

What the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Revealed about Religions

Solange Lefebvre ^{1,2}

¹ Institute for Religious Studies, University of Montreal, Montreal, QC H3T 1P1, Canada; solange.lefebvre@umontreal.ca

² Research Center on Religions and Spiritualities, University of Montreal, Montreal, QC H3T 1P1, Canada

1. Introduction

The beginning of year 2020 will be remembered as a turning point within several societies. In countries affected for many years by various secularization trends, radicalization controversies and sexual abuse in connection with religion, religion found a new visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether positively or negatively. Before that time, through the regular publication of diverse statistics, public discourse was mainly focused on reporting about ethnoreligious violence and the decline in religious practice and in the numbers of affiliated members. After places of worship in many countries were closed as part of a strategy to contain the virus and ensure people respected social distancing, suddenly worshippers organized and found new ways of negotiating with governments. Thus, they reframed public discourse, notably reminding their societies that they were still active and attached great importance to their collective rituals. In many places around the world, religious groups complained that their needs had been forgotten. Sometimes, collective rituals were the source of outbreaks, giving health authorities reason to limit worship gatherings. Consequently, religious leaders had to ask members to stop engaging in their collective religious practices, which was unprecedented. Some groups resisted health measures. In several countries, new interreligious or ecumenical initiatives were launched to gain attention from politicians responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Governments concerned about state neutrality were more comfortable addressing pandemic-related matters with representatives of several religions, instead of one or two majority religions.

The way religions embraced or resisted online activity was crucial, as some previously conventional groups suddenly had to set up online mailing lists and broadcast their rituals, thereby isolating members unfamiliar with technology. At the same time, new online services could be offered to reach different people. More critically, the situation of active places of worship, whose survival was already threatened, undoubtedly only worsened. Over the next few years, it is likely that more places of worship will close, and others will merge. The ritual most discussed during the pandemic was mourning, as thousands of elderly people who were particularly vulnerable to the virus died alone. They were often deprived of essential and spiritual care and isolated from their families because of strict social distancing practices. Relatives could not conduct collective mourning rituals or honour the body of a loved one, and this caused enormous distress. Various fault lines appeared because poorer classes, religious minorities and immigrants were often hardest hit by the virus.

From a broader perspective, as shown by a research study I conducted just before the pandemic, another issue that previously garnered little attention in the field of radicalization studies, namely, conspiracy theories, began to flourish on the internet. These related to health measures, experts, science and vaccination; such theories posed a serious potential threat to public health and safety. Apart from religion, a large spectrum of beliefs and spiritualities seemed to have great impact on the acceptance of public health policies. Some religious groups or individuals embraced these beliefs as well, contesting the relevance



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of science, the morality of vaccination and trust in governments. The way these disturbing facts will lead to increased polarization between groups is unclear. Will the line of demarcation be found between religious people and those who say they have no religion? Between highly educated liberal people and those less educated who distrust science and experts? For example, during an interview I participated in on Canadian national radio about vaccine exemptions for religious reasons, the host quipped about irrational beliefs (“these odd little ideas in their head”, he said), even though Canadian human rights allow exemption in certain cases.

These pandemic years have reminded the world that vaccine hesitancy dates back to the beginnings of vaccination and has various underlying causes more or less related to religion or spirituality. A distrust in biomedical science was uncovered, arousing the ire of the media and the public. Some circles embracing yoga or alternative medical practices, previously perceived as complementary to science or an asset to physical and psychological health, have revealed their anti-biomedical face. Importantly, while some researchers mention a return to spirituality during the pandemic, others conclude that people living without religion or spirituality were unchanged. Lastly, the relation to nature and time changed considerably during the pandemic, as people stopped travelling abroad and instead rushed to parks, gardens, lakes and forests. Around the world, people suddenly deprived of their usual socio-recreational activities took long walks in cities. Some intense human activities affecting the planet and the climate were on hold for a few months, causing environmentalists to dream of a different world. These are the main aspects we can retain from the pandemic in connection with religion and spirituality, and this issue of the open access *Religions* journal addresses a few of them.

