



## Post-Pandemic Religion

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## Post-Pandemic Religion

Some countries are emerging from COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and restrictions. Others are moving more slowly, either because vaccines are difficult to find, or there are high levels of vaccine hesitancy. The closer we draw to post-pandemic conditions, the more it becomes obvious that the ‘new normal’ won’t be the ‘old normal’ from before the pandemic locked down societies and forced changes in every kind of social activity.

Businesses are asking how much they can support remote workers, and wondering if they can lease less space, which is having a big impact on commercial real estate. Workers are buying and leasing fully wired home offices that can be craned into their back yards. People have flooded out of large cities into the surrounding suburbs, depressing housing and rental prices in some areas and causing them to spike in others. Some schools are imagining optional in-person learning going forward. Universities are wondering whether the in-person learning tradition is going to lose out to online education. Healthcare is increasingly relying on telehealth services, potentially forever changing the problems faced by rural communities in providing adequate health care.

We might have adjusted our socio-economic practices to protect vulnerable people in a pandemic, initially, but we’ve also unlocked possibilities for innovation. Disruptions always do that. The question for everyone is: what happens now? The question for scholars in the scientific study of religion might be: what can we learn about religion from all this? Here are a few examples of research questions we’d like to see answered.

At the outset of the pandemic, religious communities had to devise management plans. Some decided to meet remotely and a host of resources quickly appeared to help local churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples overcome strategic and technical challenges. Some refused to meet remotely and tried to implement social distancing and hand-washing protocols instead, sometimes provoking conflict with government officials who deemed them irresponsible. A few of the holdouts famously became super-spreader venues, bringing down social condemnation upon their heads and even government calls to investigate church leaders for murder.<sup>1</sup>

The drama of church-state conflict is a fascinating instance of people who trust science battling people who trust invisible religious powers. The science-trusting public-health supporters believe religious people are naïve, delusional, and dangerous. The religious faithful feel bullied by a hostile state invested in damaging their mission and message at every opportunity. Why does this seem to be such an intractable problem? What is the deep cognitive-science read on this type of conflict?

What effects did remote meeting have on religious communities? What was lost or gained? Does the picture look different in the short-term than in the long-term? For example, did attendance pick up right at the beginning of the pandemic but then plummet, leaving marginal attenders with even less reason than usual to show up for services? Will we see a spike in defections from the group of regular religious service attenders once we get to the point when we can measure attendance reliably again?

The scientific study of religion might be able to generate relevant insights. It is also possible that some theories prevalent within the scientific study of religion will need updating. Consider ritual theory.

Can rituals work remotely? Before the pandemic, people running virtual-reality Christian churches were routinely condemned for attempting to conduct rituals such as baptisms remotely.

But the same people so quick to condemn have themselves been running remote communion services during the pandemic. Will this lead to a transformation in the practice of religious rituals? If so, classic ritual theories in the scientific study of religion need to be revised.

What are the effects of the pandemic on collective ritual? A few religious groups were bold enough to attribute the pandemic to the actions of invisible beings. For the rest, religious beliefs and religious organizations were largely irrelevant to pandemic management. This was not so for the 1918 flu pandemic. Churches took the same range of postures, some closing for public safety while others continuing to meet in person, inevitably spreading the virus. But public-health supportive churches were far more involved in messaging and practical caring in 1918-1919 than they were in 2019-2021. What kind of impact does this relative marginalization of religious beliefs and the organizations promulgating them have on the perceived plausibility of religious worldviews? Could this be a factor accelerating the abandonment of supernatural worldviews?

So many questions! Extreme circumstances that destabilize a social equilibrium are hugely valuable for understanding the dynamics of the underlying adaptive social system. As tragic as the pandemic has been and continues to be, particularly for the elderly and vulnerable and their families, it also promises to shed a uniquely intense light on religious sociality and its cognitive conditions. We look forward to publishing papers on this topic in future issues.

## Note

1. For example, see <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-southkorea-murder/murder-probe-sought-for-south-korea-sect-at-center-of-coronavirus-outbreak-idUSKBN20P07Q>.

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