee virus in West-Africa in the 1920s, and to have moved to Haiti in the 1970s, reaching the USA in the 1970s (History.com editors 2020). Although HIV has infected tens of millions of people, there is still no vaccine to prevent it (Oldstone 2010, 7), and the worldwide death toll has

risen to over 40 million (Honigsbaum 2020, 139). The number of victims would have risen much higher if no effective medication had been found to enable people to live with the virus.

2. God and Pandemics

In his recent book *The End is Always Near* Dan Carlin poses the question whether perhaps our world may at some future moment face extinction, just as other civilizations have experienced in the past. In the chapter that deals with the role of pandemics in world history, the author wonders how current and future pandemics might dramatically change our outlook on life:

In the past societies have been reshaped and at times have nearly crumbled under the weight of a pandemic. It’s possible that, facing mortality rates of 50, 60, or 70 percent – as people who lived through the Black Death did – we might do as they did: turn to religion, change the social structure, blame unpopular minorities and groups, or abandon previous belief systems. (Carlin 2019, 144)

Within the confines of this paper it is impossible to give a comprehensive picture of how the pandemics of past centuries (and the more recent ones) have impacted on political, economic, demographic, social and cultural structures and developments. And even a more limited endeavour, namely to describe the religious impact of these disasters, which took so many lives, will of necessity remain sketchy and incomplete.

The comments of University of Cambridge historian Andrew Cunningham are worth quoting:

For Christians the visitation of disease has always been an ambiguous matter, since their God is a benign god, and nothing happens without His will and knowledge. Obviously, God sends disease, and obviously it must be as punishment for sin. But it was not always clear, even to men of religion, quite which sins were being punished by a particular visitation of a pestilence, nor why the good died under God’s justice as well as the wicked. (Cunningham 2008, 29–31)

In actual fact, “there is no single predictable religious response,” as environments also greatly differ (Osheim 2008, 36).

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11 For a fascinating study of how infectious diseases have, in many cases, altered the course of history, see McNeill 1998.
In what follows I will focus on just a few of the past pandemics, and on a few aspects of the religious impact. That is not to say that other (some of them ongoing) epidemics and pandemics, such as, for instance, leprosy, tuberculosis and malaria, were relatively unimportant. However, for this paper, I have chosen to limit myself to taking a closer look at the religious impact of the Black Death, the Spanish Flu, the HIV-AIDS pandemic and the current Covid-19 crisis, with special attention to the impact of the last three of these pandemics on Seventh-day Adventist believers.

2.1 God and the Black Death

Barbara W. Tuchman (1912–1989), a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning historian, provides in her brilliant book about “the calamitous 14th century” a detailed description of the multifaceted impact of the Black Death, including the religious aspects (Tuchman 1978, 92–125). Reaching Europe in 1346, it spread all over this continent within a few years, and, according to contemporary sources, killing perhaps one third of the population.12

Many believed that astrology provided the explanation for the plague: a triple conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars, in the 40th degree of Aquarius, which was said to have occurred on March 10, 1345 (Tuchman 1978, 103). But the vast majority of people were convinced that human sin had evoked the divine wrath, and that, therefore, the people must do everything possible to appease the divine displeasure. Pope Clement VI (reigned 1342–1352) confirmed in a bull of September 1348 (Quamvis Perfidiam) that the plague was “a pestilence with which God is afflicting the Christian people.” As would repeatedly happen throughout Christian history, the blame was to a large extent laid on the Jews. This led to large-scale expulsions, persecutions and seizure of Jewish property, accompanied by the traditional accusations of being Christ-killers, of desecration of the sacred host, and poisoning the wells. In his 1348 bull Pope Clement tried to check the anti-Semitic hysteria.13

The church, which in many ways formed the backbone of medieval society, took a severe battering. As members of the clergy were dying at the same rate

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12 Many contemporaries saw the pandemic as an eschatological event, foretold by the Apocalypse. The trumpet judgments (Revelation 9) share a pattern of affecting one-third of their target.

as the rest of the population, their number sharply diminished, while their reputation was severely tarnished by abuses and lack of moral standards (Carlin 2019, 132). As a result of the plague, “a terrible pessimism permeated society”, and the omnipresence of death was clearly reflected in much of the art of that period (ibid., 134). Many adopted “a live-for-today” attitude, while lots of others “went off the deep end with quackery and mysticism” (ibid.). “The apparent absence of earthly cause gave the plague a supernatural and sinister quality (Tuchman 1978, 104). Tuchman states: “The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair” (ibid., 99). Though unable to answer the questions surrounding the plague in any definitive way, the church still remained the centre for seeking divine intervention against this supernatural punishment. For the expiation of sins, and to plead for the mercy of God, the church “often called for communal fasts and instituted prayer marathons, together with the carrying of relics in procession through the streets” (Cunningham, 29).

