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Religious Studies at Texas A&M University...

offers an interdisciplinary minor drawing on the research expertise of faculty members from across the College of Liberal Arts, including courses on ancient and modern religions, religious practices and literatures, methods in the study of religion, and social issues around religion. Current faculty research such topics as modern Jewish philosophy, digital religion, Hispanic and Latinx religion, American religious history, Islam, Hinduism, religion and the environment, and contemplative studies.

*Insights from scholars of religion at
Texas A&M University...*

RELIGION IN QUARANTINE



*The Future of Religion in a
Post-Pandemic World*

HEIDI A CAMPBELL, EDITOR

Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World

Edited by Heidi A Campbell

Editorial Assistance by Sophia Osteen

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Religion Quarantined as Challenging the Future of Religion: An Introduction

Heidi A Campbell

In March 2020, I found myself in Germany just as COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic. I was a visiting research fellow at the Center for Advanced Internet studies at Ruhr University, where many discussions focused on the role digital media were playing in many countries' responses to the situation. As a scholar of religion, I was interested in how local religious communities were responding to social-distancing policies and community lockdowns. I noticed more and more churches and temples began to move their worship services online, and my Facebook feed became host to many of these digital experiments each weekend. Twitter and blogs became spaces where religious leaders would share updates and reports of these experiences, as digital media became an integral tool for serving their congregations when face-to-face meetings were banned.

I also began to have conversations with other scholars via Facebook Messenger and Zoom about these new trends, as religious leaders who were technologically resistant just one month ago now were readily embracing the internet. I wondered out loud with them what all this might mean for the future of religion. What would religiosity look like if social distancing becomes the new normal? Would expressions of faith increasingly become mediated as part of these shifts?

It was in the midst of these circumstances that this project emerged. I had been studying religious communities' uses of technology and the factors that guided the digital media decision making for the past two and a half decades. I knew what I was

observing was a unique moment, and I wanted to capture it in some way. The pandemic reached its height at the same time three religious traditions were getting ready for several annual and very public sacred celebrations. It was now late March, and Jews were preparing for Passover while Christians were getting ready for Easter, both of which involve familial and communal gatherings. Muslims had to consider the implications of forced physical distancing for ritual practices tied to Ramadan and the upcoming Haji. As I, and others online, discussed the current situation tied to social distancing and its impact on religious communities and institutions around the world, an idea was sparked. What if I could gather together religious studies scholars for a shared conversation on these events and the response of different faith communities? From this question grew this project that I call "Religion in Quarantine." This is an attempt to document the thinking and insights of scholars of religion on the shifts happening during this time period and to begin to consider how this might influence religious belief and practice in the future.

The result is this eBook entitled *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World*, which is a collection of short essays written by religious studies faculty from Texas A&M University. Fourteen professors and doctoral students were invited to reflect on what the future of religion might look like in light of the changes facilitated by the current pandemic and the potential challenges this may raise for religious communities. Each one was asked to write an essay that addresses one or more of the following questions:

- What key questions or challenges are religious institutions and communities facing during the pandemic?

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- How are religious groups responding and/or adapting to the forced move towards mediated/digital rather than embodied religious practice?
- How do you think the current situation might impact the future of religion in America?

The result is a diverse collection of essays where scholars draw on their religious research and background in essays that address one of two perspectives on developments related to religion and COVID-19. The first section of essays are narratives from different professors on their own spiritual journeys during the pandemic lockdown. These are very personal reflections where scholars reflect on their experiences of and connection with a specific religious community both as practitioners and scholars. Here, professors from Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Islamic contexts reflect on how their religious communities have adapted and responded to the innovation of religious practices and the faith-based issues this raises for them, especially in relation to the role and influence of technology in religious practices.

The second-half essays feature reflections from faculty on recent research projects and how that work has been influenced by the pandemic. Here, faculty focused on how current conditions and trends observed in religion's negotiation with the culture of COVID-19 have caused them to critically reflect on their own religious studies-focused research. These essays engage with emerging debates and dialogues about how religious groups are adapting, especially to the current limitations created by physical distancing and the move from offline to online expressions of religion. Together, these essays speak to what we might learn from religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how those responses might help us better understand emerging cultural-religious changes that are reshaping the future of religion.

Another key motivation behind the *Religion in Quarantine* project was to create a work that draws attention to the important thinking and research done by the diverse group of religious studies scholars found at Texas A&M University. Religious Studies exists as part of a set of interdisciplinary study units based within the College of Liberal Arts. Core and affiliate faculty conduct a variety of courses that help students explore the many ways that people experience and articulate the sacred in contemporary culture. The Religious Studies program focuses on providing opportunities for members of the TAMU community to better understand how religion addresses core concerns about human existence across cultures.

This e-book compliments these goals by showcasing the valuable insights these scholars can offer for understanding social and cultural shifts happening at this time and how they impact different religious communities in varied ways. *Religion in Quarantine* collects valuable insights and showcases important voices whose stories can help other scholars of religion prepare to address and study the future trajectory of religion being created at this time.

Transformation in and from Quarantine

Donnalee Dox

Religion and social quarantine together provide an open space for social transformation by moving attention from the abstractions of transcendence to in-body experiences of health.

Part 1-
**Defining Religion in a World
of COVID-19**

Transformation and Disruption

Sensing a transcendent dimension to the world has been part of human experience since the paleolithic age. Religion – from institutionalized theism to local animism — revolves around that sense. In the modern world, that sense of transcendence is more often disruptive to social order, outside a humanist orientation to governance. Responses to the COVID-19 quarantine thus far have focused on how social necessity has disrupted religion. We focused immediately on adaptations of Spring rituals: Easter services held in drive-in movie theatres, Seders shared virtually over Zoom, and the Hajj pilgrimage cancelled ([Wikipedia, 2020](#)). Attention has focused on religious institutions facing declining financial support and being at odds with secular politics. In April 2020, critical distance from the transformative potential of transcendence is as instinctive as social distancing. Yet, in such an uncertain time, religion’s proposition of transcendence offers potential for regeneration, renewal, and transformation.

Viral mayhem disrupts the order humans perennially seek in a chaotic world, whether through scholarly discourse or religious

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adherence. A global pandemic reacquaints us with chaos, cracking conventions of thinking, sensing, expressing, practicing, and feeling. As we ask how religious practices are adapting to socially imposed constraints on human contact and move online, we might also ask what the sense of transcendence, that fundamental unknowingness, offers for reconceiving social organization — from factory farms that incubate viruses, to production and distribution of medical supplies, to religious institutions themselves.

Appreciating the potential for religion to transform a crashing social order requires taking transcendence as a proposition, examining ways humans interpret that proposition, and following where those interpretations lead. Collectively groping our way through a passage of humbling uncertainty, confronting chaos we may have had the luxury of forgetting, could send us willingly into conceptual uncertainty. We might reflect on transcendence as the virus reveals, in the Greek meaning of *apocalypse*, new relationships between bodies and societies. Could we view medical treatment with a sense of the human body infused with divinity? Or factory farming through the lens of animism? Or let compassion guide an economy? Questions born from people's embodied sense of transcendence have transformative potential.

Embodiment and Transcendent Health

Communal religion drew focus in early April when quarantine disrupted major seasonal rituals. The public sphere seemed suddenly to miss religion, or at least its social performance. As quarantine disrupted visible body-to-body religious gatherings, it also disrupted the ways those gatherings bind people's bodies — eyes, mouth, skin, nose, ears, and organs — to a shared sense of transcendence. This sensory dimension undergirds what Anne Taves (2009) calls the “special things” that identify religious experience. In this dimension, aromas and tastes of ritually

shared foods shape the space and are prepared for rituals that take on meaning. People feel breath as they intone special words and hear voices mingling in shared language. They sense the textures, sounds, and colors of ritual garments, the press of one body against another in synchronized motions of pilgrimage or procession. The smell of flowers, incense, or burning wax evoke living memories of past rituals. Tactile sensations — a hand on a bowed head, a book or scroll held for reading, beads moving through fingers — connect bodies to divinity. Deeply felt gestures of community and devotion like the embrace of a kiss of peace or the touch of lips to an icon redefine sensuality. Quarantine immediately disrupted this embodied sense of transcendence, but also by rearranging familiar sensations in virtual environments invited new associations and new engagements with old knowledge.

The disruption of quarantine also brought out a subtler aspect of sensation in religion, toward which this essay now turns. Religion, broadly construed, may emerge from a sense of body and spirit intertwining, corporeal sensing itself becomes humanity's encounter with divinity, the human body the site for the encounter. Contemporary thinking about religion tends to construe body and spirit as a duality, as mapped by Haag and Bauman (2012), among others. In this framework, transcendence is a discursive problem to be solved by discourse. However, as my own inquiries have shown, people's sense of the interplay between embodiment and transcendence may not be oriented in this dichotomy. That reorientation disrupts the security (sanctity?) of discursive analysis, revealing corporeality as a proposition of transcendence rather than its problem. This religion proposes bodies, with all their sensory capacity, as the point in which people unknow the familiar to know divinity.

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The pandemic has placed the human body everywhere in people's awareness. As physical death and suffering become acute elements of social and existential chaos, the order we seek lies in our uncertain ability to restore health and life. A variety of spiritually oriented physical practices in America link bodily health with transcendence. These include sects of modern postural yoga, qui gong, tai chi, and martial arts; contemplative practices such as whirling and labyrinth walking, trance dance and drumming, neo-shamanism; approaches to diet such as Westernized Ayurveda and medieval European herbalism; and energy and "subtle body" therapies. Such practices are subject to critique, especially around issues of culture, social class, and solipsism. Critiques notwithstanding, *I think we will want to take more seriously the various ways people in America link bodily health with transcendent spirituality. Bodily health may become more central to religious belief and practice as we move through this pandemic.*

Like the religious traditions referenced earlier, but less widely recognized, these practices are also adapting to quarantine. Their response has been to grapple with the virus as a human condition with transformational, if not transcendent, possibilities. Of the many and varied practices, these few give a sense of that response. The nonsectarian Garrison Institute, a meditation center in western New York state, offers a "Virtual Sanctuary," addressing the problem of physical distance with an invitation to a deeper meditation practice:

How do we use this time to move towards connection and intimacy, rather than recoil in fear and further emotional isolation? How can we find the intimacy that is always available moment to moment? (Garrison Institute, n.d.)

Garrison is adding to its roster a program on Transformational and Contemplative Ecology in response to people's perceived sense of alienation from selves and the environment. Across the country, Spirit Rock, the well-known Buddhist retreat center in California founded by Jack Kornfield, aims for a skillful response to quarantine. Spirit Rock's programs, resources for self-care and *sangha* (community), have moved online as Digital Dharma, which includes nonresidential retreats. The idea of a nonresidential retreat redefines the traditional religious experience of retreating from familiar activities and surroundings into solitude. Quarantine itself is already a form of enforced retreat from social interaction. A nonresidential retreat becomes a way of "practicing deeply in our living spaces" (Spirit Rock, 2020).

Some established yoga studios have begun to offer livestreaming teachings online for home practice. Houston's Pralaya studio situates yoga, qui gong, and Tibetan breath offers meditation in the pandemic as ways to improve immunity, resilience, and health ([Pralaya Yoga, 2020](#)). The studio's name takes on particular significance in this context, as *pralaya* is a Sanskrit term referring to the world's dissolution and reconstitution in cyclic time. DanceMeditation, a Sufi-derived practice developed by New York dancer Dunya McPherson, began offering movement workshops online for the first time in mid-April. As medicine in a time of disruption,

[DanceMeditation] soothes our nervous systems, helping us find our ground, our solid sense of being-ness. This is crucial right now in a disrupted world (DanceMeditation, 2020).

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American composer Pauline Oliveros (d. 2016), introduced sonic meditations that transformed live performance into an in-body experience known as “deep listening.” Her “World Wide Tuning Meditation” is uniquely suited to Zoom’s virtual environment and has drawn participants from around the world (Pyron, 2020).

All of these organizations openly acknowledge the financial disruption brought on by the virus and invite contributions toward studio rent, charitable work, subsidies for people who cannot afford classes, and subsidies for out-of-work guest speakers, musicians, and teachers.

The effects of quarantine on embodied sensation and community may actually be less disruptive for these practices than for religions oriented around shared rituals, symbols, sacred sites, and collective devotion. The sense of embodied spirituality in these practices intervenes when bodies are vulnerable, with full awareness that some bodies are more vulnerable than others. While the physical closeness of shared practice and retreats so often described as “energy” has been disrupted, these practices take a transformational attitude toward the present moment, social as well as individual. Health, as a soteriological aim, compels meeting the suffering of others with one’s own body, and the willingness to perceive in one’s own body an order with the status of the sacred. Taken seriously, this proposition of ordered corporeality and sacred bodies may reveal epistemological and experiential grounds from which to address the current social chaos centered on suffering bodies.

I encourage us to look for how physical health becomes more prominent in religious thinking and practice, to seek in religion’s proposition of transcendence ways to mitigate the human-predicament ways of chaos, death, and suffering, and to

remember that in the world’s mythologies, humans oscillate between chaos and order, knowing and unknowing, life and death.

Donnalee Dox is Professor of Performance Studies and Interdisciplinary Religious Studies. She has published on medieval intellectual history, contemporary spiritual practices, dance, ritual, and contemplative practices.

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Religion Embracing and Resisting Cultural Change in a Time of Social Distancing

Heidi A Campbell

While Christian groups in America have responded by either embracing or resisting technological and social shifts mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic, I argue both responses are based on a shared and limiting assumption about religion being primarily event-based.

Since the middle of March 2020, I have been tracking and studying how religious groups have responded and sought to adapt to the “new normal” created by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Investigating how churches adapt to cultural events, especially those related to technology, is not a new topic for me. Since the mid-1990s, I have studied how religious communities responded and adapted to the then-new cultural phenomenon of the internet (Campbell, 2005). Just as is seen with the introduction of any new media, the internet garnered a range of responses, from those who wildly praised this innovation and called for religious groups to utilize its potential to those who warned of the potential threats it posed to religious values and called for its rejection.

This continuum, where one side promotes and adapts to cultural change and the other advocates to resist cultural change, is also very evident in the ways religious groups have responded to coronavirus and the cultural changes it has created. Religious institutions and individuals of faith have had to respond quickly

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to a number of issues at this time, including the closing of their doors, navigating new social boundaries, and implementing health policies or practices that have impacted their mission. In this brief essay, I look at two examples of how religious groups in America, specifically Christian churches, have embraced and resisted specific cultural and societal challenges that have emerged during this time. This includes some churches readily embracing digital technologies in order to maintain their work, while other groups actively resist government intervention they see as an effort to control their mission. The aim is to consider how and why they have made these responses, and what the implications may be for the future practice and study of religion.

Embracing Technology for Religious Practice: Practical Implementation Reveals Religious Focus

One of the most interesting adaptations to observe over the last three months has been how religious groups in America have embraced digital technology to continue what they see as their core functions as religious communities. Specifically, we have seen this in the swift move by many congregations — from mainline Episcopalians and Methodists to nondenominational and evangelical churches — transitioning from face-to-face worship to online forms of meeting.