2. Contents of This Issue

This interdisciplinary issue of *Religions*, entitled “Pandemic, Religion and Non-religion” allows the dissemination of research carried out during the pandemic. Ten articles cover diverse national contexts: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Israel, Italy, Poland, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The authors are scholars from various disciplines, such as media studies, sociology of religion, social work and education and theology. Several religions or religious groups are discussed: Christian churches including Amish and monasteries, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism. The Australian and Canadian articles also consider non-religious people and spirituality.

A first theme of the articles concerns how religions celebrate and communicate virtually, as digital religion was already quite present before the pandemic. A second concerns how the pandemic affects people’s religiosity. A third theme addresses how religious individuals and groups make sense of the pandemic, theologically or otherwise, through solidarity and mutual aid. Fourth, several articles point out notable differences in the treatment of minority and majority groups. Lastly, several articles analyze media coverage, while addressing a variety of religious experiences and responses. The articles can be summarized under three main categories.

2.1. General Perspectives: Religiosity and Media Coverage

Using a Polish case study, Bożewicz and Boguszewski explore the complex spiritual and religious effects of the pandemic. They conclude that a person’s previous level of religiosity determined religious engagement during the pandemic. Religious people became more religious, while less religious people further limited religious activities even after restrictions were lifted, especially young adults and residents of the largest urban agglomerations. This suggests that the pandemic accelerated the abandoning of religious practices by people whose ties to the Church had been loosening for some time. These results in Polish society should remind us that increased interest in religion (or at least spirituality) during the pandemic around the world, observed on the internet and in some countries, could be related to insecurity caused by the pandemic and may not last, as Ganiel explains in another article.

Halafoff, Marriott, Smith, Weng and Bouma address the complexity of worldviews in democratic societies in their analysis of media representations of religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to the pandemic in Melbourne, Australia. They conclude that diverse worldviews were featured ambivalently, as a positive resource but also a cause of infection. From its privileged position, Christianity received the most coverage: mostly positive but critical in some aspects (Pentecostal gathering as a cause of virus spread, sexual abuse in the Catholic Church). Classified as non-religion, spirituality, yoga and meditation and some sports such as surfing were featured in liberal newspapers as resources to cope with the pandemic, along with indigenous practices, Hinduism and Buddhism. Yoga and spirituality were criticized when they resisted biomedical authority. Minority religious such as Islam, Judaism and some ethnic Christian groups were often accused of defying health measures, indications of a “deep-seated racism” in Australian society.

2.2. Moving Online and Digital Religion

Not surprisingly, a majority of the articles reflect religions moving online. Ganiel (Ireland), Kühle and Larsen (Denmark), Taragin-Zeller and Kessler (UK), Irvine (UK), Ricucci and Bossi (Italy) and Barreau (Canada) offer complementary research on this topic. Ganiel’s article is based on questionnaires and interviews conducted mainly with Christian leaders in Ireland. She concludes that the capacity of religions to invest in online solutions to counter decline could be a key factor in the future but may be compromised by lack of resources. Her research shows a strong increase in online worship services in all denominations during the pandemic and that more clergy members and lay volunteers took responsibility for online activities. Most respondents stated that more people attended online worship services, and they intended to continue offering these: “Given the scale of the enterprise, a revitalization of religion seems more likely if a critical mass of laity become co-producers, and not merely consumers, of religion online”, concludes Ganiel. Kühle and Langholm, also using questionnaires, had better access to religious minorities, observing that the majority Christian Church, with whom the state has formal relations in Denmark, received more positive attention than Muslims despite their willingness to comply with restrictions. It seems the COVID-19 lockdown affected majority and minority religions quite differently, including their finances, because of underlying structures of majority and minority religions in Denmark and their relevance for the digitization of religion. The authors give a glimpse of doctrinal debates about online religious practices (virtual Christian communion, Muslim Friday prayer, etc.). They have already observed that most religious communities have decided to return to their previous offline activities, without necessarily maintaining online services, which already points out to a difference between contexts (cf. Ireland).

