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When believers find the door closed:
The global spiritual lockdown policy and religious reactions to it

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The prevalence of religious sociality in epidemic phenomena has been a constant in human history: a well-studied example is the 1865 cholera pandemic caused by the migratory movement of pilgrims coming from Mecca.¹ This prevalence has been proven by recent studies conducted on the largest religious gathering in West Africa, the annual Grand Magal of Touba pilgrimage to Senegal, which has been taking place since 1928. This pilgrimage is the main source for the spread of malaria and other respiratory and gastrointestinal infections in the area occupied by the Murid brotherhood.² The risk caused by religious practice was suddenly at its highest in the spring of 2020 given the major monotheistic religious festivals due to follow one after the other, involving a very busy calendar that could potentially concern some 4.3 billion human beings. Between February and May there were the Jewish feasts of Purim (9-10 March), Pesach (8-16 April), and Shavuot (28-30 May), the Christian feasts – celebrated on different dates by Western and Eastern Orthodox Christians – of Lent (February-March), Holy Week (early April), Easter, and Pentecost (mid-April and late May), and finally the long month of the Muslim Ramadan which is punctuated by daily gatherings (23 April – 23 May) and ends with the feast of Eid (23-24 May). Festive religious times invariably mix collective rites and rituals with family/social celebrations which other much-enjoyed street festivities are often added onto. Between the occasional, regular, and festive gatherings all over the world, the coming together of the faithful has been considered an opportunistic source of infection and disease spread through overcrowding and mixing. Indeed, beginning with March the world press reported daily on the voluntary closure of religious buildings including the famous Wat Sothon temple in the province of Chachoengsao, Thailand, after its abbot and his wife were infected.³

Faced with an increase in the number of outbreaks and the risk of the virus spreading, access to places of worship or pilgrimage was thus quickly regulated, indeed banned in most states, following the example of what had happened in 2014 when Saudi Arabia suspended the Haj pilgrimage to prevent the spread of MERS-Cov and potentially the Ebola virus then active in West Africa.

In addition to the subsequent and absolutely spectacular transfer of religious practices and connections into the digital world, the extraordinary creativity shown by believers everywhere in order to continue to fuel their spiritual fire and fulfil their need to be together, and the mobilisation of thousands of individual and collective religious actors driven by remarkable solidarity for the benefit of physical or moral victims, the deadly pandemic of 2020 has been a political revelation. It has allowed us to see – through what it has made us do, that is, place a temporary ban on public worship and religious gatherings – how much religious practice is a matter for the state and how important its place is in the regulation of even the most secularised societies and individuals. The pandemic has revealed that the manner in which religious life was or was not suspended speaks volumes about regimes and their governance, about the relationship between states and religions, between public authorities and

¹ CHIFFOLEAU S., “Des pèlerins et des épidémies. Recomposition des flux dangereux sur la mer Rouge et le Golfe”, (“Pilgrims and Epidemics. Reorganising ‘Hazardous’ Flows on the Red Sea and the Gulf”), *Arabian Humanities*, 2016, n° 6. MISHRA S., *Pilgrimage, Politics, and Pestilence. The Haj from the Indian Subcontinent, 1860-1920*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

² <https://theconversation.com/senegal-les-risques-sanitaires-du-plus-grand-rassemblement-religieux-de-lannee-128750>

³ <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1881450/wat-sothon-in-chachoengsao-closed-on-covid-19-fears>

populations, and finally about the authorities' legal scruples or lack thereof about depriving people so easily of their collective religiosity whose essential function in social life suddenly became glaringly obvious by its absence.

An overall picture has emerged whose outlines I shall draw in order to arrive at some conclusions: to begin with, we saw the emergence of an apparently peaceful bloc of countries of concordance in which civil and religious authorities took the joint decision to go into spiritual lockdown, that is, suspend public worship as well as, in some cases, close places of worship and prohibit any religious gathering, while often making a very poor attempt at maintaining funerary rituals (1). In these countries the consensus began to unravel because of the length of the lockdown, the human dramas associated with the hasty and dishonourable way in which the dying were accompanied and funerals were conducted, and the practical difficulties of ending lockdown.

Alongside these seemingly peaceful countries there is a whole range of discordant countries in terms of the need to temporarily suspend religious gatherings, whose situations can be classified on a negative scale: First of all, several countries failed to impose spiritual lockdown on recalcitrant religious authorities and dissenting populations (2). Others had the opposite experience: their religious authorities were ahead of the civil authorities in taking drastic decisions and pressed the latter into finally fulfilling their responsibilities (3). Then there were cacophonous countries whose political authorities, usually federal ones, denied the need for lockdown and supported religious groups that refused to comply (4). There were others still where civil authorities, because of their inability to make decisions and preconceptions about the low virulence of the disease, called on people to pray more to avoid or stop the epidemic, which was completely absurd from a health point of view. At the end of the spectrum there are a few rare countries where civil and religious authorities that are in denial of each other neither took nor obeyed any measures (6) or, even more rarely, states such as China, with its colossal demographic weight, which unilaterally imposed spiritual quarantine on their religious groups and took advantage of the health measures to further control and continue to discriminate against the religious activities of their peoples (7).

RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS IN THE DOCK

South Korea, early February

Having first appeared in Wuhan, Covid-19 is said to have begun spreading beyond China's borders as early as November 2019. However, the Chinese New Year holidays (24 January - 2 February 2020) probably speeded things up by sending millions of people to and from China, even though the city of Wuhan was placed under quarantine on 23 January. Families from the mainland and diaspora took advantage of these national holidays to meet or travel, again despite the first nearby countries closing their borders to non-resident Chinese nationals (1 February), namely, the United States, Australia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Mongolia.

