

Tidsskrift for **ISLAM**
FORSKNING

Scandinavian Journal of
Islamic Studies

**MEDIATED RELIGIOUS AND
POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON
COVID-19: MINORITY AND
MAJORITY VIEWS**

VOL 15 · NO 2 · 2021

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Design: Carl H.K.-Zakrisson

Layout: Per Baasch Jørgensen, Graphorama.dk

Tekstredaktion: Dorthe Bramsen (Dansk)

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Tidsskrift for Islamforskning er et netbaseret tidsskrift, hvis formål er at fremme videndeling blandt forskere og samtidig viderebringe forskningsresultater til den bredere offentlighed. Tidsskriftet udgives af Forum for Islamforskning (FIFO) og udkommer to gange årligt. Artikler undergår peer-review. Første udgave af *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning* udkom 17. oktober 2006.

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Religion og sekularisme under covid-19

I begyndelsen af 2020 var Kina epicenteret for covid-19, hvorfra virussen hurtigt spredte sig til resten af verden. Pandemien kom som et chok for de uforberedte stater og for deres befolkninger, der hurtigt måtte se deres hverdag underlagt restriktioner i varierende grad. På den ene side blev sundhedsmyndighedernes udstukne retningslinjer mødt med velvilje og samarbejde, og på den anden side opstod der hurtigt uenigheder både internt i mellem og på tværs af borgere, interessegrupper og politiske partier. Man så også, jo længere krisen trak ud, i stigende grad voldelige sammenstød mellem grupper af borgere og myndigheder. I første fase var nogle staters reaktion at afvise virusens tilstedeværelse i deres lande. Andre var langsomme med at få igangsat initiativer, der kunne reducere smitten, mens enkelte lande til gengæld hurtigt indførte forholdsregler i forsøget på at forhindre et større udbrud.

Online- og offline-information og misinformation har været en del af forskellige grupperingers kamp mod pandemien. Pandemien har ført til analyser, diskussioner og restriktioner både på makro- og mikroniveau, hvor ikke blot politikere, økonomer

Ehab Galal, lektor, ph.d. i Medier og Moderne Samfund i Mellemøsten. Galal forsker i medier i Mellemøsten, aktuelt og historisk, med en særlig interesse i mediernes regionale og globale indflydelse. Han har således undersøgt, hvordan den muslimske og mellemøstlige befolknings brug af medier påvirker deres forståelse af religion og religiøs praksis. I bogen *Arab TV-Audiences* analyserer han publikums respons på islamisk TV i både Europa og Mellemøsten. Aktuelt arbejder han på et projekt om mellemøstlige oppositionsmedier i og uden for Mellemøsten efter Det Arabiske Forår i 2011. Han er leder af forskningsprojektet *Mediatized diaspora (MEDIASP) – Contentious politics among Arab media users in Europe*, som er finansieret af Danmarks Frie Forskningsfond nr. 8018-00038B.

og eksperter, men også religiøse lærde og autoriteter fra verdens religioner har deltaget aktivt. Da restriktionerne ramte hele samfundet, ramte de også den religiøse praksis, blandt andet i form af periodevise nedlukninger af kirker, moskeer og synagoger. At religion således blev et aspekt og et redskab i håndteringen af covid-19 har samtidig været med til at synliggøre de religiøse institutioner som en del af samfundet. For eksempel blev spørgsmålet om kirkernes tilgængelighed under religiøse højtider en hidtil uset del af den offentlige debat i Danmark.

De offentlige debatter har inddraget mange aspekter såsom retten til religion eller religionsfrihed, det religiøse fællesskab som trøstende og støttende i krisetid, samarbejde versus konflikt mellem stat og religiøse institutioner, sekulære versus religiøse argumenter for håndtering af sygdom, religionens særlige, helbredende kraft osv. På den måde har religiøse autoriteter verden over spillet en rolle i håndteringen af pandemien enten ved at opfordre medlemmer til at overholde eller ignorere de af staterne udstukne rammer eller ved at forsøge at skabe eksistentiel og religiøs mening ud af den meningsløshed, som pandemien ligesom andre kriser også bragte med sig.

Spørgsmålet om religionens rolle under covid-19 er afsættet for dette nummers ni artikler. Artiklerne giver udvalgte eksempler på, hvordan religiøse lærde fra de tre abrahamitiske religioner, jødedom, kristendom og islam, fortolker pandemien. Fem artikler omhandler islam og de muslimske religiøse lærdes håndtering af pandemien gennem brugen af medier, to artikler omhandler kristendom, og to artikler omhandler jødedom. Eksemplerne stammer fra så forskellige steder som Danmark, Sverige, Tyskland, Italien, Rusland, Israel, Indien, Pakistan, USA og de arabiske lande. Artiklerne bidrager dermed med perspektiver på, hvordan stater og trossamfund verden over har forholdt sig til og prøvet at styre koblingen af religiøse og sundhedsvidenskabelige problemstillinger. De ni artikler viser, hvordan staterne er fælles om deres forsøg på at kontrollere pandemien ved hjælp af videnskabelige og sekulære argumenter, ligesom de forsøger at kontrollere informationer for at modvirke spredningen af misinformation. Staterne har skullet håndtere en situation, hvor religiøse grupperinger, lærde og prædikanter de seneste årtier i kraft af ny teknologi har fået nye platforme for formidling af deres budskaber. Det gælder både etablerede og selvbestaltede religiøse lærde og autoriteter. Resultatet er et nyt medie- og religionslandskab, der er langt vanskeligere at kon-

trollere, og dermed kommer medierne også til at spille en central rolle for håndteringen af covid-19.

På tværs af de ni artikler finder man en række gennemgående temaer, der belyser trossamfunds og de religiøse autoriteters rolle i forskellige verdensdele i forbindelse med covid-19. Mens artiklernes fokus varierer, træder tre temaer frem som centrale. Det første tema er samspillet mellem stat og trossamfund; det andet er spørgsmålet om, hvordan man som troende kan praktisere sin tro med dens ritualer på trods af restriktioner; og det tredje er, hvorvidt og hvordan covid-19 har forandret samspillet mellem sekularisme og religion.

Staten og religionen

Helt overordnet viser bidragene til dette særnummer, at trossamfund overvejende har accepteret, fulgt og anbefalet de retningslinjer og restriktioner, som staterne har udstukket. Det betyder dog ikke, at forholdet mellem religion og stat er forblevet uberørt af covid-19. Pandemien både tydeliggør og forandrer allerede eksisterende relationer.

Italien blev hurtigt kendt for at være et af de hårdest ramte lande. I artiklen ”Home prayer, unattended funerals and social responsibility: Muslims in Italy and the coronavirus outbreak” skriver Alessandro Gori, som er lektor i arabisk sprog og litteratur ved Københavns Universitet, om muslimske reaktioner på denne nationale krise. Gori belyser, hvordan muslimske paraplyorganisationer i Italien ikke blot støttede op om statens håndtering, men også igangsatte eller deltog i kollektive initiativer, som havde til formål at skabe national solidaritet og fællesskab. Det var alt fra at deltage i fælles interreligiøs bøn for nationen til at opfordre muslimer til at donere blod. Således blev pandemien en anledning til, at muslimske organisationer indgik i dialog og kontakt med det italienske samfund på nye måder og dermed en mulighed for at omforme den islamiske identitet i Italien og indlejre den i en bredere italiensk ramme.

I andre nationale kontekster har pandemien først og fremmest bekræftet det strategiske allianceforhold mellem religion eller dele af det religiøse establishment og staten. I artiklen ”Med bønnens kraft: Et islamisk og kristent arabisk perspektiv på covid-19” viser Ehab Galal, som er lektor i mellemøstlige studier på Københavns Universitet, hvordan religiøse argumenter bru-

ges til både at bakke op om og udfordre statens håndtering af covid-19. Mens de statsloyale religiøse lærde i de arabiske lande forbliver loyale og ikke blot bakker op om, men legitimerer statens håndtering af covid-19 med islam, forbliver de islamiske lærde, der i forvejen er kritiske over for de arabiske staters politik, kritiske og mistænksomme over for statens motiver for håndteringen af covid-19. I de arabiske lande udspringer håndteringen af religiøs praksis under covid-19 således af allerede etablerede relationer mellem stat og religion, ligesom staterne bruger de statsloyale religiøse autoriteter til at legitimere egen håndtering.

Statens etablerede måder at organisere religion på bliver derfor også afgørende for, hvordan forholdet mellem stat og religion udfoldes under covid-19. Det fremgår ligeledes af artiklen ”Islamic Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic in India and Pakistan”, der er skrevet af Martin Thomas Riexinger, der er lektor i arabisk og islamstudier ved Aarhus Universitet. Netop sammenligningen mellem Indien og Pakistan synliggør på den ene side, hvilke rolle organiseringen af religion får for statens mulighed for at blande sig i trossamfunds anliggender. I Pakistan er religiøse organisationer autonome, hvilket har betydet, at regeringen ikke kunne gennemtvinge en nedlukning af moskeer. Derfor forblev de sunnitiske moskeer åbne. På den anden side viser sammenligningen, at når et trossamfund indtager en minoritetsposition, påvirker dette også reaktionen på statens politik. Både de muslimske organisationer i Indien og shiamuslimerne i Pakistan forsøgte ved at følge staternes anbefalinger at leve op til rollen som det ”ansvarlige mindretal”.

En anden måde at forhandle sin minoritetsposition under covid-19 finder man i artiklen ”’Perhaps we see it in negative terms, but, ultimately, it is positive’: the responses of Swedish Salafis to Covid-19”, som er skrevet af Simon Sorgenfrei. Sorgenfrei er lektor i religionsstudier ved Södertörn Universitet i Stockholm og undersøger, hvordan en af Sveriges mest aktive salafistiske grupper, Islam.nu – også omtalt som Järva-salafister – har reageret på covid-19. En af reaktionerne er, hvad Sorgenfrei kalder retorisk. Det er en form for respons, der er kendetegnet ved at bruge nyheder om pandemien til blandt andet at kritisere den eksisterende politik i forhold til muslimer og migranter, ikke mindst igennem brugen af ironi. Således ironiserer en af gruppens ledere over, at man nu ikke længere må hilse på hinanden med et håndtryk, mens muslimer ellers er blevet kritise-

ret for ikke at ville give hånd til det modsatte køn. Selv om gruppen dermed forholder sig kritisk til blandt andet staten, viser Sorgenfrei, at det dog ikke er statens håndtering af covid-19, der kritiseres. Denne fremstilles i stedet som i overensstemmelse med islam.

Covid-19 har således synliggjort forholdet mellem stat og religion på flere måder. Mens pandemien har fremmet solidaritet på tværs af trossamfund og samfundsgrupper med minoriteten som aktiv medspiller, har den også cementeret på forhånd etablerede magtrelationer.

Ritualer og den religiøse praksis

Det var ikke kun i Italien, at interreligiøs bøn blev set som et fællesskabsskabende initiativ. I april 2020 kunne man i flere lande se, hvordan forskellige trossamfund bad for nationen og resten af verden. Således kaldte muslimer i et hidtil uhørt omfang til fælles bøn med et budskab om solidaritet og sammenhold fra minerater i lande som Tyskland, Holland, Storbritannien, Spanien og Belgien, ligesom flere statsledere mødtes med religiøse ledere for sammen at bede Gud om at redde verden fra epidemien. Pandemien har på den måde medvirket til at sætte fokus på den rituelle praksis. Hvor den interreligiøse bøn er en måde at skabe globalt og nationalt fællesskab og solidaritet, handler den rituelle praksis dog også om den enkeltes frihed til at tro og praktisere sin religion. En tro og rituel praksis, som risikerer at støde sammen med de retningslinjer, som staten har udstukket.

I en artikel på Forskerzonen i marts 2020 peger lektor i religionsvidenskab ved Aarhus Universitet, Jørn Borup, på, hvordan nogle mennesker er overbeviste om, at religionsdyrkelsen er meget mere beskyttende mod hvilken som helst virus end staternes forholdsregler (Borup 2020). Med troen på det religiøse ritual som indstiftet af Gud og derfor helligt følger hos nogen en overbevisning om, at ritualer ikke kan medvirke til noget ondt. Dette belyses også i flere af dette særnummers artikler. I den allerede omtalte artikel af Galal påpeges det, hvordan nogle af de koptisk-ortodokse præster i Egypten mener, at nadveren kurerer "alle sygdomme i menneskets kerne, krop og sjæl".

En lignende argumentation blev fremsat af religiøse ledere fra den russisk-ortodokse kirke. Det viser Mikhail Suslov i ar-

tiklen "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Pandemic: Problems, Challenges, Responses". Suslov, som er adjunkt i russisk ved Københavns Universitet, refererer til kirkerepræsentanternes udtalelser i marts 2020, hvor de fastslår, at nadveren ikke kan medføre smitte, fordi der er tale om Jesu blod og legeme. Til gengæld kan de fysiske beholdere af brødet og vinen være smitteoverførende, og derfor stillede man krav om engangsbrug og jævnlig rengøring. Et lignende forsøg på at balancere mellem hensynet til de troende og efterlevelsen af myndighedernes krav betød, at religiøse ledere i stedet for at lukke kirkerne blandt andet henviste til et bibelsk eksempel, egyptiske Maria, med opfordringen til ikke at gå i kirke under de nuværende omstændigheder. Men opfordringen blev opfattet som en anbefaling snarere end en befaling, hvorfor mange troende ikke fulgte den.

At begrunde begrænsninger i religionsudøvelsen med religiøse analogier har været en udbredt praksis, ikke mindst blandt muslimer verden over. Det ser man i Sverige, som Sorgenfrei skriver om i den tidligere omtalte artikel, ligesom man finder eksempler herpå i Galals og Goris artikler. Både Gori og Galal viser derudover, at overnationale muslimske organisationer udstikker retningslinjer for, hvordan de rituelle forpligtelser kan udføres islamisk korrekt, selv om man f.eks. ikke kan mødes til fredagsbøn. Det fællesskabsorienterede aspekt af fredagsbønnen kan opretholdes ved enten at følge en imam virtuelt eller ved at bede derhjemme sammen som familie, som derved udgør et islamisk fællesskab.

Brugen af medier som platform for rituel praksis fik generelt vind i sejlene med covid-19. Det var også tilfældet i den protestantiske kirke i Tyskland, som Katharina Nötzold belyser i artiklen "Deafening silence of theologians vs. creative local parishes during the Corona pandemic? – A case study of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)". Nötzold er ansvarshavende redaktør af *Global Media Journal German Edition* ved Freie Universität i Berlin og har især fokus på den debat om kirkens rolle og relevans i det tyske samfund, der opstod som følge af pandemien. De protestantiske, katolske og ortodokse kirker kom allerede i marts 2020 med en fælles udtalelse med titlen "Assistance, trøst og håb", og selv om denne udtalelse i stort omfang blev oversat af medierne, afspejler titlen indholdet af den debat, der opstod om kirkens rolle. Den handlede i mindre grad om ritualer, som kirken gav forslag til, hvordan kunne løses. I stedet var fokus på kirkens rolle som omsorgsgiver i forhold til at hjælpe

befolkningen igennem en krise.

En variant af dette mere sociale og psykologiske aspekt af den religiøse praksis kommer også til udtryk i artiklen ”Da krisen ramte: Genforhandlingerne af amerikansk-jødiske samfundsværdier”, skrevet af Maja Gildin Zuckerman, som er post.doc. ved Copenhagen Business School. Hun sætter fokus på de amerikanske jøder i USA, som har reageret på pandemien og de samtidige raceuroligheder i USA ved at organisere sociale (virtuelle) mødesteder, skabe moralske fællesskaber og proklamere stærke solidaritetserklæringer. Ifølge Zuckerman har covid-19-krisen gjort det klart for mange amerikanske jøder, at de har brug for dybe, pålidelige og autentiske etno-religiøse fællesskaber.

I forhold til de religiøse ritualer og rituel praksis har pandemien således været med til at skabe nye praksisser, men også fornyet opmærksomhed om religionens og det religiøse fællesskabs betydning. Nye interreligiøse og intrareligiøse tiltag er opstået for at skabe solidaritet og sammenhold, og disse har ført til nye virtuelle praksisser og har understreget eksistensen af troen på noget, der ligger udover rationelle og videnskabelige forklaringsrammer. Dermed har pandemien også bidraget til fornyet diskussion af sekularisme.

Sekularisme og det postsekulære samfund

I artiklen *Danish Muslim during Covid-19: 'Religion and pandemics' in a postsecular society* argumenterer Lene Kühle for, at der også i Danmark sker en sammenblanding af religiøse og sekulære argumenter. Kühle er professor MSO i religionsvidenskab ved Aarhus Universitet og har undersøgt danske moskeers rolle under krisen på baggrund af deres offentlige kommunikation på sociale medier. Kühle trækker på Jürgen Habermas' forståelse af det postsekulære samfund som et sociologisk begreb, der analytisk er i stand til at rumme, at religion på trods af stigende sekularisering ikke forsvinder, og at religiøse stemmer fortsat indgår i samfundsdebatter (Habermas 2008, 2012). I artiklen viser Kühle, hvordan muslimer bakker op om myndighedernes retningslinjer og stræber efter at fremstå som den ansvarlige minoritet, ligesom Riexinger er inde på i sin artikel. Selv om den danske stats reaktion på pandemien klart er båret frem af sekulære argumenter, sker der således også en sammen-

blanding af det religiøse og det sekulære. For eksempel viderebringer de muslimske organisationer de sekulære myndigheders budskaber, som om de var deres egne. Og fordi de teologiske reaktioner på pandemien i nogle tilfælde er blevet udarbejdet i samråd med muslimsk sundhedspersonale, fremstår sekulære og religiøse budskaber som sammenfaldende. De muslimske trossamfund i Danmark kan på den baggrund siges at tilpasse sig en sekulær samfundsorden.

Pandemiens betydning for forholdet mellem den religiøse og sekulære samfundsorden i den russiske kontekst fremstår, som analyseret af Suslov, noget mere kompleks. Hvor den russisk-ortodokse kirke under det sovjetiske styre var marginaliseret, har den i stigende grad indtaget en central samfundsrolle som moralsk og ideologisk autoritet, der har bidraget til en høj grad af symbiose og ideologisk overensstemmelse mellem den og det russiske regime. Alligevel har forholdet mellem de sekulære og religiøse myndigheder langt fra været harmonisk under pandemien, hvilket kirkens utilbøjelighed til at følge statens udstukne covid-19-retningslinjer illustrerer. Den fundamentalistiske fløj inden for kirken har lagt afstand til statens linje og udlagt den som en gentagelse af sovjettidens ateisme og undertrykkelse af religion. Således kan reaktionerne på pandemien i Rusland også sættes ind i diskussionen om det postsekulære samfund.

Et sidste eksempel, der også forbilledligt bidrager til diskussionen om sekularisme og postsekularisme, er Joshua Sabih's artikel om de ultraortodokse jøder i Israel. Sabih er dr.theol. (UNCPH) og Diplôme post-doctoral en sciences historiques et philologiques (EPHE- Université Paris) og bidrager med artiklen "God is telling us something: Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's Peshar and Socio-Political Pantheism of Coronavirus". Hans fokus er den ultraortodokse rabbiner, Amnon Yitzhaks (f. 1953) fortolkninger af og reaktioner på covid-19. Yitzhak er en fremtrædende prædikant og politiker, associeret med den ultraortodokse bevægelse i Israel, Mizrahi Haredi, og en af grundlæggerne af Ba`alei Teshuva-bevægelsen i Israel. Israels vaccinepolitik er ifølge Yitzhak en måde at kontrollere og slavegøre befolkningen, og regeringens generelle håndtering tilsidesætter den hellige kraft, som om mennesket har magt over liv og død. Sabih argumenterer for, at Yitzhaks fortolkning ikke er en fuldstændig afvisning af videnskab og rationalitet, men snarere en afvisning af sekularisme og modernismes princip om, at "modern

science is a practice which can only be fully understood on the basis of itself and performatively establishes the criterion of all that is true or false” (Habermas 2008, 210).

De ni artikler dokumenterer således, hvordan religion, religiøse institutioner og religiøse autoriteter bliver et aspekt i globale fortolkninger og håndteringer af covid-19. Det handler om langt mere end om smitterisiko ved forsamlings i forbindelse med religiøse praksisser. Generelt viser artiklerne, at pandemien har åbnet op for forhandlinger af religionens rolle såvel som religionspraksis. Nye måder at praktisere ritualer og fællesskab er taget i brug, mens forholdet mellem stat og religiøse institutioner er blevet udfordret med både styrkede og svækkede relationer til følge. Samtidig er artiklernes casestudier eksempler på den analytiske relevans af det postsekulære perspektiv, hvor religiøse stemmer stadig spiller en samfundsmæssig rolle på ondt og godt.

Litteratur

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Lene Kühle

Temasektion

Danish Muslims during COVID-19

Religion and pandemics in a postsecular society

Keywords

COVID-19, Muslims in Denmark, mosques, postsecular society,

Abstract How have Danish Muslims communicated on social media about COVID-19, and how have religious communities been included in the handling of the pandemic? Religion has become part of the public debate in new ways, because religious gathering places have been closed, owing to this crisis. Muslim leaders, and ministries and municipalities, have established religion-sensitive guidelines for how people should behave during the crisis caused by the pandemic. This article investigates the reactions of official mosque social media profiles to the pandemic, based on their public communication on social media platforms. This material is analyzed in relation to Habermas's concept of the postsecular society. I conclude that this crisis has contributed to negotiations concerning the position of minority religions, particularly with regard to Islam in Danish society.

On June 25, 2020, the London School of Economics hosted a webinar titled "Religious Communities under COVID-19: the first pandemic of the postsecular age?" The context of the webinar was explained as the identification of religious gatherings as major sites of virus transmission, and that in many countries, this had heightened tensions between the religiously observant and the secular authorities who attempt to regulate their activities.¹ The first speaker, Dr. James Walters, a Senior Lecturer in Practice in the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics, and an affiliated faculty member at the Department for International Development, was tasked with explaining the webinar's title. He did this by emphasizing that COV-

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ID-19 was the first pandemic that authorities and governments worldwide perceived as secular; that is, the pandemic was not widely considered as a sign of God's wrath or punishment. Religious leaders were not invited to advise to governments, and as the cause and cure were understood in scientific terms, medical experts took the lead as key advisors. Nonetheless, religion played a role in the pandemic. Religious communities were noticed, for better or for worse. Thus, a 2020 Editor's Note in the journal *Sociology of Religion* included religious gatherings and rituals with regard to social distancing², and conflicts involving religion, politics, and law, in the range of topics that COVID-19 has prompted sociology to address (Baker et al. 2020). Similarly, a brief at the ISA (International Sociological Association) platform made suggestions for a post-COVID-19 sociology that specifically included a call to focus on the features of postsecular societies amidst the societal challenges created by the pandemic (Hanafi 2020: 2). In this article, I will take up these challenges, and discuss the concept of a postsecular society with regard to pandemic-related public announcements made by official social media (SoMe) profiles of Danish mosque associations, and the Danish authorities' and media reactions to these. The data is drawn primarily from a study of online reactions to Denmark's lockdown in March 2020. This study (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020) was carried out by a group of academics at the Center of Contemporary Studies of Religion, Aarhus University. We collected SoMe material (mainly from Facebook, but in some case also from websites, Instagram, YouTube) from the official profiles of the so-called 'recognized religious communities'³ in Denmark during the period from March 11, 2020, when the Danish government imposed a lockdown of public institutions and all non-vital shops, to May 18, 2020, when Denmark reopened (Kühle and Vinding 2020). 'Recognized religious communities' have a privileged position with respect to tax exemption and the right to perform marriages (Nielsen and Kühle 2011). In this article the SoMe material from the Muslim 'recognized religious communities' is supplemented with SoMe material from larger mosque associations, which are not officially recognized. Material from 25 SoMe profiles of Danish Muslim organizations, representing over 80 mosque associations, provides the background for the analysis in this article. The material is public and represents official communications, therefore referencing this material is unproblematic from a research ethics perspective (Willis 2019, Legewie and Nassauer 2018).

1 <http://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?category=public+lectures+and+events>

2 Some prefer to talk about 'physical distancing' instead because "it is feared that in the long term, forgetting this concept [social distancing] will lead to human error and social isolation" (Aminnejad and Alikhani 2020). I use 'social distancing' because it is the social isolation associated with being unable to meet for religious gatherings which is the key element addressed in this article.

