Religion and Pandemic: Shifts of Interpretation, Popular Lore, and Practices. An Introduction

ALEXANDER AGADJANIAN
Yerevan State University, Armenia; Russian State University of the Humanities

KONRAD SIEKIERSKI
King's College London

ABSTRACT In this Introduction, the guest editors discuss the main themes of this special issue and relate them to the growing field of research on how the extraordinary social conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic affected the practices of religious individuals, groups, and institutions. As we suggest here, the pandemic revealed and catalysed important trends within religious traditions and also exacerbated the issues of specific religious identities as confronted against, or negotiated with, the dominant frame of secular state-controlled public health priorities, policies, and protocols.

KEYWORDS Covid-19 pandemic, religion, theology, rituals, lockdowns and restrictions, Islam, Christianity, Jainism

The Covid-19 pandemic affected all aspects and spheres of human societies and cultures; religion has been one of them. In this special issue, we address various reactions to the pandemic from religious institutions, communities, and individuals, as well as the respective transformations in religions that this extraordinary situation triggered or accelerated. [1]

The range of these reactions—and reactions to the reactions—was huge. From the shock many Muslims experienced at the sight of the closed and empty Kaaba as well as Catholic or Orthodox priests flying with relics or monstrance over infected cities and blessing them from above, to the public outrage at religious groups ignoring restrictions and becoming "superspreaders," the pandemic left no one indifferent and religion was often in the centre of debate. Like in less challenging times, from a secular perspective the visibility of religious actors and the importance of religious responses to the pandemic was mainly boiled down to the question of their "being either problematic or useful" (Hjelm 2014, 203). For religious persons, however, questions such as "What does it mean to be a good Christian/Jain/Muslim during this crisis?", "What is the moral meaning of the pandemic?", "How should one practice their faith in times of lockdowns and social distancing?" posed a real and serious challenge. [2]

Not surprisingly, religious responses to Covid-19 attracted the attention of scholars from [3]

various disciplines. When we announced the call for papers for this special issue in the fall of 2020, there already existed several websites presenting initial academic reflections on the spiralling crisis and the role of religion in addressing and managing it.[1] Since then, the number of publications has grown exponentially (we refer to some of them later in this Introduction). The interest in our call was also overwhelming—we received around forty proposals dealing with all major religious traditions. However, the road from this initial interest to the final version of the current issue took longer than we planned and was strongly affected by the continuing pandemic itself. Some of us suffered from infections and their aftereffects, others found it difficult or impossible to work because of lockdowns and increased family obligations, yet others realised that although the topic is fascinating and extremely important, the research (including fieldwork) on what was going on—and its conceptualisation—was more demanding and difficult than initially expected.

The eight papers included in this special issue come from various corners of the world and address religious reactions and responses to Covid-19 from different religious communities. Among the latter, the one that received the most attention is Islam. Two articles examine German Muslims' experience with the pandemic. While Arndt-Walter Emmerich discusses institutional responses to the pandemic and state-imposed restrictions, Simone Pfeifer offers a more intimate view of Muslim women's religious engagement. In her turn, Sofya Ragozina focuses on pandemic-related Muslim online debates in Russia. Furthermore, two papers coming from Africa—Ghana and Nigeria—address both Muslim and Christian reactions to Covid-19. Kauthar Khamis describes the appropriation of religious veiling—*niqab* and *khijab*—as a safety measure against the virus. Dauda Abubakar, Maigari Abdullahi Muhammad, Ibrahim Murtala, and Ibrahim Arafat analyse the intertwining of religious reactions (both Muslim and Pentecostal) with mass culture imagination in Nigeria. The discussion of Christian responses to the pandemic is complemented by Alexander Agadjanian's article on the Russian Orthodox Church's answers and actions to the crisis and David Robichaux, Jorge Martínez Galván, and José Manuel Moreno Carvallo's study of the impact the pandemic had on traditional Catholic *ex-voto* dances in Mexico. Finally, beyond the Abrahamic tradition, the paper by Claire Maes offers an insight into Jain discursive and ritual responses to Covid-19. [4]

In the rest of this Introduction, we sum up important and recurring themes raised in this special issue, combined with references to similar studies published elsewhere. [5]

One theme is what we would call a theology, or sometimes a sort of semiotics, of the pandemic—the ways religious imaginations dealt with the disaster referring to the authority of religious specialists and scriptures; how they explained it in providential terms as signs of a transcendental logic. We can see the usual theological tropes presenting the pandemic as punishment for committed sins—either self-critically recognizing believers' own depravities or more willingly shifting the blame onto external agents. As Ragozina shows in her paper on Russian Muslims, the general trope that the Doomsday's menace would only be withstood by impeccable piety can be reinforced by a specific anger against the Chinese anti-Uighur policies that allegedly triggered the pandemic. Nigerians, both Muslims and Pentecostals, as Dauda et al. discuss, entangle the traditional Doomsday narratives with anti-liberal and anti-Western conspiracy schemes and images gleaned from blockbusting Hollywood dystopias. Jains, in [6]

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1   For example: Kravel-Tovi and Özyürek (2020); Meyer (2020); Public Orthodoxy, Tag Archives: Coronovirus. Last accessed 14 November, 2022. https://publicorthodoxy.org/tag/coronavirus/; Covid-19, Religion in Global Society blog, London School of Economics. Last accessed 14 November, 2022. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/category/covid-19/; CoronAzur blog, National University of Singapore. Last accessed 14 November, 2022. https://ari.nus.edu.sg/coronasur-home/.