The first outbreak in South Korea occurred a few days later in a Christian sect in the city of Daegu where a female member of the Shincheonji Church infected her neighbours by attending several services on 10 February when she had a fever. Within two weeks of the virus spreading internally 483 people were seriously ill according to the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.⁴ The South Korean authorities then scrambled to track down the 260,000 followers of this sect in order to check their state of health. At the end of February, faced with the sect's unwillingness to co-operate with the health officials to trace its infected followers, the cities of Seoul and Daegu filed a complaint against its founder, Lee Man-hee. Under pressure from the media, on 2 March the latter ended up holding a press conference during which he went down on his knees to ask for forgiveness from his compatriots.

⁴ RFI reports from 23 February 2020 <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/science/20200223-coronavirus-corée-sud-daegu-secte-contamination> and 24 February 2020 <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/20200224-corée-sud-coronavirus-à-église>

According to the *Libération* newspaper of 3 April 2020, 60% of the 7,500 cases recorded in mid-March in South Korea were linked to Shincheonji.⁵

Hong Kong, early February

Studies of the spread of coronavirus within and from the network of proselytising evangelical movements in China and throughout South East Asia are still to be conducted.⁶ In any event, at China's southern border, Hong Kong's first cases, in mid-February, were also linked to religious practice, this time Buddhist. Six followers who spent 8 February together praying at the Fook Wai Ching She Temple⁷ infected each other and then their families and neighbours, who sometimes remained asymptomatic. According to a report published on 25 February by the city's Health Protection Centre they spread the virus which fortunately was contained.⁸

Iran, early February

The start of the contagion in Iran was similar to South Korea and Hong Kong: the virus began to spread from the holy city of Qom, the home of the shrine and mausoleum of Fatima Masumeh which is a major Shi'ite pilgrimage site. This city is a major theological training centre with many madrasas where Chinese and Uighur students now train, being sent by their government in order to counterbalance the so-called terrorist tendencies of Sunnism within China's current borders. The first cases of the disease were detected there in mid-February but neither the schools nor the pilgrimage were closed and the epidemic took off.

France, mid-February

The French example of the Porte Ouverte Evangelical Church, created and well established in Mulhouse, can also serve as an illustration. It is suspected that an outbreak started quietly in eastern France in November 2019,⁹ in conjunction with the movement of thousands of Chinese tourists in Alsace who arrived via Basel-Mulhouse-Freiburg Airport. They particularly went to visit the town of Colmar, the exotic location of a Chinese reality television show. The gathering of 2,200 persons in the Porte Ouverte Church to celebrate a "week of fasting" between 17 and 21 February¹⁰ was particularly fatal, as was probably the Expo Habitat fair which had been held in the same city the previous week and had been attended by 23,000 visitors. By the end of the "week of fasting" 600 people had been directly infected.

Indian subcontinent and South East Asia, late February – early March

We can also follow the trail left by the various gatherings which the Islamist missionary movement Tablighi Jamaat (Preaching Society), a South East Asian proselytising organisation founded in India a century ago, organised between mid-February and mid-March 2020 in Malaysia, Indonesia, India, and Bangladesh.

At the end of February between 16,000 and 20,000 people, according to sources, comprising Malaysians from Malaysia and Thailand but also Bangladeshis, Cambodians, Bruneians, Filipinos from Mindanao, and Singaporeans gathered in Kuala Lumpur in response to a call from this movement – 500 cases were directly linked to the rally in the Malaysian capital the following week. Two weeks later 8,000 members of the same movement came to the Indonesian province of South Sulawesi (Celebes Island). Concern in Indonesia had increased greatly and the authorities "asked" for the event to be cancelled, which the

⁵ Laurent Joffrin, "[Dieu et le Coronavirus](#)", 3 April 2020, *Libération*.

⁶ Malaysia's first coronavirus casualty was the Chinese-American pastor David Cheng, a figure of Emmanuel Baptist Church founded in America, who died on 17 March 2020.

<https://www.chretiens.info/religions/christianisme/chretiens/chretiens-de-malaisie/le-pasteur-david-cheng-tue-par-le-coronavirus-cov-19/2020/03/17/19/14/>

⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/hong-kong-buddhist-temple-becomes-host-to-cluster-of-coronavirus-infections>

⁸ *Ibidem*

⁹ CNRS study by the Public Health Centre of the University Hospital of Clermont-Ferrand.

¹⁰ https://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2020/03/07/coronavirus-a-mulhouse-l-eglise-evangelique-la-porte-ouverte-identifiee-comme-un-foyer-important-de-contamination_6032215_3244.html

organisers refused to do, thus starting an epidemic on the island.¹¹ On the same day in India, although the authorities in Delhi had banned all public meetings, the Tablighi Jamaat received 3,400 followers at its old headquarters in the district of Nizamuddin, in the heart of the megalopolis. On 25 March 2,000 people were still there despite the lockdown, forcing the police to evacuate the premises (30 March - 1 April) and place them in quarantine.¹² This widely publicised evacuation caused a huge scandal in the country and a resurgence of Islamophobia against an already stigmatised minority.¹³ At the beginning of April more than 10% of India's coronavirus cases and a third of deaths were participants at this meeting or people who had been in contact with them.¹⁴ Finally, in Bangladesh the first coronavirus death and first 17 people to test positive had previously gone to a celebration organised by the same Tablighi Jamaat on 19 March in Raipur, Lakshmipur district, to recite healing verses. Figures for the gathering, which had been banned by the authorities, vary from 10,000 (AFP news) to 30,000 (BBC) people.

United States, late February – early March

We will end this overview with the United States. Two festive periods were sources for the epidemic long before the first control measures were in place: the very popular Catholic carnival which is often desacralised and touristic in nature, and the Jewish feast of Purim which is very much a community and family-social event. Fortunately the Carnival of Catholic communities, a tourist attraction in many cities around the world, has a very flexible calendar. In Panay, Philippines, the Feast of Infant Jesus coincides with ancient tribal festivals and was held in January without causing any damage. In Venezuela the Carnival is organised on the Feast of Corpus Christi (June). In Pamplona, Spain, it is organised on the Feast of San Fermín, etc. However, in most Catholic regions – the West Indies, Venice, Rio de Janeiro, to cite only the most famous – it is held around Shrove Tuesday, 25 February, on the eve of Lent. Thus, like every year, the New Orleans Carnival drew hundreds of thousands of people, including Christian missionaries who came to remind people of the event's religious nature which is largely forgotten by the crowds. In early March New Orleans was the epicentre of Covid-19 in the southern United States.