I also include material from the study, *Religiøs forandring i en krisetid* (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). This study included interviews with 60 representatives of religious bodies in Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city. Of the 60 religious organizations that agreed to participate, thirteen were Muslim. The survey study, with assistance from YouGov, collected responses from over 1500 respondents during May 2020 (Andersen et al 2021), when Denmark was beginning to reopen after the spring 2020 lockdown. The survey is a general population survey, and as such it establishes the general response of the Danish population to the pandemic. This was useful for establishing Danes' generally secular outlook on the pandemic. Respondents with a Muslim background were few (34 of 1538), but even if this small number does not allow for investigations of how the Danish Muslim population may or may not differ significantly from the general population on the questions involved, it does indicate diversity in the responses of Muslim respondents. (Beckford 2015)

Examples of comments on official statements that health authorities published on social media are also included in this study. This material has not been systematically collected, and serves only to provide examples of reactions to official communications from the Danish Health Authority regarding advice to be considered during Ramadan. The SoMe communication I analyze were published in Danish, but for the purpose of this article I have translated the statements I quote into English.

A postsecular society

The concept of the postsecular first emerged in social theology in the 1960s. It was used to identify the hope for the emergence of a new era in which religious ideas challenged and repaired the pathology of secularity (Parmaksız 2018: 99). The concept

³ The concept of a recognized religious community is translated from the concept 'anerkendt trossamfund', which is a legal concept regulated by Law no 1533 of 19/12/2017. The concept of an 'anerkendt trossamfund' does not have an official translation. The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs uses the translation 'religious communities' and this is also the term used in

for instance the United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report for 2018 (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DENMARK-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>). The translation faith community is also widely used (Lassen 2020). The usage of the concepts of religious or faith community has been critically

assessed by British sociologist Jim Beckford who warns "urges sociologists of religion "to avoid uncritically reproducing official discourses about faith communities" (Beckford 2015). I have highlighted the status of the concept as an official legal concept by placing the concept within citation marks.

migrated to political studies in the 1990s, where it enjoyed a significant revival following 9/11 attack. Thus, this concept is anchored in two fields—in social theology and the study of politics (Parmaksız 2018: 101)—and covers a variety of researcher positions, from secularization-deniers to scholars who investigate, or even encourage, the re-enchantment of culture (Beckford 2012). The success of this concept is said to be due to its two-sided nature: It is “vague enough to attract interest, but also contained the right amount of polemic, ensuring that the concept would attract a wave of proponents and critics” (Fordahl 2017: 558). Although many scholars speak of the postsecular, the honor of popularizing the concept belongs to German philosopher and sociologist, Jürgen Habermas (Fordahl 2017). Habermas is responsible for using the specific amalgamation of “postsecular” and “society” (Habermas 2012, 2008) to describe a society in which belief in secularization theories has waned. The concept, both in general and Habermas’s particular version, has certainly sparked controversy. According to one scholar, there is “still no uniform understanding of the meaning of the concept and there are serious doubts whether it has any intellectual power, import or utility” (Parmaksız 2018: 98). An interesting proposal, which I adopt is to distinguish between the hyphenated “post-secular,” which indicates a break with the secular condition, and the unhyphenated “postsecular,” which describes an ongoing secular condition (Dora 2018). In this article, I take my point of departure in Habermas’ approach, described as “the center of the highest-profile cluster of ideas about postsecularity” (Beckford 2012: 8). I will use the unhyphenated version, “postsecular,” because Habermas does clearly limit his use of the term to what he defines as the secular and secularized societies of Europe and countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In these countries, “religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground” (Habermas 2008: 21).

Surprisingly few scholars have paid attention to the details of how Habermas outlined the concept of the postsecular society, and how he developed it in his writing. Originally, he presented the concept as having two dimensions. The first, the sociological, describes postsecular societies as societies in which the population has not—at least to any noticeable extent—become more religious. The postsecular refers to “a change in consciousness”

(Habermas 2008: 19), which includes the realization that religious communities continue to exist even in an increasingly secularized environment. The second dimension is the normative, which for Habermas entails the necessity of taking the existence of religious voices seriously, and finding ways to include them in societal debates. For Habermas, this dimension calls for post-metaphysical philosophers to treat religious perspectives as resources, which are also available and potentially useful for secular thought. Some scholars may consider these two dimensions to be so entangled that it is impossible to pursue the former without engaging with the latter. But generally, in Habermas's writing, and most clearly in his recent publication, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Habermas 2019), he appears adamant about distinguishing the sociological diagnosis from its possible consequences for philosophical thought.⁴ Therefore, my approach follows Habermas's sociological diagnosis, but parts company with the normative implication of Habermas as well as that of many of his interlocutors. I do not regard my use of the concept of a postsecular society as advocating a new paradigm but simply interpret the postsecular as an autonomous concept that should not be conflated with a 'return of religion' (cf. Parmaksız 2018). Therefore, the concept of a postsecular society that underlies the analysis in this article is neither a suggestion that the world has become more religious, nor a call to bring in religious voices. It is simply a question of how the concept of a postsecular society, understood as a society with a diminished confidence in strong theories of secularization—that is, without a belief in the inevitable disappearance of religion from the list of public concerns—may contribute to our understanding of the nexus between Danish Muslim organizations and public communication (Cf. Blumler and Coleman 2013) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic as a postsecular pandemic

4 For instance, this is clear from the way the concept of a postsecular society is discussed only in the chapter that addresses the sociological interpretation of the current religious situation.

The processes of functional differentiation are commonly construed as constituting the core of theories of secularization. Therefore, in modern secularized societies, the reduced authority of religious institutions and the subsequent assumption of

their functions by science and technology are believed to influence how a pandemic is regarded today.

We have plenty of disasters, floods, famines, plagues, but we no longer consider them caused by sin. Sacred contagion and the lightning-conductor role of expiatory rituals have withered. There is a common self-congratulatory idea that the decline of superstition is due to the growth of science, literacy and technology (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983: xviii).

From this perspective, the official, profoundly secular Danish response to the COVID-19 pandemic is unsurprising. The pandemic was not described in religious terms in official documents, and religious leaders were not called in to help determine strategy. Also, according to the survey study, very few Danes assigned any direct religious significance to the pandemic. Less than 10 percent of the respondents considered religion or God a significant aspect of their understanding of the causes or recommended reactions to the pandemic (Table 1). The support for a religious view of the pandemic is particularly low if we look at the “strongly agree” responses, which are in the range of 0–1 percent. Among the general population only 2 percent responded in the affirmative. Even among the group of highly religious persons, it was a minority, 13 percent, that responded yes to the question regarding the importance of following God’s plan to combat the pandemic, and most did not reject the other option, which is to rely on advice of the health authorities.

In March 2020, the Danish government imposed a lockdown to curb the transmission of COVID-19. Because Denmark’s Evangelical-Lutheran majority church is a part of the Danish public sector (Kühle et al. 2018), it was unsurprising that buildings belonging to the Evangelical-Lutheran majority church would close, along with schools, universities and libraries (Kühle and Vinding 2020). This contrasts with what occurred during the Spanish flu pandemic of the early 1900s, when churches were kept open to provide comfort and support (Andersen et al 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority church and minority religious organizations were encouraged to provide comfort and assistance through online media or in other ways that comply with policies of social distancing (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). According to the study of reactions to the lockdown by the ‘recognized religious com-

Table 1. Does religion play a part in the pandemic? Responses in May 2020 (n=1237–1378).

The Corona virus is part of a divine plan	Agree: 8 Strongly agree: 0
The Corona virus is due to divine or spiritual forces reacting to human behavior	Agree: 8 Strongly agree: 1
We can combat the virus If we all follow God's plan	Yes: 2

munities, many (70 percent) used SOME to provide support: Of the Christian and Buddhist group, 75 percent did and almost as many, 67 percent of the Jewish, 64 percent of the Muslim, and 28 percent of the Hindu groups made public announcements on their SoMe profiles that addressed the lockdown of Danish society (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). These numbers are based on posts on websites, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, but the extent of the outreach attempts may be greater. For instance, it is known that some Hindu organizations and Muslim organizations communicated through other media, including WhatsApp, or on websites or SoMe associated with [specific] ethnic affiliations (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020, Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). In fact, almost all religious organization with active SoMe profiles communicated about the lockdown, and the religious organizations indicated a strong sense of obligation to guide their communities safely through the pandemic, regardless of the religion. Although religious activities were seriously circumscribed by the politicians' goal of combating the pandemic by implementing the health-care authorities' advice, the legitimacy of the lockdown was perceived as strong. According to the study, in the Danish population resistance to the lockdown of houses of worship was low, supported by almost 90 percent, and any disapproval was as likely to be political as religious (Andersen et al 2021). Also, very few respondents mentioned religious activities as one of the three things they missed: 5 percent of the respondents missed regular religious meetings, whereas 6 percent missed religious holidays (e.g. Easter and Ramadan). Therefore, the Danish situation presents a case of relatively strong alignment between official policies on the pandemic and the general positions of religious communities. Although Denmark is one of the countries where restrictions on religious activity has been most intense (De La Ferriere 2020), it is also one of the countries where the population's response to government action has been most supportive (Devlin and Connaughton 2020). The Danish pattern differs from that in countries such as the United States. In fact,

25 percent of the respondents to the American Perspective Survey carried out in March 2020 said they believed that the coronavirus outbreak was an act of God (Cox, Bowman, and Clemence 2020). It should be borne in mind that Habermas does not consider the United States one of the postsecular societies. Yet, from the discussion above, I must conclude that if we understand a postsecular society as a secular society in which religion is present and noticed, COVID-19 may be an interesting lens for investigating the dynamics of a postsecular society. In the next section I first present how religion was addressed by the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, and how the Minister of Immigration and Integration identified it as a cause for concern, and second, how Muslim communities reacted to the pandemic and to the attention from the Minister of Immigration and Integration. Last, the results are discussed with regard to what they may tell us about postsecular societies.

Religion was noticed by politicians and media

When Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen determined that it was necessary for Denmark to enter a partial lockdown on March 11, 2020, that is, to send home all those working in non-essential positions in the public sector, and close public institutions, including Denmark's majority church, minority religions did not seem to be the first thing on the agenda. Although attention to minority religions was not prominent at this very early phase of the pandemic, it is worth noting that the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Joy Mogensen, as one of her first actions to the pandemic produced a video that addressed minority religious organizations, urging with them to also close their houses of worship. The reason, she pleaded and not commanded was that the legal framework to shut down religious buildings of religious was not issued until April 4, 2020 (Law no 370 of 04/04/2020). Restrictions were lifted on May 18, 2020, from which date Danish houses of worship were again open to the public. While they were exempt from the ban on large gatherings on their premises, they were still subject to detailed restrictions on the number of people who could be present on public premises (Guidelines 2020). The state's attention to its religious minorities is remarkable. Religious minorities have often been overlooked in Danish debates, owing to their relatively small

size. Only the Muslim minorities, which constitute about 5 percent of the population (Kühle and Larsen 2019: 68) are occasionally the subject of debate in the public sphere. The state has recently begun to pay more focused and systematic attention to the presence of religious minorities in Denmark. The 2017 Act on (Minority) Religious Communities (Law no 1533 of 19/12/2017) is the clearest example of how the relationship between the ‘recognized religious communities’ and the state is in the process of being formalized. The relationship between the state and the Muslim minority remains very much in the making, and often, mutual expectations seem to be out of sync (Kühle and Larsen 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have reshuffled that relationship. As the pandemic evolved, the Muslim minority increasingly became a focal point. This was related to specific events, for instance two well-attended (outdoor) Muslim burials, which did not break any laws, but which were the subject of heated public discussions. The debates led to restrictions on the attendance of burials, and as of August 19, attendance at outdoor funerals was restricted to 200 people at the same location (Guidelines 2020). In the summer and fall of 2020, local restrictions were occasionally implemented to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. For instance, this occurred in Aarhus in early August 2020, as discussed below.

Religion as a vector for spreading COVID-19

On April 23, 2020, Mattias Tesfaye, the Danish Minister for Immigration and Integration, warned Danish Muslims that Ramadan “must NOT mean an explosion in corona infected cases” (Naqeeb_Khan 24/04/2020). The warning may have been prompted by global concerns about how religious gatherings were spreading the disease (Quadri 2020), but this was not well-received by Danish Muslim organizations (wakf.dk 24/04/2020). Danish authorities’ focus on Muslims also included the development of specific, Muslim-related advice in nine languages by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration and the Danish Health Authority (FB Sundhedsstyrelsen 23.04.2020).⁵ The advice included general recommendations to stay home, follow the health authority’s recommendations regarding physical distancing, and to use electronic means of communication with family and friends. The recommendations included four more specific pieces of advice:

1. Break the fast with those you live with. Also, *Taraviah* and *Iftikaf* should be performed at home and with those you live with.
2. Do not gather in groups of more than ten people, also when outside, for instance, in parks.
3. Keep a distance of two meters and avoid physical contact such as handshakes, hugs, and kisses.
4. Celebrate Eid with those you live with. (FB Sundhedsstyrelsen 23.04.2020; my translation).

The foregoing guidelines received more than 2200 likes on the Facebook pages of the Danish Health Authority, and more than 900 comments. Many of the comments expressed a desire to share the advice, and indicate that the guidelines were generally well-received, for example, “Thank you, Health Authorities 🇩🇰🌹🌹🌹,” “Thanks, dear Denmark, that you wish us a happy Ramadan. We will of course conform to recommendation under covid19,” “💜💜 Respect to Health Authorities which has concern for us and is paying attention to it 🙏🙏😊😊,” “Thanks, Health Authorities 👍,” “Fantastic Initiative 🙌” and “I never thought they would make a video like that 😂. They think about us after all ✨.” However the focus on Muslims also generated a small number of negative responses: “Is this a joke? Like we don’t already know it (we never watch the news, ah) 🙄😂” and “When general advice has been distributed to the entire population about risks and dangers a long time ago, what is then the idea of making a specific video to Muslims can anyone tell me that? There was also a commenter who reacted to what was perceived as a ‘positive discrimination’ with respect to Muslims: “I must say, that I’m surprised. The Jewish holiday of Pesach is just over. Did I miss recommendations from the Health Authorities, or isn’t the state aware that there are Jews in the country?” (FB Sundhedsstyrelsen 23.04.2020; my translation). There were also a (smaller) number of anti-Muslim comments, followed by aggrieved comments from Muslims. The moderator banned several persons because of this.

Attention was also drawn to Muslims by the public debates following a public call to prayer (*adhan*) made by representatives of a large mosque in Aarhus on April 24, 2020. In Denmark, the call to prayer is not usually done in public (Jacobsen, Daverkosen, and Larsen 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a local congregation of the Evangelical-Lutheran church, Gel-

5 The material was published at <https://uim.dk/nyheder/2020-04/covid-19-gode-rad-i-forbindelse-med-ramadan> and <https://www.sst.dk/da/nyheder/2020/gode-rad-i-forbindelse-med-ramadan>, where it is no longer available.

lerup Kirke, decided to cooperate with the local mosque, Fredens Moske, on a joint call to pray under conditions of social distancing, by ringing the church bells and making a public call to prayer (Aarhus Stiftstidende 26.04.2020). In Europe, the Muslim call to prayer is often interpreted as an attempt at religious domination (Langer et al. 2011: 93). In this case, the call to prayer was not noticed by the public until attention was drawn to it by an action by members of the identitarian organization, Generation Identity, which raised a banner with the message “Stop the Call to Prayer” by a building in the area.⁶ Generation Identity wanted to attract attention to this public call to prayer because they interpreted it as an instance of (problematic) Islamization (Identitaer.dk 9/05/2020). On the other hand, the cooperative effort was greeted enthusiastically by the interfaith organization, Tro i Harmoni (Interfaith Harmony), which suggested that this action made it possible for Muslims “to feel their religion was reflected in the public sphere.” (Troiharmoni.dk 12/05/2020; my translation).

The media coverage of the debates of the call to prayer did not emphasize the cooperative, interfaith nature of the call to prayer, nor the extraordinary situation (a societal lockdown) to which it referred. The unusual situation was strongly emphasized by one of the applications to make the Muslim public call to prayer under conditions of social distancing.⁶ Thus, the Danish Islamic community (Dansk Islamisk Trossamfund) clearly stated that the call to prayer was an attempt to “show that we jointly demonstrate how Denmark is united at a difficult time, regardless of religious conviction” (ditsamfund.dk 11.05.2020). When the application to make the call in public was rejected, the Muslim organization stated they were disappointed, but accepted the decision.

Political reactions to the debates on the call to prayer were strong, and included two bills (B 174 and B185 2019/20) and three so-called Section 20 parliamentary questions to the government (§20 questions: S1491, S1019, S1131). The initiatives came from politicians from the opposition, and included politicians from parties such as The New Right (Nye Borgerlige), The Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the Conservative Party (De Konservative). Therefore, the rejection of the legitimacy of the call to prayer was not limited to populist parties with well-known anti-Islamic stances, but had a broader base. The debates did not mention how the re-

6 The identity of one of the applicant has not been disclosed to the public.

quest to perform the public call to prayer was intended to be an initiative not just for Muslims, but for Danish society in general. Debates instead drew on the politics of extremization, that is, a politics eager “to police the boundaries of public participation to the detriment of those subjects who, in the current state of affairs, are articulated as subjects of alterity” (Nilsson 2019: 28). Whether the way the intentions of the Muslim organization were construed in the debates was due to a misunderstanding or to a refusal to accept the allegedly benevolent intent of the initiative is unclear. However, research indicates that some politicians are deliberately invoking the COVID-19 crisis to serve agendas of discrimination and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Devakumar et al. 2020). The political debates in Denmark may indicate that in some cases, the consequences of COVID-19 mean renewing debates about the position and tolerance of minorities. Muslim organization may search for confirmation of their position as equal citizens in the midst of a crisis that calls for mutual solidarity, whereas skeptics worry that Muslim organizations are taking advantage of the situation.

The role of religious organizations during a pandemic

It is generally assumed by scholars that religion may play a major role in addressing the consequences of a pandemic, by providing care and comfort, or providing tools for coping (Andersen et al 2021). Research has already indicated how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, religious organization may be considered resources for supporting positive emotions, which may help to combat anxiety and fear (Koenig 2020). The support offered by the religious organizations may be emotional or moral, but may also be of a more practical kind. A study of a Modern Orthodox Jewish community in New York City emphasized how the religious community responded to “tangible needs (i.e., food delivery), social support, virtual religious services, and dissemination of COVID-19-related information” (Weinberger-Litman et al. 2020). The suggestion that religious communities might step up to offer practical assistance was not strong in public debates in Denmark. On their SoMe profiles, some mosques offered to help with shopping and errands (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). In Aarhus, eight of thirteen mosques indicated that

they offered practical help. This places mosques well beyond the general average of 35 percent of religious and spiritual groups in Aarhus that offered such assistance. However, the principal task of the Muslim communication is sharing information about health authority recommendations:

...we, as an Islamic center, take this seriously, as we are also concerned about the health and security of our fellow citizens. Based on the word of the prophet a diseased person should not mix with healthy people, and should not cause harm or be harmed. Also, there is the Islamic rule that preventing evils is preferable to earning deeds (Wakf Al Massira, FB 11.03.2020; my translation).

This statement, which includes implicit references to hadith compilations such as *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Muwattaʿa*, is followed by the assurance that the mosque board has “built on the recommendation of official authorities and the Danish healthcare system, and consultation with many experts.” This statement was published at 10:32 PM, only a few hours after the press conference with the Prime Minister, who announced the lockdown. As already mentioned, a study of the posts by the ‘recognized religious communities’ following the lockdown in March 2020 showed that all the Muslim communities with active social media accounts reacted quickly to the lockdown (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). The ‘recognized communities’ comprise less than one-third of the mosque associations, and less than 15 percent of Danish Muslims are members of a ‘recognized Muslim community.’⁷ Yet both recognized and unrecognized Muslim communities shared the documents and communications from the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs; in fact, nothing suggests that the recognized religious communities are more loyal to the state than the unrecognized ones. Those Muslim organizations which have active social media profiles seem to use them to share the information originally published in Danish—but in some cases also other state authorities (for instance Bosnian or Turkish).

7 According to a question answered by the Danish Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs on March 20, 2020, on January 1, 2019, membership stood at 32,082 adult members. There are about 300,000 Muslims in Denmark <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20191/ beslutningsforslag/B77/spm/5/ svar/1647758/2172163.pdf>

The mosques also seem to have sometimes been the first institutions to react to indications of surges in the number of COVID-19 infections. The above-mentioned August outbreak in Aarhus is a striking example. Residents with a Somali background were particularly prevalent among those infected. On August 3, before it was publicly known that the COVID-19 virus was re-emerging in Aarhus, three major mosques—the Fre-

dens mosque (Peace mosque), the Salsabil mosque and the Waqf mosque—announced that they were closing. Other mosques closed in the following days (Aarhus Stiftstidende 07/08 2020). Mosques in Aarhus were also active in sharing information, for instance, on where to get a COVID-19 test (Masjed E Tagwa, FB, 7.08.2020). The mosques were by no means the only ones to make efforts to curb the outbreaks. Other organizations, such as Aarhussomali, played a major role, and their efforts were perhaps of greater significance than those of the mosques. Yet the Municipality of Aarhus, which had very publicly indicated their cooperation with ethnic organizations such as Aarhussomali (Aarhus.dk 06.08.2020) contacted me for a list of mosques in Aarhus. This indicates that although the local authorities did not expect to need a list of mosques in Aarhus before the outbreak, this had become a priority. Once the outbreak was under control, the Municipality of Aarhus announced that the outbreak had been handled very successfully owing to this very successful cooperation, among other things (Farah 2020).

Religious change amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

The most noticeable aspect of what happened when mosques and other religious spaces closed in Denmark is how religious observance changed, accommodating quickly to the new situation. The apparently unproblematic and quick changes in rituals were particularly striking. The changes most noticeably affected Friday prayers, burials, Taraviah prayer and Eid prayer. The first and immediate change concerned Friday prayers. The lockdown was announced on a Wednesday night, and though it was not a legal requirement at this point, many mosques and Muslim organizations responded quickly. In fact, one mosque, Dansk Islamisk Center, had already cancelled the Friday prayers the day before the press conference, stating on Facebook,

Today the pervasive virus pandemic has led the Danish authorities to tighten the conditions for public assemblies, and to encourage citizens to show common sense when dealing with their fellow citizens. Based on recent developments, the Danish Islamic Center has decided that the Friday prayer will be canceled on Friday (Dansk

Islamisk Center, FB 11.03.2020; my translation).

Many mosques followed suit in the following days. Other mosques were apparently more hesitant, because they considered Friday prayers to be of the utmost importance. Pressure from the other mosques and the precedent set by several Muslim countries (e.g. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco) where the words of the adhan, “come to prayer,” were changed to “stay at home,” finally convinced them (Hamad bin Khalifa Civilization Center FB 3.04.2020). A reference to the health authorities’ recommendations, as stated by the Muslim organization Islamakademiet.dk, was typical:

As some have approached us and asked questions about Friday prayers and participation in the daily prayers at the mosques during the Corona virus pandemic, we have contacted health experts to better understand the health aspects of the challenge, and made some remarks in connection with Friday prayers and other larger gatherings (also of a religious nature) while the pandemic is still active (Islamakademiet.dk 12.03.2020; my translation).

Islamakademiet.dk suggested that the Friday prayers could be said in the mosques with only three participants, and that other Muslims should not worry about being unable to attend Friday prayers.. It has a precedent in what happens if an individual cannot participate, in which case the *jumu'ah* prayer is replaced by an ordinary noon prayer, the *zuhr* prayer:

We wish to point out that those who do not participate in the prayers at the mosque to avoid infecting others, or out of fear of being infected themselves, are not sinful for their lack of participation in the prayers in the mosque. However, one should of course make sure to say the prayers at home.

Logically speaking, simply replacing the *jumu'ah* prayer with the *zuhr* prayer would make the sermon redundant, as the *khutbah* (sermon) is regarded as replacing two *rak'ahs*, but some mosques stream or post sermons to supplement prayers at home. However, in some cases these are not called a Friday sermon, but a Friday Reminder (Muslimsk Ungdom, København, FB, different dates).