Surveys of over 1,500 pastors conducted by a collaboration of church consultancy groups in March and then again in April 2020, found the overwhelming majority of churches moved from offline to online-only services during the pandemic. While the initial survey found most pastors (41%) reported feeling “forced” to make this transition and “ill-equipped to use the digital tools required,” reimagining church as a mediated experience was quickly embraced by many (MacDonald, Stetzer, & Wilson, 2020). The follow-up survey in late April reported pastors were

beginning to get a handle on the new technologies, such as internet streaming and video conferencing, and most church leaders surveyed had adopted either a transfer (36%) or a translation strategy (56%) in bringing their services online (MacDonald, Stetzer, & Wilson, 2020).

Transferring church online involved simply broadcasting or livestreaming traditional worship services on the internet, trying to replicate the look and feel of weekly gatherings as closely as possible. Pastors and priests filmed themselves in empty sanctuaries or in front of home altars offering the same liturgical readings or sermons members would have encountered before the pandemic. Translating church online involves some innovation to worship rituals and spaces, such as turning the service into an informal talk-show style format where the pastor served as host and other members of the worship or music team as guests. Both instances show a very pragmatic response to this cultural shift — churches transferred or translated their worship services online in the quickest and most efficient way possible in order to fulfill what they see as their central mission, offering members a form of Sunday gathering.

Interestingly, the April survey referenced above found pastors overwhelmingly ranked conducting weekend services as their priority, so they focused their energies on this. While the survey reported giving attention to building connection within the church and then an outward missionary outlook as being other areas of concern for church leaders, the overwhelming focus was on moving the religious services online, which raises an important question (MacDonald, Stetzer, & Wilson, 2020):

When did religion in America, specifically Christianity, become primarily event focused?

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This event-based focus of contemporary religious groups in America is not a new phenomenon. Sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars have long used individuals reporting on their frequency of attendance at weekly religious services as an indicator of religious commitment and affinity. Religious groups have also used church attendance and membership growth as evaluative tools for institutional vitality. When individuals' commitment to public rituals and gatherings become the central way most religious institutions evaluate religious commitment, we see a very instrumental understanding of religion emerge and promoted. The use of ritual events as the basis for determining community membership or investment defines community primarily in institutional and place-based terms. In many respects, this embrace of digital technology by churches, while pragmatically innovative, is still based on supporting a very narrow and traditional notion of what religious community is all about.

Resisting Religious Regulation: Debating Religious Liberty vs. Communal Responsibility

One area of strong resistance from religious institutions is the cultural changes forced upon them due to social-distancing requirements which embody the move towards mediated or disembodied worship. Many churches have framed government regulations imposed on them at the state and national levels as more than just annoyances to navigate or challenges they have to problem solve around – for some, they have been framed as a full-on onslaught against their religious freedom.

Their concern is not wholly unfounded. On Easter Sunday, members of the Maryville Baptist Church and six other churches in Kentucky ignored their governor's orders against mass gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to attend an

in-person service on this sacred Christian holiday. During the service, state troopers placed notices on car windows requiring members to follow a 14-day self-quarantine due to this violation and took down license plate numbers in order to conduct follow-up visits at the homes of these edict violators (Ladd, 2020).

This was followed by members of Temple Baptist Church in Greenville, Mississippi, being fined \$500 per member for their attempts to navigate around the 10-person-or-less public gathering edict by instituting "parking lot worship." Here, members sat in their vehicles in the church parking lot and listened to the pastor preach via their car radios (Reynolds, 2020).

Restrictions on religious gathering soon became framed by religious groups as an issue of religious freedom. Churches contested prohibitions which commonly stated gatherings of more than ten members in the same building or confined and enclosed space were temporarily illegal. This basically created no possibilities for churches to hold weekly service or any public event in their buildings.

As a result, numerous lawsuits have been filed by churches in Kansas, New Mexico, Florida, Mississippi, Kentucky, Virginia, California, and Texas. State and local shelter-in-place orders have been described as discrimination against religious institutions. Churches in these states have focused their protests against public-gathering regulations that have prevented religious groups from freely meeting as a violation of their First Amendment rights (Gjeltén, 2020). These protests revolve around a careful rhetorical debate between the constitutional right of Americans to the free exercise of their religion and the demonstrated need to protect public health at this time of pandemic.

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In the case of the fine levied against members of the Temple Baptist Church in Greenville, Mississippi, the U.S. Justice Department later said, "The city appears to have thereby singled churches out as the only essential service [...] that may not operate despite following [...] recommendations regarding social distancing" (as quoted in Gjelten, 2020). Yet, even with these victories, many religious groups continue to rally against any attempts to limit their gatherings as apparent freedom-of-religion violations.

As some states in the South have moved toward lifting shelter-in-place policies and slowly opening public spaces and businesses to people in early May, churches continue to highlight the constraints they must negotiate. This includes limits placed on buildings to be at no more than 25% capacity, ensuring 6 feet social distancing between congregants, and prohibitions on music, singing, and even passing the plate that are considered conducive to the spread of the highly contagious coronavirus.

While some churches have found doing church online to be an acceptable alternative, other conservative and evangelical groups have scoffed at this idea. Such groups have critiqued moves towards creating "virtual church" that relies on internet streaming services and platforms discussed above as settling for an inauthentic, disembodied expression of the church (Perkins, 2020). Even experiments such as "drive-in church," where members meet in cars outside the church building, have been described as creative, but are still framed as settling for an incomplete form of true church gatherings to be resisted. By presenting health regulations and social distancing as a violation of religious liberty and taking on the narrative of religious persecution, these groups set up an "us versus them" dichotomy. They not only present themselves as victims of governmental

oppression of their right guaranteed by the US constitution, but as the true church of authentic believers that has not been swayed by liberal rhetoric about following governmental guidelines.

While many more facets of this resistance to religious regulations could be discussed, what this all comes down to is a question similar to that posed above, i.e., the centrality of the worship event defining American religious practice. Cries for freedom of worship are underpinned by an assumption: If the church body is not physically gathered, then it cannot truly or fully exist. This creates a very limited idea of what religion is and what the church is and represents in culture.

Challenges for the Future of Religion

Both the embrace of technology to reimagine church and the resistance towards regulations that require a new imagination are based on the same assumption. Religion is event focused and churches are defined by a very limited understanding of what it means to gather together. This also relegates discussions of religious community to being very institutionally focused and place-based.

Yet, according to my research over the last three decades, peoples' understanding and practice of community have shifted (Campbell & Osteen, 2020). The reality is that most people, both religious and nonreligious, experience and live out community as a social network of relations. As I have argued, this means that for most people, community is something that is dynamic and changeable, holds multiple connections, and is determined by personal needs and choices. This idea of the network challenges most religious groups' understanding and practices of community (Campbell, 2020).

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Over the past two decades in my research, I have continued to find that people are looking for a faith-based social network where they can build relationships, share their faith, and find meaning and value. I believe this essay, as it reveals religion as event- and program-based, suggests that religious groups may need to rethink their dependence on older models of community and religious commitment. It also amplifies the need for awareness that religious communities now function on a network mode. This fact is made visible by offering mediated online gatherings and revealing the rhetoric of the religious resistance against social distancing.

Heidi A. Campbell is Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University and director of the Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies (<http://digitalreligion.tamu.edu>). She is the author of over 100 articles on digital religion that involve studying the intersection between religious practices online and offline. She is the author of 10 books, including *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010), *Digital Religion* (Routledge, 2013), and *Networked Theology* (Baker Academic, 2016).

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Part 2- Narrating Praxis: Reflections on Performing Spirituality During Lockdown and Beyond

Practicing Islam in the Time of COVID-19

Rebecca Hankins

This essay, similar to my research on religion, centers around the lives of American Muslims, African Americans in particular, and how this virus has unequally impacted the lives of Black and Brown people in the U.S.

Religious Hadith: "Narrated Saud: The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place'" (*Sahih Bukhari, Book 71: Volume 7, Number 624.*)

Islam/Muslim COVID-19: Questions and Challenges

According to an article published in the *Washington Post*, Islam is the second-most-followed religion after Christianity in 20 states (Wilson, 2014). Despite the growth in Islam, especially in the age of Donald Trump, American Muslims face discrimination, are demonized, and wield very little influence in the United States. We are a growing minority which the majority of Americans would like to marginalize and minimize any effect we would have on society, especially within religious communities. Within the broader Muslim community, African American Muslims face double marginalization that impacts them in ways similar to and different from the larger African American and Muslim populations. A recent essay in *Middle East News*, a digital site, explains this duality succinctly: "Making up a fifth of all U.S. Muslims, Black Muslims sit at multiple intersections and are often

rendered invisible within both the larger Black and Muslim community" (Wallace, 2020). One sees the dilemma of being Black and Muslim, ignored but also disparaged, often doing what was considered menial labor but is now essential. This essay will discuss how the virus has impacted Muslim communities as a whole. How has it impacted our religious practices? How are issues of sickness and death changing our rituals? How has all of this changed my reality as an African American Muslim and the future of Islam in America?

Our Reality: "Racism is Death" (Kendi, 2020)

Numerous essays and newspaper articles are detailing the outsized impact of this virus on Black and Brown communities. The statistics are staggering, with major cities such as New York, Chicago, New Orleans, and Detroit reporting that there is an over-representation in the number of deaths within these communities from the virus. African American Muslims are finding these same issues in their experiences, where the lack of testing has impacted these communities and the lack of medical facilities within these communities, as well as the lack of necessary resources, has exacerbated the spread of this virus. For example, in Michigan and Illinois, African Americans makeup 14 to 15% of the population but account for 41% of the COVID-19 deaths. In Chicago alone, African Americans account for 70% of the city's deaths, yet just 30% of the population. In Louisiana, one of the hot spots of the virus, African Americans comprise about a third of the population but 70% of the COVID-19 deaths (Jones, 2020).

Funerals were the one activity that was of concern; they are a time of coming together to wash and shroud the body, have prayers, and console the family of the deceased, all within 24 hours of the death of the individual. The virus has forced delays

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in every aspect of Islamic burial rituals from recovering the body from hospitals to the inability to perform the washing of the corpse, conduct the prayers while also social distancing — everyone donning protective wear — and console the family via cell phone (Farooq, 2020). In response to the virus pandemic, the Fiqh Council of North America, a respected organization, has released a fatwa (guidance) regarding prayers, burial, and funeral prayers (Qadhi, 2020).

Many factors have forced the Muslim community to make changes in its weekly prayer gathering, *Jum' ah*, that occurs every Friday all over the world. These gatherings of men and women praying close to each other have now ceased, replaced with virtual gatherings. Islam has a faith tradition that encourages congregational prayer, events, celebrations, and family gatherings. Still, we have shown the flexibility of our practices to tackle this new world demand of social distancing. The upcoming month of Ramadan fasting will test us, but we have models of Muslims all over the world who have had to make these changes and more due to war, famine, and other catastrophes, for decades, if not longer. American Muslims have done what is necessary to slow the spread of the disease by closing down mosques, modifying prayers, and providing avenues to share all over the country. Muslim groups have sought to find ways to support communities and alleviate suffering through fundraising for families in need of financial assistance, food, healthcare, and housing. American Muslims seek to embody the ideal religious community despite their marginalization. "One of the prophetic traditions that really inspired this campaign is the one that says the most beloved people for God are those who benefit people the most" (Farooq, 2020).

Personal Reflection

This new "normal" has allowed African American Muslims to engage in new and renewed dialogues online. Lectures by African American scholars that often required traveling to far off venues, making it difficult to attend, are now accessible online. I was already a member of several African American Muslim groups that were only available in the virtual world, such as [Sapelo Square](#), [Patheos' Mostly Muslim](#), and [Inner-City Muslim Action Network](#) that have successfully broadened their online content.

For me, the most concerning issue is the disinformation and misinformation that is being passed around in Islamic social media circles by individuals. Conspiracies have always had a foothold within the African American community, and not without some validity. African American Muslims, marginalized and demonized, have often embraced these stories as attempts to destroy or damage Islam. That is not to say that all conspiracies are unfounded. Most African Americans know about the Tuskegee syphilis study carried out on Black men from the 1930s to the 1970s. These and many more instances have created a healthy skepticism among Black people, so that this virus's unknown properties have allowed all types of conspiracies and unfounded cures to flourish, all alive and well online. I make a concerted effort to debunk these dangerous postings whenever they appear.

Conclusion

This current situation has forced many Muslim groups to strategically plan for this or any other crisis that may be on the horizon, recognizing that future religious practices in the virtual world will be the norm, while meeting in person will be the exception. Muslims all over the world are observing our holiest period in Islam, fasting for the month of Ramadan. As we enter

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this time having to change the most important aspects of the holy month, the gatherings, the sharing of food, prayer, and the recitation of The Holy Qur'an, have moved to the virtual realm. I don't know how this will feel; it will be different from anything I have witnessed during my 40+ years as a Muslim. My family (me and my two daughters), like other Muslim families, is using Zoom to have weekly check-ins with my other children and friends around the world; we read Qur'an, learn, grow, and worship like the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide, now virtually.

This pandemic will test faith communities due to the randomness of the exposure, the inexplicable deaths of our loved ones, and the inconsolable grief that follows. What does the future hold for African American Muslims and Islam in America? We modify our practices, we move to the virtual online platforms, we adapt. We continue as we always have since the times of our enslaved ancestors trying to hold on to our faith and practices. We believe that when one dies from an epidemic, believing in Allah (God), the Prophet, and the Last Days, then they die as a martyr, and our sins are forgiven (Umar, 2020). This understanding continues to bring Muslims comfort and strengthen us for the future, whatever it may hold.

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COVID-19, Sanctuary, and the Future of American Religion

Felipe Hinojosa

In this essay, I travel home to the south Texas borderlands to examine how the Sanctuary movement of the 1980s can help us think about the future of religion in a COVID-19 America.

I grew up in Brownsville, Texas. It is a town perfectly placed on the southernmost tip of Texas — “on the border, by the sea” — in a region known as the Rio Grande Valley. The Gulf of Mexico is a short twenty-minute drive, and the two popular beaches, Boca Chica and South Padre Island, are where my sins were washed away during the many baptismal ceremonies our church held there. And my childhood home on Taylor Street was only a fifteen-minute walk from the U.S./Mexico border. Much has changed in the years since I left Brownsville back in the late 1990s. Most of the families have left the neighborhood where I grew up and Lincoln Park — the park I used to cross every day on my way to J. T. Canales Elementary — is gone, flattened by Interstate 69. But perhaps one of the biggest and most visible changes is the oddly placed border fence built in the early 2000s. The fence runs through neighborhoods, alongside schools, and starts and stops at odd, almost random, points along the Rio Grande. The fence was built in the early 2000s as part of the Bush administration’s move to secure the border. But the idea of erecting fences is an old one in American history. In the years after World War II, the federal government erected nearly 6 miles of chain-link fence in Calexico, California. According to historian Kelly Lytle Hernández, the materials used for this fence

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came from former Japanese internment camps (Hernández, 2010, p. 130). This form of “Imperial Recycling,” as Victoria Hattam calls it, has been used in Arizona, California, and in other places as pieces and remnants from war are brought here to the U.S./Mexico borderlands (Hattam, 2016, p. 32).