Participating in penitent processions was one of the most radical attempts to appease an angry God. In this connection the Flagellant movement must be mentioned, in which the penitential spirit found its most extreme expression. The flagellants beat themselves until the blood flowed, believing that their physical suffering was redemptive (Ferguson 2005, 504; Southern 1970, 306–309). Hundreds of bands roamed the land, as the movement spread quickly from Germany through the Low Countries to France and further (Galli 1996). The Lollards14 were not so spectacular in their outward behavior but not less radical in their protest against contemporary Catholicism and their demands for spiritual reform. They were deemed heretical by the Church but paved the way for many of the notions that would characterize various pre-Reformation sects (Chandra 2020).

Pope Clement’s formulation of the theory of indulgences, fatally, linked forgiveness of sins with the exchange of money. People could now buy a share in “the treasury of merit” – which had been accumulated by the blood of Christ, together with the good deeds of the Virgin and the saints – and thus acquire a pardon for their sins. Barbara Tuchman concludes: “What the Church gained in revenue by this arrangement was matched in the end by

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loss in respect” (Tuchman 1978, 121) and: “The plague accelerated discontent with the Church at the moment when people felt a greater need for spiritual reassurance” (ibid., 122–121). “The Church emerged from the plague richer if not more unpopular” (ibid., 122).

The evidence suggests that many people still found solace in religion at this time of great uncertainty, but many also did not. The famous book Decameron, by Giovanni Boccaccio, is perhaps the most significant literary testimony to the widespread rejection of religion during the Black Death, “at a time when most of Europe was still under the powerful influence of the Catholic Church and its teachings” (Mueller 2020).

2.2 God and the Spanish Flu

Why the Influenza of 1918, or the “Spanish Flu,” was so lethal is still a puzzle that remains to be solved (Oldstone 2010, ix). Perhaps due to the fact that it was of relatively short duration, it soon faded from public memory, and later was often referred to as the “forgotten pandemic” (Huremovic 2019). But when this plague hit Europe and other parts of the world, it caused unimaginable mayhem. The self-portrait of the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch very dramatically pictures him as a victim of the pandemic – “pale, exhausted and lonely, with an open mouth, emanating the “disorientation and disintegration” of someone who “isolated and alone” endures this plague (Kasriel 2020).

Science had by now informed the authorities in Western countries how this flu was spread and had emphasized the need for the temporary closing of public buildings. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders debated government orders to close places of worship. Many were willing to comply, but some believed their ministry was now, more than ever, needed and that the doors of their churches and synagogues should remain open (Sentinel 1918, 258).

In the midst of much suffering and near omnipresent death many turned to traditional forms of religion, but “most turned to our secular deity, the state” for a solution of the problems caused by the pandemic, only to find that “our faith in modern states cannot make the virus go away” (Chandra 2020). Not surprisingly, one of ramifications of the Spanish Flu was an increase in the popularity of occult practices connected with communicating with the dead (Carlin 2019, 139).

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15 For a recent translation into English, see Boccaccio 2009.
The very diverse religious response to the “Spanish Flu” in South-Africa deserves special mention, and was to a major extent also reflected in other regions of the world. In the space of just six weeks the flu killed approximately 300,000 South Africans, or roughly six percent of the population (Philips 2008, 34). Hindus, Jews and Muslims all acknowledged that the pandemic had a divine cause, but they remained mostly quiet, at least publicly, about why the people should deserve this divine action (ibid., 35). The adherents of traditional African religions tended to see the plague as stemming from indignant ancestors, or as nefarious actions of witches or wizards (ibid.). Most Christian clergy pointed to “divine visitation” as punishment for sins. As always, “generic sins like immorality, drunkenness, and lax church attendance featured prominently in the list of those that were said to have called forth God’s wrath” (ibid.). And, as could be expected, the global war (World War I) and the devastating plague were put in an eschatological frame and seen by many as signs heralding the soon return of Christ.