The book, *Mosques of Denmark*, presents the daily prayers

as a fundamental practice in Danish mosques, but also identifies teaching and funerals as important activities (Kühle and Larsen 2019). COVID-19 has affected both of these, and often, teaching has been moved online. Changes related to burials are enforced with respect to the practice of washing the body of the deceased (*ghusl*). If the deceased was infected with COVID-19, this may risk spreading the virus. Infection with virus may also delay recovery of the body from hospital, and the opportunity to console the family may be restricted because of social distancing requirements (Campbell 2020: 15). Several mosques and Muslim organizations place information about burials high on their agenda. On the Facebook page of the large, purpose-built Hamad bin Khalifa Civilization Center, a Muslim doctor was interviewed about good practices during the pandemic, including how to handle the dead (Hamad bin Khalifa Civilization Center FB 3.04.2020). According to the physician, several Copenhagen-based imams agreed to the recommendation that washing the body of someone who was infected with COVID-19 should be done while it remained in the body bag, to prevent the further spread of the disease. The recommendation was inspired by similar recommendations by Norway's Muslims Dialognetværk and Islamisk Råd Norge, which also included a permanent stop to Muslims being transported abroad for burial (Dansk Islamisk Center, FB, 21.03.2020). Another video features an imam who is in charge of many of the Muslim funerals that take place in Aarhus. The imam was filmed together with the head of the chapel at Aarhus University Hospital. The main message of the video was that next of kin should comply with instructions from the hospital chapel, and that attendance in the chapel is restricted to ten persons, and sessions of 30 minutes (Abu Khaled, FB, 15.04.2020). The video illustrates how the pandemic created a perceived need for health authorities to reach out to Muslim authorities.

The closing of houses of worship created a problem concerning the specific Ramadan prayer, Taravih, which is traditionally said every night in Sunni Muslim mosques. Mosques reacted differently. Some mosques simply cancelled the Taravih, whereas other mosques cancelled this, and also added information about how to say the Taravih prayer at home. Concerning the Eid al Fitr, many mosques cancelled the Eid prayer, some did so

with restrictions, whereas others posted information about how to observe Eid at home (Muslimsk Ungdom, København, FB, different dates).

The reopening of mosques after May 18, 2020 followed the instructions given by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs (Guidelines 2020), and was well-received by the mosques. One mosque, which is not a ‘recognized religious community’ and thus did not receive the guidelines directly from the ministry, celebrated the opening by announcing, “Good news, The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs has made recommendations for a responsible reopening of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark and other religious bodies, including mosques. Fredens Moské has decided to open its doors again for the five daily prayers” (Fredens moske, FB 18.05.2020). The reopening did not lead to a return to the pre-COVID-19 situation. Many mosques posted regulations on social media indicating who may attend the mosques, mosque opening hours, how to prepare before attending the mosque, and how to behave while there. Det Islamiske Trossamfund (The Islamic Faith Community), a major mosque in Copenhagen, suggested that elderly and vulnerable people, and children under 13, should stay at home, that wudu should be performed at home, and one’s own prayer mat should be used. Also, the mosque does not open until 15 minutes before prayers (DIT 22.05.2020). Other mosques supply disposable prayer mats to worshippers who do not bring their own, and also suggest that dikr, takbir, and salawat should be avoided, as these activities may help spread the COVID-19 virus (ditsamfund.dk 18.05.2020). Larger events continued to be cancelled. In late August, the large Shi’i mosque, Imam Ali Mosque, cancelled their yearly Ashura parade that commemorates Imam Hussein. The parade has taken place for 25 years, but was cancelled “for the safety of participants and citizens” (Imam Ali Moske, FB, 27.08.2020). It is clearly emphasized that the mosque “encourages everyone to follow the law and the recommendations made by the health authorities in order to protect those in our society who are vulnerable” (ibid).

The expressed desire to bring Denmark safely through the COVID-19 pandemic is widespread among religious communities in Denmark, yet SoMe communications from Danish mosques are plentiful and often take on a particular strong civic character.

Performing the good citizen?

Evidence of COVID-19 transmission linked to houses of worship (e.g. in South Korea, France, India, Iran) emerged early on in global media coverage of the pandemic, and as Danish historian of religion, Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger noted, religions may often encourage behavior that may lead to the spread of the COVID-19 virus:

Here you meet, stand close together, perhaps holding hands, touching the same sacred relics, sharing a sacred space or prayer rug, cleansing yourselves with or in the same water, perhaps drinking from the same sacred vessels, and the like. And this goes against more or less all the health authorities' orders. ((Fibiger 2020), my translation)

Although there was little that indicated that religious activities in Denmark had contributed to the spread of the corona virus when the survey was conducted in October 2020,⁸ the results of the survey show how the global media images mentioned by Fibiger may have had an impact on the attitudes of the Danish population. As many as 70 percent of the survey respondents responded that they to a high degree consider religious groups in Denmark responsible for the spread of the virus (Andersen et al 2021). This dovetails with Fibiger's argument that secular evaluations of religious behavior may overshadow fair concern for responsible behavior by scapegoating the religiously observant through implications that religious people do not care about recommendations from health authorities (Fibiger 2020). When Mattias Tesfaye, Minister of Immigration and Integration, warned Muslims to not ignore the guidelines for social distancing during Ramadan, social media reactions by Danish Muslims indicated that they saw this as an example of scapegoating. Given the backdrop of implicit and explicit accusations that Muslims are more likely to spread the COVID-19 virus, it is unsurprising that Danish Muslim organizations have aimed to demonstrate their compliance with the health recommendations issued by the Danish authorities, emphasizing Muslims' loyalty to the Danish state and their responsible behavior in Danish society. Some mosques almost over-performed, going to unusual lengths to follow the authorities' guidelines (ditsamfund.dk 18.05.2020). Mosques' SoMe communications resem-

8 A small number of examples of mainly within majority church has emerged subsequently.

bled the communications of other minority communities in Denmark, but were also echoed by their actions. For instance, mosques in Aarhus were more likely than other religious organizations to close entirely—eleven of the thirteen mosques that participated in our study of religious organizations in Aarhus did so. This constituted 85 percent of mosques, compared to 57 percent of religious communities that closed their houses of worship entirely (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). Yet Muslims also seem to be more surveilled: The only “invisible” mosque in Aarhus received regular visits from the police to ensure that restrictions were followed (ibid.). Ironically, most mosques’ civic SoMe communications predated the Minister of Immigration and Integration’s suggestion that Muslims would need extra encouragement to follow official health-related advice. Their efforts to be perfect citizens backfired in the case of the public call to prayer. The public call to prayer was presented as a case of Islamization, even if it was intended as a way of symbolizing the coherence of and cooperation of Danish society. Also, the attempt to use the call to prayer as a symbol of societal unity was unsuccessful in terms of changing general conceptions of the role of Muslims communities, with regard to coping with the consequences of the pandemic in Denmark.

The visibility of the Muslim communities was not entirely negative. Danish authorities approached the possible risks of spreading COVID-19 during Ramadan by formulating specific Ramadan advice, which Muslims generally received positively; many felt seen and included by the Danish Health authority’s strategies. Yet the Ramadan advice drew from criticism from some non-Muslims, who criticized the policy as advantaging Muslims vis-à-vis other minorities, such as Jews. This type of resentment may be referred to as “hijab envy.” Hijab envy is the observation by other minorities that Muslims receive attention that they do not receive, due to “a deficit in visibility: their inability to lay claim to a discernible and displayable religious identity” (Macdonald 2018: 54). Hijab envy is obviously an ambivalent feeling. Although during the COVID-19 pandemic, Danish Muslims were “deftly embodying and performing their religious identities in ways that a pluralistic milieu could witness and champion” (ibid), these actions were usually not embraced by the general public, and although they may have been visible, the attention attracted was mostly unfavorable.

To some extent, what may be interpreted as some mosques’

performance of good citizenship did follow the logic of the “dilemma of stigmatized identities” (Bail 2014), that is, the ambivalent situation where attempts to counter prejudices actually support them. Yet most of the civic communications that form the empirical basis of this article were not intended for a non-Muslim audience; they were not part of a “performative performance,” that is, announcements prompted by direct requests from the majority society (van Es 2018). The communications may also be seen as internal communication that aimed to confirm and ensure the compliance of other -Muslims with government regulations. Thus, the communications may correspond to the assertion that “Muslim minorities are not only governed from the outside but also from the inside—that is, by families, friends, and communities—locally as well as trans-locally” (Liebmann and Galal 2020: 264). A transnational dimension should be added to this statement. Some Danish mosques stream religious lectures/post advice from health authorities from countries that include Bosnia, Pakistan, and Turkey. It seems reasonable to suggest that they may follow strategies that align with the policies and religious authorities of these countries, which in most cases support the lockdowns (Riexinger, Thorsen, Fibiger, Borup and Fibiger 2021). Although strategies of being a good citizen are directed at a particular nation state, combating the pandemic also means being a good citizen of the world.

Handling the COVID-19 pandemic

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a major challenge for religious communities worldwide. The collective element, which is the life and soul of religious life, was significantly reduced if not eliminated. Given this, it is amazing how quickly many religious groups reorganized and adapted, and found theological explanations that fit the new situation. According to historian of religion Jørn Borup, this is no surprise: “It is clear from all this that religions are under pressure. But religion is also a phenomenon that is prepared for disaster. Religion has always been prepared for, perhaps even based on, threats to life” (Borup 2020). Following this line of thinking, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the first time an epidemic has challenged collective religious life. The fourth cholera pandemic

(1865–1875) spread through Muslim Haj pilgrims and hit Mecca first, before spreading to Europe (Dasgupta and Crunkhorn 2020: 4). This highlights an important aspect of the reactions to the pandemic: Often, there are resources that allow religious communities to adapt to changing conditions.

Literature concerning the consequences of COVID-19 for religious life is beginning to emerge. According to a study from New Zealand, the literature indicates that the risk of COVID-19 infection presents three primary social challenges for religious communities: 1) the need to reassess practices of worship, 2) the difficulty of mitigating any possibility of community transmission, and 3) the challenge of imposing the norms of social distancing. A fourth social challenge for religious communities was identified as addressing congregations' welfare and pastoral concerns, and those of others in need (Oxholm et al. 2020). Although all four concerns are relevant to this study, at least two others emerge: One is the question of economy, which one mosque presents as a major predicament:

The Corona crisis has left its clear mark on the entire world map. Of course, we are all affected by the seriousness of the situation, not only on the health front, but also on the economic front. No one yet knows the full consequences of the Corona pandemic. Nor does the board of Masjid Iqra. The board is concerned about the consequences of the pandemic on the structure that we all know 🕌 (Masjid Iqra, FB, 4.05.2020; my translation).

The economy of this particular mosque is probably highly dependent on donations, and the mosque board now asks for donations to save the mosque. The financial set-up of a religious community in terms of its dependence on membership fees or donations is a general dividing line among religious communities in Aarhus (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). The crisis obviously hits harder those communities that depend mainly on contingent means. Thus, the pandemic may rearrange the religious field because of this.

The pandemic has also increased the incentive for cooperation among mosques. Seven of the seventeen mosques in Aarhus were behind this joint statement:

It is strongly urged that everyone comply with the Danish Health Authority's guidelines, and particularly the ban on assemblies. We wish all Muslims a happy Eid.

Best wishes, Mosques of Aarhus (Fredens moske, Wakf Moskeen, Masjed Tawfik, Salsabil, Masjed Bilal, Masjed Alnour, Masjed al takwa) (Fredens moske, FB, 22.07.2020; my translation).

Are there any other pandemic-related changes to in evidence? It is worth noting that mosques' responses to the lockdown of houses of worship vary. Some mosques simply stopped all activities, whereas others started to produce, or increased their production of, social media content. In Aarhus more than half of the mosques increased their online activities during the lockdown (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). It remains to be seen whether the strong presence of some online actors will continue—in fact, less than half of the mosques think they will continue their new practices—and if so, what the consequences will be. Social media produces a change in the way the religious bodies interact with their audiences. The production of online material—perhaps for a broader audience—may lead to understandings being contested and challenged (Herbert 2011). In this way, the pandemic may bring about changes to the Muslim landscape in Denmark. Religious change seems to occur at the nexus of religion–state relations, which has a new face in postsecular societies. The visibility of Islam and Muslims is strongly connected to changes in the European “public consciousness” (cf. Habermas 2008), associated with the realization that religion is not going to disappear anytime soon. Therefore, the need to regulate the public appearance of religion emerges. This has clearly been the case during the COVID-19 crisis, with regard to the advice concerning Ramadan, but also with regard to the reopening of houses of worship. The visibility of large Muslim funerals led to restrictions on the number that may attend funerals. The political debates on the Muslim call to prayer display and extend this logic. However, Habermas suggests that negotiating the position of religion in a postsecular society involves reciprocal expectations, “in order to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews...” (Habermas 2008: 21). The request to make the public call to prayer during the pandemic was an (unsuccessful) attempt to carve out and perform a specific role of religion in postsecular society. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic established an arena in which different visions of a postsecular society were presented, and limits were set on the public presence of Islam.

The pandemic led minority religions, particularly Islam, to increase involvement, and even cooperation, with the state. Despite Habermas's expectation that a postsecular society would make religious voices heard in public, "the civic communication ecology" (cf. Friedland 2014) largely evaded the traditional media. Political actors as reported by traditional media focused on setting limits to Muslim presence in the 'pandemic soundscape' in contrast to countries such as Canada that due to the extraordinary situation opened public space for Muslim call to prayer (Riskedahl 2020). Yet the general negotiation of relations between secular and religious authorities was communicated by social media. Examples include the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs' public announcement of the recommendation to close houses of worship, and their instructions for reopening them. The video of the pathologist at Aarhus University Hospital and an imam delivering advice on how to handle deaths that occur under COVID-19 conditions was posted on social media. Social media were also the platforms that published advice from Muslims in the healthcare sector bringing healthcare advice and religious instruction together. Religious practices changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but so did the backbone of postsecular society, the "secularnormative order" (Parmaksız 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a new secularnormative order promoted by the Danish state, which,

...creates its own exclusion and control mechanisms over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and thereby privileges certain cognitive structures, ideological and symbolic commitments, along with the practices, habits and reflexes that are attached to these commitments. It attempts to set up an order that devalues certain forms of cultural capital and sources of knowledge (Parmaksız 2018: 109).

In such a society, the secular needs to engage with the religious. I am not sure whether this means that "neither the religious nor the secular are taken to be the natural state of things, the yardstick against which all social and cultural relations are judged and evaluated" (Parmaksız 2018: 109). But it does mean that a secular state will need to respond to religion in new ways, which may grant religious minority communities a new, more formal position in society.

Conclusion: postsecular perspectives on COVID-19 in Denmark

In an interesting historical overview of pandemics, Dasgupta and Crunkhor make the daring statement that “COVID-19 can be called a mixture of all pandemics from ancient times to the present day in terms of its effects on human civilization and natural history of disease. Pandemic dynamics, in our view (sic) has reached its culmination” (Dasgupta and Crunkhorn 2020: 7). Although this may be an overstatement, it does address the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the reaction of the Danish state is clearly secular, reactions to the pandemic commingle the religious and the secular. This is evident, for instance, when Muslim organizations communicate the messages of secular authorities as though they were their own. Because in some cases theological responses to the pandemic were drafted in consultation with Muslim healthcare personnel, the secular and religious messages may in fact coincide. In Danish debates on COVID-19, religion is certainly noted as something to be addressed. The religious and secular reactions to the pandemic correspond to the concept of a postsecular society in terms of circumstances in which a secular authority adjusts “itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2008). The pandemic did not end discussions about how religion is to be regulated and addressed in Danish society. It is too soon to know what the consequences of the crisis will be for mosques and Muslim organizations in Denmark, but it is already clear that they are likely to be substantial.

Danish abstract

Hvordan har danske muslimer kommunikeret om COVID-19, og hvordan er religionsamfund blevet inddraget i håndteringen af COVID-19 pandemien? Religion blev en del af den offentlige debat, da trossamfund lukkede ned. Muslimske ledere såvel som ministerier og kommuner udstak med afsæt i religiøs praksis retningslinjer for, hvordan folk bør opføre sig i den krisesituation. Artiklen undersøger danske moskeerne rolle under krisen på baggrund af deres offentlige kommunikation på sociale medier. Materialet analyseres i forhold til begrebet om

det post-sekulære samfund, og det konkluderes, at krisen bl.a. har bidraget til forhandlinger om minoritetsreligioner, især om islams position i det danske samfund.

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Simon Sorgenfrei

Temasektion

“Perhaps we see it in negative terms, but, ultimately, it is positive”

The responses of Swedish Salafis to COVID-19

Keywords

Salafism, Covid-19, Islam in Sweden, Islam and social media, Salafism and state relations, Islam and medicine

Abstract This article investigates how prominent preachers within Sweden’s most active puritan Salafi group, Islam.nu, relate to COVID-19. The article analyzes material published online between March 1, 2020, and July 31, 2020, which is herein divided into three categories: rhetorical responses, social responses, and theological responses. Salafism is often presented in academic literature and by the media as a current that is at odds with the majority society. The material analyzed shows that the Salafi group upon which this article focuses can rhetorically criticize certain expressions in the majority culture while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of heeding the recommendations of the Swedish authorities. Islam is presented both as an alternative and as a complement. The material also shows how the strong emphasis on proselytizing that is typical for Islam.nu is also apparent in relation to COVID-19.

The first case of COVID-19 in Sweden was confirmed at the end of January 2020, but it would take until the second week of March before a case of domestic transmission was confirmed (FHS 2020; Blohm & Heyman 2020). The first death occurred on the 11th of March in Stockholm, the same day that the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic (Pirttisalo Sallinen & Thörnwall 2020). During the month of March, the Swedish government, advised by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (FOHM), introduced a number of restrictions and directives not least concerning social interactions. Gatherings of more than 500 people were forbidden (Pirttisalo Sallinen & Svensson 2020), a lim-

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it that was then reduced to 50 people on the 20th of March (Krisinformation 2020). These restrictions influenced a number of societal actors, and, amongst others, various congregations, churches, and mosques announced that they would stop holding larger services until further notice (Aftonbladet 2020). Via the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST), Jewish, Christian, and Muslim congregational leaders sent out general information as well as information about sermons and other gatherings that would not take place.¹ The Muslim national organizations also sent out recommendations and rules of conduct to their member congregations. For instance, Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige (the Union of Islamic Associations in Sweden), the oldest Muslim organization in the country, posted the following list on its website:

We would like to encourage our member organizations to observe the following:

1. Follow the decisions and recommendations of the government and other public authorities, and stay up-to-date regarding the latest information.
2. Cancel all activities that require physical contact and that fall within the scope of the decisions made by the government, and keep mosques closed until further notice.
3. Continue religious activity in the form of lectures, reminders, and courses via digital platforms instead.
4. Inform members and followers regularly about the recommendations regarding hygiene, travel, and risk groups.
5. Contact your home municipality to find out how you can contribute to the organized emergency preparedness work being carried out in the local community, for instance by helping risk groups with errands.
6. Do a thorough cleaning / disinfection of the mosque, and clean the premises carefully when closed.

We would also like to send advice, recommendations, and appeals to all our members, followers, and visitors:

1. Keep up-to-date and follow the recommendations of the government and the public authorities regarding personal hygiene and measures aiming to limit the

¹ <https://www.myndighetsst.se/om-oss/nyheter/nyhetsarkiv-aktuellt/2020-04-16-trossamfundeni-coronakrisen.html>, accessed August 20, 2020.

spread of the contagion.

2. If you have symptoms such as coughing and sneezing or if you have a fever, stay at home until you are well again.

3. If you are over the age of 60 and/or have a chronic illness such as a disease of the heart or lungs or diabetes, you should stay at home and limit your contact with other people.

4. Donate to your local mosque! Like other institutions in society, mosques will also be impacted by the effects of the coronavirus since a large part of their revenue comes from Friday collections.

5. Support your local mosque in the decisions they make.

6. Return to God in repentance, perform extra prayers, and fast to beseech God to remove this trial and to protect us, our mosques, and our society.

7. Restrict the breaking of your fast *iftar* and *tarawih*-prayer (the extra prayer that is prayed communally at night during Ramadan) to members of your own household. (FIFS)

Although there was widespread national support regarding following the recommendations of the health agency – a consensus not only amongst religious organizations but also one that united the government and the opposition parties – it soon became clear that the outbreak was not evenly distributed throughout the population.

During the spring, suspicions grew that the contagion had been brought to Sweden by returning skiers who themselves had been infected at ski resorts in Austria and Italy (Salzinger 2020). It was later found out that this was only one of several causes for the spreading of the contagion in Sweden and that the virus also spread amongst tourists visiting Swedish ski resorts (Eriksson & Julin 2020). At the same time, it was clear that certain ethnic minorities were overrepresented amongst those who had fallen ill. The Järva area in the northwestern part of Stockholm, and especially suburbs such as Rinkeby and Tensta where many immigrant live, had been particularly hard hit (Gustafsson & Tottmar 2020; Mitti 2020). On the 24th of March, the Swedish Somali medical doctors' association announced that Swedish Somalis were overrepresented in the statistics regarding those who had fallen ill and those who had died (Randhawa 2020). Several individuals who had participated in media debates stated that

those who had been hit the hardest were socioeconomically marginalized groups for whom it would have been impossible to visit a ski resort (or work from home). Instead, they worked within the service sector and were employed as, for instance, cleaners or taxi drivers and were therefore amongst the first to come into contact with the tourists who arrived at Stockholm Arlanda Airport or Stockholm Central Station upon returning from their ski trips (Olsson & Pirttisalo Sallinen 2020). This is an issue to which we shall return below.

Salafism in Sweden and Islam.nu

Salafism is an umbrella term for fundamentalist currents within Sunni Islam, and it has become common among researchers to differentiate between puritan, political, and jihadi (or militant) Salafism. What these currents have in common is that they strive to model both private life and the organization of society after what they believe to be the example of Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims. Their ideas about just how such a society should be realized, on the other hand, differ. The largest group, puritan Salafis, generally distance themselves both from political work and from violent methods and instead want to make society Islamic by reinforcing their own piety and by missionizing in order to win more people over to their own interpretation of Islam (Wiktorowicz 2006; Olsson 2020).

One of the most active Muslim actors in the Järva area is Islam.nu, which is also one of the most visible puritan Salafi groups in Sweden.² Islam.nu is the name of the group's social media platforms but is also used as a branding name that can be found on the products and services that they offer, such as courses, books, software applications, etc. (Sorgenfrei, forthcoming). They previously ran an organization called the Ibn Abbas Center (Ibn Abbas-centret) in the Rinkeby area of Stockholm and have for some time operated the Andalus Knowledge Center (Andalus Kunskapscenter) in the Kista area where they also offer their services and products such as courses, lectures and print media. The fact that this area is home base for the group has led to them sometimes being referred to in the media and academic literature as the Järva Salafis (Ismail 2017; Ranstorp et al. 2018: 137–139. For a more critical view of this group, see Järlerup 2018 and Orrenius 2017). The preachers responsible for

² Preliminary result from an ongoing study by Jonas Svensson

the activities of Islam.nu were educated at the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) in Saudi Arabia, a country to which they maintain ties in several ways, for instance through continuing their studies there and by organizing group tours in connection with pilgrimage trips. It is upon this group that the present article will focus, and the primary material consists of Instagram posts about COVID-19 published on a joint account and on individual accounts.

Interest in Salafism has increased in Sweden as in the rest of Europe, and the past decade has witnessed the appearance of a number of academic studies and journalistic works that shed light on this topic. This is happening in parallel with signals that Salafism is becoming an increasingly popular expression of Islam, not least amongst young people with a Muslim family background and amongst converts (Sorgenfrei 2018: 172; SVT 2018).

A detailed study of Salafi groups in Sweden has been carried out by Susanne Olsson, who has published the monograph *Contemporary Puritan Salafism: A Swedish Case Study* as well as a number of articles (some of which can be found in the reference list at the end of this article). The Swedish Defence University has, under the direction of Magnus Ranstorp, compiled the report *Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism. Påverkan mot och utmaningar för det svenska samhället* (2018), which is based upon previous research, media materials, and interviews with social workers, police, and other societal actors. Journalist Magnus Sandelin has written about Swedish jihadi Salafis in the book *Svenska IS-krigare: från Al-Qaida till Jihadi cool* (2016) and in the report *Vad vet vi om islamistiska terrornätverk i Sverige?* (2018). He is also connected to the organization Doku, an association primarily made of journalists who investigate jihadism and militant Islam.³ The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) finances the project *Wahhabism i Sverige – nätverk, praktiker och mission*, which focuses upon individuals and groups connected to Saudi Arabia and to the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM). This article was written within the framework of that project.