Maes study, claim that the cause of the pandemic is a general lack of adherence outside their community to the Jain principles of non-violence and non-possessiveness. Overall, the suspicion of humanity's growing vices, often with anti-western connotations, as the origin of the virus has been common for more conservative communities, such as not only the aforementioned Muslims but also Orthodox Jews or Orthodox Christians. As other research shows, it might have also been central for the moralizing argument of some state bodies dealing with religion, such as in the case of Dyanet in Turkey.[2]

For most of the religious communities, however, the "theological" discourse as such was not the only one in the perception of the pandemic: They would usually accept the medical arguments provided by health authorities and state officials and follow the respective policies.[3] In many cases, the religious actors carefully justified their positions theologically through the idea of the compatibility of religion with science, as it happened, for example, in the case of the Society for the Support of Islam in Nigeria, mentioned in the paper by Dauda et al. At the same time, these restrictive arrangements were accepted with strong regret, reluctance, and sometimes resistance, fueled by popular convictions such as that quoted by Emmerich, "if you don't go three times to the *jummah* [Friday prayer], your heart will close." In this respect, the Jain case in Maes' paper seems to stand out, as for the members of this community the outbreak of the pandemic was an occasion to strengthen the already developed pre-pandemic discourse claiming the compatibility and consent between the principles of their faith and that of natural science. In all other cases, the attempts of negotiation coexisted with deep embarrassment.

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The main reason and the central point of the embarrassment and skepticism—and this is the second major theme discussed in this issue—was the blow that the epidemic inflicted on the very heart of religious life: its rituals, its sensual and material procedures, its corporeality, its sense of bodily communion with the divine and with believing fellows. Whereas before the pandemic believers engaged in different religious practices (the reception of Holy Communion at Mass, pilgrimages to sacred places, veneration of relics, icons, or holy figures) with the hope that this would give them "access to the sacred through the contagious effects of the material objects" (Kormina 2018, 155), now the same objects were presented to them as transmitters of a contagious and deadly disease. Agadjanian's paper provides a story of bitter debates in Russian Orthodoxy over the closing of churches for Easter celebrations, the cancelling of the Eucharist, or introducing hygienic rules into the ritual sequence—all measures that seemed to be an impossible intrusion of medical materiality into the sacral materiality of religion.[4] Robichaux et al. address the same issue of disrupted sacred materiality, taking as their example a powerful Mexican tradition of *ex voto* dances offered to local saints in supplication for health and prosperity.

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As the authors of another special issue on religious responses to the Covid-19 pandemic show, the sensorial, bodily "presence" and its possible substitution—what they call "negotiating the presence"—has been the main concern of all kinds of communities during the pandemic, including Pentecostals, Mormon, Hindu, Sufi, Shi'a Muslims, spirits devotees in

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2   The Dyanet's discourse referred to gay pride parades as signs of decay and the cause of global troubles. See Alyanak (2021); see also a chapter of the same collection: Tsipy Ivry and Sarah Segal-Katz (2021).

3   For a detailed study discussing the engagement of one religious institution—the Romanian Orthodox Church—in anti-Covid public health measures, see Dascalu et al. (2021).

4   For another study discussing the impact of the pandemic on Orthodox Christian practice, see Papazoglou et al. (2021).

Singapore, or Burning Man celebrants (Lorea et al. 2022).[5] The authors refer to Birgit Meyer's (2009) emphasis on sensational forms, which is also relevant to some papers in our collection. For instance, Pfeifer writes that for the Muslim women she studied, "the worst experience of the lockdown was being unable to come together in the mosque" and share the soundscape of a Friday prayer. In turn, Maes shows regarding Jainism how the believers "negotiated the bodily presence" by domesticating the key practices of *pūjā* and *darśan* in the situation of the physical restrictions of the pandemic. This last case resembles the Greek Orthodox "domestication" of the Easter shroud (*epitaphoi*)—the central element of the Good Friday ceremony in Orthodox Christianity—to substitute the "presence" of the sacred in their homes when the churches were closed (Papantoniou and Vionis 2020).