The border fence is much more than an eyesore in my hometown. It is a moral failure. It is a failure to see the beauty — and the contradictions — of border life. It negates the importance of over a century of cross-border commerce, and it ignores the cultural and religious exchanges so critical to border life. And while the fence in my hometown and the president’s chatter about building a “border wall” along the U.S./Mexico border have made things more difficult, they have not stopped people from finding a way to connect with and support one another. People like Mike Benavides, a school administrator, founded the group Team Brownsville, whose members come together to help those seeking asylum in the U.S. In the summer of 2018, Team Brownsville started taking breakfast tacos, coffee, sleeping bags, and other necessary items to the hundreds of asylum seekers from as far away as India, Cuba, Colombia, Bangladesh, El Salvador, and Honduras, all waiting in the Mexican border town of Matamoros to present their case to U.S. authorities.

In 2019 a group of drag queens organized a protest along the US/Mexico border in Brownsville to voice their opposition to the border wall and to raise money for LGBTQ asylum seekers. The leader of the group, Beatrix Lestrage, a.k.a. “Joe Colon-Uvalles,” commented that the goal “is to use the beauty of drag art and performance against the hateful, racist and xenophobic rhetoric that is being projected unto our communities.” Drag queens from throughout the Rio Grande Valley have since gathered in public

parks to proclaim, “We are here to bring joy, positivity, beauty, drag, culture to whatever this is,” pointing to the border fence (Leaños, 2019). These heroic acts of resistance are part of a long tradition of resistance along the borderlands. And it is this radical tradition — and the love that emanates from it — that will carry us forward in a COVID-19 America. Let me explain.

In the 1980s, a powerful movement of religious leaders, community organizers, and activists opened the doors of their churches to provide sanctuary to refugees fleeing war and violence in Central America. In the years between 1980 and 1983, an estimated 1.5 million people left their homes in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala to come to the United States. Many were farmers, teachers, former military, factory workers, young and old, and church workers who left everything in order to escape the violence and seek refuge (Crittenden, 1998, p. xvi). The Sanctuary movement emerged as a way to offer people a place to stay, some time to rest, a place to perhaps seek legal counsel, and time to think about their next move, as many came with hopes of gaining asylum in the United States. However, gaining asylum status proved difficult. The U.S. government categorized immigration from Central America as motivated by economic interests rather than a genuine need to escape war and violence. For U.S. officials, granting asylum to Central American refugees also meant an admission of guilt and responsibility for the very violence that U.S. foreign policy helped create and continued to fund (Smith, 1996, p. 162). This was something the U.S. was simply not willing to do. As a result, a majority of refugees were denied asylum. Between 1983 and 1990, only 3 percent of Guatemalan and Salvadoran applications for asylum were granted. This reality is what lit the fire of Sanctuary movement organizers who believed they had a moral

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obligation to open the doors of their churches and synagogues to give sanctuary.

My church in Brownsville, Texas, participated in this movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Iglesia Menonita del Cordero*, a Mexican American working-class congregation, opened its doors to refugees from Central America and for a few years housed several hundred people at a time. As a kid (I was in middle school at the time), I remember meeting them. I ate with them, played basketball with them, and tried (and failed) to play soccer with them. Of course, I had no clue about what they were experiencing at the time. I had no sense of their struggle, their worries, and certainly no idea of what they had left behind in their home countries. There were rumors that our church was under FBI surveillance, lots of fear that some of our own church members might be deported, and threats of potential violence against the church. I would learn all of this years later. At the time, all I cared about was organizing the next game of five-on-five.

But one thing that has stuck with me, that I have never forgotten, are the faces of the people I met. Under unimaginable stress and trauma, they seemed hopeful to me. I remember hearing them laugh, cracking jokes and speaking words in Spanish that this Texas Mexican kid did not understand. I also clearly remember the leadership of church members who worked around the clock to make sure people were cared for, that they had what they needed, and that they made contact with relatives in cities like Houston, New York, and Dallas. This scene — of churches stepping up and opening their doors to offer critical services for refugees and undocumented immigrants — was repeated across the country. From Tucson to Los Angeles to New Orleans to Chicago and New York, preachers, community organizers, and

the churches and synagogues where they worshipped stepped up, defied the federal government, and took care of people in need. For their courage, religious leaders were surveilled, imprisoned, and their places of worship deemed criminal.

The U.S.-funded wars in Central America in the 1980s created a serious humanitarian crisis at our borders. Thousands of people left their homes to come to the U.S. to escape the violence and to reconnect with their families. In providing sanctuary for the refugees, religious leaders defied the U.S. government and transformed their spaces of worship into clinics, cafeterias, and spaces of rest. The risks taken must serve as a model for how religious groups should respond in the midst of this current pandemic. In this COVID-19 world in which we all now live, it will be more important than ever for churches to enact politics of love prepared to serve refugees, immigrants, small business owners, single parents, families with sick relatives, and people who have lost their jobs because of COVID-19.

Religious organizations and houses of worship will need to get creative in how they design their outreach. Partnerships with local non-profits already doing frontline work will become especially important during this time. What all of this will look like is still unclear, but it will require a herculean effort from religious leaders as they adapt to the needs of their community. In the years since the height of the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s, religious groups have remained on the frontlines of the immigrant rights movement. While the social distancing and shelter-in-place orders will ease, the economic disaster will remain with us for the foreseeable future. It is in the midst of this, that history, and the Sanctuary movement in particular, can remind us of the moments when the saints carried us.

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Zooming into Passover

Claire Katz

This reflection considers how the pandemic had both a positive and negative impact on our family Passover Seder, pushing us to consider what we might do with our future holiday celebrations.

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” Asked every year by the youngest person at a Passover Seder, this central question to the Seder took on a renewed significance this year when Jewish families around the world participated in their Seders in near isolation from family (who were not members of their household), friends, and other members of their community. My family’s Seder was no exception.

In April 1998, I held my first Seder with the man who is now my husband. There were six of us, and I was the only Jew. We didn’t realize at the time that this Seder would mark the beginning of a meaningful tradition of welcoming friends and colleagues into our home to share in our Passover celebration. For the past twenty years (off and on, but mostly on), we have held a Seder, occasionally with more than forty people in our house. With few exceptions, I was the only Jewish person at the Seder table.

Passover has always been my favorite holiday. My fondest childhood memories are sitting at my grandmother’s Seder table discussing politics and eating the traditional foods. Living in college towns far away from family, I’ve had to create my own

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Seder table and fill it with people about whom I care deeply and with whom I wish to share this tradition.

Although living in a community with very few Jews has been lonely in an existential way, I was so grateful to have so many friends and colleagues willing to share this tradition with me. We read the Passover story, ate the symbolic food (many were courageous enough to try the gefilte fish), drank wine, discussed politics, academics, literature, and philosophy, and we laughed — a lot.

But this year, the pandemic changed all of that. My Passover Seder this year was a bit of “on the one hand,” “on the other hand.” On the one hand, we did not have our typically large crowd of friends sharing matzo, matzo ball soup, gefilte fish and horseradish, brisket, and our flourless chocolate cake. On the other hand, because the pandemic closed the schools, our elder daughter was home from college, my husband was home instead of being at a conference typically held over this time, our younger daughter would not need to rise early the next morning to head off to school, and I was home all day to prepare food. A rare experience, we actually had our Seder on the traditional first night of Passover rather than waiting until the weekend when it would be convenient for our guests and for us.

That evening, just before we started the Seder, we called my mother who lives in a retirement community in Atlanta, Georgia. Her apartment building was on complete lockdown after one of the residents tested positive for the coronavirus. But just after we hung up, my younger daughter suggested we call her back on FaceTime and have her be part of the Seder. So, we did that — we called her back on FaceTime and set the phone on a corner of the dining table so that she could see everyone.

Although it’s possible we would have thought to do that under “normal” circumstances, I don’t think that we would have. Shifting our lives into our houses for long periods of time, working from home, and having no places to congregate, we have moved much of our social lives — whether teaching, work meetings, or social gatherings — to Zoom or other online platforms.

We are now socializing online not only with people far away but also with people who live near, thus changing how we think about what it means to socialize. The most mundane of activities like having a drink together are no longer possible. Thus, moving to an online version just to say hello means we are now thinking differently about how to connect with people.

Temple Israel in Memphis, Tennessee, is my “home” synagogue. I have been a member of the congregation since 1992 — I had an adult bat mitzvah there in 1995, my husband and I were married there in 2000, and we had our younger daughter’s baby naming with our rabbi in Memphis in 2004. I am tethered to that synagogue and was grateful when I could stream their services for the High Holidays.

Experiencing services in this way is certainly not as meaningful as being present in person, sitting in that beautiful sanctuary, looking around at familiar faces I have seen over so many years. But I was grateful nonetheless to be part of a service that has always moved me and to hear a sermon from rabbis who always make me think and feel deeply about my relationship to Judaism.

The social isolation from this pandemic, however, has pushed us to think differently about how to visit with people, how to socialize, and how to engage in religious ritual, because now we

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must. The move to online social gathering is not even close to ideal, but it also opens a space for a possibility that did not exist previously — for family and friends to participate together in a ritual when, even under normal circumstances, they would not have been able to do so. But not being able to share a meal together will for me always be a marker of how impoverished the online ritual is.

In a 2014 piece for the Jewish Federation of The Lehigh Valley, Alice Level asks, “Is Judaism Obsessed with Food?” So much of Judaism and Jewish life revolves around food — there are food references throughout the Hebrew Bible, beginning with the story of creation. It was eating a piece of fruit (however one renders the Hebrew) that one was forbidden to eat that sent into motion the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. There are numerous laws governing how food is prepared and what foods can be eaten.

The food we connect to Judaism is nearly inseparable from the celebrations we have with our family and the community. Jewish holidays are filled with symbolic foods, from the food fried in oil for Hanukkah to the symbolic food on the Seder Plate to blintzes on Shavuot to the apples and honey one eats on Rosh Hashana for a sweet year. And my own connection to the Sabbath is the meal I ate with my grandparents every Friday evening growing up and when I was in college.

On the one hand, the pandemic pushed us to find creative ways to honor the traditions and rituals of a holiday that is normally celebrated around a table with friends and family. And I am grateful for the technology that allowed us to do that. On the other hand, nothing can take the place of people sitting side by

side, of passing the food, sharing homemade matzo ball soup, hiding and searching for the *afikomen*.

I wrote these reflections on the pandemic sitting at my desk in our house where, thus far, everyone in my family is safe and healthy. We are lucky. The pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to think about what is important — a cliché, I know, but nonetheless true. We have obviously traveled less this spring than we usually do. Evenings are spent cooking and eating dinner together rather than driving frenetically, taking ourselves and/or our daughter from one activity to the next. I exercise and read more than I did previously. And I love the idea of “Zooming” people — friends and family — into our celebrations.

But there is a cost to having learned this lesson — so many people are dying and will still die, so many people will recover but still be damaged by the disease, so many people have lost their jobs and livelihoods. When I think to the future, I also worry about the future of religious practice specifically for Judaism, which relies so much on sharing food and sharing our tables, not only celebrating but also mourning in a community with others. What will a *minyan* look like over Zoom? What will it mean to sit *Shiva* with someone who has lost a family member?

Zooming with loved ones who are far away, who would not be able to join us under the best of circumstances, is wonderful gift. But nothing can really take the place of actually breaking bread — or in this case, breaking matzo — with those about whom we care. I do not have the answers for how Judaism will need to think about these practices, I only know that something very special will have been hollowed out of Judaism’s soul if we are not able to practice our religion in the physical presence of others.

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Reimagining Church after Quarantine: Online Worship at Friends UCC

Robert Sean Mackin

Going online poses new challenges and creates new opportunities for the church.

“What is a good image for God’s kingdom? Consider the church, when it is scattered it might seem small. But, when it’s planted, when it is rooted, it grows into something larger than life.”

Pastor Dan De Leon, Friends Church

Located in College Station, Texas, Friends Church is an average-sized progressive Christian church located in a central Texas city best known for its large public university. The church is "open and affirming," indicating that LGBTQ+ individuals and families are welcome. Over the years, the congregation has embraced marriage equality and other progressive causes, including accommodating/welcoming disabled individuals, articulating Christian responsibility to counter climate change, fighting for immigrant rights, addressing the needs of unhoused families, and discussing what it means to be an antiracist church. Friends is an affiliate of the United Church of Christ, a mainline Protestant denomination. This essay discusses the transition to online worship in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Going online both poses challenges and creates opportunities for the congregation.

Adoption of New Technology at Friends

Since Pastor Dan De Leon’s arrival over ten years ago, the congregation has embraced technology as a strategy for

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evangelicalism. Early on, the pastor's sermons were recorded and made available to stream or download. More recently, the church began broadcasting entire services on Facebook Live. The recordings are simple, made with a single digital camera that is mounted in the rear of the sanctuary. The production quality of these recordings bears little resemblance to the polished online presence of local megachurches, which combine prerecorded segments with live services using multiple cameras and a range of lighting to enhance the mood.

Going online due to quarantine posed few challenges, at least initially. As Holy Week progressed, the church's online worship services became more ambitious, using multiple cameras, prerecorded portions, and some exterior segments. The church's familiarity with digital cameras and microphones meant moving all religious services online posed less of a challenge than it likely did to some of the other, similarly sized religious groups in the area which have little if any online presence.

This essay focuses on the Palm Sunday service of April 5, 2020. I focus on the sermon where the pastor wrestles with an age-old theme which, suddenly, due to the pandemic, has new meaning: how to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. Quarantine poses several challenges for the congregation that the pastor addresses directly: When a congregation is quarantined, what happens to the church community? Will it ever be the same? Should it?

Reflections on Palm Sunday

The stream on Palm Sunday opens outside the familiar church building, with the camera focused on the senior and associate pastors. The contrast of the two figures outside the building looks odd. As the camera turns from one to the other – clearly at least 6 feet apart per CDC guidelines of social distancing – a lone

pickup or sedan comes into view underscoring the otherwise empty lot.

While some congregations in the area are using the Zoom platform to broadcast their services (usually accessible with a code posted on the church website), Friends Church has adopted Facebook Live to stream services. It is available without restriction. Importantly, the platform allows viewers to simultaneously observe the service but also participate in unique ways. Members and others can write a message on the sidebar, enabling other viewers to see and respond. Church members use this feature to post commentaries, greetings, prayers, and the occasional whimsical reflection. On this occasion, a moment of levity is provided by an individual who comments that the image of the two pastors outside the church, holding fronds and standing about six feet apart, reminds them of an episode of the irreverent television program, *South Park*. This comment receives several “likes” from viewers.