Behind Islam.nu and the Andalus Knowledge Center, we find primarily three individuals – Abdulwadod Frank (b. 1974), Moosa Assal (b. 1984), and Abdullah as-Sueidi (b. 1985) – all of whom grew up in Sweden and all of whom have converted to Islam (Assal 2020; Karlsson & Johansson 2012; Shavit 2019: 353–355; ÖKV Play 2015). All three have degrees from or are current-

3 See <https://doku.nu>.

ly studying at the Islamic University of Madinah. At the center in Kista as well as on their website and via other platforms, they offer one-off lectures, longer courses, and other products that one can partake of online or in real life, such as books and software applications for tablets and cell phones. These products seem often to be financed by crowdfunding, i.e., donations from followers, to enable distribution free of cost to Muslims and Islamic congregations throughout the country. They also organize trips to Saudi Arabia, for instance in connection with pilgrimage trips (Sorgenfrei 2021). The individuals responsible for Islam.nu also hold lectures and sermons in other places in Sweden, and, taken together, these activities can be seen as the expression of extensive mission activity (Ranstorp et al. 2018: 139–141).

Source materials

The three preachers who are responsible for Islam.nu thus publish materials on a range of platforms both under the name Islam.nu and via their individual accounts. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to analyze material that they have shared on the Islam.nu account and on their individual Instagram accounts. These accounts are individual rather than personal in the sense that they are used in order to share material that is usually related to their shared activities and they appear as representatives for Islam.nu and as Muslim role models and preachers. The accounts are open in the sense that one does not have to “follow” them in order to read what is published on them. In addition to these materials, this article also analyzes a lecture about COVID-19 that was announced on Instagram and that has since then been published on the website Islam.nu. I have collected and analyzed sources published between March 1, 2020, when information about COVID-19 was on the rise in Sweden and started to appear on these accounts, and July 31, 2020.

During the period in question, 100 posts were published via the Islam.nu Instagram account, but not a single one concerned the pandemic. Instead, the posts published informed readers of their activities and the products they provide, offered daily advice during the fasting month of Ramadan, which in 2020 started on the 23rd of April, or were comprised of some other sort of theological content.

During the same period, 83 posts were published on Abdulwadod Frank's account (abdulwadodfrank), and of these only 1 had to do with COVID-19. This was a post made to inform readers about the above-mentioned lecture, which was published on the website Islam.nu on March 23, 2020. The other posts that appeared on Abdulwadod Frank's account during the period in question consist of short films in which he answers questions about the fast during Ramadan and a series of interpretations of *Arāf*, the seventh surah of the Qur'an.

On the Instagram account of Moosa Assal (medinastudenten), 65 posts were published during the relevant period, 6 of which concerned COVID-19. Assal's account contains several different categories of posts but the majority consists of posts belonging to a series with the hashtag #dagensråd ("advice of the day") and other similar encouragements or words of wisdom from the Qur'an and hadith or of a more general religious character.

The largest number of posts that concern COVID-19 were made by Abdullah as-Sueidi. During the period in question, he published a total of 101 posts on his Instagram account (abdullah_sueidi), 28 of which concerned the pandemic. One can note that 26 of these, i.e., 93%, were published between the 2nd of March and the 20th of April. After that, the majority of posts published concern Ramadan. The final two posts that concern COVID-19 on the account were made in July when it became clear that Saudi Arabia would not allow pilgrims to visit during the pilgrimage month due to the ongoing pandemic.

It is these posts published on the accounts of Abdullah as-Sueidi and Moosa Assal and the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank that comprise the primary source materials analyzed in this article.

The main themes

After coding the material, it was divided into three distinct although sometimes overlapping categories: 1) *rhetorical responses*, which, using stylistic markers such as irony, comment upon news about COVID-19 in order to, for instance, criticize what the authors perceive as being the prevailing political order or to focus on the superiority of their own position; 2) *social responses* in which their own social responsibility and that of their fol-

lowers in relation to the challenges posed to society by the pandemic is emphasized; and 3) *theological responses*, which often utilize various didactic elements primarily taken from the Qur'an and the hadiths, that offer an explanatory framework and a program of action in regard to the current situation. This way of categorizing the source materials will also inform the structure of the article.

Rhetorical responses

A rhetorical question is a frequently employed rhetorical device that is characterized by the fact that the answer to it is implied and obvious. It can be used to emphasize a message in order to engage one's audience or to undermine the arguments of one's opponents (Hägg 1998: 116). In the Instagram posts analyzed for the purposes of this article, irony was sometimes used when commenting upon reports about COVID-19. Rhetorically, ironic statements seek to show that something is not as it should be by emphasizing the opposite of the current situation (Encyclopædia Britannica 2019).

One example of such a rhetorical post employing irony can be found in the very first post made that concerns the virus. It was published on Abdullah as-Sueidi's account on March 2, 2020. It consists of a screenshot of the tabloid *Aftonbladet's* website and the following comment:

"Stop shaking hands". That's what the hashtag that is going viral on social media says. An air hand-shake is the new thing – shake without touching.

As-Sueidi's comment posted in connection with his sharing of the image reads as follows: "To all the brothers and sisters who can't get a job because they refuse to shake hands with the opposite sex: now's your chance :)". This post can be read as an ironic comment on the so-called handshake cases that received media attention in Sweden, one example being the case of a female Muslim substitute teacher who was dismissed from her job because she did not want to shake hands with male colleagues but instead chose to greet them by putting her hand over her heart (Sydsvenskan 2018). In connection with a 2016 debate about shaking hands, Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfvén said: "In Sweden we greet each other. We shake hands with both

women and men" (SVD 2016). As-Sueidi's post is directed towards these events and such statements as the one quoted above. Through an ironic twist of fate, the government and the public authorities are now forced to encourage citizens to abstain from shaking hands.

As-Sueidi offered a similar formulation two weeks later, on the 16th of April. Under a screenshot of the daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet's* report about Denmark temporarily abolishing a requirement introduced in 2019 that forced those wishing to become Danish citizens to go through a handshaking ceremony, as-Sueidi wrote "Ouch! Denmark, this has got to hurt. Some Islamophobe is going to come along soon and blame Islamists for having invented the coronavirus in order to Islami-cize the Western world". Further rhetorical phrasings of this kind directed against Islamophobia were also published during the month of March:

COVID-19 has actually brought some good things with it. Islamophobes and racists have been kept busy by writing about the pandemic instead of by attacking us Muslims and immigrants while ISIS is encouraging its supporters not to go to countries where the illness is spreading. Look on the bright side. :) (March 18)

COVID-19 has led to pubs closing, faces being covered, and handshakes stopping. Despite all of this, I have not heard of any Islamophobe blaming the virus on Muslims. Earth-shattering. (March 21)

These instances of irony are of course directed towards the Danish handshaking ceremonies – which are perceived as being Islamophobic – but also towards social commentators and others who see public expressions of Islam as a sign of an Islamization of society and who thereby are opposed to the mission activity that is characteristic of the group behind Islam.nu.

As we can see in the post from the 18th of March, irony is not only directed towards Islamophobia but also towards the terrorist group the Islamic State. It refers to news reports that stated that the Islamic State told its members to abstain from traveling to Europe (Larsson 2020) and thus is an example of the divide that one can find between militant (jihadism, takfirism) and non-violent (puritan) Salafism (Wiktorovich 2006). Islam.nu and the individuals responsible for its activities have

for the past several years explicitly distanced themselves from jihadism and are eager to highlight their work against radicalization and violence, which has also been observed in earlier studies (Ranstorp et al. 2018: 137-139; Olsson 2020).

During the same period, as-Sueidi also shared several posts in which he emphasizes that Muslims had set a good example during the pandemic in contrast to the "ski tourists" (who here should probably be seen as representatives of the majority society, i.e., the ethnically Swedish middle- and upper classes) suspected of being the cause of the spreading of the infection. For instance, on the 20th of March, he shared a screenshot of a report from the tabloid *Expressen* that stated that roughly 25,000 Swedes had been on skiing trips in the Swedish mountains and that 499 people had been allowed to take part at one time in related parties at hotels and restaurants. (The Public Health Agency of Sweden still had a limit of 500 people set for social gatherings at that time.)

As stated above, it was long believed that the virus had principally come to Sweden via tourists returning from skiing trips who themselves had been infected in the Austrian Alps. In a comment accompanying the image, as-Sueidi asks rhetorically: "How have Muslims and skiers, respectively, protected themselves from COVID-19?" He continues, writing that "practically all" mosques had been closed for Friday prayers while skiers attended events where one typically "drinks alcohol, dances, and parties". This difference between "skiers and Muslims", he suggests, shows that "Muslims, in this case, really care about their fellow human beings [...] They showed that Islam really is a religion of mercy that Muslims strive to implement". The skiers, it is implied, are egoistical and act irresponsibly regarding others in a way that goes against what as-Sueidi sees as being Muslim values. (The fact that there might be skiers who also happen to be Muslims seems to be inconceivable in this context.)

These posts make use of various rhetorical strategies in order to demonstrate what is perceived as being hypocritical in Swedish (and Danish) majority society and in order to show the superiority of Islam and the righteousness of Muslims.

As-Sueidi uses irony and other rhetorical devices in these posts in order to show what he sees as being the defects in or potential hypocrisy of the majority culture while simultaneously presenting Islam as an alternative or a complement. They can be understood as a counter-discourse in the sense that they seek

to identify and question elements in majority discourse without necessarily distancing themselves entirely from, e.g., the recommendations made by the public authorities (Terdiman 1985: 149; Abu Lughod 1990; Faxneld 2015). The form of Islam that as-Sueidi represents is emphasized as a counter-cultural resource, a subversive complement characterized by mercy, compassion, and social responsibility.

Studies of irony have shown how it can simultaneously strengthen ties to an audience that shares one's opinions while creating or maintaining distance from an audience that does not (Kaufer 1977). Insisting upon the superiority of one's own group over an opposing group in this way can also be regarded as a means of tightening the bonds that link a group of followers to bring them closer together. It is a rhetorical device that is used regularly in posts published on the accounts analyzed in this article (Sorgenfrei, forthcoming; see also Graham 2016; Coser 1956), and Susanne Olsson has also noted similar othering strategies in her study of puritan Salafists in Sweden (Olsson 2019). However, in the Muslim ideal that is emphasized in these posts we also find an encouragement to work in a responsible way that overlaps with the next category.

Social responses

As we have seen, "Muslims" were presented as an ideal in contrast with "ski tourists" in the Instagram post discussed above, and what is emphasized in particular about their activity is precisely that they had behaved in a socially responsible way. To do so as a Muslim is also a prominent theme found in several other posts as well as the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank that will be analyzed below. On the 11th of March, for instance, Abdullah as-Sueidi offered two pieces of advice related to the spread of the COVID-19 virus in a post that can also serve as an example of how the analytical categories used in this article often overlap. He writes:

- 1) Follow all the regulations and recommendations given by the authorities and by medical doctors in order to avoid being infected or infecting others.
- 2) Attach your heart to Allah. Don't be afraid. Stay calm. Only a very few people have been infected. The number

of those who get infected and then die from it is extremely low, especially amongst the younger generations. And, in the end, the worst thing that can happen is that one dies, and then we return to our Creator. So why should we be afraid?

Here, what have in this article been classified as social and theological posts respectively are placed side-by-side. This is of course not unusual in the history of religions. We find an example in the Lutheran motto *Ora et labora*, "pray and work" and another in the Qur'an where the exhortation to pray is often juxtaposed with the expectation to give alms (see, for instance, surah 2, verse 3).

We can also note how as-Sueidi encourages his followers to obey the recommendations given by the public authorities. Doing so is presented as being religiously sanctioned in a post containing several further recommendations that was published on the 12th of March. These are said to be based upon what "several fatwa councils in a number of Muslim countries" have said about the matter. Here it is stated that: 1) one is not allowed to pray in a congregation if one is sick; 2) one should follow the advice of the authorities and their decisions regarding quarantining and the like; 3) if one is afraid of being infected or of infecting others, one does not have to attend the Friday prayer, which in that case must be compensated for by praying the *dhūhr* prayer (the noon prayer), four rakat (prostrations). These should, one must assume, be done at home.

In media reporting in particular, Salafism is often presented as a current that distances itself from the majority society and its institutions and that is driven by an ambition to create parallel societies informed by other values and norms systems than those prevalent in society at large (Abramovicz 2018. In some respects, this article can be regarded as a somewhat superficial reading of Ranstorp et al. 2018) The material analyzed here, however, implies that, at least in relation to the group and material discussed in the present article, such a distancing from Swedish authorities is not seen in this case even though criticism is directed towards certain tendencies in the majority culture and the majority politics (as seen in the examples above). By referring to fatwas, they are rather making it religiously sanctioned to follow the recommendations of the Swedish authorities regarding COVID-19.

During the period in question, Abdullah as-Sueidi also

made several posts informing readers about Muslims he saw as having made important contributions to society and encouraging more people to get involved and help others during the pandemic. On the 22nd of March, he published a post about something referred to as "COVID-19 Aid". "Some [Muslim] brothers in Stockholm have started a service where they help people who are isolated at home and need help to go shopping and similar things", he wrote, emphasizing that it is "a very nice initiative based upon compassion", something he would like to see more of. On the 27th of March, he posted a screenshot of an article about a Muslim couple in the city of Strängnäs who had in a similar way helped people affected by the pandemic. He added the comment that he "hoped more Muslims would get involved in similar things". Moosa Assal also highlighted the importance of taking social responsibility, e.g., in a post published on the 16th of March in which he praised healthcare workers.

In these posts, they do not explicitly write that other Muslims should be the recipients of assistance but instead emphasize that willingness to help others is a Muslim ideal. There are, however, other posts that do emphasize that one should specifically help other Muslims. For example, in a post published on the 21st of March Moosa Assal remarks that many business owners had lost money during the pandemic and he added a comment in which he asks his followers to give the names of "the halal companies that you know of owned by our brothers and sisters". One can understand this as a way of supporting the entrepreneurship of Muslims rather than that of business owners in general and thereby simultaneously reinforcing a Muslim group identity and helping the local Muslim communities where their followers live and work.

These ambitions were however jeopardized by a post published on the 23rd of March, which noted that Swedish Somalis were overrepresented in the statistics regarding infections. Abdullah as-Sueidi wrote:

More than half of those who have died from the coronavirus in the Stockholm area are Swedish Somalis. Many of our older uncles and aunts don't understand Swedish and can't keep up with the safety precautions one ought to take in connection with this virus. I know that you who follow [my posts] know many different languages. Lend a hand by spreading information so that it reaches

as many people as possible and in particular those who don't understand Swedish. May Allah show mercy to those who have died.

That Swedish Somalis were overrepresented was, as we have seen, also taken up in the Swedish media, and several possible reasons for this were suggested, e.g., what are often crowded living conditions, living in tightly knit communities where there is much intergenerational socializing, and elderly Somalis not understanding enough Swedish to enable them to comprehend and follow the recommendations given by the public authorities (Krepner 2020; Randhawa 2020).

The reasons given for the overrepresentation of Swedish Somalis, in particular the notion that they could not understand information about COVID-19, were met with criticism (Frömark & Rajs 2020. Osman 2020). For instance, social commentator and former chairperson of the Association of Young Swedish Muslims (SUM) Rashid Musa said: "speculations about the ability of the victims to read and write as a cause for their deaths are not only shocking but also serve to place the blame on the victims and their families. These statements only reinforce the colonial notion of Swedish Somalis being illiterate and uneducated" (Musa 2020).

A post made by Abdullah as-Sueidi seems to have received similar criticism. In a new Instagram post published both in Swedish and Somali on the 25th of March in which a previous post was quoted, he apologized for the way in which the latter had been formulated. Under an image of a heart-shaped Somali flag, he wrote that "Somali brothers and sisters have felt offended by this since it can lead to increased racism against Somalis because people might believe that they are ignorant about the illness that is spreading or that they don't follow the hygiene recommendations given due to the virus". He emphasized that this does not only apply to Somalis and that it is "very important that we help each other spread information about COVID-19 to as many people as possible".

In the posts that have been discussed in this section, we have thus been able to see how Abdullah as-Sueidi asked his followers to be attentive to the recommendations made by the Swedish authorities and that he encouraged his followers to act in a responsible and compassionate way. Several of these posts highlight an ideal without specifying who the recipients of the suggested activities should be while others are more specific and

encourage those who read them to help other Muslims and what are referred to as "halal businesses". Taken together, these posts can be regarded as aiming to remind readers of, and strengthening, their Muslim group identity and the local Muslim community without necessarily being in opposition to the majority society. Islam is also in this case presented not as a competitor to the Swedish authorities and national initiatives but rather as a complement to them.

Theological responses

As we have seen, both Abdullah as-Sueidi and Moosa Assal use theological arguments in posts that have herein been assigned to the category of social responses. There are no clear boundaries separating these categories, and the need to take social responsibility is in particular presented as a religious virtue. However, during the period in question posts were also published that emphasized religion as a comforting resource. We find an example in a post made by Abdullah as-Sueidi on the 20th of April in which he encourages "those who feel fearful and anxious about being alone during the COVID-19 pandemic" to reflect upon a verse from the Qur'an: "Fear not – God is with us" (9:40).

The most obvious example of how one theologically can and should respond to COVID-19 from the perspective that is represented by Islam.nu is found in the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank that was published on March 21, 2020, as a sound file on the website Islam.nu (Frank 2020). It is just over 52 minutes in length and is loosely structured around 10 points that can be summarized as follows:

- 1) COVID-19 should be understood as a reminder of the weakness of humanity and of the fact that health is one of the most beautiful gifts that humanity has received from Allah. Abdulwadod Frank cites here a statement attributed to the early theologian and jurist al-Shafi'i (767–820): "Health is a crown that the *healthy* wear on their heads, but only the sick can see it."
- 2) Everything that happens has a divine cause and a purpose. It is predestined, and there is wisdom behind

all of Allah's decisions. "Perhaps we see it in negative terms, but, ultimately, it is positive". Muslims must therefore strengthen their faith and their confidence in Allah wishing them well and in there being divine wisdom behind everything that happens.

3) COVID-19 can therefore be seen as a trial and as an opportunity to deepen one's relationship to Allah and to Islam.

4) Abdulwadod Frank also emphasizes that Islam teaches that illness can afflict people as a punishment from Allah. "This is a wakeup call ... Allah is not pleased with humankind... It's time to make *tawbah*. To turn to Allah and to repent of one's sins".

5) Through repentance and confidence in God (*tawbah* and *tawakkul*), one can return to Allah, but that does not mean that one does not at the same time have to do everything one can in order to prevent becoming infected or infecting others. If one nevertheless becomes sick, it is fate.

6) Frank emphasizes the importance of getting one's information from the right sources and of not listening to or spreading the conjectures and conspiracy theories that abound on social media.

7) There is both worldly medicine and religious medicine and they complement each other. Regarding worldly medicine, he encourages his listeners to follow the advice of "the Public Health Agency, medical doctors, and researchers". He exemplifies this by showing that they, just like Muhammad, recommend imposing a quarantine when an epidemic emerges by quoting a hadith: "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." (Bukhari n.d., 71: 624).

8) He also emphasizes the importance of not shaking hands, of covering one's mouth when sneezing, of washing and disinfecting one's hands, and of doing what one can to strengthen one's own immune system by exercising and maintaining a healthy diet. He points out that Muhammad has also recommended honey, black cumin – the remedy for all afflictions except death – and *Zamzam* water (water from a well in Mecca) for their medicinal properties.

9) He touches upon the topic of medicine and advises

everyone to read a book about “prophetic medicine”, *Tibb al-Nabawī*, by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350), but he also emphasizes that Islam does not prohibit the use of conventional medicine, (“Allah has not sent down an illness without also sending down a medicine”), but the medicine must be permissible within the framework of Islam. For instance, if somebody were to say that smoking a joint or drinking a shot of tequila helps against COVID-19, one must not partake of them. He also emphasizes that the Qur’an and the hadith contain advice about performing *du‘ā’* and *dhikr* (forms of prayer), asking Allah to make one well again. Therefore, he concludes, it is not medicine nor is it one’s immune system that restores one’s health; it is Allah who does it.

10) Finally, Abdulwadod Frank refers to a hadith that stresses the importance of doing good, being helpful and spreading happiness, and performing *du‘ā’* and *dhikr*, which is presented as the best way to banish evil and receive protection.

To begin with, we can note that Abdulwadod Frank, in a way that is typical for the Salafī current within which he positions himself, derives his statements and recommendations from the Qur’an, hadith, and early jurists and uses theological terminology in Arabic, all of which anchors what he says in the first epoch of Islam which is normative within Salafī discourse. According to the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank, one should as a Muslim understand the global pandemic as part of Allah’s plan, and within this insight lies both consolation and instruction. Allah’s actions are good even if their goodness cannot always be perceived by human rationality. COVID-19 thus offers an opportunity to practice and deepen one’s faith in God and one’s prayers because, according to this perspective, just as Allah created the pandemic, it is only Allah who can liberate humankind from it.

Frank is, however, not advocating fatalistic passivity: faith in God should be complemented by action and taking social responsibility. Like as-Sueidi and Assal, he insists that Islam does not contradict what he calls “conventional medicine”. They should be understood as complementing each other.

One hadith can be said to summarize the position Frank preaches (even if he himself does not explicitly refer to it). In this narrative, a man asks Muhammad if he should tether his

camel and trust Allah or if he should let his camel walk around freely and trust Allah. Muhammad is then said to have answered: tether your camel and rely upon Allah (Tirmidhi n.d., Vol. 4, Book 11, Hadith 2517). In other words, one should first do what lies within one's own command to prevent the camel from escaping – in the present situation, getting infected or infecting others – but, at the end of the day, one must be aware that everything ultimately lies in the hands of Allah.

However, Abdulwadod Frank also emphasizes the importance of becoming a better person. Here, COVID-19 is presented as a sign that Allah is displeased with humanity and that He demands more repentance and a greater reliance upon Him. The only real cure is to turn to Allah and Islam. Hence the message of the lecture can simultaneously activate feelings of guilt and feelings of comfort. This, too, is common in the history of religions: religion can supply rituals and messages that provide consolation in difficult situations but also narratives that cast blame on those who are afflicted (Larsson 2018). At the same time that religion can be a resource for reducing anxiety, religious narratives can also increase anxiety in connection with diseases and great personal trials (O'Brien et al. 2019). In the lecture by Abdulwadod, these narratives go together, since COVID-19 is presented as being a trial from Allah while Allah at the same time is also the only one who can protect or cure those who fall ill. Prayer, repentance, and moral betterment become the answers to all the challenges that COVID-19 poses to the believer, and the group behind Islam.nu is presented as having the religious education that is needed to guide those who are worried on the straight path.

Conclusions

As I have shown, three different but overlapping categories of responses to COVID-19 can be found in the source materials that have been collected and analyzed for the purposes of this article. I have named these categories *rhetorical*, *social*, and *theological* responses. Under the first heading, we saw how various rhetorical devices are used in order to criticize what are seen as being Islamophobic tendencies in society and to simultaneously reinforce a sense of a shared Muslim group identity. This can be seen in relation to earlier studies of puritan Salafis in Swe-

den, which have shown that they strive towards achieving at least a partial separation from the majority society which they consider to be un-Islamic and immoral (Olsson 2019; Dogan 2012). In the source materials analyzed here, however, we could not detect any unambiguous distancing from the majority society. Instead, a counter-discourse was activated that presented Islam as a complement to the recommendations presented by the public authorities.

In posts that could primarily be classified as belonging to the second category, the importance of taking social responsibility in order to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic for society was emphasized. The material analyzed here shows that the three preachers upon which this article focuses encouraged their followers to heed the advice and recommendations outlined by the Swedish authorities and the Swedish government. This, however, does not mean that they by definition think that Muslims should submit to the directives given by Swedish politicians and authorities. We found examples of this in the posts that discussed the custom of shaking hands and in the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank where he emphasizes that medicine violating the principles of Islam is not permitted. One can also see in connection with this category how the sources present Islam as an alternative and complement to the majority culture rather than as being in conflict with it. We also saw in a number of Abdullah as-Sueidi's och Moosa Assal's posts an emphasis on strengthening the local Muslim community.