Purim, also known as the Jewish Mardi Gras, this year took place on 9 and 10 March. In New York an outbreak of Covid-19 had just occurred in the Young Israel Orthodox community in New Rochelle, north-east of Manhattan.¹⁵ It accounted for 108 of the 173 cases then recorded in the state – including its rabbi – leading Governor Cuomo to impose a local lockdown. On 10 March the other Orthodox communities in the megalopolis celebrated Purim without taking any precautions and together with the New Rochelle community. The festival boosted the number of family and social events after a day of fasting and a large collective ceremony at the synagogue. In the days following Purim¹⁶ a disproportionate number of Orthodox Jews, including many rabbis, were hospitalised. The same thing happened in north London, Israel, and France. In the latter the entire French Jewish community in the north and east of the country was affected. Joël Mergui, president of the Central and Paris consistories,

¹¹ <https://www.cnews.fr/monde/2020-03-18/indonesie-des-milliers-de-pelerins-musulmans-se-rassemblent-malgre-le-coronavirus>

¹² <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/religion-en-inde-un-important-rassemblement-musulman-est-lorigine-dun-foyer-epidémique>

¹³ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-nizamuddin-markaz-india-lockdown-6340969/>
<https://theconversation.com/violences-anti-musulmanes-en-inde-quelle-responsabilite-pour-le-gouvernement-modi-132884>

<https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/discriminations-la-pandemie-exacerbe-la-haine-contre-les-musulmans-en-inde>

¹⁴ On 9 June 2020 the Indian government announced that foreign participants at the Tablighi Jamaat gathering which was considered responsible for the disease in India would be banned from entering the country for the next ten years, something which was very much in the interest of Modi's Hindu nationalist government. <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/2-500-musulmans-etranagers-interdits-sejour-Inde-10-ans-2020-06-09-1201098331>

¹⁵ <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/10/814099444/new-york-creates-containment-area-around-cluster-in-new-rochelle?t=1585237559670&t=1588337544074>

¹⁶ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-religious-festivities-may-have-proved-deadly-to-community-rtvsgkffh>

but also many community leaders and members were hospitalised. The Fondation Rothschild retirement home lost one third of its residents. According to the President of the Jewish community of Créteil (Val-de-Marne) quoted in *Le Parisien*, by 7 April 22 of its members had died of coronavirus, including André Touboul, Director of the Beth Haya Mouchka educational institutions in Paris, the largest Jewish school in Europe. In eastern France Maurice Dahan, President of the Bas-Rhin Consistory, as well as Elie Cohen, his counterpart in Haut-Rhin, were taken into intensive care. In Strasbourg 11 of the 13 consistorial rabbis were infected.¹⁷ In Russia all synagogues were closed on 25 March by order of Alexander Boroda, President of the Russian Federation of Jewish Communities.

THE INTERACTION BETWEEN CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES DURING THE SPIRITUAL LOCKDOWN

The suspension of religious life was one of the first government measures locking down the civilian population, measures which were taken one after the other during the month of March. The specific forms taken by the lockdown depended on many factors but the two most important were both public and religious authorities being convinced of the need to impose it. Public authorities had to be convinced that the virus would spread dramatically among the population. Religious authorities also had to be convinced, in keeping with their own conception of sacredness and the importance they attached to people's lives in relation to spiritual requirements, of the vital need of such measures, provided that they accepted the idea that the virus would spread during their own gatherings.

From these two “certainties-attitudes” we see emerging a typology of national situations with regard to the acceptance and implementation of a temporary suspension of public religious ceremonies, a temporary ban on religious gatherings, and a temporary closure of places of worship. This typology is made up of four main categories: agreement on the decision to take quarantine measures and its opposite; disagreement on the need for lockdown; denial of necessary lockdown or its opposite; and repressive lockdown with no possibility to challenge it.

Concordance

In a number of countries the mutual certainty of the rapid spread of the virus and the role of religious gatherings in that spread translated into rapid measures to suspend public worship and more or less completely close buildings. The restrictions were imposed in the name of the health emergency and accepted by religious authorities who relayed and implemented them among their flocks. A stunned world watched the live broadcast of Holy Week services from the Vatican, with an empty St Peter's Square and Basilica and a solitary pope, even during the Way of the Cross at dusk on 10 April, having previously delivered on 27 March an exceptional *urbi-et-orbi* blessing in the absence of any living soul after the Italian government had declared national lockdown.

Public worship suspended, places of worship closed

The countries where religious authorities consented to buildings being closed and public worship suspended are quite varied. Among so-called Muslim countries Saudi Arabia temporarily closed its borders to foreigners from 27 February, then all its mosques on 17 March, suspending the small pilgrimage (*umra*) with the approval of its Shura Council. On 23 April, at the beginning of Ramadan, it announced the closure of the Great Mosque of Mecca, the Kaaba, and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, all holy places that had still been left open with many precautions and without foreigners. In the Maghreb the Ministries for Religious Affairs suspended Friday group prayers in mid-March and then decided to close the mosques, which were not to reopen on the evenings of Ramadan (*tarawih*) or the Night of Destiny (*laylat al-qadr*), and not even for Eid. Similar measures were taken in other Muslim states. The

¹⁷ Héloïse de Neuville, “Coronavirus : de nombreux responsables communautaires et responsables juifs contaminés”, *La Croix*, 7 April 2020.

closure of mosques, decided in March or April, was extended until the end of May or even the beginning of June. Thus, in Singapore the authorities decided (together with the Islamic Religious Council, the MUIS) to immediately close mosques until 4 May, that is, eleven days after the beginning of Ramadan, and then to authorise their reopening only with strong precautions in terms of distancing, hygiene, and limiting the number of worshippers, on pain of reclosure. However, in some of the Sahel countries the public decision to close mosques for Friday prayers and during Ramadan caused riots, as it did in Mali, Niger,¹⁸ and Senegal; this was not the case for Indonesia which was instead affected by “hidden practice” despite bans on gatherings and “wild” movements to villages. Divisions between religious authorities and the faithful sometimes arose in Muslim countries since for the latter the month of Ramadan and the Eid festival reinforce the solidity of their family sociality and neighbourly relations.