In transitioning to online services, Friends opted to maintain the same format as their face-to-face worship service. This includes music – the choir director plays piano and sings – and lay volunteers greeting the online congregation and reading the Old Testament passage for the day. Over the course of Holy Week, the production of the services becomes more complex – using more than one camera, including exterior shots, and incorporating a children's message from a member who recorded it from her home. It is a notable change when contrasted with the recordings of church services from before the quarantine.

Online worship also allows and encourages more engagement and interaction than would otherwise take place in a typical face-to-face worship service at Friends. For example, during a typical

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passing of the peace, participants will usually shake hands and exchange hugs with others seated near them. During the online service, members and former members greet one another, say peace, and use the buttons provided by Facebook to express their approval — namely, small images of hearts and blue thumbs rise like bubbles, then quickly burst. These buttons are used throughout the service to communicate appreciation of a song or an idea expressed in a sermon.

The Sermon

In the Palm Sunday sermon, the pastor asks the congregation to consider not only the passion, but what Jesus's resurrection means for a congregation in quarantine. The Sunday message was inspired by the parable of the mustard seed (Matthew 13: 31-32). The pastor recounts that while taking a walk with his family, his son pointed out a "big patch of bushes and tall grass and a few tall trees growing out of it with branches that make a canopy over the street." For years, the pastor and his family had overlooked this "wild and beautiful" part of their neighborhood. Suddenly, they realized it merited closer inspection: birds, insects, and even rabbits made a warren in its shade. The pastor also calls attention to the unseen, the deep roots below the surface which thrive in good soil. The green patch, like the mustard seed and plant which inspired the message, are metaphors for the kingdom of heaven. But that is not all.

As seen in the quotation which opened this essay, in times of quarantine, the church is also the metaphorical Kingdom of Heaven. Pastor Dan challenges the congregation, asking, "I wonder, as the church is scattered and sheltered in place like the disciples were out of fear for their lives when Jesus was taken from them and publicly executed. Are we finding in these times

of uncertainty and worry that we are rooted deeply in the love of God?"

He concludes:

We have never experienced anything like this before. So when we come out of it, we can never be the same. I'm looking forward to the day when we can ... be the church in a new day when we can do more than gather for worship, when we can serve our neighbors with bold, creative acts of care and compassion, when we can work for justice with refreshed relentlessness...

The congregants, gathered around screens, show they are moved by this powerful message. During the sermon, members write "Amen" or offer words of praise and appreciation. Before quarantine, those in attendance rarely interrupted the sermon. This silence is typical of mainline Protestant services. Yet, with worship online, members are more actively engaged, typing their approval and responding to one another's comments.

Pastor Dan's reflection made evident the fact that the church was never going to be the same; but that is as it should be. The coronavirus poses a fundamental challenge to all. While worship services were moving online, the church needs to change in a more fundamental way, too. Palm Sunday made evident the fact that the church was already taking steps in a new direction.

Toward the end of the worship, it is common for the pastor to ask the congregation if anyone would like to ask for the congregation's prayers. In the past, 4-5 people would raise their hand and speak. With worship on Facebook, there has been an outpouring of requests.

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The pastor read several requests during the service, but he could not keep up. New prayers were posted, and members were responding to one another, expressing love and support.

Conclusion

Palm Sunday is usually a time for introspection, of grief, but also anticipation. This service provoked many questions: How will the quarantine affect Friends Church? Also, how will moving all services online affect the character of the congregation's relationship to one another and their faith? In the future, I expect churches like Friends will need to maintain and perhaps even extend their online presence. Doing so will help incorporate members who participate remotely. What is more, until a vaccine for COVID-19 is available, online services will continue to serve the immuno-suppressed, those who will prefer to be cautious and not risk face-to-face interactions, and those far away who have rekindled their ties to the congregation through technology. The digital community created out of necessity during the quarantine is likely to grow out of choice as a new normal emerges.

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The Charism of Zoom Church

Nandra Perry

This essay considers how the move from face-to-face to online forms of church creates unique opportunities and challenges for rural congregations, from the point of view of a scholar of religion who is also an Episcopal priest.

I hold a unique position. My days are spent as a professor of English at a large public university here in Texas, where I study, write, and teach about the English Reformation. However, my nights and weekends are mostly spent in a small nearby town where I serve as a non-stipendiary priest for a rural Episcopalian parish church. This dual role as scholar of and leader in the church gives me a kind of double vision. On the one hand, I am a keeper of a tradition that I love and that I do not wish to see radically changed. On the other, I am keenly aware of how trauma—and the radical changes that often accompany it—are woven into the history of the church. This isn't even our first plague—far from it! For well over a thousand years now, parish churches like mine have struggled to adapt to all manner of adverse conditions. In that sense, nothing could be more traditional than my little church's current struggle to adapt to COVID-19.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Palm Sunday. Under normal circumstances, this is a big Sunday and important celebration for St. Philip's, the rural parish where I serve. Like most Episcopal churches, we celebrate Palm Sunday the same way each year,

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with a boisterous Palm procession, favorite hymns sung only at this time of year, and a dramatic reading of the Passion of Christ from the book of John found in the Bible.

But this year's Palm Sunday was obviously different. Here in the Diocese of Texas, we have not been under "normal circumstances" for nearly two months now. Since Friday, March 13th — when I got the text from our bishop that we would be closing our doors for public worship starting immediately — the people of St. Philip's have not been able to gathering in our beautiful old sanctuary. We have had to move to a new meeting space, gathering online via the Zoom online conferencing system: not just for worship, but also for business, daily prayer, and some much-needed fun.

Had Palm Sunday been our first Sunday using Zoom, I would have been heartbroken. What is Palm Sunday, after all, without a procession (or palms, for that matter)?! How could we possibly move into the dark drama of Holy Week without the spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist? I can't say I'm not still grieving those losses. But Palm Sunday found me in a much more joyful mood about worshipping virtually than I would have ever anticipated was possible even just a few weeks prior to the day.

The Sunday before Palm Sunday was our third time using Zoom, we had decided that since we could not process around our church on Palm Sunday, we would each be responsible for decking out our individual Zoom squares in honor of Jesus's entry into our homes. My plan was to use a virtual background, not least because I had a lot of other tasks coming up in the following week. That is how it happened that I found myself in a panic less than an hour before the service, not having realized until just that moment that none of our family laptops supported virtual

backgrounds. "I got this," said my husband. As I put the finishing touches on my sermon, he and our daughter gleefully ransacked our linen closet.

Palm Sunday found me seated in front of a red(ish) tablecloth decked out with checkered red napkins. I was wearing my white cassock and surplice, but over jeans and in bare feet and with a red winter scarf around my neck in lieu of a traditional red stole. My daughter and Husband had fashioned a bandana backdrop for themselves and we were all holding "palms" from different shrubs around our homes. As parishioners logged on one by one, we began to laugh at each other's improvisations. One was wearing a fun red hat. Another (a visitor joining us from the Midwest) was wielding a golf club for a palm. One young family included stuffed animals in their procession. Almost every square included a pet or two. As our pianist struck up "All Glory Laud and Honor" on her electric keyboard, we muted our mics, waved our palms, and sang along from home.

As much as I hope Palm Sunday 2021 looks more like Palm Sunday 2019 for St. Philip's, 2020 Palm Sunday exemplifies all the ways we have been changed forever — and largely for the better — by the experience of doing church digitally during this time of pandemic. That we have been able to change at all is the first (and happiest) surprise. At the beginning of the year, I would have told you that our congregation was too old, too small, and too rural to benefit much from digital tools. I am a college professor Monday through Friday and have long used Zoom professionally. However, pre-COVID-19 pandemic, it would never have occurred to me to ask my parishioners to download and then master such "sophisticated" conferencing software. Imagine my surprise, when every single person in our congregation (many

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of them over the age of 70) did just that in the space of a single weekend.

The fact that the story of St. Philip's is far from unique is the single best news I've heard about organized religion in 20 years. If traditional communities like ours can adapt to sudden change, then the church is healthier and more resilient than we might have believed. Now that we know this, perhaps we can stop wringing our hands about the declining numbers of people in our pews and simply get on with the business of becoming salt and light in the 21st century.

Our church has begun to have conversations about what things might look like for us when things "go back to normal." Zoom has increased our Sunday morning attendance by over 50% and also helped us succeed for the first time at offering midweek prayer, socials, and Bible study. Like many small churches, we have struggled to offer these supplements to Sunday worship in our traditional space. It turns out that Zoom is a great equalizer. It allows older parishioners to avoid driving at night and requires a lower time commitment from younger ones. Perhaps most importantly, it makes church accessible to our parishioners with chronic illness and disabilities. Now that we all have it, we'll keep using Zoom for midweek meetings and socials and also to include people in Sunday worship who cannot join us physically.

Zoom Church has also changed who counts as "us." On the one hand, we have never been more rooted in our particular locality. On the other, we've been joined in worship by people from all over Texas and five other states. Many of them are becoming part of our community. We are beginning to have conversations about how we might continue those relationships once churches are gathering physically again. It is hard to predict what that will

look like, but I feel certain it will not look like our local church as usual.

As my opening anecdote about Palm Sunday exemplifies, playfulness is another important lesson we've learned from doing church digitally. Because our sanctuary does not have adequate bandwidth, live streaming worship was never an option for us. While I look forward to returning to our beautiful physical space, I think this season of doing without all the accoutrements of traditional Episcopal worship has taught our congregation something important about our essential identity. St. Philip's is more than a historic sanctuary and great music. It is more than physical bread and a shared chalice. What we need most and do best is community. For us, what that means is common prayers, the Word preached, and the gift of being together, even (maybe especially) when we are far from camera perfect. Zoom church has reminded us that worship at its best is holy play. It has made us more adaptable, creative, and charitable. This is the charism the church will need for whatever is next.

When I step back and consider, as a scholar of religion and a professor of English, what I have observed about religion and also been able to be a part of, it makes me think that we are witnessing a shift in what counts as common worship in Christian culture every bit as dramatic and consequential as the shifts that shaped what most Christians in the West today think of as traditional worship. The Reformation gave us hymnbooks and long sermons in the vernacular. COVID-19 is taking those things away for now, along with the common cup. What it will replace them with is hard for me to say for sure; but my week-to-week perspective is that the church goes on and that our desire for community is what is at its heart.

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Mediated Mindfulness, Inter-Religious Bonds, and Collective Healing: A Quarantine Diary

Srividya Ramasubramanian

Here, Srivi Ramasubramanian reflects on her spiritual journey through the lens of mediated mindfulness, interfaith solidarity, and community-based healing, as she teaches online guided meditation sessions during a pandemic.

In this brief essay, I reflect on my spiritual journey through my quarantine diary during the COVID-19 pandemic. I move through various phases of denial, worry, fear, peace, solidarity, betrayal, withdrawal, and finally, hope for new beginnings through oneness. Yoga, meditation, music, and art help me heal from the collective losses, trauma, and grief around me. Creating sanctuary safe spaces for peace and interconnectedness across people of multiple faiths, backgrounds, and perspectives is central to going beyond individual transformation for collective healing as a community, nation, and world. To do this, we need to build bonds of trust, mutual respect, solidarity, collaboration, and cooperation. We need to understand that all faith traditions speak the same truth of bliss and joy that comes from oneness.

Ignorance and Denial: Wildflowers, Shanti Choir, and Silent Retreat

Texas wildflowers are in bloom in early March in Texas where I am quarantined. The interfaith community choir that I cofounded, Brazos Valley Shanti Choir, meets from 4-5 PM. I have

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a hand sanitizer available next to the sign-in desk. Later, I shudder when I learn that more than 70 members of a choir in Seattle tested positive for coronavirus. My silent retreat is canceled. I decide to design my own. I unplug, disconnect, and relax. I read Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Pema Chodron. I slow down, take naps, and go into deep rest.

Worry and Fear: Cancelations Galore, Uncertainty, and Worries

The first COVID-19 case in my county starts around mid-March. All kinds of cancelations and postponements are happening. My child's school will remain closed. My university closes in-person classes as we prepare for online teaching. My trip to San Diego for a conference and keynote is canceled. I worry a lot about the mental health of our students, about stressors within families, and domestic violence. I share about my favorite meditation app: Insight Timer – and why I like it. I send reminders several times to my social media friends to take deep breaths and practice daily meditations.

Peace and Solidarity: Interfaith Solidarity, Mediated Meditations, and Safe Spaces

At the end of March, I decide to launch a mediated meditation series during the pandemic. Many people show up from around the world – Malaysia, Ecuador, California, Texas, and elsewhere – for the meditation sessions. From all kinds of faith backgrounds, races, and genders. This is refreshing simply because there are so few online spaces for interfaith solidarity. Everyone is looking for some peace and ways to cope and grieve. I realize that it is important to create inclusive shared spaces for healing at the individual and collective levels. I decide it is important to have some shared agreements, clarify my intentions and methods, and create a mission statement. I say that “Mediated Meditations

with Srivi is meant to be a safe, affirming, inclusive, and supportive space for creating community through meditating together. We welcome people of all faiths, nationalities, races, occupations, genders, sexual orientations, faiths, age groups, political orientations, and abilities.”

The first week I offer meditations on panchakosha (five layers of existence), loving kindness meditation, shavasana, chakra/energy centers, and empty bowl. The second week's meditations focus on mantra (on oneness), full moon (on letting go), finding our joy, yoga nidra (deep relaxation/sleep), and the third eye (on clarity and focus). The third week I offer meditations on panchakosha, new beginnings, chakras/energy center, be the light, and mindfulness.

Betrayal and Withdrawal: Toxic Online Spaces and Emotional Labor of Diversity Work

By mid-April, the online space and community that I have created on social media does not feel like the same space anymore. There are tensions everywhere. I feel misunderstood, misrepresented, and hurt. I decide to get away from social media and coil myself into a shell. I am overwhelmed and feel unsupported. Those of us doing emotional care work are all drained. I wish friends would acknowledge, appreciate, and support our work. At least I wish they would not question, challenge, or hurt us or our work. I decide to conclude the daily meditation sessions.

Renewal and Hope: True Friendships, New Beginnings, and Art as Healing

It is early May now. Texas lifts its shelter-in-place even as the number of deaths continues to increase in the state. We are the first state to reopen. I reflect on the meaning of true friendship during crises. The good, bad, and the ugly – we see it all during a

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crisis. My reflections from this week center on intergroup solidarity. Crises teach us who our real friends are. True friendship means mutual respect, amplifying one another's voices, and standing up for one another. True friendship is about consistent solidarity rather than random acts of occasional charity.

Knowing the healing power of art, I decide to run an art-based fundraiser with my teenager's art prints. I also immerse myself into learning how to edit videos for YouTube. The creative process of working on this project brings me joy even though the learning is challenging. I create my first YouTube channel and guided meditation called "New Beginnings." I realize the key role that the meditation sessions had played in keeping me anchored and healthy.

I decide that it is time to offer guided meditations once again. But I don't think I have the energy to offer them every day like I did in April. It has to be once a week. We start "Mediated Meditations on Mondays in May" on May the 4th. May the force be with all of us during this challenging time of our lives.