Lastly, in the third category, we could see how Abdulwadod Frank connected social responsibility to an ideal of piety. COVID-19 was explained as being a punishment or as a challenge given by Allah that simultaneously offered the opportunity to strengthen one's individual Muslim piety by intensifying one's prayers and one's trust in God and by acting in a morally responsible way in society. Abdulwadod Frank and the others behind Islam.nu thus at least indirectly present themselves as religious authorities who can guide their followers through the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis.

The source material is interesting not least because it shows how representatives of a current that is often seen as being separatist in relation to the majority society can – at least in regard to some matters – represent an ideology and a praxis that advocate following the advice and recommendations given by the Swedish authorities. Islam is presented here not in contrast to

the majority society but rather as a complement to it. The recommendations and theological interpretations that appear in the source materials analyzed here do not differ to any great extent from those presented by Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige (the Union of Islamic Associations in Sweden) as quoted in the beginning of this article, or from the as undertaken in relation to the ongoing pandemic by, e.g., the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan 2020), which provided similar theological answers in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Molén 2020).

Like other puritan Salafi groups, Islam.nu is focused on mission, and this article has shown that such missionizing ambitions are an important element in all three categories. Their responses to the challenges that COVID-19 poses for society in general and their followers specifically are formulated in a way that aims to strengthen individual Muslim piety, a Muslim group identity, and the local Muslim community while bolstering their own authority as religious experts.

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Alessandro Gori

Temasektion

Home prayer, unattended funerals and social responsibility: Muslims in Italy and the coronavirus outbreak (March-May 2020)¹

Keywords

COVID-19, Muslims in Denmark, mosques, postsecular society,

Preliminary remarks: the public religious scene and the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy²

¹ As everywhere else, in Italy, too, the COVID-19 epidemic is still (26.02.2021) a massive issue on the public scene from both a purely medical and a general social point of view. Summer 2020 was characterized by a general relaxation of the restrictions imposed on daily life in spring, but by autumn, with the daily infection rate back on the rise, the Italian government once again began issuing a series of measures to limit general social interaction. However, the implementation of an overall strict lockdown on the order of the one enforced from March to May 2020 has been avoided. Throughout the article I will limit my analysis to the first period of the epidemic, i.e. from the beginning of the lockdown until the first reopening phase (9 March – 2 May 2020).

² On the impact of the government's anti-COVID measures on the religious life of Italian Catholics, and on the sensitive legal aspects contained in the prime minister's provisions, some scholarly literature is already available: see for example (Ferrari 2020); (Aderò 2020).

Abstract Sadly, in 2020 Italy was one of the countries hardest hit by coronavirus (by 26 February 2021 2020: 2,868,435 infected; 96,974 dead). All religious communities in Italy had to respond quickly and clearly to a common and invisible threat, while providing guidance and support to their local congregations and complying with government provisions in order to curb the spread of the virus. From 9 March to 2 May 2020, Italy's approximately 2.9 million Muslims, like all other residents, had to abide by the country's strict stay-at-home orders, refraining from going out except for emergencies and to buy food. In the present article, I will make use of selected texts published on the official websites of the *Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia (UCOII – Union of Islamic congregations and organizations in Italy – اتحاد الهيئات والجاليات الإسلامية في إيطاليا)* and of the *Associazione Islamica Italiana degli Imam e delle Guide Religiose (Italian Islamic Association of Imams and Religious Guides; الجمعية الإسلامية الإيطالية للأئمة والمرشدين)* to determine and discuss: 1) which practices of the Italian Islamic community were most affected by the epidemic, and 2) how Italian Muslims carried out various symbolic and social initiatives to demonstrate their active participation in the common fight against the spread of the virus.

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Italy has been one of the countries hardest hit by COVID-19. As of 26 February 2021, 2,868,435 cases and 96,974 deaths have been recorded nationwide, making it the country with the seventh-highest death rate worldwide, at 1,605 x 1,000,000 inhabitants).³

In an attempt to slow the spread of the disease and shield the healthcare system from a possible collapse caused by a quick and massive onslaught of patients, the Italian government adopted a series of increasingly harsh measures, culminating in an almost complete lockdown of the population on 9 March 2020. On that day, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte extended to the entire national territory the quarantine already implemented in Lombardy and 14 other northern Italian provinces, forcing the Italian population to stay home. In the following days, all commercial activity (with the exception of supermarkets and pharmacies), and all businesses and industries considered non-essential, were forced to remain closed. People's freedom of movement was drastically restricted, and every person found outdoors had to prove they had a valid reason to be on the move. At that time, the result was probably the largest and longest lockdown in the history of Europe, and certainly the harshest response taken in any region of the world (except China) against the spread of the virus. The lockdown was slowly and gradually eased starting 4 May 2020, as Italy embarked upon a partial normalization of social life.

During the almost two-month period of total lockdown, all collective activities were strictly forbidden. This general prohibition extended to all forms of communal religious rituals and practices, which were therefore completely banned. The Catholic Church fully complied with the government's injunctions⁴ and local bishops cancelled all daily masses and other indoor practices (e.g. baptism, marriage) and heavily restricted access to churches, even for individuals who only wished to pray;⁵ attendance at funerals was forbidden, and pilgrimages, devotional processions and other public rituals were suspended.⁶

The ban on collective ceremonies – especially those playing a relevant social role like Sunday morning mass, which is normally attended not only for its religious significance but also as an occasion to meet up with relatives and friends – had a profound impact on Italian Catholics. Masses were streamed online on several different portals and websites for the benefit of the faithful,⁷ but this solution could evidently not fully compensate the absence of physically perceptible social contact among the

3 Data obtained from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>.

4 “Church and state in Italy work together to prevent spread of coronavirus”, Vatican News, 9 March 2020 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-03/church-state-in-italy-cooperate-to-halt-spread-of-coronavirus.print.html>

5 As prophylactic anti-virus measures inside the churches, praying individuals had to stay at least one meter apart. Holy water fonts were emptied, making it impossible to perform spiritual/ritual cleansing before prayer (on these restrictions see Allen 2020).

participants, which is a constituent part of the liturgy.⁸ The images of closed churches, at a time when many believers expressed a dramatic need for divine support, had a tremendous psychological effect on the minds of Catholics, the consequences of which will have to be analysed in the near future.⁹

Church funerals (and funerary ceremonies in general) could not be held, and the inability to bid deceased relatives a final farewell had a major emotional impact on the population, and led to dismay and anxiety even in completely secular Italians. In some cities in Northern Italy that were especially hard-hit by the virus, authorities had problems storing the high number of coffins. Churches offered to store them, while the Italian Army volunteered to transport some of these coffins from churches and morgues to cemeteries.¹⁰

Muslims in Italy¹¹ (est. 2,600,000, or 4.3% of the population,¹² making it the country's second-largest religious community)¹³ were also directly hit by the strict lockdown ordered by the gov-

6 An analysis of the way local Church authorities implemented the set of norms issued by the central government could reveal the extent to which there was room for differences of interpretation.
7 See for example: <http://messeindiretta.altervista.org/>; <https://www.santantonio.org/it/live-streaming>; <https://www.sanfrancescopatronoditalia.it/messa-diretta-streaming-oggi>; concerning the canonical problem connected with streaming mass as a substitution for in-church mass, see the guidelines issued by the Conference of Italian Bishops (CEI): <https://chiciseparera.chiesacattolica.it/celebrare-in-diretta-tv-o-in-streaming/>. 8 The physical proximity of the attendees at a Catholic mass is exemplified in the ritual of exchanging “the sign of peace” (historically: “kiss of peace”), when the congregation shake hands with one another. The practice generally marks the beginning of the Eucharist in the Roman Liturgy (or of another other moment of the mass, according to the different traditions) and represents the unity and fraternity of the body of the Church before God. Church officials

have recommended to substitute it with an exchange of eye contact.

9 It should be mentioned that for Easter, the leader of Italy's opposition far-right Lega party issued a request to have Churches exceptionally opened – with certain health restrictions in place – in order to allow the faithful to attend the holy celebration of the feast. The Catholic Church did not officially support this politically motivated request, which was eventually dismissed.

10 On the dramatic situation in some areas of Northern Italy, see a first-hand description (Hornig-Stöhr 2020).

11 Sociologically and culturally speaking, Muslims in Italy comprise several different layers and groups (for example: recent converts to Islam, lifelong Muslims, local Italians, Italians from immigrant families, and newly arrived immigrants). For the purposes and the scope of the present paper, I will not distinguish among these different groups. I believe that, faced with a common threat, the various segments of the Islamic community in Italy largely blurred their internal cultural divides, even if it cannot be ruled out that in some instances

cultural and sociological background may have played a role in prompting different attitudes and responses to the crisis. This point could be the topic of further research.

12 A great deal of uncertainty still surrounds the total number of Muslims in Italy. Here I am using the figures calculated by Italian sociologist Fabrizio Ciocca (Ciocca 2019, 29-40; and see in particular his online updated statistical résumé Ciocca 2019b). The present article is not concerned with the history of the presence of the Islamic religion in Italy nor with the general cultural and sociological issues connected with the growth of Islam in the country. On both topics the available literature is vast. I will merely refer the reader to two introductory articles (Vincenzo 2010), (Roggero 2002), as well as to the full-fledged survey by (Ciocca 2019), which provides information and further bibliography.

13 Orthodox Christianity, the followers of which are estimated to be around 1.800.000, is the second-largest Christian denomination in Italy after Catholicism (Lauritzen 2011).

ernment. All the country's Islamic associations and groups immediately complied with the containment measures taken by the public authorities and halted all collective rituals, closing all mosques and prayer halls. Muslim scholars started streaming sermons, and giving talks and presentations on the internet to provide guidance to local congregations, who were urged to pray at home with their families.

While many aspects of Islamic daily life remained less affected by the COVID-19 emergency, the concerns of the Muslim communities had to focus on two fundamental Islamic rituals, which became impossible to perform under the lockdown: 1) the Friday noon congregational prayer (*salāt al-jum'ā*), with its characteristic Friday sermon (*khutba*);¹⁴ and 2) funerals, including bathing the corpse (*ghusl*) and the prayer for dead (*salāt al-janāza*).

In what follows, I will try to briefly describe some of the solutions that Italian Islamic communities found to the theological and practical problems connected with the temporary cancellation of these two constituent parts of their collective life. Along these lines, I will analyse how Italian Muslims communicated, both among themselves and to the wider society, their efforts to face the pandemic's spread through the country.

As a documentary basis for my analysis, I will select various written and audio-visual sources, mostly in Italian and partially in Arabic, available online and produced by the *Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia* (Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy: UCOII اتحاد الهيئات والجاليات الإسلامية في إيطاليا).

The absence of a single institution representing the majority of Italian Muslims, and the lack of a committee coordinating the existing Muslim groups and organizations, has made for a wide array of Italian Islamic associations, whose relationship with one another is often characterized by rivalry and competition.¹⁵ The conflictive relationships among the Italian Muslim organizations has prevented the Italian state from officially recognizing Islam as a religious community on the same level as other communities and denominations (e.g. the Lutheran Church, the Jewish Community, two different Buddhist groups, and many others), which have signed a memorandum of understanding – *intesa* in Italian – with the authorities.¹⁶

The *Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy* (hereinafter UCOII), which has often come under sharp

14 As the month of Ramadan started on 23 April 2020, the issue of the tarāwih supererogatory prayers was also raised.

15 About the different Islamic associations active in Italy, each of which represents a different social, cultural or theological/ideological fraction of the Islamic public scene in the country, see (Angelucci 2014), (Bombardieri 2014), (Piccinini 2019).

16 For the complete list of the religious communities and confessions which have signed an agreement-memorandum with the Italian state, see; http://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/intese_indice.html. On the long-debated and still unresolved issue of signing a memorandum of understanding with an officially acknowledgeable and fully representative Islamic organisation in Italy there is a notable bibliography in Italian: see for example (Ferrari 2017), (Angelucci 2018), (Conti 2018).

criticism for its alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (which the group has consistently denied),¹⁷ is probably the largest and certainly the most active Muslim organisation in Italy. UCOII, which manages 153 local associations, 80 mosques and 300 prayer halls, has for many years been a dynamic presence on the public stage, on the internet, and on social media, in a clear endeavour to gain followers, influence and prestige, in hopes of presenting itself as the sole reliable representative of Italian Muslims. During the most acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis, UCOII activated all the communication tools at its disposal to tackle and ease the bewilderment, dismay and fear spreading among Italian Muslims. In the perspective of the present paper, therefore, the texts and documents produced by UCOII have the advantage of being focused on the real, ongoing situation, and of directly aiming at achieving Islamic solutions to the problems facing Italian Muslim communities as a result of the pandemic and lockdown.

I will also make use of several documents in both Arabic and Italian posted on the Facebook page of the *Associazione Islamica Italiana degli Imam e delle Guide Religiose* (Italian Islamic Association of Imams and Religious Guides; الجمعية الإسلامية الإيطالية; للأئمة والمرشدين; hereinafter *Associazione*), founded in 2011 with the aim of providing educational support to local imams. The *Associazione* also functions as a committee of Islamic legal experts in charge of issuing fatwas for the Italian Muslim community. It works in close connection with UCOII, which treats to the *Associazione's* fatwas, analyses and statements as valid legal perspectives that believers can safely follow.

I will critically scrutinize the selected corpus, following the common practice of textual analysis in a religious-oriented context.¹⁸

Pray at home and stay safe! The issue of the salāt al-jum'a

As the mosques were shut down due to the lockdown order issued by the Italian government, the country's Islamic communities were deprived of one of their main centres of congregation and communication. To keep alive their connections with the faithful, all Muslim organizations in Italy ramped up their online activities, providing the public with live and recorded speeches and sermons, mostly aimed at analysing the situation and pro-

¹⁷ Some press sources from 2017 point to significant Qatari economic backing for UCOII (https://www.huffingtonpost.it/2017/02/02/accordo-islam-italia_n_14572256.html).

¹⁸ See for example: (al-Azami 2016); (Wijsen-von Stuckrad 2016).

viding reliable advice to face the unusual and dramatic circumstances. After closing all its mosques and prayer halls on 5 March,¹⁹ on 6 March UCOII opened a special hotline, along with a WhatsApp number, to take questions from local Muslims.

The need to strictly comply with the guidelines issued by the government was repeatedly underlined,²⁰ as well as practical information about the virus, how it spreads, and how best to avoid it.²¹

Campaigns and collective initiatives were launched on social media to nurture bonds among fellow Muslims stuck in physical isolation. In particular, at the beginning of Ramadan (24 April 2020), the Associazione launched the community campaign *Una moschea a casa nostra* (A mosque at home – في بيتنا مسجد) with the aim of transforming “our homes into an oasis of science, knowledge, engagement, and worship”. In connection with this campaign, the Associazione posted on Facebook a written document in Arabic and Italian giving instructions on how to organize a “family mosque” at home during Ramadan, accompanied by a selection of Hadiths that justified and supported the practice of home prayer in case of necessity.

It seems that large-scale use of social media allowed Muslims in Italy to rapidly switch to a kind of “mixed online/domestic modus”, which offered a suitable environment to carry out the daily prayers and *du‘ā’s*, and to create a suitable spiritual atmosphere for Ramadan.²²

However, the strict Italian lockdown presented Muslims with a problem that the internet and social media could not easily resolve. As all the mosques and prayer halls were closed, it was impossible to perform the mandatory collective rituals on Fridays at noon: namely, listening to the sermon of the preacher and then carrying out the congregational prayer.

19 The faithful were informed about the closures through a Circular Letter to the Community (*Circolare Comunitaria* 01/2020) in Italian. The document was uploaded to UCOII’s website (<https://www.ucoii.org/2020/03/05/01-2020-disposizioni-emergenza-coronavirus-per-le-comunita-islamiche/>) and posted on the group’s Facebook page.

20 See the post in Italian on the Facebook page of the Associazione

on 9 March: *Carissimi vi chiediamo la massima collaborazione* (Dear all, we ask for your full cooperation). The Associazione posted on its Facebook page a link to the speech of the prime minister, where he declared the implementation of the nationwide lockdown.

21 Examples of the posts on the Facebook page of the Associazione: 10 recommendations in Arabic to prevent COVID-19 infection (7

March 2020); *Insieme con responsabilità e consapevolezza* (Together with responsibility and awareness): press release by the Associazione on its Facebook page, 10 March 2020.

22 See (Bongarrà 2020) and the 22 message by *‘Ibādāt athnā’ al-makth fi al-buyūt* posted on the Facebook page of the Associazione on 5 April 2020.

This thorny issue faced all the Muslim communities living in countries with a full lockdown in force. Speeches and even prayers could be easily streamed online so that the faithful could follow them live, but doubt arose about the legal value of a prayer performed by someone standing behind an imam whose presence is merely virtual.²³

The issue of praying behind an imam *in absentia* is not actually a new one in the Islamic world. Already the spread of radio brought the topic to the attention of important Muslim legal experts. Al-Azhar's shaykh Hasanayn Muhammad Makhlūf in 1950 issued a fatwa according to which "It is not sufficient to hear the *khutba* and the movements of the imam from a radio" to make the Friday communal prayer legally acceptable. The argument in support of this conclusion is that the prayer at noon on Fridays is valid only if performed collectively, as the Prophet himself performed it in a group setting. The faithful must follow the way the Prophet used to pray according to the Hadith: "Pray as you saw me praying – *Sallū kamā ra'yatumūnī 'usallī*".²⁴ The opinion of Makhlūf was contradicted by Moroccan Hadith scholar Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Siddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1960), who in 1956 published a very dense booklet titled *al-Iqnā' bi-siḥhat salāt al-jum'a fī al-manzil khalfā al-midhyā'* ("Convincing people that the Friday communal prayer is valid when performed at home behind a radio set").²⁵ In the text, the Moroccan scholar posed only two conditions for the legal acceptability of this form of prayer: that the imam and the praying person are acting synchronically, and that at least two individuals are praying together behind the radio.

The debate on the possibility of praying *al-jum'a* in absentia and/or praying it at home by creating a small *jamā'a* ("group") with one's own family members was abruptly refuelled by the unprecedented obstacles of the COVID-19 pandemic and by the exponentially increased usage of online surrogates for many other religious activities.

Many Muslim religious authorities were urged to take a clear stance on this point. The overall result worldwide was that only a minority considered as licit a Friday prayer performed behind a virtually present imam and among a group of virtual congregants via a ceremony streamed online. This was the unequivocal position of Umar Al-Qadri, the head of the Islamic Centre in Ireland, in his fatwa issued on 12 March 2020.²⁶ Ahmad Kutty, head of the Islamic Institute of Toronto, with some reservations, sid-

23 The practice of uploading videos of *khutbas*, e.g. on YouTube, was already widespread before the coronavirus crisis: see (Hirschkind 2012).

24 The fatwa can be read in the collection *al-Fatāwā al-islāmiyya min dār al-iftā' al-misriyya*, volume 1, Cairo: Wizārat al-awqāf, 1980, 85.

25 The book was published in Cairo at the *Maktabat al-ta'lif*, n.d. The year of publication is not stated on the cover but can be gleaned from a date mentioned inside the book.

26 <http://www.islamiccentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/Fatwa-on-Permissibility-of-Online-Jumua-Taraweeh-during-Covid19-Islamic-Centre-of-Ireland-2.pdf> and the following <http://www.islamiccentre.ie/wp-content/uploads/Statement-after-Detailed-Fatwa-from-Shaykh-Dr-Umar-Al-Qadri-Final.pdf>.

ed in favour of the validity of the online *jum'ā*, but strictly as a temporary remedy to cope with the exceptional circumstances at hand.²⁷ Likewise, UCLA-based Professor Khaled Abu al-Fadl, head of the *Usuli Institute* in Los Angeles, streamed his *khutbas* and virtual Friday prayers on the website of the institute.²⁸

While dismissing the acceptability of online prayer,²⁹ some other Islamic authorities proposed holding the congregational prayer at home with a minimal presence of three people (including the imam), all of them members of the family, so as to respect the restrictions imposed on public gatherings. This view was supported by Texas-based Egyptian scholar Dr Muhammad Saleh, a religious adviser for Huda TV, who stated that three people were sufficient to establish a *jamā'a*, while the *khutba* could be limited to a series of simple invocations and pieces of advice.³⁰ The same position was taken by Saeed Qureshi, imam of the *Dar al-Islah* group in Teaneck Township of Bergen County, New Jersey, who published his own short guide on how to perform *jum'ā* at home.³¹ In the Arab world this kind of home *jum'ā* was considered licit by shaykh Khālid 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Rifā'i, one of the promoters of the website *Islam Way – Tariq al-Islam*.³² In India, renowned preacher Zakir Naik, founder of the international satellite channel *Peace TV*, also voiced his support for the acceptability of home *jum'ā*.³³

Still, the majority of Muslim legal institutions and experts considered unacceptable both the virtual prayer with an imam in absentia and the home *jum'ā*.³⁴ Most Muslim scholars stated that since the COVID-19 pandemic posed a serious risk to congregants' health, there was a legally valid justification to outright miss the communal prayer. Instead of the *jum'ā*, the faithful were

27 The fatwa is dated 2 April 2020: *On Holding Virtual/Online Jumu'ahs and Taraweeh Salats During COVID-19 Precautions* and it is published under <https://islam.ca/virtual-jumuah-and-taraweeh-during-covid>.

28 <https://www.usuli.org>.

29 For an interesting excursus on the challenges contained in the "virtualization" of the Islamic sacred sphere triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic see (Anwar 2020).

30 On Dr Muhammad Saleh see: <https://www.drmsalah.com/biography>; <https://www.huda.tv/>;

<http://www.hudaonlineacademy.com/?frcourse=1370547708>; the fatwa in English was released in a video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvaAzzFkQo8> and in a TV program on Huda TV (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17jRhLCWYro>).

31 <http://www.darulislah.org/index.php/simple-procedure-for-jummah-at-home/>

32 Arabic fatwa posted on the website *IslamWay* on March 23: <https://ar.islamway.net/fatwa/78132/>.

33 See for example his YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_hwp2C_S_U.

watch?v=M_hwp2C_S_U.

34 See for example the *Resident Fatwa Committee of the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America* (AMJA), *The European Council for Fatwa and Research*; *The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowment* (UAE); al-Azhar University; the *Rābitat al-ulamā' al-sūriyyīn* (in the person of Muhammad Sulaymān Nasrallāh al-Farrā') and many others. A quick survey of the different positions taken by the Islamic authorities worldwide in connection with these two issues can be found in Yasin 2020.

invited to perform the normal noon prayer (*zuhr*) at home, as the proper requirements to do so could easily be satisfied anywhere, without the need to introduce undue innovations.

In Italy, the Associazione took a clear stance in a communiqué posted on its Facebook page on 3 March 2020 (in Arabic) and on 5 March 2020 (in Italian), when the lockdown had still only been implemented in Northern Italy. The incumbent risk for the life of the believers and the consequent closing of the mosques to limit the spread of the virus were considered legally sufficient justifications for refraining from the fulfilment of the duty of praying together in the mosque behind a physically present imam. Believers under lockdown were invited to perform the normal noon prayer in the safety of their own homes.

On 13 March 2020, the Associazione posted a fatwa in Arabic and in Italian, in which it reaffirmed that the ongoing health risk was a fully justifying reason to miss the collective Friday prayer. The justification was valid also in connection with the “three times” mentioned in the Prophetic saying: “Whoever neglects three collective Friday prayers out of indifference, God will seal his heart”, a Hadith which had raised the worries of the Muslims in Northern Italy, where the lockdown had already lasted for three weeks.

Neither the Associazione nor UCOII directly and specifically discussed the possibility of performing the *jum'a* virtually and/or at home: the recommendation for believers to perform a standard noon prayer at home implicitly contained the refusal of the two other hypotheses. However, the Associazione explicitly confirmed its dismissal of the virtual *jum'a* and of the home *jum'a* on 3 April 2020, posting a link to a fatwa issued on that very day by the International Union of Muslim Scholars, where the organization headquartered in Qatar affirmed that in countries where the *jum'a* ritual was prohibited, the preferable (*al-rājih*) choice was to pray a common *zuhr*.

