

An Amazon Lament

by Dick Robinson

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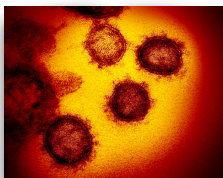
In a recent, theological and practical article startlingly titled “Christianity Offers No Answers About the Coronavirus. It’s Not Supposed To”, prominent evangelical New Testament theologian N. T. Wright reminds us – using his language – that we can find no rational explanations nor romantic relief. What we need instead, “is to recover the biblical tradition of *lament*.”

Lament is where I find myself this day, as we work with the indigenous Shipibo-Conibo people living along the Ucayali River in the Amazon jungle. Our area of evangelical outreach, community



development and servant leadership training is in the District of Tahuania, at the southernmost reach of Shipibo settlements. Villages in Tahuania typically number between forty-to-eighty families with an average of six-to-eight children (conditions are harsh, human services – medical, educational and economic – scarce. Families live by farming and fishing, augmented by hunting for increasingly scarce game. Water is plentiful but polluted by bacteria and heavy metals from open-pit mining further up the water-ways. Men, women and children are unusually susceptible to disease.

The Shipibo-Conibo were early and ready because of ancient cultural history to receive the good news announced by Christian missionaries to the jungle during the last century. Many down-river communities have well-established churches. However they lack well-developed theological and ministerial training. The Bible has been translated into their language, but where there are any Christian educational materials they are in Spanish, quite foreign especially to older adults. As Westerners we encounter both syncretism and spiritism, as well as animistic spiritual traditions; belief in and often bondage to what the apostle Paul – missionary to the “nations”, the ethnic peoples of the world – called “*principalities and powers*”, the “*elements*” - in the Greek of the NT - the *stoicheia* of this world. Could the coronavirus pandemic be theologically classified as a... (continued below)



[Picture the COVID-19 coronavirus](#) (at left). It can only be seen under a microscope. The diameter of the circle below it is 1inch. The circle-in-a-circle is 1mm. Reduce the size of the 1mm circle by 1,000 times, a factor of 0.0001, and you arrive at approximately the size of one coronavirus, seen only under a powerful microscope.

The word virus “comes from a Latin word describing [poisonous liquids](#)”. It is – according to the website referenced – “genetic material contained within an organic particle that invades living cells and uses their host’s metabolic processes to produce a new generation of viral particles....[They] can also burst their host celll as they expand in numbers...[in a] cycle of reproduction.” Later the authors suggest that there could be as many as 100 million types of viruses on Earth’s surface.”



(continued) ...spiritual “power” or “element”? One well-established theological interpretation is that *the principalities and powers* use the physical elements of a broken – read “fallen” – world to bring about sin and its consequence - the *power* that is death. Our Western world view would not so-categorize it; here in the Amazon we cannot be so sure. If COVID-19 is transmitted to a Shipibo village, it will run rampant through their communities, lacking both the social distancing and medical resources needed. Death will flourish and overwhelm them. I cry out to God in lament.

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– for the Shipibo-Conibo in a time of pandemic –

Dick Robinson – April 2020

LORD God Almighty –
Eternal Father of our Lord,
Jesus Christ, our sufferer and redeemer,
Divine Spirit, breath of life and eternal helper.
“Save us!” we cry.

We are held captive;
fear of the unknown looms in darkness,
terror of unseen powers overwhelms us,
the dread of this crisis divides us.
The shroud of death lies over us.

We cry out to you!
Do you hear our pleas?
Do you regard our prayers –
birthed in the unprecedented,
steeped in the unknown,
saturated by anxiety;
Do you heed our petitions?
Our eyes are lifted up to you.

Have mercy upon us, our Father in heaven –
God above all the gods;
Creator of all,
Savior of all,
Merciful to all.
Jesus, Son of God;
who died our death,
who is our life,
who is our peace.
Holy Spirit of God;
our advocate and counselor,
our helper and intercessor,
our power over oppression.
We will speak of your goodness and your power over all.