Bliss and Wisdom: Yoga, Union of Mind-Body-Spirit, and Oneness

We are one. We are complete. We are that which we seek – that peace that love, that joy. *Sat-Chit-Ananda*: Truth-Wisdom-Bliss. *Om Shanti*.

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Evangelization in Isolation: Problems of Disembodied

Due to quarantine regulations of the COVID-19 pandemic that require religious organizations to deliver sermons online, evangelical churches are unable to adequately recruit new members due to the technological limitations of digital media.

Part 3-

***Narrating Research: Examining
Religion Post-Pandemic Implications***

Community Building

Adam Bajan

How do churches recruit new members when they can't meet face to face? This is the question facing countless churches across America during this time of self-imposed isolation. For evangelicals with a growth-oriented mindset, the situation is particularly acute and presents a number of challenges that must be overcome if they are to continue in their task of propagating the Good News. This is because the social-isolation factor of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly hinders the ability of evangelicals to recruit new community members and in so doing, furthers the decline of organized religion in America.

Evangelicals are outreach oriented and their mission work is characterized by the use of commercial entertainment media in liturgy, specifically in the orchestration of these media to produce an embodied, highly tactile worship experience that invites participation rather than dictating it. This typically involves the use of multicolored mood lighting, digital video

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projection, and worship music played by multipiece bands and supported by surround sound. The advantage of this liturgical template is found in its tactility and immediate familiarity to newcomers who might otherwise be put off or feel threatened by a more traditional style of religious worship. The disadvantage, however, is that it requires embodied participation in order for its full effects to be felt. Evangelical leaders and their staff are cognizant of this requirement, and this is why they work to ensure that the proselytization of new visitors occurs in person.

However, evangelicals also recognize that embodied participation in worship is not always possible, and this is why churches record and catalogue their sermons on easily navigable websites that are paired with various social media platforms. Working on the principle of “getting the word out,” evangelical social media function by providing regular information updates and announcements for community members and by helping attract potential new members with publicly available sermons. This combination of online sermons and regularly updated social media is crucial for evangelical community growth because more likes and shares translate into higher page rankings in search engines. Maintaining a high page ranking is an important aspect of the evangelical operational template because it increases public visibility. In fact, most new church visitors discover evangelical communities from a simple Google search or by the recommendation of friends or family. But regardless of the presence of evangelicals online, the structure of their churches is nevertheless oriented toward embodied communal participation rather than isolated distance education. In addition, the technical limitations of these online repositories of community-related information make them a poor substitute for the embodied experience of in-person participation in worship services, and evangelical pastors tend to view them as such.

In terms of the technical limitations of online materials, many evangelical churches provide podcasts of sermons through their website and social media. Usually edited in house, evangelical podcasts are oriented toward pre-existing community members who may have missed a regular service and simply want to catch up on their pastor’s weekly message or those who want to hear it again. However, evangelical podcasts are typically audio only and do not include the worship component of services in which church bands play a series of upbeat songs with Christ-centered lyrics. This means that for potential new church visitors stumbling upon an evangelical podcast for the first time, they miss out on two significant aspects of a weekly service: the visual presence of a religious community and the worship component of a service in which community members become unified through the effervescence of collective worship.

For larger evangelical churches with higher operating budgets, sermons are video recorded and made available on church websites through streaming video platforms such as Vimeo. Unlike podcasts, these sermons have the advantage of a visual component to church pastors’ weekly addresses and are more appealing to potential new visitors than audio alone. But as with podcasts, video sermons do not include worship music. This too causes potential new visitors to miss out on a significant component of the evangelical operational template and diminishes the ability of evangelical pastors to recruit and retain new community members. For potential new visitors, unfortunately, the unsupported recitation of scripture is often not enough to guarantee repeat interest. One way this can be more easily understood is by comparing the experience of in-person, embodied worship to the consumption of online, faith-based materials such as podcasts and video sermons.

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Similar to the opening act in a concert tour paving the way for the headliner, the embodied worship component of an evangelical Sunday service sows the seeds of audience interest due to its entertainment value, which is increased by the uplifting spiritual message of a pastor disseminating Christ's teachings. This is because it is the orchestration of the various media forms used in the evangelical template that provides the initial impetus for visitors to stay for the weekly message, and it too is supported by media as pastors make use of multicolored lighting and elaborate digital visuals when reciting scripture. As with the worship component, the experience of watching these performances from a screen is considerably removed from the experience of embodied participation and does not translate well to an online-only format. Lacking the tactility of physical presence, online podcasts and video sermons are at best a rudimentary substitute for the real thing, leaving evangelicals to make the best of an unfavorable situation.

In trying to make the best of this situation, evangelicals are forced to rely on disembodied, in-house, amateur-produced online materials to meet their community needs rather than the much more effective effervescent physicality of embodied worship. Prone to distraction by more stimulating experiences than listening to a podcast or watching a video sermon without worship music, curious web surfers are likely to shift their attention away from a less-than-ideal religious experience. For evangelical churches and leaders doing God's work by spreading the Gospel to the public, the recruitment of new members will have to wait for a time when physical gatherings are the new normal. In the meantime, churches will have to make do with retaining what members they do have, working to maintain their interest with a limited tool kit while at the same time competing against the sins of digital multitasking in quarantine.

At odds with religious tradition and the ubiquitous and informal communal gatherings that characterize contemporary evangelical Christians, the longer these organizations are forced to deliver their content online without the full support of embodied worship, the longer they risk losing their material advantage in the saving of lost souls. Given that this trend toward online-only worship affects all evangelical churches under lockdown, it is likely to result in a full step backward from the advances they have previously made in reaching out to the disaffected individual who needs embodied community more than ever. The irony is that the very tools evangelicals have used to proselytize these individuals so effectively are now the tools of their discontent.

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How Embodied is “the Body of Christ?” COVID-19 and Christian Corporeality

Daniel R. Bare

Restrictions on corporate gathering during the COVID-19 crisis highlight several ways that traditional Christianity conceptualizes “the body of Christ” as an objective reality, suggesting that some churches’ de-emphasis on the corporeal nature of Christianity might augur diverging trends about the utilization of “online worship” in the future.

Easter quickly approached in April 2020 amidst a global pandemic, and American churches scrambled to adjust to the myriad quarantine and stay-at-home orders proliferating throughout the nation. For ecclesiastical leaders across the theological spectrum in College Station, Texas, this year’s Palm Sunday celebration – the prelude to the following weekend’s commemoration of Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection – carried with it the additional question of how such a corporate observance could possibly be effected at a distance. Father Greg Gerhart of St. Mary’s Catholic Church noted that the church’s newly livestreamed masses attracted upwards of a thousand viewers, yet this still amounted to merely “playing the cards we have been dealt” – a poor substitute for a gathered congregation and physical participation. West Oaks Baptist Church, a congregation in the Reformed Protestant tradition, went even a step further. Not only did they set up a livestream, but they also invited congregants to attend a “drive-in” service, gathering in the church’s parking lot to sing, pray, and hear the sermon from

the safety of their parked cars. “There is an aspect of our faith that involves the gathering together of God’s people,” explained Pastor Joshua Lloyd, “so we are trying to figure out how we can do that but maintain the safety that is necessary” (Hogan, 2020).

The newfound challenges facing churches due to COVID-19, especially restrictions on corporate gatherings, serve to illustrate an important element of historic Christian traditions across the globe – albeit an element that has become de-emphasized in many streams of American Christianity. The traditional worldview of the Christian religion is, in many respects, intimately tied to the idea of corporeality. That is to say, Christian theology and practice entail more than the emotional ecstasies that accompany transcendent sacred music or the intellectual rigors of deep personal study; historic Christianity also includes, in several key and unique ways, an emphasis on *embodiment*, on spiritually imperative tangible realities, that the COVID-19 crisis both illuminates and (potentially) undermines. As the pandemic compels temporary changes to typical modes of assembly, more than ever before, churches and pastors are grappling with the sustainability of “online worship.” Is it ultimately a technological boon or a theological threat? Christian congregations’ eventual responses may well diverge according to the degree to which they embrace the corporeal aspects of the faith.

The theme of “embodiment” in Christianity is especially present in the multifaceted concept of “the body of Christ,” and the sudden threat of the novel coronavirus highlights this idea in at least three substantial respects. First, the doctrine of Christ’s incarnation (that God the Son took upon himself a fully human nature and *became* a man, to live forevermore as the fully divine and fully human God-Man) affirms God’s corporeal presence among his people. God the Son became a man in order to save

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sinful humans – a mission that required his death and resurrection. In this sense, the “body of Christ” elicits among Christians both a sense of God’s compassionate provision amid suffering and the ineluctable reality that human life itself *is* an embodied experience that includes the inescapable promise of death. If nothing else, the rapid emergence of a new disease has forced many Americans to face an uncomfortable reality – a reality from which the modern world largely insulates us. Death comes for us all, someday. In this respect, the COVID-19 crisis has granted multitudinous opportunities for Christian leaders to urge their hearers to reflect on the fragility of life, the inevitability of death, the promise of a final divine judgment, and the necessity of finding ultimate salvation in the life, death, and bodily resurrection of the incarnate God. Even amid the social and logistical challenges of the moment, for many Christians these troubles have kindled an evangelistic zeal tied intimately to the corporeal nature of human experience.

Secondly, the Christian ritual of the Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, has historically carried great corporeal significance. Particularly for those whose faith is steeped in centuries-long theological traditions, Jesus’s instruction to “eat my flesh and drink my blood” (John 6:54) indicates that the bread and the wine of the sacrament entail Christ’s presence in a *real* sense, with *real* effects. Therefore, taking the Supper is a crucial and nonnegotiable element of historic Christian practice. Granted, there are major – perhaps even irreconcilable – differences in how various groups understand this doctrine. The Roman Catholic Church holds that the bread and the wine transubstantiate, that their substance is transformed into the literal, physical body and blood of Christ. Many Protestants see Rome’s view as unbiblical or even blasphemous, but longstanding traditions like Reformed Protestantism still affirm “that worthy

receivers [of the Supper] spiritually receive and feed upon Christ crucified and all the benefits of his death by faith, and that Christ is spiritually present at the supper” (Barcellos, 2013). Far apart as these traditions might be – and indeed, we would do well to remember that Protestants and Catholics mutually anathematized one another beginning in the sixteenth century – both recognize that there is some real sense in which the Lord’s Supper relates to Christ’s body and objectively communicates grace to participating believers.

Thirdly, and closely related, the corporeal nature of Christianity also manifests in the idea that all Christians together constitute, in a spiritual but still very tangible sense, the “body of Christ.” Such references are replete throughout the New Testament epistles, almost always tied to issues of corporate interaction and gathered worship. Believers are “all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13); spiritual gifts are distributed to members of the church “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12); Christians are to love, forgive, teach, and admonish one another in the message of Christ “since as members of one body you were called to peace” (Colossians 3:15); and so on. For this reason, the worship of the church as “the body of Christ” *requires* a physical corporate gathering; individual spiritual activities are no replacement because “the body does not consist of one member but of many” (1 Corinthians 12:14). Hence Pastor Lloyd’s explanation that “our faith . . . involves the gathering together of God’s people.”

These last two points in particular – the “body of Christ” in the Supper and in the assembly – groan uncomfortably under the weight of COVID-19 restrictions. As large gatherings are suspended or curtailed, essential corporeal elements of Christian practice remain, at least temporarily, unfulfilled. Believing that

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the elements of Christ's body in the Lord's Supper provide objective and necessary spiritual sustenance, these believers are unable to partake; convinced that their standing as individual members of the corporate "body of Christ" dictates assembling together for worship, these Christians must now subsist largely in quarantined isolation, separated from the rest of "the body." A sense of corporeal privation drives the intense desire to recongregate, just as a privation of nutrition drives one's physical body to seek out food to eat.

The COVID-19 restrictions have pressed most churches to consider using livestream technology to broadcast worship services online, but this temporary necessity has also provoked sharp conflicts. Some Christian leaders, especially those who heavily emphasize and prize the corporeal elements outlined above, see online viewing as an innately inferior stopgap that fails to meet the biblical criteria of true corporate worship – a momentary necessity, perhaps, but *not* a replacement for physical gatherings of "the body." Yet a multitude of others have embraced "online church" (or, at the risk of being prosaic, "e-church") as an unfettered good. Many observers have lauded the practical advantages of "going to church" in the pajama-clad comfort of their living room, and numerous pastors have noted with excitement the uptick in online attendance compared to physical gatherings. American Christianity often generates a religious milieu that prominently, sometimes almost exclusively, emphasizes the *personal* aspects of the faith and views the Lord's Supper as purely memorial in nature; perhaps it is no surprise that such an environment might also comfortably embrace e-church as the wave of the future, untethered from the corporeal burdens of past tradition. As COVID-19 forces more people than ever before to assess the online-worship model, I speculate that we will see a practical divergence emerging along theological

lines. Those churches and leaders that deeply emphasize the embodied elements of the Christian tradition – the incarnation, the objective spiritual sustenance of the "body and blood" in the Eucharist, the special nature of the assembled congregation as the "body of Christ" – will quickly retreat from e-church. But many others, particularly those who are not so strident to embrace Christian corporeality in doctrine, will emerge from quarantine prepared to adopt online worship as the practical outreach methodology of the future. As the divergence persists, participants and observers alike will need to grapple with the question: How embodied is "the body of Christ?"

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Faith Under Quarantine: Lessons from Camus

Daniel Conway

*The COVID-19 pandemic afforded my students a unique opportunity to study the effects of quarantine — with respect, in particular, to *The Plague* — while adjusting to real-time conditions of quarantine in their own lives.*

Pandemic in the Past

Long before I was made aware of the COVID-19 virus, I decided to ask my undergraduate students to read *The Plague* [*La peste*] by Albert Camus (1947). I also scheduled this reading assignment for the end of the Spring 2020 semester, which, as it turns out, meant that the students would be reading and thinking about the quarantine of Oran while enduring their very own quarantine in Texas.

The central figure of acknowledged religious authority in *The Plague* is Father Paneloux, a Jesuit priest who ministers to the Catholic faithful of Oran. When the plague strikes, the “ecclesiastical authorities” in Oran commence a “Week of Prayer,” which culminates in a High Mass on the feast day of St. Roch. Intending to account for the provenance and possible remission of the plague, Father Paneloux takes to his pulpit to deliver the sermon. In doing so, he neither minces his words, nor spares the feelings of his parishioners:

“If today the plague is in your midst, that is because the hour has struck for taking thought. The just man need have no fear, but the evildoer has good cause to tremble. For plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor, and implacably He will thresh out His harvest until the wheat is separated from the chaff. There will be more chaff than wheat, few chosen of the many called. Yet this calamity was not willed by God” (Camus, 1991, p. 95).

On the face of it, there is nothing particularly remarkable or unique about this sermon. Priests and other religious leaders regularly attribute natural disasters and outbreaks of disease to the upsurge in or persistence of sin (or similar lapses, whether real or perceived). When Hurricane Katrina swamped the city of New Orleans, for example, various celebrity preachers blamed the devastation on the city’s permissive tolerance of homosexuality.

