On 19 March 2020, I visited Sheffield’s plague memorial. This is a monument to a past epidemic, the cholera which killed at least 402 people in 1832 in the UK city where I live. The cholera outbreak brought solutions in the forms of public health and sanitation – changes that have lasted. Standing by the mass grave, I asked myself about the new emergency. What would be the impact of this new plague? In what ways would it bring lasting change for its survivors?

Much has been written about COVID-19, its handling by governments and its impact on society. George Chryssides and Dan Cohn-Sherbok’s book asks about our faith: how did COVID-19 affect the religions of the world? The editors have collated the contributions of 28 authors who represent 14 religions. Each author was asked to address five questions which framed their responses:

1. How does your faith explain why such events occur?
2. How has it affected your religious practices?
3. What changes has it necessitated?
4. What differences might we expect once the pandemic is over?
5. What have we learned from it? (p. xxii)

The result is an eclectic mix of chapters. Some tell individual stories of the pandemic. There are narratives about local faith communities and their responses. We read of a Jehovah’s witness community and a Unitarian experience in the United Kingdom, and of Sikh sewa (selfless service) in California. Then there are those who tell of the national or international reaction of their religion. Others address a particular way in which
their faith or practice was challenged by pandemic restrictions. Some felt constrained by their faith and unable to worship online – some Jewish congregations, for example. We read, too, of the discussions among Christians around online celebration of the Eucharist. There is a Bahá’í reflection on “normal”, and the hope not to return to the normal we knew. Two Christian Scientists tell mostly of their acceptance of vaccination. We read of Zoroastrian responses and “good thoughts, good words and good deeds”; of Shinto prayer to quell the pandemic; of Hindu resilience; of the challenges for the Hajj and the difficulties surrounding death rituals for Muslims; of Buddhist and Jain understandings.

The stories are largely practical; they tell of community action and continuing worship, of the ways in which we humans are able to adapt ourselves and respond to challenges. They tell of community support, of working together to help others, and of the ways in which many faith groups adapted to COVID measures and began to meet online. For some, this was an experience to build on, an opportunity to connect widely that they will learn from and use to develop. For others, it was necessary at the time and not to be repeated. The deeper questions of faith are less prominent. Who, after all, has an adequate answer to the why that is different from the why of any other tragedy or disaster, or an answer which can conform to the strict word limit of these contributions? And the question of what we have learned and what might change is unanswerable so close to the event. Some of the authors offer their own analysis. Some claim to speak of wider responses. Very few mention any research which has examined the impact of COVID-19 on faith or religious practice. They are content to speak from experience, and yet such research has taken place, the BRIC-19 study of Manchester Metropolitan University and partners being just one example.

The collection is geographically limited. It is not always easy to tell where contributors are located from their profiles, but almost all are from the United Kingdom or the United States. One is from India, and there are two from Southern Africa who write about traditional African religion and its synthesis with Christianity, in what feels like a very particular and limited way. However, this is largely a book about Western religion and pandemic religious responses in richer countries.

The editors deliberately excluded those who took a position which opposed vaccination, as they did not wish to give a platform to harmful viewpoints. There are also no contributors who insisted that pandemic precautions were unnecessary as their God would protect them from the virus. While understanding the reasoning behind this editorial decision, it does narrow the spectrum of views represented. In his introduction, Christopher Lewis observes that past plagues were often thought to be sent from God, as
punishment. Dan Cohn-Sherbok observes that no authors in this collection believe this about COVID-19. This, too, may simply be a perspective not given voice here. It is true, though, that religious thinking has changed. We have learned about disease and its spread and used that knowledge. Most faith groups did not urge followers to gather to pray for deliverance and so become super-spreaders. Our religious leaders largely took and encouraged precautions for their own health and that of others. Questions remain about the way in which, as we emerge from the pandemic, we continue to care for the vulnerable among us. Have we indeed learned anything about our commitment to one another?

This collection is a fast response to the recent pandemic. It sits alongside the vast body of contemporaneous writing which tells the story of COVID-19. We need more distance to fully appreciate the lessons of this pandemic, and to know what of value we have learned. However, this is an important start to that reflection. It begins to ask questions which matter and engages with a range of answers. In his foreword to the book, Rowan Williams reflects on the need for spiritual insight as we learn from the pandemic and reflect on the ways in which power was exercised and the inequalities within society that were exposed.

I enjoyed the book as a snapshot of ideas. It will live on my bookshelf next to the accounts of those days and the reflections on what happened. I will look forward to further in-depth research and analysis of the ways in which we have been changed by COVID-19, and the ways in which our expression and understanding of faith has grown.