At the same time, to reinforce the importance of praying on Fridays, on 3 April 2020 the Associazione posted a speech in Arabic and Italian by Aboulkheir Breigheche, an imam in Trento (Northern Italy),³⁵ which underscored the importance of Fridays. In this way, Italian Muslims were reminded of the unique significance of Friday as a special day in the Islamic conception of time, despite the impossibility to duly and fully honouring it.

35 Aboulkheir Breigheche, a medical doctor of Syrian origin living in Trento, is an active (and sometimes controversial) personality in the Muslim communities of Northern Italy.

Funerals without attendance: the challenge of a solitary farewell

A further set of problems that the Italian Muslims had to face under the lockdown concerned funeral rituals. The measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus made it impossible to carry out all the basic practices that make up the Islamic funeral: washing the corpse, wrapping it in the shroud and praying for the dead at the burial ceremony. Moreover, the strict quarantine dramatically impacted the very few Islamic cemeteries available in Italy, the usage of which is normally first reserved for local residents. The impossibility of flying the bodies out of the country, or even transporting them freely within Italian territory, led to shocking episodes like the one in Pisogne (Brescia, Lombardy, Northern Italy), where the body of Muslim lady who died on 18 March 2020 remained at home inside the coffin for a week. It was not possible to transport her to the cemetery of Brescia until 27 March 2020, when she was finally buried.³⁶

Starting from 20 March 2020, in an increasingly dramatic situation, UCOII and the Associazione started to look for solutions while launching the campaign *Degna sepoltura a tutti: non lasciamo indietro nessuno* ('A proper burial for all: no person left behind'). In a series of three live-streamed talks on 28, 29 and 30 March 2020, UCOII discussed the situation of the Muslim deceased with representatives of the local Islamic communities and presented proposals for immediate solutions. The situation began to noticeably improve as of early April, when new Islamic cemeteries were opened in Pontelongo, a small commune in the area of Padua (Veneto, Northern Italy), in Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna, Northern Italy) and Avellino (Campania, Southern Italy).³⁷

The doctrinal and legal background for performing funerals under lockdown in Italy was set in a fatwa issued in Italian and Arabic by the Associazione on 19 March 2020.³⁸ The main points of this juridical opinion are the following:

- 1) the *ghusl* can be substituted by *tayammum* or even completely skipped, if necessary.
- 2) The shroud (*kafan*) can be substituted by a common garment placed over the deceased's clothes, if possible; otherwise "the clothes they were wearing at death are themselves the *kafan*".
- 3) The *salāt al-janāza* ("prayer for the dead") can be performed by a single person in the presence of the body. Friends and family can carry out the *salāt al-*

36 The case was also covered by many different Italian news outlets: for example: <https://www.agi.it/cronaca/news/2020-03-24/coronavirus-musulmana-mortabrescia-7823443/>; <https://www.quibrescia.it/provincia/sebino-e-franciocorta/2020/03/26/pisogne-al-cimitero-la-donna-morta-vegliata-dalla-famiglia/559583/>

37 The exceptionally dire situation which Italian Muslims had to face in connection with the impossibility of carrying out funerals was also taken up by the international press: see for example <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/muslims-in-italy-struggle-to-bury-victims-of-the-pandemic-35030>; <https://www.newframe.com/covid-19-shows-italys-lack-of-muslim-burial-spaces/>.

38 The fatwa was published on the Associazione's Facebook page on 19 March 2020. It can be downloaded as a PDF from the UCOII website: <https://ucoii.org/2020/03/19/coronavirus-fatwa-associazione-degli-imamper-i-riti-funebri>.

ghā'ib (“the prayer for the absentee”), which is a legally valid substitute for *salat al-janāza*, when the latter cannot be attended or performed. Finally, 4) the corpse should be buried in an Islamic cemetery but, should this prove impossible, it can also be buried in a non-Muslim cemetery.

These very flexible guidelines are in accordance with the positions taken by all the most renowned Islamic organizations in the world.³⁹ In particular, the Italian fatwa is directly inspired by a similar document issued by the European Council for Fatwa and Research at its extraordinary session from 25-28 March 2020. This institution, too, considered that the unprecedented circumstances allowed for a wide range of justifications for many practices that would otherwise be considered religiously unacceptable.⁴⁰ The UCOII also prepared a practical guide to the performance of funerals under coronavirus lockdown,⁴¹ where all the principles of the Associazione's fatwa were implemented with reference to the concrete situations in which the local communities were forced to act.

It is interesting to note that the Italian fatwa does not address the issues connected with the possibility of granting the status of “martyr” (*shahīd*) to Muslims who die of COVID-19. By contrast, the text of the fatwa of the European Council for Fatwa and Research refers to a Hadith⁴² from which it can be inferred that a believer who dies of a pestilence (*tā'ūn*) will have a reward similar to that of a *shahīd*. Since COVID-19 can be categorized as a *tā'ūn*, its victims can be treated as *shuhadā' al-ākhirā* (‘martyrs of the Hereafter’).⁴³

Many institutions in the Islamic world have actually supported this view (for example the Egyptian *Dār al-iftā'* and the

39 For an interesting survey on how different Islamic authorities have coped with the problems posed by the pandemic for the performance of Muslim funerary rituals, see (Al-Dawoody-Finegan 2020).

40 See the source document in Arabic in the final communiqué of the session, fatwa number 19 in <https://www.e-cfr.org/blog/2020/04/01/>.

41 The guidelines for funeral rituals with instructions for the coronavirus emergency, in Italian, can

be downloaded at: <https://ucoii.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VADEMECUM-RITUALITA-FUNEBRE-PER-LA-COMUNITA-ISLAMICA-IN-ITALIA-1-1.pdf>.

42 Hadith is transmitted by 'Ā'isha and preserved in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* (n. 5734): “Plague was a punishment which Allah used to send on whom He wished, but Allah made it a blessing for the believers. Everyone (among the believers) who remains patient in a land in which plague has

broken out and considers that nothing will befall him except what Allah has ordained for him, Allah will grant him a reward similar to that of a martyr”.

43 Formally, there are three different kinds of martyrs in Islam: *shahīd al-dunyā*, *shahīd al-ākhirā* and *shahīd al-dunyā wa-al-ākhirā* (*shahīd' al-ma'raka*). For a definition of each category see (Kohlberg 1997).

Dār al-iftā' of Dubai),⁴⁴ while underscoring the fact that the body of a victim of COVID-19 is that of a *shahīd al-ākhirā* and not that of a *shahīd al-dunyā wa al-ākhirā* ('martyr of this world and the Hereafter'). Therefore, it must go through the standard funerary procedure.

One might speculate as to why UCOII and the Associazione did not mention the possibility of considering COVID-19 victims as martyrs. The negative connotations that the word *shahīd*/martyr has acquired in the Western press, where it immediately evokes suicide bombers in the mind of less-knowledgeable readers, could possibly have played a role. The lack of any practical consequence on the funerary ritual for COVID-19 victims could also have pushed UCOII to avoid mentioning their potential status as martyrs.

Belonging to a common land: community suffering as forge of identity

Italy's unprecedented and dramatic experience with the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the whole country into a general state of dismay, discomfort, incertitude and anxiety not experienced in recent national history.

The prohibition on everyday interpersonal interaction, the impossibility of collectively using and enjoying outdoor and indoor public spaces, the restrictions on personal movement and public gatherings, and the suspension of all ceremonies and rituals which normally are carried out in groups, affected all the inhabitants of the country, irrespective of their religious, political or social positions. In a situation characterized by compulsory general isolation and a complete disruption of social ties, the nurturing of interpersonal connections became a collective problem to which expanded usage of all possible online tools could provide only a partial response.

It is apparent that Muslims in Italy made an immense effort to keep alive the bonds between isolated believers and their communities, on both a local and a national level. In this effort, moreover, Muslim organizations strived to communicate to the wider sectors of the Italian population the complex challenges facing their specific religious group, in an attempt to merge their own particular problems into the common and deeply felt bewilderment and pain affecting the society as a whole.

44 For the Egyptian *Dār al-iftā'*'s position, see the video where the Grand Mufti Shawqī 'Allām states that coronavirus victims will be *shahīds* of the hereafter, and therefore their bodies have to go through the regular funerary procedure on earth (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AEApL_m_doI); for the Dubai *Dār al-iftā'*'s position, see <https://www.albayan.ae/across-the-uae/news-and-reports/2020-04-01-1.3818115>.

At the beginning of the harshest period of the lockdown, different sectors of Italian society began to spontaneously mobilize to create small public events, where people were able to foster and reinforce their collective bonds. A long series of evening flash-mobs were organized, where people came out on balconies, rooftops, and windows to sing together the national anthem, “Volare”, or other popular Italian songs, in an effort to find “a moment of joy in this moment of anxiety”⁴⁵ and to create a “community in the age of coronavirus”.⁴⁶ In a similar way, Italians were invited every day at noon to go out on their balconies or lean out their windows and join in a round of applause to thank all the doctors and nurses who were taking care of COVID-19 patients.⁴⁷ The motto *Andrà tutto bene* (“Everything’s going to be alright”) was written and repeated on social media, radio, TV, windows, shops and walls: it rapidly became a kind of secular mantra that people continuously reiterated to reassure and encourage each other.

In this framework of collective actions, UCOII, the Associazione, and many local Islamic associations also periodically organized and/or took part in collective activities to help people gather either virtually or in compliance with the government’s social distancing rules. Moreover, these initiatives were not specifically marked as Islamic, instead targeting the wider Italian public, which was directly involved, and aimed at merging the dismay in which the Muslims found themselves with the general suffering of the Italian people. Particularly important in this regard was the participation of the Muslim organizations in marking several national commemorations, during which people tried to reaffirm a sense of all belonging to a shared nation. Below I will simply list a series of such events, which I have selected from the Facebook page of UCOII and the Associazione.

On 19 March 2020, UCOII and the Associazione took part in the day of prayer for Italy launched by the Episcopal Conference of Italy (CEI), in which representatives from all Italy’s different religious groups participated. On 27 March 2020, UCOII’s president Yassin Lafram participated in an interfaith religious ceremony in the city of Bologna alongside the Chief Rabbi of the local Jewish community and the Catholic archbishop, to observe a minute of silence in memory of the victims of COVID-19.

On 28 March 2020 the Associazione posted a video produced by the Islamic cultural centre of Brescia under the title *In-*

45 (Horowitz 2020).

46 (Kozłowska – Todd 2020).

47 (Mackenzie 2020).

vocazione per l'Italia ('An invocation for Italy'),⁴⁸ a *du'ā'* in Italian, where the imam of Brescia, Amin al-Hazmi (of Yemenite origin), asks God to have mercy on the country and rapidly cast away the epidemic. On 12 April 2020, UCOII and the Associazione congratulated the Catholic faithful on the occasion of Easter 2020.⁴⁹

Besides the activities directly connected to religious life in Italy, UCOII and the Associazione promoted initiatives of general social interest to aid health officials in the fight against the pandemic. On 18 March 2020, UCOII's president Yassine Lafram invited all Muslims in Italy to donate blood to support hospitals and clinics. During the harshest period of the lockdown, UCOII and the Associazione periodically invited the faithful to collect money in order to buy face masks and distribute them among the population in several different cities and villages across Italy as a practical contribution to the common efforts to curb the pandemic.

To make clear Muslims' full participation in Italian society during the dramatic period of full lockdown, UCOII and the Associazione posted links to all the statements and press briefings by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, starting with his 9 March speech declaring the beginning of the nationwide lockdown. Finally, Yassine Lafram congratulated the Italian people on the occasion of Liberation Day, celebrated every 25 April. In Italy, Liberation Day is a deeply significant national holiday commemorating the end of the Second World War, of the Fascist regime and of the Nazi German occupation of Italy. Despite the lockdown, on that day some public ceremonies were organized to mark the date.

48 The video and the text can be found at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1711321235675880&id=224862734321745&__tn__=K-R

49 The post raised some criticism by a small number of Muslims, who wrote negative comments to the post to the effect that a "good Muslim" should not congratulate non-Muslims on their religious festivities. These stray comments, however, were ignored in the thread. On the same day, the Associazione also posted the message that the Italian President delivered to the people on occasion of Easter 2020.

Conclusions. Alone and together: identity dynamics in the pandemic period

The COVID-19 pandemic remains a developing threat. In the summer of 2020, most of the world's countries started easing the draconian measures put in place over the past spring, allowing for a more or less limited reactivation of social and economic activities. In autumn, with infection rates again on the rise, many countries, including Italy, began doubling down once more, issuing new restrictions and prohibitions on social life. While complete lockdowns are more politically fraught than last

spring, the second and third wave of infections have seen them enforced in countries across Europe, and in Italy have brought renewed school closures and restrictions on domestic travel. Thus, every new day is faced with a mixture of hope and fear, while uncertainty hovers over the daily lives of most of the world's population.

It is still too early to begin a comprehensive assessment of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had across the many levels of collective life. Global responses to the challenge show a wide diversity due to the different health, economic and cultural circumstances across the areas hard hit by the pandemic, and the prospect of a common international response remains elusive. A time will come, however, when scholars from different branches of the humanities will be able to analyse the survival strategies and public health narratives developed by different human communities throughout the COVID-19 period.⁵⁰

The unprecedented situation Italians lived through from 9 March to 2 May 2020, and the severe and all-encompassing lockdown that the authorities imposed on the population, had a tremendous impact on the people's behaviour, psychology and social perceptions.⁵¹ In particular, the enormous difficulties that the Italian population had to face in order to retain structure in their daily lives, and the impossibility of engaging in normal social relationships, has engendered a deep collective trauma whose consequences and ramifications have yet to be fully understood. I hope that the very specific case I have focused on may provide a tiny but interesting contribution to a wider picture that will be more fully fleshed out in the future.

As a religious minority, Muslims in Italy under the spring 2020 lockdown had to face problems both specific to the community and common to all the population. The need to endure isolation and face the rupture of all normal social bonds was shared by Muslims and the Italian people at large. At the same time, trying come out of the solitude in which the population was forced had a specific importance for the Muslims: Islamic communities are scattered across different territories, neighbourhoods and rural areas, and the physical meeting on Fridays for the communal prayer plays a crucial role in maintaining the ties that bind this community together. Likewise, the impossibility of performing this fundamental religious duty most certainly had a crucial impact on Muslims' sense of unity and mutual proximity. The same can surely be said about the prohibi-

50 The scholarly literature on different pandemic dynamics is vast and multifaceted. On the narrative of pandemics, I have found extremely insightful the very recent book by (Davis-Lohm 2020) based on the events of the 2009 H1N1 influenza virus outbreak (the so-called "swine flu").

51 On the psychiatric dimensions of pandemics, see the beautiful collection of essays by (Huremović 2019).

tion on carrying out Islamic funerary rites: the general ban on funerals was a major blow to all Italians, and even non-religious people experienced grief at not being able to accompany their relatives or friends to their final resting place. For the Islamic community, this human sorrow was coupled with the pressing difficulty of even finding a place to bury the deceased or repatriating their remains. Although the situation has slowly improved, the ban on funerals inflicted a deep wound on the private and collective consciousness of Italian Muslims, and especially those living in small, remote villages, who were literally left alone with their dead.

The two organizations I have analysed reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic quite actively,⁵² and tried to use the crisis and the enormous challenges it posed to Muslims in Italy as a way to open up a deeper dialogue with Italian society, as well as to forge new connections both among the many local Muslim communities and with the general population as a whole.

The crisis was therefore transformed into an opportunity to redesign communal Islamic identity in Italy, and to embed it within a wider Italian framework: it is dramatic but also partially consoling to see how suffering became a catalyst for such a significant development in Italian society.

52 It is interesting to note how the activities carried out by UCOII under the lockdown elicited sharp criticism from another Italian Islamic association (*Centro Islamico Culturale d'Italia/Islamic Cultural Centre of Italy*), which manages the largest mosque in Rome. This organization, in an open letter signed by its head Abdellah Redouane (https://www.facebook.com/centroislamicoculturale/posts/3003764709659958?__tn__=K-R), accused UCOII of “riding the coronavirus wave as a marketing strategy, with 24/7 posts and announcements” (“Si è cavalcata la pandemia da Coronavirus per fare marketing con continui post e annunci, giorno e notte”). An analysis of the contrasts among the different Islamic Italian associations during the lockdown is, unfortunately, outside the scope of the present paper.

Danish abstract:

Italien er desværre en af de hårdest ramte lande af Coronavirus (d. 26. februar 2021: 2.868.435 smittede; 96.974 døde). Alle trosamfund i Italien skulle hurtigt og klart reagere til en fælles og usynlig trussel og samtidigt give vejledning og støtte til deres lokale menigheder og tilpasse regeringstiltag for at afdæmpe virensens spredning.

Muslimerne i Italien (ca. 2,600,000) som alle andre landets beboer skulle følge statsbestemmelser om at blive hjemme og afholde sig fra at gå ud, bortset fra nødsituationer og madindkøb (en nærmest fuldstændig lockdown).

I min artikel vil jeg prøve at finde ud og diskutere, 1) hvilke specifikke områder og praksisser i det italienske islamiske trosamfund blev mest påvirket af epidemi og samtidigt 2) hvordan de Italienske Muslimer iværksatte nogle symbolske og praktiske initiativer for at vise det italienske samfund deres aktive deltagelse i den fælles kamp imod virussen.

I min undersøgelse vil jeg bruge nogle officielle kilder (både skriftlige og visuelle) offentliggjorte af *Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia* (UCOII اتحاد الهيئات والجمالات الإسلامية في إيطاليا); *Union of de Islamiske menigheder og organisationer i Italien*), landets største Islamiske selskab og analysere dem i perspektivering til både den Islamiske religiøse teori og praksis og de nuværende italienske samfundsforholder.

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Martin Riexinger

Temasektion

Islamic Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Pakistan

Keywords

COVID-19, Muslims in Denmark, mosques, postsecular society,

Abstract India's and Pakistan's governments, like most of the world's governments, responded to the spread of the COVID-19 virus with lockdowns, which in principle also affected religious institutions and rituals. However, Sunni mosques in Pakistan were not closed, as the government has no authority over autonomous religious organizations. In contrast, the Islamic organizations and institutions in India complied with government orders, and tried to present themselves as a "responsible minority" during a period when relations with the Hindu nationalist government were strained, and because a convention of the Tablighī Jamā'at had contributed considerably to the spread of the disease in the country and abroad. In Pakistan, the role of the "responsible minority" was played by the Shiites, who closed their mosques. On the whole, Muslim religious leaders and organizations showed little interest in taking a stand on the pandemic. Those few who make extensive use of the internet tend to address the better-educated social strata, and tend view pandemic-related restrictions more favorably.

This paper was originally commissioned and planned as a survey article, and attempts to map Islamic organizations', public figures', and state agencies' responses to the COVID-19 crisis in India and Pakistan. This includes not only responses to the epidemic itself, but also measures taken or proposed by the two countries' central or regional governments, therefore this paper must address the relationship between Islamic organizations and the state, and in the case of India, attitudes among the non-Muslim majority, as well. Where pertinent, the activities of Mus-

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lms with South Asian backgrounds abroad are also mentioned. This documentary approach identified four specific research questions which will be addressed in this paper.

1. The differing attitudes of most religious authorities to canceling congregational prayers in India and Pakistan.
2. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority–majority relations, as early in the pandemic, the spread of the disease was accelerated by religious “super-spreader events” in both countries.
3. Legal (*fiqh*) and other religious arguments used to legitimize or to delegitimize anti-COVID-19 measures.
4. The surprisingly little attention paid to the pandemic by many religious actors (as reflected in their media). As the research was unavoidably dependent on material that was easily found on the Internet, it is necessary to consider how distorted the findings may be, as a result of this selection.¹

The course of the COVID-19 pandemic in India and Pakistan

In both India and Pakistan, individual cases of COVID-19 began to emerge in February 2020. In the following month, the disease could no longer be contained, and spread throughout the population. In both cases, religious meetings and pilgrimages to other countries played decisive roles at this stage. In the following months, officially-published infection rates and the per capita death tolls remained below those of most Western and Latin American countries. Epidemiologists add caveats regarding these numbers, as, among other things, India’s and Pakistan’s low official infection rates reflect the fact that far fewer people are tested than in Western countries. When it comes to the relatively low death toll per capita, the low average age is a factor to be considered, and frequent previous infections may have prepared the populations’ immune systems well.² Nonetheless, when it comes to absolute numbers, India was the country with the third most deaths related to COVID-19, behind the USA and Brazil at the time of writing (early December 2020). Moreover, it seems that the governments of both countries were not convinced that the relatively favorable numbers reflected the actual spread of the disease, as they opt-

¹ A note on references: Links to organizations’ websites or news-only items appear in the footnotes, other items are also listed in the bibliography.

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54730290>.

ed for harsh lockdown measures that resembled those of many Western and Middle Eastern countries, potentially leading to detrimental economic effects: The government of India estimates that its GDP will contract by 8.9 percent in 2020, whereas the World Bank forecasts a 1.9 percent economic contraction for Pakistan.³

As in other countries, citizens' compliance with the government mandates was presented in terms of responsibility, and religious leaders and organizations were also expected to contribute to the containment of the disease, although the measures implied considerable interference in religious practices.⁴ Before describing the responses of Islamic actors in India and Pakistan to the double challenge of COVID-19 and the counter-measures, it is necessary to describe the main groups in the heterogeneous landscape of South Asian Islam, which will be referred to frequently, the relationships between Islamic institutions and organizations and the state, and finally, the political situation on the eve of the COVID-19 crisis, which was particularly decisive in India in terms of religion becoming a central issue in the public response to the pandemic.

Islam in South Asia: The institutional framework and the main currents

A characteristic difference between Islam in South Asia and Islam in most Middle Eastern countries is the fact that religious life has not been organized by the state in the last centuries. As result there exists no state-controlled religious bureaucracy as in Turkey or most Arabic countries. This resulted in the development of a heterogeneous religious landscape in what are today India, Pakistan, and Bangla Desh. A number of religious currents representing specific religious and legal traditions organize religious education and mosques. Although in India they are still mostly privately financed, they profit from a state collected *zakat* in Pakistan. Further sources of income are donations from other states, in particular the Gulf monarchies and Iran, whose importance should not be overrated. The religious sphere is not completely independent of state influence in either country. Although the average quarter or village mosque is not state controlled in Pakistan, Auqaf Departments of the provincial governments administer the financial and practical matters

3 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/indicators/moodys-revises-india-forecast-for-the-calendar-year-2020-to-8-9/articleshow/79186213.cms>; <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/pakistan/overview>.

4 Riexinger et al. 2021.

5 <http://centralwaqfcouncil.gov.in/>.

of many Sufi shrines and a number of representative, mostly historical mosques. In India, the Central Waqf Council has a similar role under the Ministry for Minority Affairs and its sub-branches in the states and union territories.⁵ Politicians in Pakistan have continuously attempted to control the religious discourse, but with limited success. The Council of Islamic Ideology, an institution intended to legitimize state policies in Islamic terms, or to formulate Islamic doctrines suitable for suiting realpolitik, does not wield much authority, a matter that once again became apparent during the COVID-19 crisis.⁶

Three currents represent various traditions of Sunni Islam: the term “school of thought” (*maktab-i fikr*) is commonly used.⁷

Barelwis: Named after Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921), this school of thought represents the amalgamation of Sufism and the strict adherence to Ḥanafī law that characterized Islamic beliefs and practice in Northern India for centuries. Sufi rituals are performed at the traditional *darbārs* “courts” around the tomb of a saint under the supervision of a *pīr*, who usually is a descendent of the saint, and the government agencies mentioned above. Instead of playing a leading role in performing the traditional Sufi rituals, Barelwi scholars legitimize and defend the basis of their theology. Although Barelwis may be the largest school of thought in terms of the number of adherents in Pakistan (there are no statistics for any of the three South Asian countries), the Barelwis lag behind the Deobandis when it comes to its number of educational institutions and the media output.⁸ Generally, Barelwi scholars have denounced secular education. This has contributed to their archetypal image of “backward” rural *maulwī* in the eyes of secularists, and also Islamists. *Minhaj ul-Qur’an* (“method of the Qur’an”), an offshoot of the Barelwis that plays a important role in terms of responses to the COVID-19-crisis in Pakistan and in the diaspora, diverges markedly from this image. Since 1980 it been organized by Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri (b. 1951) and addresses more educated social strata, by presenting a variety of Sufi and Ḥanafī Islam that takes secularly-educated sensibilities into account.⁹

Deobandis: Named after the town Deoband, north of Delhi, where the *Dār ul-‘Ulūm*, the “mother” *madrasa* based on their teachings was founded in 1867, the Deobandis follow the Ḥanafī school of law, but they reject most ritual aspects of Sufism. They are particularly active in the field of religious instruction. Daughter schools of the original seminary have been founded

6 <http://www.cii.gov.pk/>; Zaman 2018: 90–92, 119.