In a similar vein, Father Paneloux accounts for the outbreak of plague as the consequence of God having “turned His face away from us,” which he interprets as a proportional response to their persistent habit of taking for granted His “divine mercy” (Camus, 1991, p. 96). According to Father Paneloux, in fact, the plague is an undeserved gift from God — and so, evidence of His love — albeit in the form of a stern admonition to return to the path of righteousness. As Paneloux explains, God has unleashed the plague as a means of claiming their full attention: “Now, at last, you know the hour has struck to bend your thoughts to first and last things” (p. 97).

To his credit, Father Paneloux pitches in and becomes a regular member of the sanitary brigades that have been formed in Oran to limit the spread of the contagion. Although he continues to believe that the citizens of Oran have brought the plague on

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themselves, he nevertheless affirms the mission of tending to the afflicted. He thus strikes a familiar balance between blaming the victims of the plague and assisting them and their loved ones in their hours of need.

This delicate balance is challenged by a grave turn of events. A young boy, Philippe Othon, son of the local magistrate, has been stricken by the plague. Can it be said that this child, innocent by all accounts, deserves the plague as a punishment for his sins? Even if one were inclined to classify the youngster as collateral damage in a larger exercise of divine retribution, one would be hard pressed to see (much less defend) the justice and mercy of the deity whose will includes the suffering of blameless children.

And the situation worsens. Young Othon has been injected with an experimental serum that is meant to relieve some of the worst symptoms associated with the plague. The hope attached to his recovery is thus suggestive of the larger hope for a more comprehensive victory over the plague. But the serum does not work as planned, and the boy's condition continues to deteriorate. He is clearly death-bound. The serum also has the unfortunate "side" effect of causing him to endure violent spasms and wracking convulsions. If anything, the serum exacerbates his suffering. What deity has ordained this ordeal?

Father Paneloux does not duck the ensuing challenge to his faith (and so, to his religious authority). Rather than question his God or subject his faith to critical reexamination, Paneloux doubles down on his earlier attempt at theodicy. In a second sermon, he dramatically raises the stakes of his exhortation to his parishioners: If the death of the innocent child is incident to God's will, he advises, then it must become incident to the will of God's faithful. Rather than question the justice and mercy of his God, that is, Father Paneloux questions the (relative) value he

and others have attached to the life of an innocent child. In effect, his second sermon transforms the boy into a convenient scapegoat whose painful, seemingly pointless death allows the faithful of Oran to align their will with the will of Paneloux's God.

Pandemic in the Present

In my undergraduate courses and modules in philosophy of religion, I typically spend quite a bit of time discussing the various theodicies of influence in the Western (or European) traditions of philosophy and theology. In conjunction with this pedagogical objective, I often ask the students to read *The Plague* and evaluate the wisdom of Father Paneloux's quarantine-prompted sermons. This year was different because we were contemplating the quarantine of Oran while complying in real time with quarantine measures imposed upon us under the plague-like conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the questions I raised with my students were not received as abstract, academic, or hypothetical, and they were not restricted to the confines of a relatively obscure colonial port city on the coast of Algeria.

Owing to their own experience of quarantine, my current students have been unusually attentive to the rhetorical power of Father Paneloux's sermons. As they now know, conditions of plague and quarantine intensify the desire for answers and amplify the need for meaning. Even those students who disagree with Father Paneloux, including those who deem him evil, cold, or heartless, have been able to appreciate (and respond to) the power of his appeal. What Father Paneloux understands is that in times of crisis and uncertainty, people need to be united. The world they face together must make sense, even if the sense made of it is unflattering or daunting to us. Under such conditions, Father Paneloux realizes, *any* explanation of the

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plague, including the victim-blaming explanation he serves up, is preferable to no explanation at all.

This time around, in other words, my students were able to appreciate that Father Paneloux's sermons, even if considered spiteful, served a purpose. They recognized in themselves a desire for meaning, for explanation, and for a second chance to hew to the path of righteousness. Indeed, what is the alternative? To concede that the plague comes and goes for no reason at all? That its periodic resurgence is a permanent feature of our world? That our best efforts will secure at best a temporary respite? That no deity hears — much less heeds — our petitionary prayers?

Reflections on Studying Pandemic

I will close this essay with three reflections:

First, drawing on their unique, first-personal experience of quarantine, my current students have exhibited a keen appreciation of the role of religious figures and religious authorities in stabilizing a society or polity rocked by uncertainty. They are aware that Father Paneloux's sermons were meant to succeed as secular (or political) interventions, independent of their merit as spiritual interventions.

Second, alert to the rhetorical effect *on them* of Father Paneloux's sermons, my current students have been unusually adventurous in considering the merit of Camus' opposition to hope. Typically, in a class like this one, Camus does not receive a sympathetic hearing. In the past, his opposition to hope and his relentless attention to the meaningfulness (or not) of the present moment have struck my students as extreme. My current students are similarly reluctant to give up their hopes for the

future, but they are significantly more sympathetic to the imperative, especially as it is dramatized in the work of the sanitary brigades, to create meaning for themselves in the here and now. Even if they are not yet willing to live a hopeless existence, they understand that some expressions of hope can be as devastating in their own right as the onset of plague.

Third, and finally, current students are noticeably more alert to the (admittedly counterintuitive) suggestion that an aspiration to "sainthood" is possible for those who do not believe in God. Jean Tarrou, the hero of the novel, characterizes this model of "sainthood" in starkly privative terms, i.e., as a lifelong quest to minimize the harm one does to others. By way of honoring my quarantine-bound students, I yield my final words to Tarrou, as he reveals to his friend, Dr. Rieux, the meaning of life:

The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it needs tremendous will-power, a never ending tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses. Yes, Rieux, it's a wearying business, being plague-stricken. But it's still more wearying to refuse to be it (Camus, 1991, p. 253).

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***From Physical to Virtual Pious Presence: Muslim Community
Consciousness Redefined in the Age of Coronavirus***

Side Emre

The meanings we attribute to being a “community” and “being pious” are rapidly changing for Muslims today due to the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic as communities adapt to social restrictions and isolation at times in stark contrast to centuries-old traditions.

With the relentless advent of the COVID-19 pandemic today, Muslims all around the globe are facing a unique and challenging dilemma. How to maintain a spiritual and moral bond without being in actual physical contact with the members of their faith community? How to feel a sense of communal belonging when they are obliged to abide by social-distancing restrictions? How to fulfill their promise to God and Prophet Muhammad when they cannot fulfill the ritual obligations, congregate for daily prayers, attend funerals or festivities, gather for breaking their fast, or visit a Sufi shrine/lodge? As these questions gain urgency, the meanings traditionally attributed to “community or people” (in Arabic, *umma*) are in flux. In this short essay, I propose that our accepted notions of being part of a faith community have abruptly changed in the post-COVID-19 world which, in my opinion, represents a watershed moment. As the uncertainties surrounding the issues of containing the sickness, controlling its debilitating and devastating impact on human life, and delays in

developing an effective vaccination protocol continue, the Muslim population of the world, projected to be 2.2 billion by 2030, will have to redefine what it means to be a religious community and how to practice their faith amidst a sickness that thrives on physical contact and proximity.

Possibly derived from Hebrew (*ummā* or *umetha*), the Arabic term *umma*, meaning “community or people,” has a long linguistic history reaching back to Akkadian (*ummatu*) in the Near Eastern and Mediterranean geographies. The concept of community has been a central aspect of life in the Near East for many centuries before the coming of Islam. When Prophet Muhammad first began preaching the revelations from God (Arabic: *Allāh*), the Creator and Lord of the Judgment, in the predominantly polytheistic Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century C.E., he urged his fellow townsfolk, the Meccans, to submit to the will of one and only God. His monotheistic message emphasized the importance of being part of a physical community of faithful believers and not straying from the “straight path.” The concept of the community represented one of the core aspects of Muhammad’s message as he transmitted God’s revelations on the very same topic to his followers. In time, Prophet Muhammad’s cult following became the nascent Islamic *umma*. In the Qur’an the term *umma*, meaning religious community, occurs sixty-two times. In the Prophetic Hadith, the term gains an overwhelming urgency. So much so, that the Muslim community was given its foremost legitimacy in a popular saying attributed to Muhammad: “Truly, my *umma* will never agree together on an error” (Arabic: *inna ummatī lā taḍjītami’u ‘alā ḍalālatin*) (from the *Sunan* of Ibn Māḍja, *Fitan*) (Denny, 2020). During the foundational period of Islam, the *umma* referenced communities who shared a common religion and faith, and in later periods, it came to define different Muslim communities with specific

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regional designations and nonpolitical/partisan affiliations. For pious Muslims today, whether they live in Europe, Africa, the Global South, North America, Asia, or the Middle East, being part of the *umma* is tantamount to Muslims' unique sense of identity. This particular identity transcends national and linguistic boundaries. It is a transcendent spirituality and a moral code that connects every believer to Prophet Muhammad and God in sanctuaries of worship. This identity relies not only on common ethical or spiritual principles but also on close physical bonding in worship locations (mosques, masjids, shrines) where the pious can congregate, peacefully practicing their faith, alone and yet in commune, with their fellow Muslims, replicating centuries-old traditions and fulfilling their promise to submit to the will of God. In fact, the physical aspect of communal worship is so central that every Friday, pious Muslims congregate for the Friday prayers in their neighborhood mosques across the globe. This is but one aspect of the Muslim faith which is being redefined in the post-COVID-19 world.

More importantly, as Muslims envision a future in which the core principles of being a member of the *umma* are being redefined, various governments with Muslim-majority populations are taking the lead to put into effect swift adjustments to religious practices with an urgent sense of preservation of life over religious obligations and preservation of centuries-old traditions. As such, the concept of how to be a faith community during a pandemic is being transformed on a daily basis, depending on the exigencies of the moment. Examples are too numerous to cite here.

In an effort to curb the disease's spread, the Saudi government suspended the Umrah Pilgrimage to Mecca on March 31. Following this decision, the Saudis also announced that annual

Hajj Pilgrimage travel plans would be put on hiatus for July 2020. With no equivalent precedent known in modern history, one of the most significant events and one of the five pillars of Islamic faith has thus been suspended because of the pandemic. In Turkey, Friday congregational prayers are now prohibited, as well as the five daily prayers in masjids/mosques. The call to prayers announced from mosque minarets have been changed from "come to pray" to "pray at home." The famous al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem has closed its doors to worshippers. In Senegal, popular Sufi festivities have been suspended. In many mosques across the globe, fervent disinfection procedures and indefinite mosque closures have been put in place. In Sri Lanka, a majority-Buddhist nation, members of the Muslim minority population who died from COVID-19 have been cremated as per governmental orders to prevent communal funeral prayers, disregarding Muslim burial rites. For conservative Muslim nations, such as Qatar, there is another angle: Governmental restrictions imposed by the pandemic require the favorable opinion (Arabic: *fatwa*) of religious scholars (Arabic: *ulama*) before they are legally put into action.

As with the expansive spectrum of countries with majority- or minority-Muslim populations, different measures and restrictions forced on citizens aim to the curb destruction of human life rather than adhering to religious tradition. While many countries are willing to err on the side of caution, there are others with limited economic infrastructure struggling to withstand the effects of the deepening crisis. In the Global South, some countries such as Burkina Faso, with an over 60% Muslim population, chose to implement next to no restrictions for communal gatherings of worshippers. There is a growing sentiment in economically insecure countries that building "herd immunity" remains the more realistic solution to prevent total

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societal and economic collapse. In other words, just as the Muslim world represents an expansive and eclectic spectrum of faith with Sunni and Shi'i creeds, and with followers of Sufi orders, the official responses to the pandemic also differ from one majority-Muslim country to the next, depending on an array of complex societal, political, and economic urgencies.

This is just one side of the coin. How do Muslim communities respond to the crisis as it is unfolding in the U.S.? One telling example is found in the Aspen Institute's Resources for Maintaining Community During the COVID-19 pandemic (Aspen Institute, 2020) and its outreach. The institute's *Inclusive America Project* details in a blog how Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim communities are adjusting to the rapid changes happening today. The shift from contact-based community worship and religious practice to virtual ones has been abrupt. Their focus on digital platforms that give information on online events and digital faith-based communities, teaching tools, and other mediums reflects innovative efforts to increase mindful and compassionate connectivity between practitioners of different faiths. In that framework, the blog provides various useful links and informs us that platforms such as the Islamic Network Groups and livestreamed prayer services by different Muslim community centers in the U.S. are among the digital venues that Muslim practitioners can utilize to transform their understanding of faith-based community during the pandemic. Other influential networks such as the Islamic Medical Association of North America, the American Muslim Health Professionals, Islamic Society of North America, and *Fiqh Council of North America* advise Muslim communities to suspend daily prayers as a precaution. The ADAMS Center in Virginia, one of the most well-known mosques in the U.S., not only canceled daily prayer services but also halted center-based educational

programs. This organization now offers sermons on Facebook, as well as a Facebook Live venue connecting health professionals with community groups.

With many governments across the globe trying to adjust to the current pandemic climate by giving priority to science over faith and religious traditions, not-for-profit organizations and myriad digital platforms are helping us move away from the generic and rigid descriptions of being part of a physical religious community. It seems like we are all on the same path to rewrite and reconceptualize what it means to be a community at this time. The COVID-19 crisis engulfed and isolated lives. Perhaps the best way to get through this is to embrace the pandemic's impact to create genuine stories to share. Many such stories can now be found online during the current month of Ramadan as Muslims are adapting to a new normal in their daily lives defined by the pandemic.

In unexpected ways, the old Arabic term *umma* has come to hold a new and inclusive meaning for us all, as vulnerable citizens of a stricken world. As practitioners of world religions, whether monotheistic, polytheistic, and/or agnostic, we all face similar fears, sense of loss, and yearning for hope. We also strive for a common goal: to create a safe haven for our loved ones and share empathy for others whose stories we read, watch, and listen to, ever more so intently than before. Perhaps what we accepted as a physical faith community changed, but the idea of the community will continue to thrive as Muslims will continue to innovate and adjust their faith to the demands of this new world.

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Digital Media as Sacred Space

Courtney Price

Thriving online religious communities present opportunities to reconsider the definition of a sacred space in the wake of COVID-19.

In many church calendars, spring is a season of both hope and loss. Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost offer opportunities for many Christians to meditate on the joys and griefs in the life of Christ, mirrored in their own lives. How strange that in such a season, so many Christians are not able to be in the sacred spaces they normally occupy at this time of the year. For many, the current pandemic is a source of confusion and increased isolation during a season that normally brings people together.

There is another holy day approaching soon for a particular online community. May 4th is the anniversary of the death of Rachel Held Evans, an influential writer and speaker who passed away in 2019 at the young age of 37. Rachel was known for her wisdom, public vulnerability, and her power to create church with everyone she met. Thousands have used the hashtags #RememberingRHE and #BecauseofRHE on Twitter to share their stories of how Rachel's life impacted their own, many of them from minority communities that have traditionally felt ostracized by evangelical Christianity. In the words of Jonathan Martin (2019), a pastor and writer, "I'm not sure if you ever find 'meaning' in the death of a friend . . . But I will say this: #becauseofRHE, I'm still watching people who did not have a

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people, become a people. And that's a hell of a thing." Rachel's family graciously allowed her funeral service to be livestreamed as a further testament to her large online community, a digital church for what the *New York Times* (2019) called "the wandering evangelical."

