

# Crisis, fear and hope: an introduction into practical theological reflections

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Crisis. A word that today fills all news headlines worldwide. For each person, the word crisis will refer to something different. Some persons will connect it with an economic crisis that has a direct impact on their household budget. For others, it's about a war crisis that made them refugees overnight. Some will think primarily of an energy crisis, where others will immediately think of the Covid-19 crisis that brought sickness and death to the family. There will also be those who link crisis to a very personal existential experience: an experience that will not make the headlines but that can just as easily determine the course of life.

How does the phenomenon of crisis and how do various crisis experiences relate to faith of individuals and groups of people and the functioning of faith communities? This question forms a common thread in this volume *Coping with Crisis*. In this volume this question is specifically approached from the discipline of practical theology. This means, first, that the question is not raised in its generality or in the abstract but is addressed in the context of specific local, sometimes private experiences of crisis. Second, a practical theological approach to the question means that theological analysis and interpretation is an important part of the discourse conducted.

*Coping with Crisis* is an outcome of the many scholarly reflections, debates and presentations that took place during the bi-annual gathering (because of the Covid-19 crisis fully online) with the same title of the *International Academy of Practical Theology* in the summer of 2021. The local organizing team, comprised of members of four Belgian theological faculties, had long been looking forward to receiving practical theologians from around the world in Leuven—a charming Flemish town that

hosts one of the oldest theology faculties of the world, founded in 1432. Alas, the Covid-19 crisis made it impossible to hold a physical meeting in Leuven and the conference had to be held in a virtual format. What was initially merely the inevitable reaction to an immediate crisis turned out to be a catalyst for innovation in the conduct of a major international conference, which ultimately allowed around two hundred participants from Africa, Asia, Australia, North- and South America, and Europe to attend the conference from July 8 to July 10, 2021.

The online format of the conference consisted of a mix of pre-recorded online clips and interactive live sessions. The pre-recorded online clips allowed participants to benefit from speeches and papers independently of the different time zones they were in. The clips also provided an opportunity for scholars to creatively employ new audio-visual methods to present their contributions. For once, time and space did not constrain participants' choice of which paper presentations they could attend. Every participant had equal access to all the papers presented at the conference. Furthermore, online message boards allowed participants to post questions to speakers and presenters. These questions and comments were then used as input into the live discussions. The nearly one hundred paper presentations in video-clip format, debated in twenty thematic live discussion panels, offered a vivid panorama of the concerns, research questions, and methodological challenges that characterize contemporary practical theology in all its cultural and confessional diversity. The contributions of Karen Reed (St. Thomas University), Sabrina Müller (University of Zurich) and Lindsay Desmet (KU Leuven) received honorary mentions as the most creative, impressive, and memorable video-clips.





While everybody had a chance to watch the online clips of the academic papers at their personal convenience, the plenary of the conference was assembled every day for a dense program of interactive live sessions in video-conference format. The interactive live program included daily sessions of morning prayer, plenary discussions with the keynote speakers, twenty moderated panels to discuss the papers that had been presented as video-clips, and business meetings. The keynote speakers were available for Q&A and scholarly discussions in the moderated plenary panels. Participants from around the world thus had the opportunity to engage directly with all the speakers. This volume adds to/continues with this discussion and exchange

Like the conference, the various authors in this edited volume consider the multidimensional phenomenon of ‘crisis’ in both its sense of threat and opportunity. How are people coping with experiences of crisis? In what way does the rhetoric of fear and crisis mobilize people for social action? Does the current sense of ‘crisis’ lead to valuable and effective positive actions or does it overwhelm our senses, paralyzing our ability to act? And what does the experience of ‘crisis’ imply for contemporary theological conversations?

The various contributions in this volume each depart from a specific context or locality of practices of people and communities in the midst of some sort of crisis. A practice has a “value-laden, aims-oriented nature” (Bennett 2018, 63). It refers to “... a set of actions that instantiate knowledge, meaning and understanding; action is always socially embedded, habitual and embodied” (Bennett 2018, 67). Against the background of this practice-oriented approach, different questions come to the fore and will actually be addressed throughout this volume. How can a particular experience of crisis be (theologically) understood? How is this experience connected with or embedded in a particular social context? How does

the phenomenon of faith relate to this experience? What do we mean when speaking about ‘coping’ with crisis? What are core values that play a role in such an expression? How is living with crisis embodied in particular situations and how might faith communities act in such situations?

The volume has been structured along the lines of five sides of the crisis experience where connections with the phenomenon of faith might be located and further explored: (1) Justice, (2) Uncertainty and fear, (3) Belonging, (4) Care, and (5) Being church.

The first part of this volume on justice addresses the themes of socio-economic, political and ethical components of crisis, the issue of migration, developing ecological virtues, and the theme of food and welcoming at the table. The second part on uncertainty and fear covers the themes of fear and solidarity, populism, fear as a form of diakonia, and coping with dis-ease. Belonging is the main theme of part three of the volume and addresses the war experience, the refugee experience, the sacrament of the Eucharist, and Christian hospitality. Part four is focused on care and covers themes like spirituality expression and needs, embracing risks, pastoral care, the phenomenon of dementia, and spiritual uplifting of children. Part five has church as its focus and addresses the themes of spiritual care by churches, the existence of spiritual abuse in churches, and the church experience of being in crisis.

We hope this rich sample of perspectives on crisis, reflected on from a practical theological lens, will add to our understanding of an experience rooted in a global and highly interconnected world.

## References

- Bennett, Zoë, ed. *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology*. London; New York: Routledge, 2018.