7 Zaman 2018: 14–23.

8 Sanyal 1996; Gugler 2011; Philippon 2011.

9 Philippon 2011: 230–255.

all over South Asia. Before British rule ended in 1947, leading Deoband scholars supported cooperation with the Indian National Congress, in contrast to the Muslim majority.¹⁰ As a result, the *Dār ul-‘Ulūm* is often considered the main Islamic authority in the country, and fatwas issued by its *Dār al-iftā’* are often presented as the official Islamic view. Other leading scholars opposed that line, and supported the formation of Pakistan as a separate state for the Muslims in British India, and subsequently moved to the new state and built up their own organizations there. Under British rule, the Deoband school had already found many followers among the Pathans on the border of Afghanistan, therefore these areas, the capital, Peshawar, and Karachi, where most of the refugees and voluntary immigrants from India settled, became their centers in Pakistan. In Pakistan, their scholars often also enjoyed the special recognition of state authorities.¹¹

A particular subgroup of the Deobandis was to play a decisive role during the COVID-19 crisis in South Asia. The *Tablighī Jamā‘at*, the largest Muslim revivalist movement worldwide, was founded to convince rural Muslims to perform their religious duties regularly through the missionary activities of groups of men who travel around preaching for some part of the year. Today it has one independent branch in India, in Pakistan and in Bangla Desh, and their annual conventions (*ijtimā‘*) in these countries are among the largest Muslim gatherings after the *ḥajj*. The movement has also spread beyond South Asia, but nowhere else has it grown to a similar extent. Apart from enjoining regular religious practice, this movement discourages involvement in “worldly matters,” that is politics and current affairs in general.

Ahl-i Ḥadīth: This school of thought’s self-designation as “people of the hadith” stems from their identification with the hadith collectors of the early Islamic period who (in their eyes) opposed any introduction of human considerations in theology and law. Like the Deobandis, the Ahl-i Ḥadīth denounce Sufi rituals, particularly those by graves, and the ascription of a special ontological status to Muḥammad, and even more so the *awliyā’* (Sufi saints), and even reject the schools of law. Their outlook resembles that of the Wahhabis, with whom they have cooperated extensively since the 1920s. As a result they are well-connected in international puritanical networks, whereas they have less followers than the Barelwis and Deobandis.¹²

10 Friedmann 1971, 1976.

11 Zaman 2014: 131–133.

12 Riexinger 2004.

A religio-political movement that is sometimes considered a fourth school of thought is the **Jama'at-i islami**, the organization founded in 1941 by the Islamist ideologist, Abu l-'Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979). Regarding theological and ritual questions, they mostly agree with the Deoband schools, and this movement controls only very few mosques or *madāris*. But according to the Mawdūdī they set the implementation of the “complete code of life” that Islam represents above the traditional aspects of religious life. Conceived of as elite-cadre party that follows the Leninist model, today the Jama'at-i islami in Pakistan is still a top-down organized political party with a relatively large number of members, but rather modest election results. But particularly owing to its activist student organization, which does not shy away from intimidation, the Jamā'at-i islami has a disproportionately strong influence on public life in urban Pakistan.¹³ In India, the Jamā'at-i islāmī turned into an organization of a very different sort, after 1947. As it was quite unlikely that an Islamic supremacist concept could be implemented in a society in which Muslims comprise less than 15 percent of the population, the Jamā'at-i islāmī focused on spreading reform ideas among Muslims, and by becoming increasingly irenic and ecumenical, it developed into the foremost Muslim agent in inter-religious dialogue initiatives.¹⁴

In addition to Sunnis, **Twelver Shiites** live in many parts of Pakistan and India. In studies that address societal and organizational aspects, they are often treated as representing another school of thought, as they have their own mosques and educational institutions. Because of differences regarding rituals, beliefs, and in particular, positions concerning the early history of Islam, it is impossible for them to find common ground with the Deobandis and Ahl-i Ḥadīth. Since the late colonial period, tensions between Shiites and puritanical Sunnis, sometimes also Barelwis, occurred on the occasion of Muḥarram, though usually with a limited degree of violence.¹⁵ From 1979 onwards the conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites in Pakistan became charged due to the ideological cum geopolitical confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Violent Clashes and terrorist attacks became a became the major threat to the public order, since the 1990s thousands, most of all of Shiites have been killed in sectarian attacks.¹⁶ This sectarian violence was formally denounced, but never systematically targeted by various governments, because the same Sunni organizations responsible for sectarian vi-

13 Nasr 1994, 1996; Hartung 2014.

14 Sikand 2004: 79–92.

15 Rieck 2016; Fuchs 2020.

16 In the 2002–2018 period, 4847 (Ismailis included) https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/Shias_killed_Pakistan.htm.

olence also furthered Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir. No Shiite scholar in South Asia has reached the rank of a *marja' -i taqlid*, whose legal judgments laymen and lesser scholars are supposed to follow, therefore believers follow authorities at the scholarly centers in Iraq (the majority) or Khamne'ī in Iran (who can provide more resources). In Pakistan they are therefore denigrated as agents of hostile powers by Sunni sectarian agitators.

The Political Situation on the Eve of the COVID-19 Crisis

India

In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has been the decisive development throughout the last three decades. The Bharatiya Janata Party superseded the Indian National Congress as the leading party. The latter has traditionally garnered a large share of votes from the Muslim minority, although there was never a "Muslim bloc vote."¹⁷ This ensured that politicians paid attention to Muslim concerns, or more precisely, what community leaders presented as such, as for example, the protection of the Muslim Family Law against its replacement by a unified civil code which the Constitution in principle demands. This clientelist treatment led to resentment among many Hindus, which contributed to the rise of Hindu nationalism. In the BJP attitudes to Muslims vary considerably. On the one hand, the party nominates Muslim candidates for parliamentary seats, on the other hand, it includes members of radical organizations that are involved in violent anti-Muslim activities. With a few regional exceptions, very few Muslims consider voting for the BJP, but systematic, strategic voting by Muslims to support the candidate with the best prospects against the Hindu nationalists either cannot be observed either. Specifically, Muslim parties field sometimes-successful candidates from the few Muslim majority constituencies.¹⁸ The 2014 Lok Sabha election did result in the lowest representation of Muslims in 50 years (4 %), and for the first time, the ruling party had no Muslim Member of the Lok Sabha. In the April/May 2019 elections, the share of Muslim MPs rose slightly, but again, none belongs to the BJP, which won a

¹⁷ Graff 1986.

¹⁸ In particular, in some constituencies in Kerala, and in Hyderabad and Aurangabad.

¹⁹ Kopf, Thaker & Wolfe 2019; Vernier 2019.

sweeping victory.¹⁹ However, the BJP's power is constrained by the framework of the federal system, as the party governs only 17 of 34 states and union territories.

The last major political controversies that preoccupied India before the COVID-19 were related to the status of Muslims under Hindu nationalist rule. In August 2019, Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state, was divided and deprived of its special status, which led to local protests, and was also regarded as an affront by many Muslims in other parts of India.²⁰

On December 11 2019 the Lok Sabha passed the Citizenship Amendment Act, which grants Indian citizenship to Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, and Christians who left Pakistan, Bangla Desh, or Afghanistan before 2014, whereas Muslims from these countries cannot make a similar claim. Many Muslims and secular opponents of the BJP denounced this as unconstitutional religious discrimination, claiming that the reason was not protection from religious persecution, but the understanding of India as the natural home of Hindus (although the amendment also applies to Parsis and Christians). Widespread dissatisfaction with the law among Muslims and in secularist circles led to demonstrations throughout India. The situation escalated in Delhi, where the campus of the Muslim university, Jamia-i Millia, was a rallying ground for the protestors. In the course of the protests, over 60 persons, mostly opponents of the bill, but also policemen and government supporters, lost their lives.²¹ Therefore, relations between Muslims and the Indian government and the large sections of the population that supported the amendment were tense when COVID-19 broke out.

Pakistan

The 2018 general election in Pakistan brought about a decisive change in the political landscape. By winning the most seats in the National Assembly (with only 31.8 % of the votes), the Pakistan Tehreek-i Insaaf (PTI) of former cricketer Imran Khan ended the three-decade period of shifts between the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). However, as he won on an anti-corruption and "Islamic welfare" agenda, Imran Khan had to form a coalition government with several regional parties and Muslim League factions. The PTI governs three of the four provinces; only Sindh is controlled by the PPP. The electoral coalition of religious parties, Muttahida Majlis-i

20 <https://www.dw.com/en/how-indias-muslims-view-the-kashmir-dispute/a-35981601>.

21 Human Rights Watch 2020.

22 <https://www.electionpakistani.com/ge2018/result.html>; in addition to the seats won by the constituencies, further seats are allocated to women and religious minorities on a proportional basis.

Amal, gained only 12 territorial seats, all in Pathan majority areas, whereas other religious parties gained none.²² Neither Imran Khan's victory nor the religious bloc's meagre election results outside a specific region changed the relations between religious groups and the state in Pakistan. Their ability to mobilize large crowds—despite their rather modest electoral backing—to gather against “heretics” and “blasphemers,” is a further factor that accounts for the authorities' timidity about confronting them.²³

Religious responses to government measures

Unlike the highly centralized Middle Eastern countries, both India and Pakistan are federally organized, and state/provincial governments are largely responsible for public health and security concerns. In both countries, these lower levels of authority took different approaches to reopening after the nationwide lockdowns.

India

In India, several state/union territory governments enforced prohibitions on gatherings, which also affected religious meetings, before the federal government (henceforth, Centre) ordered a 14-hour curfew on March 22 2020, followed by a lockdown that was ultimately extended to May 5. The rushed decision to lock down, including terminating train services, was severely criticized as counterproductive, because the departure of many rural migrants from the big cities caused considerable congestion at major train and bus stations.²⁴ From May onwards, the Center allowed specific sectors of the economy and society to reopen stepwise, whereas many states and territories opted to extend lockdown measures because of the local infection rates. Some Muslim organizations took precautionary measures before the nationwide lockdown was imposed, but the prevailing attitude seems to have been that those who come to the mosque for Friday prayer must not be turned away.²⁵ When the lockdown finally made it impossible to hold congregational prayers, no (major) protests seem to have occurred in India, instead, regional Islamic organizations and institutions expressed support

23 Afzal 2020.

24 Harriss 2020: 97.

25 <https://theprint.in/india/call-off-friday-prayers-cut-duration-how-mosques-plan-to-tackle-covid-19/384109/>

26 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/will-cooperate-with-govt-measures-asad/article-show/74720761.cms>

for the measures taken.²⁶ Jamā‘at-i islāmī scholars argued that if the imam, the muezzin, and two servants were performing ritual prayer in the mosque, the community had done its duty to uphold communal prayer; a similar solution was later proposed by Deoband and in two provinces of Pakistan.²⁷ When mosques were, in principle, allowed to reopen in June, some institutions, such as the Sufi-oriented Firangi Mahall, Deoband, and regional Muslim councils urged caution, or even prolonged the closing period.²⁸ In another fatwa on the occasion of the end of Ramadan, Deoband explained how the ‘īd prayer is to be performed in absence of an official imam, and provided a sermon to be read aloud at home.²⁹

Besides prayer in mosques, burials, and their preparation, other rituals were affected by government measures against the pandemic. Indian political authorities never attempted to prohibit the burial of COVID-19 victims, unlike in Sri Lanka, where Muslims were required to cremate their coreligionists who had died of COVID-19, but mandated hygiene precautions conflicted with traditional practices.³⁰ The *Dār ul-iftā’* at Deoband responded to several questions regarding official regulations that affected Muslim rituals. For example, they allow the deceased of COVID-19 to be washed with a hose, and the body be packed in a plastic bag (as demanded by the Mumbai municipality).³¹ A similar rule was also passed by the head of the Firangi Mahall, Sufi-oriented *madrasa* in Lucknow with a certain influence in Northern India, who also emphasized that victims of COVID-19 were to be buried in Muslim cemeteries after his precautions were taken. With this statement, he responded to protests against the burial of a victim of COVID-19 in the Muslim graveyard of Lucknow.³²

27 “Corona Virus: Appeal of Shariah Council, Jamaat-e-Islami Hind”; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_V7jj6n3S3c; see <>.

28 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lockdown-5-0-islamic-centre-of-india-issues-advisory-for-reopening-of-mosques/article-show/76237447.cms>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/lockdown-mosques-in-kerala-to-remain-closed/article31774783.ece>

29 *Dār ul-iftā’*, *Dār ul-‘ulūm* Deoband 2020a.

30 On Sri Lanka: Silva 2020: 25–29.

31 *Dār ul-iftā’*, *Dār ul-‘ulūm* Deoband 2020b.

32 <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2020/state-editions/khalid-rasheed---s-fatwa-on-burial-of-corona-victims.html>; <https://darulifta-deoband.com/ur/fatwa/MTc5NDgy>.

33 <https://www.socialnews.>

<xyz/2020/08/22/hyderabad-asaduddin-owaisi-mumtaz-ahmed-khan-inaugurate-mobile-covid-19-testing-van-gallery/>; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1039726773111418>, “Interview—COVID19, Indian Media & Muslims”; <https://www.sahilonline.net/en/jamaat-e-islami-hind-maharashtras-statewide-donate-plasma-defeat-corona-campaign-from-aug-4-to-6>.

Islamic organizations such as the Jamā‘at-i islāmī or the small Muslim political party, All-India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, engaged in various kinds of charitable activities that contributed to the fight against COVID-19, such as organizing test stations, donating plasma, and providing help to those rushing home in the early phase of the lockdown.³³ Muslims even cremated the bodies of Hindu COVID-19 victims that had been abandoned by their families owing to fear of infection.³⁴ Without denying the honest motivation of the participants, the fact that these activities were centrally planned and widely advertised in the media reflects how these Islamic organizations intended to present the Muslims as responsible, committed, and reliable citizens at a time when they were frequently reviled as internal enemies. This also applies to the fatwas that urged compliance with COVID-19 measures, and the very cautious approach to reopening the mosques. This reflects the circumstances of Muslims under Hindu nationalist rule after the Citizenship Amendment Act protests, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the fact that not all Muslim organizations had acted responsibly, so others saw a need to tidy up behind them, an aspect about which the leader of the Jamā‘at-i islāmī Syed Sadat-ullah Husseini does not mince words.³⁵

Pakistan

In Pakistan, a nationwide lockdown was imposed on April 1 2020, but since mid-March the provincial governments had increasingly restricted public events and finally imposed lockdowns of their own.

In contrast to India, Pakistan’s central government was not able to enforce the closure of most mosques. Scholars from the various Sunni currents opposed this move. Even the All Pakistan Ulama Council, from whom the government had expected support, did not concede to more than a shortening of the

34 <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/apr/16/muslims-cremate-hindu-neighbour-during-covid-19-lockdown-in-madhya-pradesh-2130930.html>; [https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/telangana-muslim-volunteers-cremate-hindu-](https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/telangana-muslim-volunteers-cremate-hindu-man-after-family-refuses-to-per-)

form-last-rites-1714792-2020-08-25.

35 “Interview—COVID19, Indian Media & Muslims” 04:30–05:50.

36 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541658>.

37 Hassan & Paul 2020; large protests against the closing of mosques erupted only in Niger,

elsewhere they were quelled: Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 151.

38 Rehman 2020; this factor explains opposition to suspending religious rituals in many places: Riexinger et al 2021: 136; Thorsen 2021: 144–146.

sermon, an increased distance between the rows, and a recommendation that the elderly remain home.³⁶ In some cases, protests against the closings turned violent. Apparently out of fear of civic unrest, the government refrained from further initiatives to enforce the closure of mosques, and negotiated minor restrictions concerning hygiene and density.³⁷ Apparently, a major reason for this obstinacy of the religious leaders was the fear that the flow of donations would ebb.³⁸ Not all mosques remained open. A few highly visible historic mosques, such as the Badshahi Masjid in Lahore, are controlled by the provincial Auqaf Departments, and were closed.³⁹ The Council of Islamic Ideology urged people to pray at home.⁴⁰ Finally, the government tried to convince the scholars to comply with its measures by asking for a fatwa from al-Azhar, but to no avail, as the Egypt's highest religious institution wields no authority in South Asia.⁴¹ Finally, the provincial governments of Sindh and Balochistan were able to convince religious leaders to hold Friday prayers with the mosque staff only.⁴²

Furthermore, Pakistan's Shiite leaders took a different approach from the Sunni scholars, led by Shāhinshāh Naqwī, they declared that their mosques should be closed to congregational prayer.⁴³ Naqwī was trained in Iran, where in March 2021 the government was still in denial, but with this decision, Shiites appeared to be a "responsible minority," whereas the Ahl-i Ḥadīth ignored that mosques were closed and even the *hajj* suspended in Saudi Arabia, the country which they usually look as a model. This fits with a common pattern of religious groups' responses to COVID-19: local circumstances trump transnational ideological orientations.⁴⁴

Unlike in the situation related to the mosques, Pakistan's

39 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbZvacN3AEo> .

40 <https://www.geo.tv/latest/280615-islamic-ideology-council-asks-masses-to-pray-at-home-to-prevent-coronavirus-outbreak>.

41 Ahmad 2020: 259, 270.

42 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543935>; <https://www.geo.tv/latest/279437-sindh-balochistan-punjab-restrict-congregational-prayers-in-mosques>; www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-ramadan-pakistan/pakistans-sindh-province-bans-prayer-at-mosques-during-ramadan-idUSKCN226166.

43 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCU-m18rAHo>.

44 Riexinger et al. 2021: 138.

45 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541790> ; <https://nation.com.pk/13-Apr-2020/punjab-auqaf-minister-visits-data-darbar> ; <https://www.dawn.com/news/1540884>; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2189531/sindh-govt-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-due-coronavirus-outbreak> ; <https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2020/sindh-to-reopen-all-shrines-for-public-after-eid>; <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/700008-shrine-of-lal-shahbaz-qalander-to-open-from-aug-17>.

tribune.com.pk/story/2189531/sindh-govt-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-due-coronavirus-outbreak ; <https://nation.com.pk/30-Jul-2020/sindh-to-reopen-all-shrines-for-public-after-eid>; <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/700008-shrine-of-lal-shahbaz-qalander-to-open-from-aug-17>.

provincial governments had leverage when it came to closing most Sufi shrines, which they control through the Auqaf Departments. The severity of measures differed markedly from province to province. In the Punjab they were closed from March 18 to May 21 2020, in Sindh from March 14 until after ‘īd al-aḏḥā in July/August.⁴⁵ The closure in March necessitated cancelling one of the most popular ‘urs celebration in Pakistan at the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, where in a normal year, about 1 million people gather. Only some officials and a few musicians circled and clad the graves. Despite the cancellation, parties of pilgrims travelled to the shrine, but they were dispersed.⁴⁶ In this respect, it must be taken into account that the effect of the closure hit local economies hard, as these shrines are surrounded by commercial areas with shops that sell items related to the rituals or religious books, and food stalls that serve the visitors.⁴⁷ The longer closure of shrines in Sindh, in contrast to the Punjab, may reflect that the ruling PPP is least impressionable by religious sensibilities.

By the end of August 2020 the lockdown was generally loosened. As a result, Shiite Muharram processions, in which many of the Sufi-oriented in Pakistan also participate, were allowed with strict distancing regulations, in addition to the regulations which are supposed to prevent sectarian violence.⁴⁸ Processions on *Yawm-i ‘Alī*, the anniversary of Ali’s martyrdom, on May 15, were banned, but at least in Rawalpindi, some Shiites defied the restrictions and celebrated with processions, flagellation, and chanting.⁴⁹ The relaxation of the lockdown that began in August also meant that Pakistan’s other major ‘urs at the Data Ganj Bakhsh shrine in Lahore could take place from October 6 to 8. No special COVID-19 measures are mentioned, but access to the shrine is strictly controlled anyway, since the terrorist attacks in 2010 and 2019.⁵⁰ The laxer rules also made a third kind of event possible once again: large-scale sectarian rallies. On

46 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2189531/sindh-govt-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-due-coronavirus-outbreak> ; <https://www.samaa.tv/news/pakistan/2020/04/sindh-cancels-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-annual-urs-over-coronavirus-spread/> ; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2196599/1-lal-shahbaz-qalandars-urs-slip-without-usual-celebrations>.

47 <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541790>.

48 <https://www.worldaware.com/covid-19-alert-pakistan-police-enforce-restrictions-aug-30-observance-ashura>.

49 <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20200515-006> ; <https://www.samaa.tv/news/pakistan/2020/05/todays-outlook-pakistan-observances-youm-e-ali-without-processions-national-assembly-meets/>.

50 <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/8-dead-explosion-targeting-elite-force-vehicle-near-lahores-data-darbar>.

51 <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2020/09/anti-shia-rallies-raise-alarm-bells-over-groups-sectarian-ambitions/> ; Mirza 2020b.

September 11 to 13 and 20, large crowds in Karachi demanded that the anti-blasphemy law be extended to vilify the Companions, which would practically prohibit Shiite rituals and the presentation of the Shiite version of early Islamic history.⁵¹

If religious organizations were involved in charitable activities related to the COVID-19 crisis, this was not highly publicized, with the particular exception of al-Khidmat, the charitable organization of the Jamā‘at-i islami. In the initial stage of the epidemic, its volunteers provided food, hand sanitizers, and medical care to marginalized groups, particularly religious minorities and transgender people; later, they organized ambulance services, plasma donations, and testing facilities.⁵²

Religion-related super-spreader events and religious scapegoating

Throughout history, epidemics have always been times when deviant religious groups have been singled out as scapegoats. During the COVID-19 pandemic this has been particularly evident, as religious gatherings and rituals that involve chanting and/or close contact with persons and objects in fact turned into “super-spreader events” that drove up infection rates disproportionately rapidly. By ignoring the danger of the epidemic, intentionally or owing to ignorance, certain religious leaders provided fit occasions for the agitation of sectarian or communalist entrepreneurs and made it difficult for politicians and authorities to balance establishing targeted strategies, holding responsible persons to account, and avoiding communal blaming.⁵³ In South Asia, two religious currents are particularly associated with this problem.

In both Pakistan and India, the Tablighī Jamā‘at held meetings in March 2020. Participants at the events were infected, and re-

52 <https://alkhidmat.org/tag/covid-19/> ; <https://www.ucanews.com/news/pakistan-islamist-group-wins-praise-for-covid-19-initiative/87596> , <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/688169-al-khidmat-foundation-plays-leading-role-in-fight-against-covid-19>

53 [https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-corona-outbreak-afflicted-by-communal-virus-blaming-tablighi-jamaat-](https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-corona-outbreak-afflicted-by-communal-virus-blaming-tablighi-jamaat-could-be-misdirected/349784)

[could-be-misdirected/349784](https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-corona-outbreak-afflicted-by-communal-virus-blaming-tablighi-jamaat-could-be-misdirected/349784) ; <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/beyond-the-blame-game-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-tablighi-jamaat-episode/article31230333.ece> ; <https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/former-indian-civil-servants-protest-targeting-of-muslims-over-covid-19/>.

54 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2203599/9-27-pakistans-covid-19-cases-linked-raiwind-ijtima-report> ;

<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/23/820043866/mass-religious-gathering-in-pakistan-leads-to-fresh-concerns-over-covid-19-sprea> ; Ahmad 2020: 257.