In Israel the closing of the airspace in early March by a very cautious government and the quarantining of citizens returning from Europe and the United States were accompanied by a ban on visits and international travel for Pesach due to take place a month later. During March the government tightened its ban on gatherings from over 5,000 people on 4 March to 100 and then 10 people. The state ordered the lockdown and closure of places of worship. On the eve of the national lockdown the rabbinical authorities called on the faithful to follow the public-order measures and allowed one last group prayer at the Wailing Wall for the healing of the sick. The lockdown, the closure of places of prayer and study, and the suspension of public worship were observed throughout Israel except in ultra-Orthodox districts, which required the intervention of the army,¹⁹ and among the Arab population of Israel. During Holy Week Christian districts and villages kept up their observances even though the Feast of the Holy Fire and the liturgies at the churches of the Holy Sepulchre and of the Nativity in Bethlehem took place without the faithful. On the side of the Palestinian Authority, restrictive measures went unheeded in Gaza. This same ignorance of the suspension of worship for Ramadan and Eid could be found among the Shi'ite populations of Lebanon and Iraq.

In Europe Alexis Artaud has drawn up a list of all emergency laws suspending public religious celebrations, painting the following picture:²⁰ Denmark, Germany, the United Kingdom, Slovenia, and Cyprus saw complete spiritual lockdown and the authorities' obedience to it. There were no notable incidents, at least at the beginning, with religious authorities – both national churches and minority groups – being perfectly conciliatory.

Public worship suspended, places of worship conditionally kept open

Most European countries opted for a slightly more liberal position than the previous one, combining the prohibition of public worship with the conditional opening of places of worship: religious authorities were required to “police” them themselves and to check compliance with the measures taken. In these countries the control of the flow of worshippers and the implementation of health measures were the responsibility of priests and churchgoers themselves. France, for example, issued a decree keeping places of worship open but limiting attendance to a maximum of 20 people except for funerals (decree of 14 March). It ended up prohibiting all gatherings in places of worship – which were nevertheless left open – and reduced family presence at funerals to 20 people (decree of 24 March). For its part, the Catholic Church of France reduced or stopped attendance by worshippers, strictly enforced the rules on funeral services, and, in a highly symbolic gesture, closed the Marian shrine at Lourdes which is visited by more than one million pilgrims during Easter week. In Latvia up to 50 people were allowed to gather for funeral ceremonies subject to distancing and hygiene measures laid down by official orders. Together with Italy, France, and Latvia, Greece, Romania, Malta, Estonia, Ireland, Finland, Croatia, Belgium (where the long legal suspension of public worship was confirmed by the Council of State in June), Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia, and Austria opted for this solution.

¹⁸ <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Islam/Coronavirus-Niger-emeutes-contre-linterdiction-prieres-collectives-2020-04-23-12010908241>

¹⁹ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/confinement-en-israel-une-ville-ultra-orthodoxe-sous-blocus-militaire>

²⁰ <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-how-new-restrictions-on-religious-liberty-vary-across-europe-135879>

In South East Asia, Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world with 270 million inhabitants, did not decide to systematically close places of worship during lockdown either, except in the capital. The Ministry for Religious Affairs issued its guidelines for prayer and worship during the month of Ramadan: strictly limited regular gatherings as well as fast-breaking dinners and compulsory prayers were suspended. Virtual door-to-door almsgiving was introduced. While in Jakarta virtually all mosques were closed, in the provinces many continued their activities during Ramadan albeit they had to observe safety rules: hand washing before and after, bringing own prayer mat, and trying to keep one's distance. And, for the very first time in the Muslim world, at the beginning of April Jakarta considered postponing Eid, with Malaysia soon following suit on 23 April, as people there practise *balik kampung*, i.e. they abandon the cities in order to return to their villages and celebrate this great day. In the end Eid was not suspended but travel was banned and gatherings in mosques were very severely reduced.

Apparently religious authorities in countries that took minimal measures began to accept the suspension and very limited access to buildings, to the point that the faithful could think the buildings were closed. In some countries religious authorities' compliance with public measures seemed almost exemplary. Catholic authorities in particular distinguished themselves by their civic-mindedness. But they were not the only ones. In France Chief Rabbi Haim Korsia increased the number of his prevention messages to accompany the first decree and then the second decree which was even more restrictive with regard to the use of places of worship, limiting them to funeral rituals only. A campaign organised by the French Union of Jewish Students and the United Jewish Social Fund used showbiz stars such as Patrick Bruel and Gad Elmaleh to convince the faithful of the need to stay home even during Pesach.

Public worship authorised, places of worship kept open

One final equilibrium is worth noting. It is a seemingly lighter type of agreement in which the health measures taken by public authorities were reduced to a minimum when it came to religious practice. Although gatherings were banned, public worship was still possible and buildings were open, with religious authorities being expected to monitor. Switzerland, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Spain all adopted this solution. Their measures of relative freedom rested on limiting public worship – sometimes reduced to priests alone – and limiting access to buildings (small number of people, distancing, no contact between persons or with liturgical objects, hygiene measures), but above all on the trust placed in the good will of religious authorities, Catholic and Protestant, who were entrusted with deterring the faithful from going to worship, especially during major feasts.