The most authoritative text about Adventist eschatology was, and remained for a long time, the two-volume work of Uriah Smith, which resulted from his “thoughts” on Daniel and the Revelation. Published respectively in 1873 and 1867 (and posthumously revised in 1907), references to “signs of the times” could, of course, not touch on the Spanish Flu and later pandemics. However, another prominent book on eschatology, written by James Edson White (1849‒1928) mentioned the 1918 pandemic. It referred to this plague as “the most decimating pestilence of all history.” If there was any sign of the soon coming of Christ, this was it (White 1938)! However, it appears that this pattern of thought did not dominate Adventist thinking when the pandemic was actually taking place.

Seventh-day Adventist church members were certainly not immune to the influenza pandemic, but we have no way of knowing how many succumbed to it (Campbell 2020). Our main information about the reaction of Adventists to the “Spanish Flu” comes from the USA. The extent of the drama was highlighted in Adventist publications. West Virginia Conference President T.B. Westbrook, for instance, wrote in November 1918: “If there was ever a time in the history of the world when we needed to offer incense (pray) to God for help, it is now. All our churches are closed, and some lines of the work are at a standstill. The plague … is raging everywhere and there are many dead bodies in every place” (Westbrook 1918, 1).
When the authorities wanted the churches and schools to be closed, there were no Adventist protests suggesting that this limited their religious freedom. One article in the *Review and Herald* noted the scarcity of medical personnel. The author added this telling comment: “Many cases of the disease even among our own people have been neglected because of lack of someone to minister to them. Our sanitariums are crowded with these cases, and many nurses, doctors, and others have contracted the disease” (Ruble 1918, 16). Church leaders at various levels urged the members to isolate when needed, and “exercise intelligent faith” in dealing with this enormous threat, mindful of the principles of the church’s health message. Many Adventist schools meanwhile saw a significant increase in the enrolment in medical courses and Adventist periodicals carried extensive advertising for the Red Cross (Campbell 2020).

Confirming what was stated above, a survey of Adventist dealings with the Influenza in one of the American regions (Columbia Union) gives no indication that church leaders and church members emphasized that this pandemic should be seen as a sign of the nearness of Christ’s second coming. The journal of the Columbia Union included many obituaries, but over-all focused on the practical aspects of surviving the disease, and on assisting others to do so. Numerous articles also reported that the church did all it could to continue its various ministries (Blyden 2020). One Adventist leader warned against a “holier-than-thou”-attitude on the part of those who might survive the plague and attribute this to their own righteousness, “while attributing the misfortune of his brother to his lack of fidelity” (Ruble 1918, 16).

### 2.3 God and HIV/AIDS
AIDS – the acquired immune-deficiency syndrome – was first identified and named in 1981, although researchers now believe that this virus infection had occurred much earlier in different places in the world. Its precise origin is, however, still unknown. AIDS results when the human body is no longer in sufficient measure able to resist the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The HIV/AIDS disease, which eventually became a pandemic, differs in a very significant aspect from other pandemics in that the initial expansion (in particular in the USA) was marked by its predominant spread among gay men. This connection with homosexuality, and also with frequent substance abuse, together with its initial high death rate, led many conservative Christians to believe that God was using AIDS to punish the, in their eyes, heinous sin of
homosexuality. For many AIDS sufferers this caused intense feelings of shame and guilt. At first, the diagnosis of HIV was an almost certain death sentence, but, although thus far no vaccine has been developed, the availability of effective medication turned HIV into a manageable chronic condition. (Sadly, this medication is not always obtainable in sufficient quantities, and at an affordable price, in developing countries.)

Susan Sontag (1933-2004), an American author, philosopher and political activist, personally experienced how cancer could cause feelings of shame and culpability, but she pointed out in her book *Illness and Metaphor* that such feelings that were often experienced by cancer patients were to a large extent replaced by those of AIDS-patients (Honigsbaum, 148). The fact that, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, AIDS was often referred to as a lifestyle disease and linked to promiscuous sexual relations, tended to stigmatize AIDS-patients.