Also discussing doctrine, another article focuses on people’s creativity, seeing the pandemic as a factor simply amplifying pre-COVID-19 global trends. Drawing on in-depth interviews with faith leaders in the UK (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Sikhism), Taragin-Zeller and Kessler observe quite optimistically that online worship opened new possibilities for faith communities, notably allowing people to “more easily access and experience the ‘products’ of other faith communities”. They reveal the way a “home theology and sanctuary” was created, and in the case of segregated communities, how the pandemic resulted in the union of genders through prayer at home. They observe differences found mostly within each religion, as strong convergences were observable between religions. For example, the most orthodox worshippers of all religions combined had more in common than they did with their others of their own faith. Some occasionally broke government guidelines, prioritizing doctrine over public health. The article reminds scholars to look at “other types of religious needs and sensitivities” in specific contexts such as the global pandemic. Also illustrating this creativity, Irvine conducted digital ethnography about a Catholic English Benedictine monastery, which expanded its digital presence and social media involvement during the pandemic. In an unprecedented public presence, they appeared as experts in self-isolation, inspiring hundreds who had been

forced to withdraw from the world. Very subtly, the author recognizes that while the relationship created by digital support is effectively quite a “unidirectional one in which the monastery remains the locus of authority”, the Benedictine theology presents “listening” as a form of active participation, and this leads into Barreau’s article on digital religion.

Beyond the simple fact that religions had to move online, Barreau focuses on existing digital religion, namely, the way virtual experience is transforming rituals. He conducted vast research on hybrid rituals during the pandemic, especially related to death and various types of grief (delayed, complicated, atypical, etc.). It seems the practice created by digital support is characterized by both effectiveness and individualization, offering new possibilities, as well as significant limitations, when it comes to dealing with human crisis. The delayed grief experienced widely during the pandemic could be partly overcome by bimodal rituals, favoring individual and free interpretation, at a moment chosen by the participants. Effectiveness lies in the power digital religion gives to the individual to embrace self-centered understanding, while traditional religions provide a structured and exterior framework. However, without mediation or counselling, “does digital religion introduce an effective but brittle relationship to reality?”, asks Barreau.

Also expanding the view of online religious dynamics, Ricucci and Bossi’s article deals with the mobilization of religions to support migrants as “welfare actors and places of trust”. It develops a case study in the multi-religious and multicultural city of Turin, Italy, about how youth and second-generation migrants, often seen as less religious, found a new role and a voice to explain their specific way of being religious during the pandemic. Interviews were conducted with 30 young members of Muslim, Romanian Orthodox and Catholic associations linked to Romanians and Filipinos. Young people were especially valued for digital and linguistic skills, acting as mediators between the larger society and their communities. They actively provided services to their ethnoreligious communities, seen as irreplaceable places of trust by the older generations. Among other results of the study is that some young Muslim protagonists criticize negative media coverage of their religion and feel their volunteer work should have been better acknowledged.

2.3. The Most Observant Minorities

The article by DiGregorio, Corcoran, Colyer and Stein studying Amish and conservative Mennonites, as well as the one concerning Haredi Jewish communities written by Shuman, echoes Taragin-Zeller and Kessler’s article, as “strictly observant” groups are discussed. Looking at newspapers of religious minorities, DiGregorio et al. studied their refusal to hold virtual rituals. They reflect on a challenge faced in many other contexts: “How governmental mandates placed a disproportionate burden on these groups”, and how did the latter cope theologically with the pandemic? While they had a low rate of vaccination, they developed various ways to make sense of social distancing measures: faith in God who is still in control and the importance of care for each other. Like the monks studied by Irvine, their way of life found new meaning during the pandemic, because they favor a deep relationship with nature and a slow pace of life. Their writings describe nature in detail and remind that ‘God’s creation is unaffected by the pandemic’. In the case of Haredi Jews, Shuman precisely addresses the problem of collectivistic groups and how they are represented, the media having focused on their high degree of contagion. While some truly resisted health measures, the study reminds us that their solidarity and cohesion were fairly low, as diverse positions were adopted in the community. The case study concerns an internal campaign against whistleblowers who exposed health measure violations within their communities.

Since we are not yet in a post-pandemic society, no research can really assess the long-term effects of the global phenomenon that has affected all of us. Research initiatives are only beginning on these topics, and researchers need time to draw firmer conclusions. This issue will contribute to building knowledge on a crucial issue.

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