

The uses of ADVERSITY

George Herbert and the
Christian experience of affliction



SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY
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Theologising in the Shadow of a Pandemic

An initiative of the SCD Theology Research Network

The uses of adversity: George Herbert and the Christian experience of affliction

Abstract

It has been interesting to observe the emotional fluctuations of opinion pieces written during covid lockdowns. At the start of the Melbourne lockdown in 2020, news outlets like the ABC and the Guardian featured upbeat commentary on how to get the most out of lockdown. The lockdown was presented as an opportunity for creativity, self-expression, and growth.

But as the weeks and months wore on, this rhetoric increasingly gave way to a mood of weariness, perplexity, and even despair. This fluctuation between creative self-expression and despair marked out the limits of the contemporary western imagination when it comes to dealing with suffering. Part of the legacy of Christianity in western societies is a profound conviction of individual agency and an essentially activist conception of society. Social ills are to be rectified; evil is to be resisted; suffering is to be overcome. To live responsibly is to struggle. There is no doubt that narratives of struggle are one of the ways that we make sense of otherwise apparently meaningless experiences of suffering. But the

activist conception – where I respond to suffering with freedom, creativity, and resistance – is only one strand of Christian teaching.

This paper will explore another strand, in which the believer seeks to make ‘use’ of suffering without any expectation that it will be alleviated or overcome. This account has something in common with Stoic conceptions of resignation and consent. But a Christian account conceives of such consent not as passivity in the face of suffering but as a particular way of exercising agency in circumstances that cannot be changed. Assoc Prof Myers will suggest that this strand of Christian teaching not only complements the activist account but underpins it. The will to change the world for the better depends on a prior moment of acceptance of the reality of the world as it is, including the reality of the limitations of human life and agency. Simone Weil suggested that ‘the greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural cure for suffering, but a supernatural use of it’.

The paper will explore a Christian understanding of the uses of suffering through a close reading of George Herbert’s poems of affliction, in which the believer undergoes affliction as a form of participation in Christ.

Presenter: Associate Professor Ben Myers



Ben Myers is director of the Graduate Research School at Alphacrucis, where he oversees HDR programs with nearly a hundred candidates in theology and other disciplines. He was previously Lecturer in Systematic Theology

at Charles Sturt University and Dean of Liberal Arts at Christian Heritage College. His latest book was *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism*, and he is currently completing a book on union with Christ in the poetry of George Herbert. in the poetry of George Herbert.

Respondent: Dr Andrew Mellas

Andrew Mellas is Senior Lecturer in Byzantine History & Liturgical Studies at St Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College. Andrew’s research focuses on the history of emotions in Byzantium and he has published widely on the performativity of hymnody and hagiography.

Date

Friday 28 May, 2021 | 2.00 - 4.00pm

Location - via Zoom

Contact: neilo@scd.edu.au for details