In general, the main-line Christian churches rejected any stigmatization and many started initiatives to minister to victims of AIDS. Among evangelicals the picture was more varied. Some, like Jerry Falwell (1933–2007), were adamant that the virus was a biological judgment on those who engaged in sexual (especially, homosexual) promiscuity and drug abuse. However, others were closely involved in President Bush’s 2008 PREPFAR program (President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief), which saved countless lives, notably in Africa.

Many Christians still feel that they are faced with a moral dilemma how they should deal with PWA’s (Persons with AIDS). On the one hand, they “blame the victim by defining AIDS as punishment for sin”, while, on the other hand, they recognize AIDS-sufferers are sick people who need care (Kowaleski 1990, 91). In other words: they are sinners and they are sick. This and other views of HIV/AIDS continue to strengthen the incorrect idea that AIDS is almost always linked to a gay lifestyle. But, if AIDS is not a divine punishment, it is, according to other Christians, the “natural” outcome of a “sinful” lifestyle. They frequently emphasize that one should love the sinner, while hating the sins.

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16 Published by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux (New York) in 1978.


Among Seventh-day Adventist Christians the same views were (and are) found. Because of the frequent association of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality, Adventists have often been reluctant to speak about this disease. Adventist hospitals tended to be afraid that too much focus on the treatment of AIDS-patients would negatively impact on their public image.

In 1987 the Adventist denomination established an AIDS Committee. In the years following a few conferences were held at different levels of the church and a number of AIDS-related initiatives were undertaken, notably in Africa. Activities by ADRA (the Adventist Development and Relief Agency) deserve special mention. Gradually Adventist official journals began to publish articles about the AIDS-pandemic, as a rule carefully avoiding giving the impression that HIV/AIDS was also a problem in the Adventist church, and circumspect in speaking about the issue of homosexuality—due to the church’s strong rejection of homosexuality (Lawson 1992). Adventist sociologist Ronald L. Lawson, emeritus professor of Queens College (City University of New York), concluded a detailed survey of Adventist attitudes towards HIV/AIDS with this sobering statement: “The response of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to the AIDS crisis has been extraordinary slight” (ibid.).

When the denomination held its quinquennial world congress in 1990 in Indianapolis, an official statement about HIV/AIDS was issued. The statement referred to the moral questions surrounding the pandemic, but, typically, avoided the term homosexuality: “Desiring to reveal the redemptive love of Christ we need to separate the disease from the issue of morality, demonstrating a compassionate, positive attitude toward persons with AIDS, offering acceptance and love, and providing for their physical and spiritual needs.” (AIDS 1990). The statement acknowledged that AIDS had made its entrance into the Adventist Church and stressed the importance of accepting persons with AIDS and ministering to them: “The local church can find many ways to minister to those with AIDS. Church members can join or form a support group and become individually involved in a supportive role to meet the needs of persons and families impacted by AIDS” (ibid.).

Lawson, however, found that, when he conducted his research in Africa, many African church leaders tended to deny even the existence of AIDS in the Adventist Church. In reality HIV/AIDS developed into a major crisis among Adventists, especially in the countries around Lake Victoria, which have a high density of Adventist believers. It was reported by researchers on the
ground that “a great number of the church’s members had died of HIV and AIDS, including pastors” (Makahamadze and Sibanda 2008, 293–310; see p. 296). This study in a missiological journal criticized the Adventist leaders in many parts of Africa for disallowing the use of condoms by their members, and thereby jeopardizing the containment of the disease (ibid., 299–300).

2.4 God and Covid-19

As this paper is written, it is too early to analyse the religious impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in any depth. It would seem that the religious responses of the people to this crisis are very similar to those of earlier pandemics. Michael Wakelin, the executive chair of the Religion Media Centre in the UK, stated in July 2020 that “over the last few months, many of us have become more religious and we have all been reminded of the importance of faith in bringing society together in times of distress.” Whether this can be supported by solid data or is based rather on wishful thinking, remains to be seen, and it is impossible at this juncture to predict what role religion will play in the post-Covid world. Certainly, the way people “do” church (or synagogue and mosque) may have changed significantly, as a result of the physical closure of large numbers of places of worship, for a considerable period, all around the world, and the extensive use of online platforms.