Frictions

However, the severity of the measures taken ended up causing fatigue everywhere, even in the most liberal countries, showing its full harshness in relation to the exception granted to funerals.²¹ Quickly, in April, authorities and populations, particularly in the Catholic world of Europe, Africa,²² and the Americas, asked for public worship to be reopened.²³ Some populists sought to hijack this issue,²⁴ expressing their indignation at the impracticable, even inhumane, and undersized nature of the so-called funeral exception. Coupled with the inhumane quarantine imposed on the elderly in their own homes or in care homes, and with the ban on visiting relatives that were treated or in intensive care in hospitals, even if they were at death's door, the exception granted to funerals so they may be held in places of worship only allowed for very basic services. It did not prevent thousands of people from dying alone,

²¹ Bklyner, "Muslims and Jews Struggle to Observe Burial Traditions As Loved Ones Die in The Pandemic", 2 April 2020, <https://bklyner.com/muslims-jews-funeral-coronavirus/?fbclid=IwAR2QAIYi4PFFDs4aB-zoAPZYMnWuyxKcoAYFyepZHBgH1c5vw1Ex-148RfU>

<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Islam/Coronavirus-musulmans-peinent-enterrer-morts-2020-04-24-1201090970>

France: <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Vive-emotion-autour-linterdiction-recueillir-pres-corps-2020-04-21-1201090400>

²² <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Monde/En-Afrique-chretiens-musulmans-simpatientent-face-fermeture-lieux-culte-2020-05-11-1201093667>

²³ <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Monde/Coronavirus-Afrique-question-reprise-cultes-publics-2020-05-18-1201094927> <https://www.ncronline.org/news/quick-reads/italian-bishops-talks-government-post-lockdown-liturgies>

²⁴ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/religion-litalie-des-fideles-se-prepare-celebrer-paques-en-streaming>

without spiritual or family consolation, without their loved ones being able to bid them a final farewell and go through all the stages of mourning. Respect for people, dead and alive, was not the fundamental criterion which could lead to salutary measures to alleviate the pain experienced by families, and this tragedy will require readjustments in the future priorities of respect for religious freedom.

Different kinds of discordance

Despite its shortcomings, the solution of mutual responsibility had the merit of being clear. But it was not the most widespread. In our overview, disagreement between public and religious authorities was rather the rule, revealing a great disparity in terms of who was responsible for the discordance.

Recalcitrant religious authorities

First of all, in those situations where public worship was not banned and buildings remained open, it is interesting to note that this measure *often* went hand in hand with the certainty that a direct ban would have provoked a violent reaction. States then found themselves having to accommodate disgruntled or indignant religious authorities, while at the same time imposing compulsory lockdown and repeatedly warning of the danger of any group religious practice. In Orthodox countries this balancing act was performed with national churches divided between a group close to the Patriarchate of Constantinople which accepted the idea of changing practices during the epidemic, and another linked to the Patriarchate of Moscow which expressed its hostility. In the face of calls from the World Health Organisation, the “Moscow bloc” resisted and expressed its initial disagreement with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople who called on the churches of his communion to stop rituals and services until the end of March.²⁵ Going against him, on 10 March the Holy Synod (the collegial institution of Orthodox Churches) recalled the sacredness of communion: “Taking part in the divine Eucharist and communion, the common chalice of life, surely cannot become the cause of the spread of the disease, for the faithful of all times know that taking part in the divine communion, even during pandemics, constitutes an effective affirmation of surrendering to God.”

In Russia, while all other faiths (Muslims, Jews, Buddhists) closed their places of worship of their own accord, the Russian Orthodox Church turned a deaf ear for a long time. “If a law goes against our faith, our duty is to ignore it,” said Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov, head of the synodal commission for family affairs on 28 February on Russian TV channel Spas. He then advised the faithful to hold night meetings to avoid police patrols and, like the Holy Synod, concluded: “Not taking communion would be madness: the Black Death could only be contained when people began to take communion (sic). The order given by the Italian authorities testifies to their profound ignorance of God. The end is near.” Nevertheless, the first recommendations were posted on the official website of the Russian Orthodox Church following a meeting of the Synod:²⁶ the liturgical kissing of the crucifix could be replaced by a simple blessing, the sick could be anointed using disposable cotton buds which would be burnt at the end of the ritual, the spoons used to give the host would be washed after each communicant, and Sunday Bible schools and parish centres would be closed. Six days later the Bishop of Bryansk postponed indefinitely the presentation of Saint Spyridon’s relics to the faithful in a bid to avoid prophylactic kissing. At Lipetsk a Way of the Cross was also cancelled, being replaced by prayers. On 13 March, during a homily broadcast online, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk stated: “[Civil authorities] have told you not to leave home if you have symptoms, not even to go to work. And I would add: do not come to church either!”

The least convinced by this position were the monks who, in Russia as in Ukraine, remained intransigent on traditional practices. The Monastery of the Caves (Pechersk Lavra) in the centre of Kiev, a world orthodox holy site and the seat of the Russian Patriarchate in Ukraine which was founded in the eleventh

²⁵ <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/19/818392907/eastern-orthodox-church-to-halt-services-until-end-of-march?t=1591778497715>

²⁶ <https://www.lecourrierderussie.com/societe/2020/03/leglise-divisee-dans-la-lutte-contre-le-covid-19/>

century, disregarded the measures recommended but not imposed by the state.²⁷ Its Metropolitan, Bishop Paul, exhorted the faithful to “fear nothing”, “rush to the churches”, and “embrace” one another. The monastery continued its public liturgies without any precautions throughout March. By 9 April around 30 of its 250 monks were infected. By 13 April 90 were sick and 2 dead. The Metropolitan, himself hospitalised, eventually admitted that he had underestimated the problem and decided to apply the health measures in Russian Orthodox churches, before ordering the suspension of public worship. On the eve of the Great Week of Orthodox Easter the Monastery of the Caves was placed under quarantine with the help of military guards. The President of Ukraine ordered that masks be worn at Easter ceremonies, which were allowed, while urging citizens not to go to church for the occasion.