As I hear conversations about the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities, I find myself thinking of Rachel Held Evans often. I was fortunate to be in attendance at the first Evolving Faith Conference in the fall of 2018, the only one at which Rachel was present before her death. The conference was a dream of Rachel's and several of her close friends', a way for the large, digital community to finally be in the same physical space together. It was a powerful experience — so many strangers brought together from all over the globe by shared pains and hopes. When I hear these conversations about distanced religion, about whether such communities can be as effective as those that are formed face to face, I think back to that conference and to the community that both preceded it and continues on after it. Digital church isn't something that started because of a global pandemic — it was already here, creating a space for lived religion and making it accessible to those in need of community. Whether we're talking about satellite churches connected on Sunday morning by simulcast, digital churches meeting in Second Life, or Twitter communities of evangelicals, digital church makes connectivity possible in ways that expand our definitions of what a religious space can be and force us to confront what aspects of religion are truly sacred.

This pandemic isn't the first time that church communities have been separated by distance, or the first time that they have survived by relying on communication technologies. Christianity was founded by networks of churches connected through a

robust system of letters and manuscript circulation. The New Testament letters — much like the social media posts I see every day — are scattered with sentiments of longing for community, the desire to see dear friends face to face. In Romans, Paul writes, "For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you — or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine" (Romans 1:11-12, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*). Many of the New Testament writers, in fact, spend a great deal of time explaining delays in these cherished connections, promising to send additional messages and messengers as soon as possible. Yet the fact remains that neither distance nor mediated religion are unknown to Christians. Both factors are built into the foundation of the faith.

If there's one thing that I would have religious communities learn from COVID-19, it's that digital forms of religion are more accessible to people who, for whatever reason, cannot, or will not, step inside a physical church. Eliminating the physical space of the church may be a sacrifice, but to others it is an invitation that cannot be accepted otherwise. I've already heard stories about friends hosting church meetings on Zoom, surprised by the number of people from the neighborhood joining the service. Strangers who have never been inside the church that is just down the road may, for the first time, feel comfortable visiting when the walls are removed.

On a deeper level, the current situation allows us to reconsider the meaning of a "sacred space" and how spaces that feel uplifting to one person can be threatening to another. This isn't to say that we should do away with brick and mortar, but rather that we have a unique opportunity to examine our assumptions about where people want to be when they interact with the holy.

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It also allows us to see that for some people, the essence of the holy is community, in whatever form it takes. In her book, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*, Rachel Held Evans (2015) writes, “This is what God’s kingdom is like: a bunch of outcasts and oddballs gathered at a table, not because they are rich or worthy or good, but because they are hungry, because they said yes. And there’s always room for more” (p. 148). In digital religion, that table takes many forms, both serving and shaping the community gathered around it.

The second thing that this pandemic lets us reconsider is the supposed opposition between embodied and mediated religion. For example, there is an assumption that holding church over video chat is not preferable to meeting together in a shared physical space. Long before this pandemic, there was already a similar discussion about simulcast churches, where one pastor’s message is spread to a dozen or more “satellite” locations. The question was asked, don’t these churches need to be led by leaders in the flesh? Can a single pastor do their job properly at more than one physical location? Even when I was a child, I remember attending a large metropolitan church that broadcast the Sunday morning service on television. If I was ill and unable to attend service, my mother would be sure to have it playing on the TV, but it wasn’t considered as “real” as being there in person. It was a tool for emergency situations and for those without physical access to a church, much like how many people see the tools of digital religion today. We certainly still appear to be taking face-to-face religion for granted.

There’s no question that many aspects of religion are designed for face-to-face interaction. How exactly does one have Communion over Zoom? But mediated religion need not be the enemy of embodied faith. Reading, one of the most integral

activities of Christianity, is a prime example of how divinity can be accessed through media, while remaining fully embodied. When we read, we invite transformation through direct contact with the benevolent Other. Cassandra Falke (2017), drawing upon the Catholic philosophy of Jean-Luc Marion, writes that “Because we cannot anticipate the way we will be changed by an event of reading, we commit ourselves first to the act of surrender itself and, through that surrender of our own intentionality, find ourselves remade” (p. 3). In sacred reading, that transformation occurs through communion with God, with the benevolent Other, and the saints, depending on individual interpretation. The book mediates this process by creating a space for sacred transformation that alters the reader. In times of religious upheaval and social turmoil, as well as times of peace, Christians have often found books to be powerful intermediaries for divine communion.

In these bewildering times, we would do well to rethink any dismissiveness toward using digital tools in religion. They have proven to be incredibly powerful and useful to people who need them. They allow for the creation of religious communities that could not otherwise exist, communities that intrinsically share some of the liminality of the media by which they are shaped. They allow access for people who do not have local churches to attend that will accept them for whoever they are, wherever they are. They challenge us to rethink what makes our communities sacred, whether it is the tools or the work that we really value. And ultimately, if we understand that books and scrolls are united with Twitter threads by the act of reading, we are able to recognize the mediation that is built into the foundation of Christianity. What is old is new again, and what is new is old.

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Grassroots Evangelism: Returning to the Principles of Christianity

Zachary Sheldon

“Faith healing” and other deceptive practices by certain ostensible religious figureheads have brought about a reorientation in some evangelicals towards the basic tenets and foundational principles of the Christian faith, which could alter structures and patterns of power in evangelical Christianity.

Evangelical Christianity has long employed a rhetorical strategy of “disidentification” to define itself and its values. Disidentification is the principle of defining oneself in opposition or contrast to something or someone else, emphasizing what you are *not* perhaps even more adamantly than stating what you *are* (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Online, in church, and in public forums, many evangelical leaders use politicians and “prosperity gospel” leaders as foils to condemn and contrast their own beliefs as a way of shoring up their theological identity amidst their followers (Piper, 2008). In recent years, evangelical authorities have faced emergent challenges to their authority from the possibilities inherent in digital media, as individuals with skills like cultural competence in technology have emerged as the authoritative voices of the digital era (Campbell, 2016). However, in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, I believe that I witnessed another emerging challenge to traditional evangelical authority: individuals lovingly articulating the core beliefs of the Gospel. I have witnessed this primarily amongst my network of evangelical friends and family on Facebook. Absurd claims about religious

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influence over the coronavirus seem to have motivated individuals not to disidentify with or condemn those making such claims, but rather to clarify what Christianity really is. In so doing, I argue they are reorienting and refining their own convictions and commitment to those core beliefs. I argue that these faithful individuals are casually challenging the status quo of evangelical authority through shifting their social media conversations from a critical disidentification to a constructive discourse about the core spiritual message of the faith. And this is happening primarily in response to one event: the spurious “healing” of the coronavirus by televangelist Kenneth Copeland.

Though not an evangelical himself, Copeland’s theology makes him an easy target for evangelical disidentification. The Word of Faith preacher has drawn ire for his lavish lifestyle and “prosperity” theology (Bote, 2019), and so has become easy for evangelicals to condemn but not engage with. He can be held up like Joe Exotic the Tiger King (seemingly the patron celebrity of the pandemic, at least in the U.S.) as an example to be ridiculed whenever news outlets need a bizarre “Christian” or preachers need a straw man. And Copeland’s most recent antics have only played into this public image. On March 11, 2020, the televangelist claimed to heal his viewers of the coronavirus. On April 3, he commanded the Lord to destroy the virus: “Wind, almighty strong south wind, heat, burn this thing in the name of Jesus. Satan you bow your knees, you fall on your face, COVID-19 I blow the wind of God on you. You are destroyed forever, and you will never be back” (Kenneth Copeland Ministries, 2020). Importantly, Copeland did not specifically ask for or offer a timeline for the virus’s destruction, noting that “The wind of God, it doesn’t have to be a fast wind,” which may explain the continued rise in cases and deaths.

Such claims were, of course, absurd, and so quickly critiqued in mainstream media (Perez, 2020) and even some Christian news outlets (Blair, 2020). But responses from evangelical leaders were intriguingly nonexistent. Though they are certainly not required to comment on actions by individuals like Copeland, the absurdity of his claims and their widespread mainstream coverage would have seemed like an opportunity for comment and elaboration. Indeed, in the few days following Copeland’s broadcast, videos of his “healings” were continually reposted to the online network Reddit, primarily as an object of ridicule in the network’s atheism-oriented forums. But where people did respond, in my experience, was on Facebook, and their responses were not at all what I expected.

Coming from an evangelical background, I am still friends on Facebook with many whom I grew up with in the church. Over time, that friend base has anecdotally proven, to me at least, findings that Facebook in particular serves as a giant echo chamber for political thought on *both* sides of the aisle (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). Political and critical posts abound, usually with the kind of disidentifying rhetoric explored above: other parties, denominations, and organizations are critiqued. Little in the way of constructive criticism is offered, implying that these kinds of posts function to bolster those already in agreement with their stances rather than try to engage or witness to others outside of that fold. Importantly, this is not true of *all* evangelicals, even my Facebook friends. But the public association of evangelicals with these tactics, especially when it comes to politics, opens the faith to being criticized as having elevated politics and power over Jesus’s message of care for both the wellbeing and salvation of one’s fellow man.

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What I have seen online indicates to me that the coronavirus pandemic serves as an important and ongoing moment of refining evangelical Christianity from the ground up. For me, it began on Facebook with people sharing stories about Copeland's "cure" for the virus, where instead of disidentifying with the preacher through ridicule or dismissal, I saw individuals seeking to clarify the message of the Gospel and its values. Instead of celebrating the clarity of their religious views in opposition to the politics of others, I observed compassionate messages seeking to dissuade people from following after someone perceived to have only his best interests at heart. Multiple friends spread video of Copeland accompanied by admonitions that Jesus "would not make loud and proud proclamations from the comfort of a studio" but would rather "get very near to those who were sick" to "heal them with compassion." In the comments on such posts were further explanations of the personal nature of Jesus's ministry, explanations of God's perfect timing in handling even crises in the world, and encouragement to reach out and explore one's own personal relationship with Jesus in contrast to the grandstanding kind of faith promoted by Copeland. There was a tenderness to these statements, containing a respect for the severity and reach of the pandemic combined with a love for lost souls that diverged strongly from the general tendencies of discourse on social media regarding religion. The collective realities of suffering and fear focused attention on our common humanity and supplied motivation for considerate and considerable grace to others amidst the chaos of the crisis.

No major evangelical leader has denounced Copeland or used his "healing" to share the Gospel or clarify the faith. Instead, this shift is being observed in my friends, in the lives and on the Facebook profiles of everyday people that I know as an entirely grassroots effort. In the book *Spreadable Media*, Henry Jenkins,

Sam Ford, and Joshua Green remind us that spreading media texts "helps us articulate who we are, bolster our personal and professional relationships, strengthen our relationships with one another, and build community and awareness around the subjects we care about" (2013, p. 304). In this hopeful formulation, the individual's sharing of media reaches across their network of friends and connections to create and extend meaning. As a spreadable text, video of Copeland was able to be shared and commented on all across the internet.

What I observed in my evangelical Christian friends is that instead of relying on a rhetoric of disidentification and critique to bolster an evangelical identity in opposition to Copeland, my friends chose to embody a position of outreach and a compassionate sharing of the Gospel that contrasts with recent evangelical discourses. Moments of crisis often call for the redefinition of movements and shifts in their structure. The silence of evangelical leaders and the refocused discourse of individual evangelical Christians could spark the reorganization and reorientation of those denominations. What I see as possible through the religious use of social media in this particular moment of crisis is the gradual depoliticization of some American religious discourse and a reorientation towards the core evangelistic principles of Christianity. As individuals find their voices in these kinds of actions, it could gradually lead to the collapse of traditional denominational power structures and reliance upon figureheads. Consequently, this could lead to the expansion of local churches and ministries that could have far greater and more direct impacts on local communities. Historically, evangelicals have used their religion to fight for sometimes national structural changes. What this change in discourse postulates is a reorientation towards changes in individual hearts and lives that could very well lead to the larger

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moral and societal changes that evangelicals have fought for all along.

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Climate Skeptics, Coronavirus Skeptics? Notes on the Response of Politicized Evangelical Elites to the Pandemic

Robin Globus Veldman

Observers have suggested that the Christian Right's initially skeptical response to the coronavirus crisis owes to anti-scientific attitudes, but political and economic conservatism and a sense of embattlement with secular culture may play a more direct role.

In an op-ed published in the *New York Times* about two weeks after many states had begun social distancing due to the coronavirus pandemic, author Katherine Stewart blamed the Religious Right for the United States' chaotic response, arguing that "denial of science and critical thinking among religious ultraconservatives now haunts the American response to the coronavirus crisis" (Stewart, 2020). It is important to note the Religious Right refers to politically conservative Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews. Despite the inclusion of non-Protestant religious traditions, evangelical voices have always dominated the Religious Right, which is why many use the term Christian Right. According to Stewart, these same anti-science attitudes could be found among "the hard core of climate deniers," which she identified as being "concentrated among people who identify as religiously conservative Republicans."

Several reports have noted an overlap between climate denialists and voices promoting skepticism about the severity of COVID-19 (e.g., Banerjee & Hasemyer, 2020). But what about Stewart's

claim about evangelicals — is it true that the underlying factor motivating their opposition to social distancing is denial of science? Stewart's claim echoes an argument that has also been used to explain evangelicals' higher-than-average levels of skepticism regarding climate change: Evangelicals are skeptical about climate change because of anti-science attitudes rooted in their opposition to evolution (e.g., Wilkinson, 2010). Yet as I have written elsewhere, evangelicals accept the scientific consensus on many scientific issues, from medical research to basic ecology (Veldman, 2019, pp.109-111, pp. 59-60). In fact, my own field research among evangelical climate skeptics suggested that their skepticism about climate change was fueled not by suspicions of science in general, but by a perceived need to defend Christianity against secularist attacks on orthodox Christian teachings (Veldman, 2019).

In this brief essay, I would like to extend this observation to the response of evangelical climate skeptics to COVID-19, with a slight adjustment. Unlike climate change or evolution, which may threaten Biblical accounts of creation or the end times, COVID-19 does not threaten core Christian doctrines. Nevertheless, the response to it *does* threaten to undermine values that many evangelical climate skeptics embrace regarding the value of free markets and the rightfully central place of Christianity in American society. Thus, rather than attributing their response simply to anti-science attitudes, I see free-market principles and a sense of embattlement with secular culture as playing an important and underexplored role in the COVID-19 response.