[10]   Another big theme that appears in this collection, as in many other similar studies, and that is closely related to the same dialectics of presence and distance, is the rapid growth during the Covid pandemic of the virtual, online-mediated forms of worship and devotional assembly. The pandemic inspired an accelerated trend toward what has been called "the distanced Church" (Campbell 2020). It might at first be perceived as a temporary, involuntary suspense of physical actions and gatherings, but in fact meant a continuation of the old trend of translating old practices into the new language of the digital, and thus became an area of creativity that may have lasting effects beyond the time of the quarantine (Berger 2018). Jains in Maes' paper are inventing the "third space" between the physical and the virtual; so are Mexicans whose video-recorded dances become an accepted ritual innovation. As Robichaux et al. put it, "a combination of digital and in-person media [made] it possible for local Catholic communities to maintain during the pandemic the relationship with their patron-saint, based on the principle of *do ut des,* 'though differently.'"

[11]   The domestication of worship and new spacial arrangements have been widely reported in the pandemic time (Manmit and Tiffany 2021). The new media also changed the borders of the worshipping community. For example, the national ummah, in Ragozina's paper, tends to merge with the global (digitally-connected) community while discussing personal piety and commitment to rules. In fact, the new media's effect proved to be complex: they can be both subversive (in relation to the 'old' practices) but also reinforce conservative mobilisation. They are also ambivalently related to the issue of individual versus communal religiosity. On the one hand, they may give rise to individualised—personal or domestic—forms of worship and spirituality (which seems obvious when gatherings are forbidden)—and this trend was chronicled in this special issue as well as in other studies (Baker et al. 2020; Musa, Neuve-Eglise, and Tavakoli 2020). On the other hand, because of their public openness and connectivity, they widen the community, redraw boundaries, or even create new communities (Lorea et al. 2022, 182–83). Overall, the resulting paradox, brought to all religious groups, is that of growing hyper-connectivity as opposed to (and, in a way, as substitute for) sensory deprivation.

[12]   Yet another effect of the pandemic time has been the adjustment, or a certain reconfiguration, of religious authority and respective institutional structures. Emmerich shows how the German Muslim institutional hierarchy was challenged by the new rules, which brought about renegotiating authority and decision-making between individual mosques and Muslim bureaucratic bodies while simultaneously testing relations with German state authorities in a time of extraordinary and uncertain regulations. Agadjanian discusses similar issues raised in the Orthodox Christian hierarchy, when vague and contradictory guiding rules generated on

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5   The referred paper is the introduction to the special issue of *Religions*, "Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Mediating Presence and Distance", Vol. 52 (2), 2022.

the top (of both religious and secular authorities) led to uncertainties in reactions of various grassroots groups. Ragozina shows how the traditional authority of the ulemas was amplified by what she calls "popular ijtihad"—the explosive growth of spontaneous opinions of common Muslims through internet forums and blogs.

An interesting turn found in several papers is that of the pandemic as a "blessing in disguise."   [13]
Such positive aspects of the otherwise challenging situation can be traced in Emmerich's paper, where he shows how dealing with the pandemic crisis by leading German Muslim organisations helped them to present themselves as reliable partners to state authorities; as well as in Pfeifer's work when she quotes one of her respondents exclaiming "I would never have thought it possible that the Azan could be allowed in Germany!" However, they are the most clearly expressed in the case studied by Khamis in Accra, Ghana. There, the pandemic made Muslim veiling a protective garment against the virus rather than a symbol of Islamic extremism, as it was seen earlier.[6] Furthermore, in a clear case of inter-religious entanglement, the veil also began to be used by some Christian women from a mixed Christian-Muslim neighborhood.

Finally, the cross-cutting theme that runs throughout all the papers of this issue is the   [14]
question of how the very religious *identity* of individuals and groups endures, either being shattered or reinforced in the situation when they faced a health crisis globally interpreted in clearly non-religious—medical, rational, and scientific—terms. People who identified with a religion were stuck between resistance and compliance. It was more or less discreet or open resistance, rooted in their religious persuasions and habitus, and a compliance with policies imposed by (mostly secular) states and international institutions. In a way, it was a dilemma of ontological and epistemological security (the ability to retain a specific identity, a specific way of knowing or interpreting the world and one's place in it) as well as of an existential insecurity caused by the epidemic. The compliance with restrictions, too, needed to be justified in religious terms, referring to religious tradition as the special and most efficient source to cope with the insecurity, fear, and mourning. Also religiously justified were the inevitable changes, shifts, and transformations in practices. In any case, the pandemic revealed or even accentuated religious identity, which was particularly opportune for scholarly observation.

This outline obviously does not exhaust all the themes explored in this special issue. Some   [15]
other topics, essential for a more complex and nuanced understanding of religious reactions to the pandemic, were not examined by our contributors. The most obvious example of such a topic are the varied responses to Covid-19 vaccines—the issue that came up on a later stage. The further exploration of the pandemic and its challenges and consequences for religious individuals, communities, and institutions is yet to be continued.

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6   This phenomenon somewhat reminds us of an interesting recent study about how the *Shi'a* pilgrimage centers in Mashhad and Qum, Iran, have been remodeled for carrying new functions of vaccination or medical help-centers during the Covid pandemic, thus "legitimising" the new agendas with the grace they traditionally possess; see Neuve-Eglise & Tavakoli (2022).

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