Finally, in Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Russia, and Serbia the faithful still flocked to celebrate Orthodox Easter, kissing icons or taking communion by drinking wine poured into the same spoon held out by the pope...

Religious authorities one step ahead

Conversely, religious leaders could, on the contrary, anticipate government decisions²⁸ and press authorities into taking drastic measures. This was clearly the stance of the Catholic Church in all the countries where it holds sway over a majority of the population. All Holy Week festive/popular celebrations were already suspended with its consent from the beginning of March: In Italy, Sicily, Spain, Malta, the Philippines, and elsewhere in the Lusitanian-Hispanic Catholic world the tradition of confraternity processions and other Ways of the Cross, urban and popular festivities dating from the Mediterranean ancient age, came to a historic halt. Seville, which has built much of its reputation on its processions, cancelled “its” Holy Week, as did Malaga and Tarragona, at the same time as the Spanish government announced that the country would go into lockdown. In Italy no less than 400 local Ways of the Cross were suspended and the Vatican publicly reorganised its own Holy Week celebrations.²⁹

In Latin America the Catholic Church in particular was one step ahead of government decisions. First in Colombia where the virus arrived via a 19-year-old girl who had returned from Italy without knowing she was infected. On 1 March she went to Sunday Mass at the Casa Sobre la Roca Church in Bogota. The Colombian Health Institute counted at least one hundred members of that parish who were infected that day. In this country with a strong religious practice, counting 6,864 evangelical churches and 4,000 Catholic parishes, it was the dioceses that took the first drastic measures. While public authorities still allowed gatherings of up to 50 participants, the Archdiocese of Bogota suspended all public services except funerals and birthdays which were celebrated in small groups, with attendants having to enter through a side door. In order to persuade the faithful who persisted in wanting to get together, Cardinal Ruben Salazar asked them to follow the example of the Pope who was under lockdown! Public celebrations were finally suspended by the government on 23 March and a general lockdown imposed. The end of the health measures was set by the Colombian President for 13 April, the day after Easter, including all Holy Week ceremonies. At the end of April Colombia seemed to have averted the disaster. It had “only” 7,000 cases and a flattened curve.

Likewise in Nicaragua where in early March the Catholic Church asked its most vulnerable members – “the over-60s, pregnant women, and children” – not to attend mass or processions in person and instead follow them from their homes via social networks or the media. In the face of these calls, the Sandinista government encouraged the population to take part in Holy Week events and the Plan Verano 2020 (“2020 Summer Plan” designed to promote tourism) which was endorsed by Vice President Rosario

²⁷ <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/un-celebre-monastere-ukrainien-devient-un-foyer-d-infection-au-coronavirus-20200409>

²⁸ Catholic Church – Bishops Conference of England and Wales, *Coronavirus guidelines*, <https://www.cbcew.org.uk/home/our-work/health-social-care/coronavirus-guidelines/>
German Catholic Church <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/experte-elfern-sollten-kindern-die-corona-krise-erklaren/>

²⁹ “Rome Modifies Holy Week Liturgies for Covid19 Pandemic”, 21 March 2020, *Patheos* : <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/labmind/2020/03/rome-modifies-holy-week-liturgies-for-coronavirus-pandemic.html>

Murillo. On Saturday 14 March the Nicaraguan government even organised a “love march in the time of Covid-19” in which, in the end, neither President Daniel Ortega nor the Vice President took part.

It is also worth noting that, while taking action in response to the dioceses, the leaders of several Latin American states did not hesitate to invoke divine intercession to ward off the epidemic. Thus, at a government press conference, El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele called on the faithful to pray for the country: “I know this is a secular state but we have many believers – I ask those who are to ask God to help them deal with this problem.” Paraguay's leader Mario Abdo Benitez used social networks to urge families under lockdown “not to forget the spiritual realm”. “The power of prayer, I am sure, will protect the nation,” he said. Even Uruguayan President Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou took part in an interfaith prayer convened by Cardinal Daniel Sturla, Archbishop of Montevideo. The country is, however, an exception in the religious landscape of Latin America because of its stronger attachment to the principle of secularism. Its president stressed that while the state was secular, it was not secularist, and “all initiatives for the benefit of the nation and the country (were) welcome – religious, secular, all of them”.³⁰

Twofold cacophony

The Nicaraguan example allows us to present the difficult case of internal cacophony between political authorities, and between political authorities and religious groups. This situation unfortunately occurred in the American federal countries, namely, in order of seriousness: Mexico, the United States, and especially Brazil.

In Mexico churches continued for a while to fill up every Sunday until the Episcopal Conference's health talks during March.³¹ However, on 15 March the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, a major pilgrimage site, was still full to bursting. While some Mexican states had decided to suspend public worship, such as Mexico City on 21 March, the Mexican president serenely affirmed that the Way of the Cross in Iztapalapa, a true national institution, would still take place during Holy Week. Throughout the month of March he continued to mingle with crowds, giving hugs and brandishing amulets and six-leaf clovers – his only weapons against the virus – in front of journalists. For a long time he encouraged the population to support the local economy by continuing to socialise and eat out. According to him, the economic repercussions could be more devastating than those of the pandemic. His wait-and-see attitude prevented national emergency measures from being put in place until 30 March when, almost overnight, the federal government rushed to order a national lockdown and suspend all public religious celebrations, including Holy Week in Iztapalapa, until the day after Easter, just like in Colombia.