The titles of two recently published small books by Christian authors illustrate the different theological interpretations of the pandemic. Professor Mark Hitchcock of the conservative Dallas Theological Seminary, places the Corona-crisis in an eschatological context (Hitchcock 2020). Covid-19, he maintains, is a prelude to the earth’s final events (ibid., 75–79). Tom Wright, a prominent New Testament theologian and former bishop of the Church of England, looks at the Covid-10 crisis from another perspective (Wright, see note 1). We must, he says, accept that events happen which we do not fully understand. We must also acknowledge that in what happens humans play a role, and humans (Christians in particular) also have special responsibilities in confronting the consequences of such events.

We find this dual approach to the current pandemic also in the Adventist media, although the eschatological emphasis is much more pronounced in the

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media of independent ministries on the right-wing fringe of the church than elsewhere. A message of church leadership about the COVID-19 vaccines opened with combining these eschatological and pragmatic aspects: “Seventh-day Adventists look to the coming of Christ as the great culmination of history and the end of all disease, suffering, and death. At the same time, we have been entrusted with the Adventist health message” which teaches “healthful living through practical and wholistic lifestyle behaviours.”

The “official” denominational media have so far (early 2022) tended to emphasize pragmatic aspects which concern worship services and “running” the church during this crisis, and have reported how many of the church’s ministries have continued to function, while new creative initiatives have been launched.

3. Covid-19 and Conspiracy Theories
In the past pandemics have always given rise to conspiracy theories. We have already mentioned that during the fourteenth century Plague, the Jews, in particular, were scapegoated. At the time of the Spanish Flu conspiracy theories abounded and often focused on the Germans. Pieces of “fake news” reported that German submarines purposely spread the disease around the world (Mawdsley n.d.).

It should come as no surprise that millions around the world also embraced various conspiracy theories in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic. A

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21 This is illustrated in the list of articles about Corona that have appeared in the Columbia Union Visitor. See: www.columbiaunionvisitor.com/2020/how-visitor-reported-1918-1920-pandemic (accessed May 11, 2022).

22 The European Union defined a conspiracy theory as a “belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent.” These theories “often appear as a local explanation of events or situations which are difficult to understand and bring a false sense of control and agency. This need for clarity is heightened in times of uncertainty like the Covid-19 pandemic. See: ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/identifying-conspiracy-theories_en (accessed May 11, 2022).
study in the Netherlands found that ten percent of the population believes that Covid-19 is spread on purpose by pharmaceutical companies to boost their profits. Existing on-line conspiracy movements, such as the anti-5G groups and anti-vaccine movements, have melted into new umbrella-like conspiracies, as, for instance the ID2020 theory. This is a version of a popular theory which proclaims that Bill Gates and Microsoft are doing everything they can to use the Covid-19 crisis as “a pretext for mandatory vaccination programs.” These vaccines, allegedly, are a cover for “implanting some form of microchip, radio frequency implantation (RFID) chip or other digital tracking device” (Thomas and Zang 2020). It appears that this ID2020 theory is especially driven by “fringe Christian conspiracy sites.” The plan to inject microchips is allegedly part of a global New World Order that is in the process of being established, and that those microchips represent the “mark of the beast.” As a result, entire populations can easily be checked and controlled (ibid.).

It was to be expected that this and similar totally unfounded theories would also have a strong appeal to segments of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In a substantial article in the official journal of the denomination, church leaders referred to false, alarmist, ideas that are circulating among Adventists, and pointed out that any linking of the “mark of the beast” with a Covid vaccine has no basis in Adventism’s traditional eschatological understanding. The article downplays the eschatological significance of the Covid-19 pandemic, warns against acceptance of these and other extremely speculative ideas, and encourages the church’s membership to place full trust in the vaccines that have been developed. (Interestingly, it is noted in the article that Ellen G. White did not in principle object to vaccination. At the time, when there was a smallpox epidemic in the region where she lived, Ellen White herself was vaccinated and encouraged her staff to follow her example [Dobson in White 1958, 303]). The media on the right-wing fringe of the church tend to be quite open to conspiracy theories, but are not speaking with one voice with regard to any linkage between the Covid-19 vaccine and the mark of the beast.