Before proceeding, I should clarify that in this essay, I am not speaking of evangelicals in general, but of an influential subset of "politicized evangelicals" — evangelicals associated with the politically conservative Christian Right (Williams, 2009, p. 151) —

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who have been actively involved in promoting climate skepticism. These individuals' views are not representative of the tradition as a whole, but they are useful for the purposes of assessing how denial of science might shape opinions toward both climate change and COVID-19. Since these individuals all actively seek to shape the opinions of the evangelical laity through Christian radio or television appearances, their views may also give us an indication of how conservative evangelical laypeople view the pandemic.

To understand how free-market principles have shaped the response of evangelical climate skeptics to coronavirus pandemic, I now turn to an organization known as the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation. Founded in 2000, the Cornwall Alliance was a brainchild of the Acton Institute, a think tank that promotes a combination of faith and pro-free-market values (Veldman, 2019, p. 206). In recent years, the Cornwall Alliance has become the premier organization promoting climate change skepticism within the evangelical community. It has also addressed COVID-19 several times since the pandemic began to dominate headlines in the US. Here I will briefly discuss several points from the Cornwall Alliance's first substantive mass email about the threat, which it sent on March 18. Written by E. Calvin Beisner, the group's founder and national spokesman, the email began by urging readers to trust in God. This would not protect them from getting sick, he cautioned, but should remind them that "God is in control, and if we suffer illness, it's because that's better for us." Strangely, that is, he began his email by urging readers to embrace sickness as God's will. Secondly, he urged readers not to fear, adding that in the average year, 37,000 Americans die of flu and predicting that COVID-19 was "unlikely to kill that many Americans ever, let alone each year." In a follow-up article posted on the organization's website the same

day, Beisner stated that a "generous" estimate was that COVID-19 would kill 10,000 Americans. This was an underestimate — as of May 7, over 67,000 people had died from COVID-19 in the US (CDC, 2020) — and contradicted what public health officials predicted at the time.

Having argued there was little reason for concern, he next cautioned about "unintended consequences" that might arise from solutions to the pandemic, urging public officials to "avoid drastic measures that destroy jobs and so cause poverty, which can pose even greater risks than COVID-19." At this early date, then, the Cornwall Alliance's primary concern was the economic damage that the pandemic response might cause. This third point directly parallels the Cornwall Alliance's argument against taking action to address climate change, action which Beisner has long argued will harm the poor. Indeed, in commentary posted on the Cornwall Alliance's website the same day, Beisner acknowledged that anyone familiar with his organization's views on climate change would "recognize this [discussion of the coronavirus pandemic] as analogous to our warning that drastic attempts to reduce global warming . . . are likely to cause much greater harm than good" (Beisner, 2020). Underlying Beisner's skepticism of mainstream epidemiology, then, was the Cornwall Alliance's commitment to "private property rights, entrepreneurship, free trade [and] limited government," all of which would be threatened by a nation-wide shutdown orchestrated by the federal government (Cornwall Alliance, 2020).

A search of public comments made by other climate skeptics in the Christian Right suggested a second motivation: the same "embattled" mentality that motivated skepticism about climate change. Starting around the mid-2000s, a number of politicized evangelicals began suggesting that the idea of human activities

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altering global weather patterns was being promoted by secular elites (e.g., Hollywood, liberals, and the media) to undermine Christian teachings about God's omnipotence. David Barton, a politically connected evangelical who is best known for his best-selling pseudo-historical books depicting America as a Christian nation, adapted this framing to the coronavirus pandemic by complaining that the "fear and panic" in response to the COVID-19 pandemic occurred not because the situation was serious, but because "this is the most secular America has ever been" (Montgomery, 2020). Although he later reversed course, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council, a conservative pro-family evangelical organization, initially argued that overblown concern about the virus was due to "the media . . . just pounding it" (Holt, 2020). Both responses reflected blame back at secular elites who were portrayed as exaggerating the problem — just as these same elites were alleged to have done with climate change (Veldman, 2019, p. 185, pp. 178-182).

To be sure, Beisner, Barton, and Perkins have all displayed an aversion to both mainstream climate science and epidemiology. But their skepticism about the response to the coronavirus pandemic should not be reduced simply to scientific skepticism. Instead, it likely reflects a more complicated set of argumentative maneuvers inspired by politicized evangelicals' partisan commitments. Whether they will change their minds as deaths mount is unclear, but the Christian Right's seemingly parallel responses to climate change and COVID-19 certainly deserve close scrutiny in the months to come.

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and behavior. Her research has focused on American evangelicals' attitudes toward climate change and, more recently, the intersection of religious nationalism and anti-environmentalism.

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Conclusion

Themes on the *Present Future of Religion*

Sophia Osteen and Heidi A Campbell

Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World brings together the reflections and insights from faculty and graduate students working in Religious Studies in a variety of academic departments and disciplines at Texas A&M University. They offer a rich diversity of reflection on challenges that religious communities are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, both capturing insights from their academic research and sharing from their personal journeys during this time. The aim of this book has been to capture these thoughts and revelations in the midst of the social, cultural, and religious negotiations these researchers and the communities they study and/or are affiliated with are encountering. By organizing these essays into two core sections, this text provides a unique snapshot of both their personal experiences with religion during a global pandemic and a reflection on how their research work has been altered by the pandemic and its changes. What becomes evident in these essays is how the way that religion is practiced and conceived during this period of quarantine and lockdown is changing, and these transformations have the possibility of causing long-term shifts in religion in the American context.

In “Narrating Praxis: The Performance of Religion and Post-Pandemic Implications,” researchers described and reflected on their personal experiences practicing their own religion in lockdown. Essays spoke to their engagement in Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim religious gatherings during this time. Many described what they say are intensely different experiences from their traditional religious ritual encounters, like celebrating Palm Sunday processions over the internet and participating in the Passover Seder with extended family over Zoom. Many

researchers described how religious days were the same, yet very different. While traditional Seder holidays are spent at home, they are typically filled with both immediate and extended family joined together under the same roof to celebrate. For Claire Katz, the traditional Jewish foods were still made and the dinner table was still set, but this year, her mom sat in a nursing home and the rest of her extended family celebrated from their own homes. Katz reflected that although Zooming family members during Passover was meaningful, there is nothing quite like sharing a table and breaking bread together.

Other researchers reflected on the ways that as individuals, they had been forced to adapt and how out of the flexibility of many of their religious groups, there were more opportunities available like online resources, sermons from living rooms, prayer readings virtually, celebrating Palm Sunday over the internet with golf clubs in lieu of palms, or meditations over Zoom. Traditional services or holidays that many individuals had experienced the same way for years, now required individuals to be willing to do them differently. Perry explained that her somewhat hectic Palm Sunday service in jeans and a make-shift background demonstrated how connected her members were by their joining in and adapting. She explained that moving online made her small Episcopal church better and demonstrated how, by downloading applications on their computers and finding their own places to celebrate, members discovered “the church is healthier and more resilient than we believed.” Hankins reflected on her own personal experience of practicing Islam during a time of social distancing. She explained that American Muslims have adapted by closing down their mosques and creating avenues for online prayers and readings. She encouraged people with the fact that by being flexible and moving online, especially during Ramadan, they are doing what many other Muslims around the

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world have had to do for years — make changes because of wars, famines, and catastrophes — and COVID-19 proved to be no different.

In this section, faculty reflected on the ways they believed the COVID-19 pandemic and period of quarantine would create radical shifts in the ways that religion is practiced in this country. For example, Hankins reminded readers that although this internet-shift was born out of necessity, it will eventually be made out of choice. She explained that the shift online for Muslims all over the world was born out of a state of crisis, but given our ever-changing world, being ready to move online at any moment is important, and now that people have experienced it and seen its success, she believes that the “...the virtual world will be the norm while meeting in person will be the exception.” It is evident through the responses from religious groups that religion can and will continue. The scholars explained that their religious groups came up with innovative and novel responses to social distancing in hopes of carrying forward their mission in a time of crisis. During the most important religious holidays for the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, they have moved celebrations online in a swift and purposeful manner, indicating the dedication of members. Yet, for researchers, this often led to more questions, such as: Will religious community members who have experienced this online worship and these gatherings be willing to come back to the pews, mats, or seats for services as usual?

In the second section, “Narrating Research: Reflecting on Religion Research in Lockdown,” faculty and graduate students reflected on their experience of researching digital religion during a time of national and global lockdown. Many of the researchers discussed the realities of social isolation for religious groups. Emre

described how Muslims have struggled in a period of online religion, since so much of the practice of their religion involves maintaining bonds with members of their communities, congregating together daily for prayers, and gathering with one another for fasting. This reality creates a dilemma for religious groups trying to discover how they can continue on with their religion. It is often more complex than just switching on a livestream. Others explained the technological realities of needing to explain to congregation members Zoom and how to download it, or having to ensure their presence online is sufficient to maintain their rankings and increase their visibility. These were concerns and issues that were novel to many religious groups, as they have never had to consider them before.

The research narratives highlighted the variety of ways the observed sacred rituals required adaptation and modification when taken from a face-to-face setting to an online one. People had to adapt by formulating new ways to connect, celebrate holidays, and maintain membership through various internet resources like uploading Islamic sermons and meeting online for daily readings and prayers. This points to a potential shift for religion in America, from an embodied to a mediated experience driven by digital technology for many. Scholars reported that the religious innovations being observed within Islamic, Protestant, Jewish, and Catholic contexts were, in one respect, born largely out of necessity due to the community constraints and social-distancing policies. Yet many articulated the idea that this move from the offline to online spaces, and embodied to disembodied religious practice, had the potential to continue on far beyond the conclusion of quarantine and social distancing. Importantly, this represents a more fundamental shift from a view of religion as embodied, to one that is disembodied. Bajan pointed out the fact that in a period of history where embodied community is

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more important than ever before, because of this rapid shift online, “evangelicals are forced to rely on disembodied, in-house, amateur” forms of community. Bare similarly addressed the topic of embodiment by explaining that one of the historically fundamental aspects of Christianity is its corporeal nature, which the COVID-19 pandemic undermines. For many practicing Christians, this online form of community “...fails to meet the Biblical criteria of true corporate worship,” and as Bare told readers, it is a “momentary necessity but *not* a replacement.”

Consequently, because of the swift shift from offline to online, researchers speculated how this might cause religious leaders to rethink their fundamental beliefs regarding embodiment and disembodiment. Churches, temples, and mosques alike have had ample time to consider what this rapid shift online means for them as a community. Can they exist as an online community? Do online livestreams constitute their definition of “church” or “service?” Bare explained that he speculates “...that we will see a practical divergence emerging along theological lines,” with the groups that value embodied elements of their religion quickly returning to their usual in-person meetings post COVID-19, while those who do not place a high value on corporeal worship maintain their online forms of worship for the years to come. Emre also reflected that this period of social isolation has altered previously held beliefs about the definition of “community” for Muslims. As at one point, when many would consider a faith community as being exclusively one that meets often in person, prays in close physical proximity, and listens to the same sermons live, this time of pandemic has seemed to offer a new definition for what a faith community can be. She explained that while this time of transition has been difficult for many Muslim individuals, this test might yield cultural shifts and “...perhaps what we accepted as a physical faith community changed, but

the idea of the community will continue to thrive as Muslims will continue to innovate and adjust their faith to the demands of this new world.” While the variety of religions and denominations handled this situation differently, this period inevitably will lead many church, mosque, and temple leaders to ask, “How embodied is our religion?”

Reflecting on the discussion shared by these two sections of essays, we see scholars in this collection encouraging religious leaders from all denominations and traditions to remain open to rethinking the ways they “do religion.” Moments of crisis, as many scholars explained, not only enable a rapid shift in practical and pragmatic aspects of religious engagement, but also open up a space for considering what aspects of belief and practice represent the core of their religious identity and community. Sheldon argued this by suggesting that social isolation creates an “...ongoing moment of refining evangelical Christianity from the ground up,” a “redefinition of movements” and “refocused discourse.” Price also suggested that forced religious innovation challenges leaders to “rethink any dismissiveness toward using digital tools in religion. They have proven to be incredibly powerful and useful to people who need them.” She encouraged readers and religious groups to accept that “mediated religion need not be the enemy of embodied faith.” For example, several essays reported how religious leaders were surprised to see how their use of technology and online platforms created new opportunities to reach members and even community outsiders considered largely unreachable before. This moment allowed individuals who typically would not step foot inside religious buildings such as a church, mosque, or temple to casually drop into a worship service or engage with faith communities online in less threatening ways and without the fear of being called out as a visitor in their midst.

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Overall, *Religion in Quarantine* provides important insights from inside individuals' own religious journeys during this period, as well as their perspectives as participant-observers through their research reflection. Collectively, these essays identify the potential the current situation has for bringing about radical shifts in both the way Americans "do" and think about religion. As the pandemic continues, religious innovation and adaptation will continue to be demanded of religious communities. The "new normal" means there may never be a full return to the business of religion as it once was, event and location dependent. Religious groups will continue to have to imagine new forms of gathering, opportunities for relationship building, and ways of expressing their devotion to meet with the new social conditions and demands created by COVID-19. By capturing the researchers' and scholars' reflections on this moment, we will be better able to track the extent of the impact and outcomes of the religious-cultural shifts being experienced during this unprecedented time in history.

Key Lessons from Religion in Quarantine

Lesson 1:

Some religious groups will easily adapt, and others will not.

Campbell and Dox pointed out the fact that this shift from offline to online brings with it consequences, both good and bad. Dox identified the powerful ways that people have adapted by moving their religion online, and Campbell addressed the fact that there are people that refused to change their ways by defying governmental orders as they gathered together as a religious group. They demonstrated the ways that in a time of crisis, some will adapt and others can't or won't.

Lesson 2:

Sacred holidays and rituals are disturbed in all religious traditions.

When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the United States, it seemed to correlate with many of the most important holy days and rituals of many different religions. The most important days were interrupted, forcing religious followers to change their traditions.

Lesson 3:

The forced move from offline to online makes researchers ponder the future of gathered religion.

This period of social isolation caused many of the researchers to question what this meant for the future of religion. While the move online has been necessary for now, will it continue in the future when it is not essential? Will people return to their places of worship or opt for the new control over their religious engagement offered by audience-driven, online experiences?

Lesson 4:

Religious communities that are flexible and willing to innovate will adapt to current and coming changes.

Although disappointed at canceled traditional holidays and in-person meetings, researchers noted that by being flexible, religious community members could adapt to the changing traditions of their religion and be creative. Within days of learning of the state of the crisis within the United States, many religious leaders were innovative in their responses to the pandemic by being willing to test out new technologies and novel ways to celebrate and be a community. Many of their sacred days could be celebrated and rituals acknowledged, just in vastly different ways.

Lesson 5:

Quarantine reveals the power of technology that many religious groups were previously unaware of.

While some religious gatherings have been online for a while, many communities were forced online by the COVID-19 pandemic. For those groups, the transition online required new technological insights and forced them to consider new tactics to maintain their congregations.

Lesson 6:

Lockdown begs the question, "How much of religion is embodied?"

When services move from in-person communities to online ones, many of the researchers questioned what the COVID-19 pandemic means for embodied religion, and more so, how much of religion is embodied. In a period where people are not allowed to gather together, the inherent question of the purpose and definition of religion comes into question.