The situation in the United States is probably the most well-documented and commented on, and the issue is part of the general question raised by commentators about the country's somewhat disorderly management of the health crisis. Depending on which perspective we adopt, this disorder is a sign of the vitality of this great complex democracy or, on the contrary, it reveals its dysfunctions. In mid-March some of the states decided to impose general lockdown, including a religious one with the interfaith consent of institutional leaders,³² but others did not because there was no infection yet and so religious gatherings continued to be held. However, in those states that were under lockdown a discussion quickly started on the special nature of faith as a vital need and on the collective dimension of religious freedom which is the first among freedoms. It was not possible to stop people from practising together. While mainstream churches such as the Catholic Church and the old Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Lutheran churches maintained their civic stance, at times criticising policies that eased lockdown quickly³³ – as

³⁰ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/amerique-latine-cette-foi-qui-nous-sauvera-du-coronavirus>

³¹ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/quick-reads/new-mexico-diocese-let-small-number-people-attend-mass>

³² Brian Adams, “Why Faith Communities Are Key Partners in Planning for a Coronavirus Outbreak”, 12 March 2020, ABC net : <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/faith-communities-and-the-coronavirus/12050700>

³³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/05/21/minnesota-catholic-lutheran-defy-walz-reopen-coronavirus/?>

did Muslim,³⁴ Jewish, and Buddhist authorities – instead some Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Prosperity Gospel groups noisily challenged the ban on gatherings and called on their followers to come and celebrate, being certain of God's protection.³⁵ As a result of growing pressure in the name of religious freedom for religious practice to be exempted, a number of governors finally agreed to no longer subject religious gatherings to the general lockdown, while at a press conference on 18 April the US President took journalists to task on the injustice of restricting Christians from practising their faith while Muslims were (according to him) allowed to practise theirs. He suggested, just as baselessly, that Muslims celebrating Ramadan, which was about to begin, would not be subject to the same social-distancing rules as Christians had been on Easter Day. "I've seen a great disparity in this country... they go after Christian churches, but they don't tend to go after mosques." This presidential attempt to stir up discord, also made by the far right,³⁶ did not however conceal the other major battle waged by the federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on precautionary measures and guides for attending places of worship, further calling for a delay in reopening those same places even after the decision to ease lockdown had been taken.³⁷

In Brazil tragedy competed with farce. We witnessed the superb attitude of denial from a federal president in cahoots with a murky neo-Pentecostal and business world, seeking to destabilise the legitimate governors of his states, all of whom took measures to lock down and restrict religious gatherings with the consent of the Catholic Church, Jewish and Muslim institutions, and most evangelical churches. A neo-Pentecostal sectarian clique pressed Jair Bolsonaro – who was rebaptised in 2016 in the waters of the Jordan River by a pastor from this movement and who declared that God and chloroquine would save the country – into calling for an immediate end to the lockdown. It peddled the idea, taken up by the president, that the pandemic was nothing more than "hysteria". Among them was the powerful Edir Macedo, the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (1.8 million followers), who explained that the virus was Satan's and the media's "tactic" to sow terror and that the faithful should read the Bible instead of learning about the virus. In a video disseminated through WhatsApp, later deleted, the pastor claimed that behind coronavirus were hidden economic interests. Macedo deleted the recording from his own social-network accounts. Then he released another one in which he asked Evangelicals not to look for medical information or advice about the pandemic and read the Bible instead.³⁸ Until the second week in March the country's major pastors continued to offer their services as if no lockdown measures were in place. Aligning himself with these pastors and at the request of a group of them, in early April Bolsonaro decreed, in imitation of some of his neighbours, a national day of fasting and prayer so that Brazilians would be "delivered from this evil as soon as possible".³⁹ He went to the courts to ask that religious worship be included as an "essential service". This exceptional situation shows above all the influence exerted by expanding neo-Pentecostal entrepreneurs who own media outlets and are involved in politics: they preach untruths about the virus in their churches, inundate the public with false information via their networks, and, finally, have a great responsibility in relation to the measures taken – or not taken – to combat the epidemic.

Prayer versus lockdown: the adepts of denial

³⁴ National Muslim Task Force, North America, Statement on COVID-19, 18 March 2020 http://www.isna.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/National-Muslim-Task-Force-Statement-on-COVID-19_03-18-2020.pdf

³⁵ "The US Churches and Pastors Ignoring Stay at Home Orders" *The Guardian*, 5 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/coronavirus-churches-florida-social-distancing>
<https://theconversation.com/covid-19-aux-e-u-comment-certain-predicateurs-ont-ils-reagi-face-a-la-menace-de-pandemie-134759>

³⁶ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/analyse-armes-religion-et-confinement-pourquoi-lultradroite-se-rebiffe-aux-etats-unis>

³⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/reopening-guidance-for-churches-delayed-after-white-house-and-cdc-disagree/2020/05/20/36a81f8e-9aec-11ea-89fd-28fb313d1886_story.html
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/white-house-and-cdc-remove-coronavirus-warnings-about-choirs-in-faith-guidance/2020/05/28/5d9c526e-a117-11ea-9590>

³⁸ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/amerique-latine-cette-foi-qui-nous-sauvera-du-coronavirus>

³⁹ <http://www.open-diplomacy.eu/blog/bolsonaro-covid19-bresil-brazilia-coronavirus>

There is one last group of countries which, for different structural reasons – a lack of public resources for some, the religious instrumentalisation of power for others – decided to do nothing (or very little) and to let providence save their population, in a way taking advantage of its credulity. This shared denial – the epidemic will not spread, we don't have to take any measures, we will not hinder the glorification of God, religious gatherings are not contagious, on the contrary, faith will save believers – helped spread the virus to a great extent.⁴⁰

Thus in mid-March Guatemala's President Alejandro Giammattei asked his people on national television to unite for a day of prayer and fasting in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, imploring God to bless their country. Same thing happened in Honduras where President Juan Orlando Hernandez invited his fellow citizens – live on Honduran national television (TNH) and his Facebook page – to fast and pray during a “great day of prayer for the health and unity of the Honduran people”. In Ecuador the leaders of the city of Guayaquil, a Covid-19 hotspot in the country, named Sunday 5 April as a day to implore God for help in the face of the calamitous health situation in the city and the spread of the virus in the country. President Lenin Moreno called on Ecuadorians to unite in prayer “regardless of their beliefs” because “faith moves mountains and for a believer who prays nothing is impossible”.

