Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: How did early American Protestants respond to disease and suffering? What rule did religion play in their response to sickness? In her new book, “The Course of God’s Providence: Religion, Health, and the Body in Early America,” author Pippa Koch explores the doctrine of providence, a belief in a divine plan for the world and its manifestations in 18th century America. I’m Emily Yeap.

Koch, an assistant professor of religious studies at Missouri State University, is my guest today. She joins me to share why she wrote the book and what it covers.

Pippa Koch: I’m a scholar of religious studies, but I’m also a historian of early America. So, I did a lot of work in graduate school studying theology, studying the ideas, thought in Christianity in the early modern world. I read a lot of work on early America on colonial America and I started noticing that a lot of historians weren’t quite getting their theology right. They kind of assumed that aarly American Christians were very passive in their response to disease, in their response to suffering, that their view of God as all powerful made them kind of paralyzed when it came to understanding how to respond to sickness. And so, because I had this background studying theology, and as a historian I thought it was time to maybe investigate what actually was happening. Did they actually respond to sickness in this way? Because everything I saw showed that they had a profound interest in medicine and that they were out there trying to cure people, that they were writing medical manuals, and so my curiosity was peaked. I wanted to figure out how to understand this sort of difference between what historians had told me and what made sense.

Emily Yeap: Koch’s book dives into how people in 18th century America tried to understand the place of God’s will in their lives in the midst of progress in medicine.

Pippa Koch: It’s about whether or not that made the world a less religious place; if that made people put more faith in themselves and in their ability to overcome suffering and just like left God behind or if there was a way in which they found a middle ground. And the conclusion I come to is that they find a middle ground. That God never completely leaves the equation. Even if they stop talking explicitly about God in a way that sounded familiar in colonial America, there's still a way in which people were looking at their suffering and trying to find a meaning in it.

Emily Yeap: What does Koch want people to take away from her book?

Pippa Koch: Even though a lot of historians have made a strong effort to dispute this notion, we still see people who argue that religion and medicine are opposing forces and that they never belong together. And a lot of what I work on in the book is that that’s not the case. And even in this sort of early moment when the division was supposed to begin, it didn’t happen then and I don’t know that it’s really happened since. And certainly there are places where they aren’t in the same room, but for a lot of people they remain situated together. And that as people try to understand their suffering, as people try to understand really difficult medical decisions, religion is still in the room. There’s a reason to pay attention to that as a medical practitioner, as a friend, as an individual going through suffering, this missing religion is not helpful. It tells us a lot about the human experience.

Emily Yeap: Koch believes the COVID pandemic makes the book even more relevant.

Pippa Koch: COVID happened really at the end of the whole writing process. I was in the stage of getting back my final reader feedback and one of the anonymous reviewers said you can’t not put a preface or some sort of comment about COVID in this book because it’s affecting how all of us understand disease. And it was interesting because as someone who’s read so much about disease in the past, I didn’t need to be told that disease was significant in human experience. But, it does help make my case I think. And we’ve all had very different experiences with COVID and that’s part of the point, that people experience disease in tremendously different ways because of their resources, because of where they’re situated, because of their background, because of their perspective on God, because of their perspective on suffering and what it means in human life.

COVID was a way, I think, for me to say, “Hey look we have this in common with the past.” That sort of way in which we all live embodied lives at the end of the day. We can’t ignore our bodies, that we can’t ignore pain, that we can’t ignore mortality and grief. I think that is something that connects us to people who lived before.

Emily Yeap: You can buy Koch’s book online, such as Amazon or NYU Press. I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417)836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at KSMU.org.