In an article for the website of the Amazing Facts ministries, Gary Gibbs, the president of the Pennsylvania Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, insists that “the mark of the beast concerns enforced worship,” and “this is not an element of the current pandemic.” He does, however, emphasize that many developments with eschatological significance might be accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Gibbs n.d.). Walter Veith, the person behind the Amazing Discoveries ministries, who is known for conspiracy theories, has circulated a series of YouTube video-discussions with one of his associates, Martin Smith, which are replete with conspiracy theories.26 David Gates, an independent Adventist evangelist, who speaks to audiences around the world, promotes the idea that the Covid-19 vaccines, together with the 5G-signal, are Satan’s tool to destroy humanity and make human beings into automatons.27

4. Pandemics as Signs of the End
Whenever pandemics struck, many Christians asked the question whether they were experiencing a sign that the return of Christ was near, and this is a question many are asking today with respect to the Covid-19 crisis. In the Lukan version of the Olivet Discourse, Christ mentions among the signs of the end the occurrences of “earthquakes, famines and pestilences in many places” (Luke 21:11). In some versions of Matthew 24 these “pestilences” are also mentioned, but scholarly opinion almost unanimously supports the view that the original Matthean text (24:7) “favors the omission of this word” (Nichol 1957, 497).

The “signs of the end” would signal the impending doom over Jerusalem (which came when the Romans destroyed that city in 70 AD), and would also remind mankind of the certainty of the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time. This applies to all the “signs” which Jesus mentioned, and also to other signs, mentioned by the apostles, including the sign of the “pestilences”. Josephus mentions in his Book of War that at the time of the storming of Jerusalem by the Romans “pestilential destruction” came upon them; and soon

26 These may all easily be found on YouTube. See: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGmv31EbHg8wPOR5b9s_IXg.
afterward a famine. First-century Roman sources confirm that the Roman world repeatedly suffered from epidemics. Tacitus, for instance, reports in his *Annals* a plague that hit Rome in the autumn of 65 and killed at least 30,000 people. Moreover, the history books give ample testimony of numerous “pestilences” during the Christian era.

The traditional Seventh-day Adventist view has been that the time of the end began around the time of the French Revolution. At that time the prophetic time period of 1260 days (which in Adventist traditional thinking equals as many years) was thought to have ended. It was when “the great tribulation,” caused by the medieval papacy, had come to an end (Nichol 1956, 500–502). In line with this view the signs of the times occurred from around that time onwards. Thus, epidemics and pandemics that occurred since that time (as e.g. the Spanish Flu) qualify as “pestilences” that Christ predicted. The Covid-19 pandemic would, therefore, certainly also qualify as a sign of the times.

Hans K. LaRondelle (1929–2011), a prominent Adventist theologian, who wrote extensively about aspects of eschatology, emphasized that the so-called “signs of the end” cannot be placed in any chronological order. They are “signs of the age” and characterize the entire period between Jesus’ two events (LaRondelle 1999, 11). Jon Paulien, another Adventist theologian who specialized in eschatology, warns against placing too much emphasis on the time-element of the signs (Paulien 1994, 85–87). The Reformed systematic theologian G.C. Berkouwer very much agrees: “The signs are not pertinent to only a remote end-time. No, for believers they are summons to constant watchfulness” (Berkouwer 1972, 248). If this view is accepted, it would follow that all epidemics and pandemics of the last two millennia may be seen as genuine “signs of the times”. They all are signals pointing mankind to the climax of history, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

It was to be expected that during major pandemics of the past many Christians would regard these plagues as signs of the certainty of Christ’s coming. And even more so, that Seventh-day Adventist Christians would emphasize

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this aspect as they lived through the Spanish Flu and saw how HIV-AIDS ravaged particular segments of society in numerous countries. It would go against the Adventist DNA, if they did not regard the Covid-19 pandemic as a sign of the Second Coming. It is, however, surprising that the eschatological dimension does not dominate the response of Adventist Christians to the current pandemic to a greater extent. This aspect would certainly invite further investigation.

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Zusammenfassung


Résumé


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