Further afield on the African continent other political leaders used such language too. Thus Tanzania: Disregarding the fact that the first Covid-19 cases had been recorded in his country, on Sunday 29 March, like every Sunday, the Tanzanian President John Magufuli went to mass in the capital Dodoma and before leaving he told his worried compatriots: “God is in these sacred places so the satanic coronavirus can't survive here. If he enters, he will burn. That is why you must certainly not worry.”⁴¹ John Magufuli went on to encourage his compatriots to go to church or mosque. His words caused an outcry among Tanzanian opposition who condemned the President's culpable negligence. “Don't contradict science, this disease is really dangerous,” warned opposition figure Zitto Kabwe, urging John Magufuli to close places of worship as soon as possible in order to stop the spread of the disease. Magufuli paid no heed, nor did he take any other measures apart from temporarily closing some public places.

However, it is Iran that went furthest in its laissez-faire attitude, allowing itself to become one of the countries worst hit by the pandemic. Even when the media began to reveal that Qom was the source of the virus, the ayatollah in charge of the mausoleum refused to suspend worship, explaining that the shrine was a “house of healing”. Another official told the good people of Iran that the virus could not hit Muslims, only to then he himself become infected. Not only did some directors of theological schools in Qom refuse to close them, they further did not hesitate to promote Islamic medicine to get rid of the virus, a concept invented by the Iranian-Iraqi Ayatollah Abbas Tabrizian. As of 31 March Iran was officially recording 3,000 new patients per day. On 2 June figures remained the same and the infected population was estimated at 170,000 people according to Ministry for Health spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour speaking on state television.⁴² Even though the state decided to temporarily close the shrines in Mashhad and Qom and to cancel Friday prayers in mosques at the end of March, these bans were not observed, with most mosque officials ignoring the order and continuing to worship. Iran spent Ramadan in this intermediate state where the government did not seek to enforce its lockdown orders on religious matters and gradually lifted restrictions from April onwards. This “laxity” should also be seen in light of the religious legitimacy of the officially Islamist regime which uses religion as an easy means to compensate for the suffering of the Iranian people. Above all, this attitude is combined with a total denial of the geographical origin of the spread of the virus. In neighbouring Iraq the head of the Mahdi Army, the Iraqi Shi'ite Muqtada al-Sadr, took it upon himself to identify the causes of the pandemic, confidently stating in a tweet: “One of the most appalling things that have caused this epidemic is the legalisation of gay marriage.” Sadr called on “all governments to repeal this law immediately and

⁴⁰ <https://theconversation.com/virus-religion-et-politique-dieu-appelle-au-secours-de-lamerique-latine-137121>

⁴¹ <https://www.courrierinternational.com/revue-de-presse/fake-news-face-un-virus-satanique-le-president-tanzanien-encourage-aller-leglise>

⁴² <https://www.leparisien.fr/societe/coronavirus-l-acceleration-de-la-propagation-se-confirme-en-iran-03-06-2020-8329092.php>

without hesitation". And it was in an armoured vehicle that his supporters broke through the barrier around the Sadr City district set up by the Iraqi army to protect Baghdad from the pandemic.

Repression

There is finally one country whose policy of fighting coronavirus led to complete – but poorly documented – stifling of religious practice and a return to religious repression: China. From the very first lockdown order in Wuhan on 23 January the provincial political authorities forced faiths to close their buildings and banned all religious gatherings without any negotiation. We do not know how funeral rites were handled that winter but we do know that, despite the easing of lockdown, those buildings were still closed in June. On 1 May controversial new rules on “ethnic unity” came into force in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The “Regulations on the Establishment of a Model Area for Ethnic Unity and Progress in the Tibet Autonomous Region” were adopted by the TAR People’s Congress on 11 January and were therefore applied while Tibetan Buddhist temples remained closed. At the other end of China the bishop of Wenzhou disappeared on the eve of Easter. A Chinese government directive was issued to Catholic institutions in Zhejiang province on 29 May, authorising resumption of worship on condition that priests teach patriotism to their flock. It is highly likely that the private gatherings that have made up for the continued closure of places of worship despite lockdown being eased will be deemed clandestine churches and a new wave of repression will begin. It will take advantage of this general ban on all public worship which was enacted last February when China was locked down and is likely to last.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when we take stock of the restrictions imposed on religions between March and June 2020 because of the pandemic – public worship suspended, places of worship closed or drastically modified, practices changed – we can say that there was no generalised religious opposition to these measures but there were points of friction in countries where religious minorities are already discriminated against and stand up to official power, such as in Israel. However, a form of exasperation became widespread when lockdown-easing measures were slow in setting public worship free and, earlier, when it became clear that dying from coronavirus led to unethical practices in which the funerary exception was not even applied. A global reflection on the right to a death that is not only dignified but also protected in its sacred stages, from the dying moments to burial or cremation, may rightly take up a good part of future debates between lawyers and journalists.

On the other hand, we can also say that public authorities did not wage a war against religion or take advantage of the epidemic to further tighten their grip on religious groups, except in non-democratic countries such as China and most definitely North Korea. How will this stifling affect the regimes themselves in the long run?

Between these two polar ends we find a lot of tension, confusion, procrastination, or manipulation. At both ends of the spectrum, the sometimes staggering denial by political leaders who used the credulity of their citizens to justify their inaction or refusal to lock down, as in Brazil, echoed the denial by radical religious groups who used their resistance to legitimate authorities to underscore their fundamentalism, as in the United States. Thus, we can say that coronavirus has made civil authorities aware of the major role they play in regulating religions, and religious leaders of the importance of working together with public authorities. Finally, religious life has found a new channel in the form of digital communication. Although the latter has long been used by thousands of religious actors, its systematic use during the pandemic will occupy sociological research for a long time to come.