55 <https://twitter.com/SALSIKandar/status/1243767028483117062> ; <https://twitter.com/AyazLatifPalijo/status/1243141693114703872> ; <https://twitter.com/Edwardian842/status/123806235091111168> ;

turned to their home regions, creating new centers of infection. The large meeting in Raiwind, Pakistan, was hastily ended on March 12, three days before a lockdown was imposed, nevertheless, many participants had to be quarantined. The town of Raiwind was completely locked down, and so were centers of the Tablighī Jamā‘at throughout the country.⁵⁴ The Pakistani meeting led to some scathing Tweets from secularists, but had no political repercussions.⁵⁵ In contrast, the March 3 to 24 2020 meeting at the Delhi Markaz in the Nizamuddin borough of Delhi had a much larger political impact. Unlike the large *ijtimā‘* in Raiwind it was only a minor meeting of regional leaders. Nevertheless, it apparently violated the union territory government’s ban on religious gatherings of more than 50 persons, and moreover, persons from abroad participated. The Delhi police, which are under the supervision of the federal government, did not intervene, despite alerts. When the first cases of COVID-19 at the meeting were reported, the Union Territory government imposed quarantines, but by that time hundreds of participants had already left.⁵⁶ On April 15 the Tablighī leader Muḥammad Sa‘d Khandalvi and six other office-bearers were finally charged with “culpable homicide not amounting to murder,” a charge that does not necessitate an arrest.⁵⁷

Owing to the previously-mentioned communal tensions in India, reports on the outbreak fell on fertile ground in Hindu nationalist circles, and it took very little time for the hashtags #CoronaJihad and #TablighiVirus to trend on Twitter. A close investigation of these Tweets would be worthwhile, as many seem to contain concocted stories about scholars exhorting Muslims to disregard social distancing, to cough and sneeze or smear objects to spread the virus. Doctored videos and audio

56 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-nizamuddin-tablighi-jamaat-markaz-the-story-of-indias-largest-covid-19-cluster/article31313698.ece> ; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/who-is-to-blame-for-virus-going-viral-from-nizamuddin/article31264902.ece>; the chronology of the meeting is unclear: According to Boaz (2020: 135) it started March 8, however, the main activity seems to have taken place between March 12 and 15.
57 <https://www.thehindu.com/>

[news/cities/Delhi/tablighi-jamaat-leader-booked-for-culpable-homicide-after-attendees-die-of-coronavirus/article31346315.ece](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/tablighi-jamaat-leader-booked-for-culpable-homicide-after-attendees-die-of-coronavirus/article31346315.ece).

58 Harriss 2020: 96; Asif 2020: 153–155; <https://www.india.com/viral/trending-news-today-may-09-2020-tablighi-jamaat-delhi-police-crime-branch-finds-maulana-saads-audio-clip-doctored-sends-it-to-forensic-science-lab-4023963/>.
59 Mathew 2020.

60 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/uttarakhand-bjp-mla->

[gives-communal-advice-to-fight-coronavirus](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coronavirus-outbreak-j-p-nadda-communal-colour-tablighi-jamaat-nizamuddin-6346539/) ; <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/coronavirus-outbreak-j-p-nadda-communal-colour-tablighi-jamaat-nizamuddin-6346539/>; <https://scroll.in/latest/959274/covid-19-separate-wards-for-hindu-and-muslim-patients-made-in-ahmedabad-hospital>.
61 <https://thewire.in/communalism/bjp-mla-says-tablighi-jamaat-members-can-be-shot-dead-for-not-seeking-treatment>; further examples: Boaz 2020: 136.

tapes also flourished in social media. Even prominent TV hosts participated in the baiting.⁵⁸

The Government of India sent mixed messages, both warning against giving the incident a “communal twist” and continuously emphasizing its importance.⁵⁹ Lower-ranking members of the ruling party did their best to fan the flames. In the state of Uttharkand, a member of the Legislative Assembly advised against shopping in Muslim shops, or patronizing barbers and shoemakers (jobs commonly associated with Muslims);⁶⁰ a member in Karnataka even said that Tablighis who had been avoiding treatment should be killed.⁶¹ The strong negative response to the incident was a major factor that motivated other Indian Muslim organizations to be extremely compliant with official measures, as mentioned before.

In contrast to the *ijtimā*, the preaching tour of the Sikh guru, Baldev Singh, who had in early March 2021 arrived from a trip to Europe including Italy, and thus contributed to the spread of the epidemic in the Punjab, or the outbreak at a temple in Tirumala (Andhra Pradesh) were not similarly politicized.⁶² The fact that many members of the Tablighi Jamaat who recovered from COVID-19 donated plasma also received little attention.⁶³ This bias is far from unique: Emphasizing the negative aspects of communal behavior and downplaying the positive effects of communal commitment has been a common pattern when reporting on religious communities' actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, as has been demonstrated with reference to the first super-spreader religious event in South Korea.⁶⁴ The Jamiat ul-Ulema-i Hind, the organization of Deobandi scholars, went to the Supreme court to bring action against the press and the social media in particular, which they claimed fomented communal hatred. The Chief Justice rejected the case, as an action would have curbed the freedom of the press.⁶⁵

Many Shiites in South Asia make pilgrimages (*ziyāra*) to the

62 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52061915>; <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/super-spreader-guru-puts-indian-villages-on-high-alert-1.4872423>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-idUSKCN25612T>.

63 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52452468>.

64 Introvigne & Šorytė 2020.

65 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/sc-refuses-to-hear-plea-seeking-action-against-media-for-communalising-nizamuddin-markaz-issue>, further examples:

Mathew 2020.

66 Hart 2020.

67 <https://www.opindia.com/2020/03/pakistan-coronavirus-shia-sunni-virus-pilgrims-return-from-iran-taftan-border/>.

tombs of imams and their eminent descendants in Iraq, Syria, and Iran. Therefore, Shiites from both India and Pakistan were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak at the shrine of Fāṭemah-e Ma‘šūme in Qomm, perhaps the largest super-spreader religious event.⁶⁶ It is unsurprising that the fact that some of the first COVID-19 infections in Pakistan were detected among Shiites who had visited Qomm led to their being scapegoated on social media.⁶⁷ However, the whole country taken into consideration it is rather surprising that anti-Shiite agitation related to COVID-19 remained limited, but this may be because Sunni sectarian organizations themselves were hostile to COVID-19-prevention measures. However, there is one remarkable regional exception where the spreading of COVID-19 by Shiite pilgrims secularized on a larger scale: In Balochistan, public employees belonging to the Hazara, a Farsi-speaking Shiite ethnic group whose members fled from Afghanistan in the 1980s, and are easily recognizable by their Central Asian facial features, were forced to take leave from their government jobs by the provincial government, which accused them of spreading COVID-19, implying their close association with Iran. And although Hazara pilgrims returning from Iran were forced into quarantine, other travelers were not subjected to such treatment.⁶⁸

Initially, the presence of Indian pilgrims in Qomm and their return from Iran did not attract much attention. However, several hundred Shiite pilgrims were stranded in Iran after flights from that country were cancelled. The fact that the Indian government took no initiative in bringing home these pilgrims until a case was filed with the Supreme Court may be interpreted as indicating that the government does not consider itself responsible for its Muslim citizens abroad.⁶⁹

Islamic actors in South Asia and the New Media during the COVID-19 crisis

The minor importance of COVID-19 and of Internet communication to South Asian Muslim groups

68 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>; Mirza 2020a.

69 <https://www.thehindu.com/>

news/national/sc-seeks-govt-reply-on-over-800-stranded-pilgrims-in-iran/article31181703.ece

70 Urdu being considered as the national language and lingua franca

of South Asian Muslims, although the supporter of the party are primarily found among Pathans.

71 @juipakofficial; @MoulanaOfficial.

In general, the Internet and social media play a minor role—if any—in the communication strategies of South Asian Muslim organizations. Many of them, even some political parties, do not even have websites, for example, the Jamia-e Ulema Pakistan, the party of the Barelwis in Pakistan. The Deobandi Jamiat-e Ulema-e Islam Pakistan has an which provides pictures from the party's rallies. The choice of language – exclusively Urdu – indicates that the party targets a less Westernized segment of society⁷⁰ Two Twitter accounts, one related to the party, one to its leader Moulana Fazlur Rehman, serve similar purposes.⁷¹ COVID-19 receives hardly any attention on these platforms, with the exception of a Tweet in which Falzur Rehman states that the Pakistani government fails when it comes to combating COVID-19 in the same way as it demonstrates its inability on other fields.⁷² In March, another Deobandi scholar with a little-used Twitter account posted a prayer supposed to protect against infection by the Corona virus.⁷³

The Deobandi madrasa Jamia Binoria in Karachi has a blog that was reactivated in April 2020, after a five-year hiatus. The new entries are *nashīds* and videos from functions where the participants were apparently neither practicing physical distancing nor wearing face masks. The fatwa section includes no COVID-19-related items. This is particularly remarkable, as the director of the institution, Mufti Muhammad Naeem, died of this illness on June 20 2020, a fact that the Indian internet preacher Zakir Naik (s.b.) does not mention in the obituary.⁷⁴ Several videos on Binoria Media, its YouTube channel, which has a relatively large number of subscribers, show the funeral, but do not mention the circumstances of his death.⁷⁵

The websites of most Islamic movements and organizations in Pakistan neglect Corona and its effects on society as well. The Markazi Jamiat-Ahli Hadith Pakistan website resembles that of the JUIP, and the organization also communicates through a Facebook page and a YouTube channel (with 428 subscribers as of September 28, 2020). On the website there is a gap between a statement—unrelated to COVID-19—by the leader, Sajid Mir, on March 7 2020, and pictures from the annual convention in mid-September 2020.⁷⁶ The lacking interest in COVID-19 can even be observed on the Jamā‘at-i islāmī website, where one might expect more focus on public concerns. An exception to the rule is its volunteer organization, al-Khidmat, which publi-

72 <https://twitter.com/MoulanaOfficial/status/1271055813805772807>.

73 <https://twitter.com/UbaidUl63872193/status/1239783920939536385>.

74 <https://binoria.org/>; <https://binoria.org/dr-zakir-naik-on-mufti-muhammad-naeem-ra-condolence/>; <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2020/06/senior-religious-scholar-mufti-naeem-passes-away/>.

75 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNrE-QWJq_fsNoCLx-c8607w.

76 <https://ahlehadith.pk/>; <https://www.facebook.com/mjapak>; <https://www.youtube.com/c/ahlehadeespakistan>.

Tahir ul-Qadri

As mentioned above, Tahir ul-Qadri's movement, Minhāj ul-Qur'ān, is rooted in the Barelwi tradition, but he eliminated those aspects that earned the Barelwis the image of being particularly out of sync with the demands of the modern age. He discusses general religious questions, and he also addresses questions such as "Islam and science". In addition to his religious activities, Tahir ul-Qadri also led a political party, the Pakistani Awami Tehreek, which was not based on a specifically Islamic platform. Because of the "first past the post" election system, it had no electoral success, therefore the party focused on marches for electoral reform, which escalated into a violent clash that led to 14 deaths in 2014. After this, he focused on religious matters. Although activities of many other Barelwis focus on domestic matters, Tahir ul-Qadri seeks cooperation with Sufi-oriented Islamic movements in other parts of the world, and takes an irenic stance to Shiism.⁸¹ In Western media he has attracted some attention with his statement condemning terrorism and suicide bombings.⁸² Women play a larger role in his movement than the usually do in other South Asian Islamic organizations, given their seclusion at home. The Danish branch of the Minhāj ul-Qur'ān even emerged out of a women's study circle.⁸³ These aspects of Tahir ul-Qadri's approach may also explain why the Minhāj's the presence in communities of Pakistani descent abroad is particularly strong in countries where their educational level is high. Today, he communicates mainly through his YouTube channel (371 k subscribers March 25 2021), which he started in 2010. Currently, new clips are published at least once a day. Mostly, he addresses general religious issues, but on certain occasions, he presents series of lectures on a specific topic for example, in Muḥarram, when he exhorts Sunnis to demonstrate their love for the Prophet's family. However, public concerns are rarely addressed. The videos published during the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis are exceptions. Formally, apart from some clips from debates, Tahir ul-Qadri's videos may be classified as frontal teaching, with the presenter sitting before his book shelves filled with the hadith collections and commentaries on the Qur'ān, sometimes fortifying himself with those volumes from which he is going to quote during the lecture.

Tahir ul-Qadri starts his contributions on COVID-19 by describing its symptoms and offering practical hygiene advice, such as hand-washing and disinfecting items,⁸⁴ then he empha-

81 Philippon 2011: 230–256;
Riexinger 2020 : 52.

82 <https://www.minhaj.org/english/oid/33357/BBC-News-Cleric-launches-counter-terrorism-curriculum.html>

83 Kühle & Larsen 2019, s. 235–236.

84 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 04:00–5:40, 08:10–08:20.

85 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 05:45–07:00.

86 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 07:00–08:00.

87 "Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri" 09:30–10:30.

sizes the necessity of avoiding gatherings,⁸⁵ and it is only after this that the first religious reference appears, namely, that the Prophet advised against travelling during an epidemic.⁸⁶ This is the starting point for an elaboration based on a variety of hadiths and reports from the Companions, which exhort Muslims to avoid any behavior that could spread an epidemic, which means complying with social distancing rules. He asserts that people always used to do so in the case of *tā'ūn* (plague), which according to him was also caused by a virus, not a bacterium.⁸⁷ The outbreaks he references were of a kind that the WHO would declare a “pandemic” today.⁸⁸ He then extensively discusses the hadith prohibiting travel to places where an epidemic is raging, and travel from one’s own area if it is struck by an epidemic.⁸⁹ Insights informed the behavior of the *ṣahāba* when the plague broke out in Kufa.⁹⁰ Furthermore, he refers to another group of hadiths, according to which the “sick” should not be mixed with the “healthy” (*lā yūridū l-mumriḍa ‘alā al-muṣiḥḥ*), conceding that it refers primarily to livestock (*mawāshī*), but passing over the fact that some of these traditions deny the idea of infectious diseases (‘*adwā*).⁹¹ He then refers to other traditions that urge the isolation of people infected with leprosy.⁹² Although Ṭahir ul-Qadri quotes extensively from Arabic sources, he uses a lot of anglicisms when explaining the objectives of the rulings, such as, “contagious disease,” “categorical,” “test positive,” “isolation/isolate” “quarantine,” “break up.” His use of this terminology bolsters his claim that modern responses to epidemics were already recommended by the Prophet.⁹³ Thus, he implicitly confirms his opinion that Islam and science are in harmony. Nevertheless, on another occasion he stresses the priority of medical concerns over religious ones. In contrast to the previously-

88 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 11:40–.

89 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 10:30–14:20; “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during Pandemic | Part-1” 09:25–10:35.; al-Bukhārī 5728 (book 76 no. 43).

90 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 13:20–13:30

91 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 19:00–22:40; al-Bukhārī 5771, 5773–5775 (book 76 no. 85, 87); Muslim 2221b; Ibn Māja 3541; Abū Dāwūd 3991; Dols 1977: 109–121.

92 “Corona Virus & Prophetic

Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 23:00–26:30.

93 “Corona Virus & Prophetic Teachings | Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri” 15:15–16:45 (in particular, but throughout this and other clips).

94 Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic | Part 1” 04:45–06:00.

mentioned resistance of Pakistani ‘ulamā’ to the closing of mosques for congregational prayer, Tahir ul-Qadri endorses the closing of mosques and abstaining from congregational prayer, arguing that Corona is a crisis that resembles a war. Such exceptional circumstances necessitate reconsidering rules concerning fasting and prayer.⁹⁴ He underlines the urgency of the situation when he mentions that people who asymptomatic may also be infected.⁹⁵ In the first video on this topic, he extends the argument in favor of the general lockdown, with reference to a hadith that one should wait out an outbreak of the plague where one is at that time, with patience and trust in God’s reward. Thus, Islam recommends a “lockdown although the “scientific knowledge” was not “available” but in light of contemporary knowledge, the reason for this recommendation may be understood.⁹⁶ In such cases, it is recommended that one maintain a distance of *rumḥ aw rumḥayn* (“a lance or two”), which he identifies as three to six feet.⁹⁷ As there is no verse in the Qur’ān or a *ḥādīth* with provisions for prayer under the circumstances of an epidemic, Tahir ul-Qadri draws an analogy (*qiyās*) by referring to the dispensation from the Friday prayer in the case of heavy rains and flooding. As religion is not supposed to be a burden to the believer, under such circumstances it is appropriate to pray at home.⁹⁸

Although Tahir ul-Qadri prioritizes medical approaches for combating the pandemic, he emphasizes that religion must also play a role, when it comes to the individual level. It provides a “spiritual vaccine” that empowers believers to cope with the adverse effects of the social distancing measures. God’s “prescription” is to be followed as diligently as that of a doctor.⁹⁹ He elaborates for some time on the *an ‘amta ‘alayhim* and the *ghayri l-maghdūbi ‘alayhim* in the Fātiḥa (1:7) as evidence of divine guidance that protects those who abstain from misdeeds, before

95 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic | Part 1” 03:40–04:00.

196 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic | Part 1” 14:00–20:15; al-Bukhārī 6619 (book 82 no. 25)

97 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques

during Pandemic | Part 1” 23:50–27:40.

98 “Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during Pandemic | Part 1” 33:20–37:56; “Special Prayer & Commandments for Friday and Congregation Prayers in mosques during the Pandemic |Part 2” 00:00–03:20.

99 “Spiritual Vaccine” 10:30–11:00.

100 “Spiritual Vaccine” 12:00–23:30.

101 “Spiritual Vaccine” 26:00–28:39; Langholm Larsen et al.: 18.

102 Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 149–150, 155; Galal in this issue: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/14/kuwait-mosques-tell-believers-to-pray-at-home>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/14/coronavirus-the-impact-on-islam-video>

presenting concrete approaches to handling anxiety, stress, and depression.¹⁰⁰ In the final section of the video, he says that the challenges must be overcome by withdrawing (*khalwa*) and the spirit of *i'tikāf* (self-isolation with a focus on rituals). He hints at a sequel in which he will elaborate on this topic; however, this never appeared.¹⁰¹

The repertoire of Prophetic traditions to which Tahir ul-Qadri refers is fairly common, as the same hadiths were already mentioned in the first fatwa issued in Singapore on February 18 2020, which advocated closing the mosques, and were often cited in the Arab World.¹⁰²

Zakir Naik

Zakir Naik (b. 1965) is an “Islamic influencer” from Mumbai. He did not formally study to become a religious scholar, but a physician, but nevertheless he has been engaged in *da'wa* activities since his teens, and turned this into his profession. The organizational backbone of his preaching activities is the Islamic Research Foundation, which he launched, and his most important propaganda tool the YouTube-channel, *Peace TV*. Sometimes labelled a Salafi, his religious standpoint is instead Deobandi. The main focus of his preaching reflects classical apologetic subjects, such as favorably comparing Islam to other religions, and demonstrating that Islam is compatible with science (implying that the theory of evolution is not science). He occasionally preaches in Urdu, but primarily in English, which accounts for the audience he has attracted outside of South Asia.¹⁰³ In India and in Western countries he has been declared a supporter of terrorism, but no such claim have been substantiated, and his preaching includes no incitement to violence. Nevertheless, India revoked his passport in 2017, and he is now settled in Malaysia.

Unlike Tahir ul-Qadri, Zakir Naik did not immediately address COVID-19, which he explained by noting that “every Tom, Dick, and Harry” felt entitled to say something about it, which led to a wave of “fake news.”¹⁰⁴ Even worse, some persons not qualified as *mujtahids* arrogated to themselves to come forth with Islamic guidance.¹⁰⁵ Even in the medical profession, a only small numbers of virologists is qualified to say something about the Corona virus. He then explains the history of its discovery, the harmless and dangerous variations of Corona viruses, and the specific challenges of Corona.¹⁰⁶ Only then does he address-

103 Riexinger 2020: 55; his influence is particularly strong among young Muslims in Norway: Bangsta & Linge 2015.

104 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 01:00–04:30.

105 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 04:30–05:00.

106 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 05:00–13:40; also the basis for the argument in, “Should Muslims follow Social Distancing for Fear of Coronavirus? – Dr. Zakir Naik.”

107 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 13:40–16:30.

108 “Dr. Zakir Naik on Corona Virus” 16:30–17:39.

109 “If a Muslim doctor dies of treating a patient with COVID-19, will he get the Sawaab of a Martyr?”

es COVID-19 from a Islamic point of view. Like Tahir ul-Qadri, he quotes the hadith that prohibits travel to and from places where the plague has broken, out and those with injunctions against physical contact with lepers.¹⁰⁷ Finally, he cites a hadith that declares the plague a punishment for those who deserve it, whereas it is a blessing for the believer, as those who die of the epidemic are martyrs.¹⁰⁸ Weeks later he reversed this position and stated that a doctor who dies because he was infected while helping patients who are infected with Corona will not receive the reward (*thawāb*) of a martyr in the hereafter, but only the reward for saving lives, as not every epidemic is the plague.¹⁰⁹

When it comes to closing mosques, he declares that this is acceptable in those cases that the government has consulted both medical experts and the *fuqahā*, but he does not consider it appropriate in countries where no cases of COVID-19 have been reported. However, infected persons should in any case stay home, and mosques should take measures to ensure the necessary distance between those who pray, and provide disinfectants. Moreover, the doing the washing and supererogatory prayers at home diminishes the danger of infection. Abstaining from prayer out of fear is not recommended.¹¹⁰ Stating that various scholars hold different opinions, he himself abstains from determining whether a congregational prayer will be counted as congregational prayer or just as individual prayer if a six foot distance is kept.¹¹¹

Jamā‘at-i islāmī-i Hind

The Jamā‘at-i islāmī in India makes many of its public functions available on its Facebook page, and throughout the first half of 2020 the organization dedicated much attention to COVID-19. In a speech given at a seminar on COVID-19, the leader, Syed Sadatullah Husseini, complains that Muslims do not show enough interest in modern science, which is essential for coping with the pandemic, just as it has made life easier in many respects. He emphasizes this by asserting that the Prophet encouraged finding out about technical advances in the military field.¹¹² After complaining about ethnic persecution and refugees, and about the increasing gap between rich and poor, he admits that the relation of these topics to COVID-19 is not “scientific”, but “ethical”, as the Qur’ān relates how people who indulged in self-aggrandizing behavior were punished by floods or similar dis-

110 “Should Mosques be Closed During the Coronavirus COVID-19 Pandemic All Over the World? – Dr. Zakir Naik”

111 “Is Prayer valid when we Pray as a congregation in a Mosque keeping 6 ft distance between 2 worshippers?”

112 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 06:00–14:45.

113 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 21:20–23:30.

114 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 28:30–32:30.

115 “Lessons of COVID-19 for Humanity” 32:30–33:10.

asters.¹¹³ Furthermore, he argues that the Corona virus is a result of the “ecological imbalance” caused by abusing the plenty God has bestowed on mankind for the production of luxuries, and thereby threatening the last refuges of biodiversity. It is here that pathogens transgress the species boundary and infect humans. He also quotes “Ghandiji,” to emphasize that the Earth has resources enough for everybody, if used responsibly.¹¹⁴ Therefore, one has to hope that the simpler life under the lockdown will teach humanity a lesson, and convince people to lead more austere lives.¹¹⁵ Such ecological references are rarely found in Islamic discourses on COVID-19 in South Asia and elsewhere, but are frequent in Hindu debates, hence such remarks reflect the influence of the Jamā‘at’s interaction with Hindu leaders.¹¹⁶ Like Tahir ul-Qadri’s, Urdu Husseini’s is highly anglicized, to suggest that the speaker is up to date on the medical and administrative aspects of the crisis.

Raziul Islam Nadvi, the secretary of the Jamā‘at-I islāmi Hind, addresses the topic of Islamic rules for containing the pandemic. He starts with the ḥadīths that urge the separation of the sick and the healthy, but unlike Tahir ul-Qadri, he acknowledges that there is a problem, as these traditions deny the concept of infection. Nadvi circumvents this by asserting that infections happen only because of God’s will.¹¹⁷ According to him, the correctness of the hadith advising against travel to or from a place stricken by the plague is proven by the of COVID-19 spread from China by travelers.¹¹⁸ However, his arguments are not derived only from the early history of Islam. He also relates Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqallānī’s (1372–1449) observation that initially about 40 people per day were dying of the plague in Cairo, but after believers gathered in mosques to pray for help against the epidemic, the daily death toll rose to 1000.¹¹⁹

Other speakers for Jamā‘at-i islāmi address questions such as the economic and environmental impact of the COVID-19 crisis.¹²⁰ Moreover, in line with its commitment to the interfaith dialogue it has developed in India, the Jamā‘at-i islāmi organized an online conference of religious leaders, to discuss how religions may help to combat the Corona pandemic. No other Islamic organization participated, and remarkably, the National Trustee of the Bahai in India—generally considered heretics among Muslims—was invited to contribute (the other contributions came from Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, and Spiritualist

116 Fibiger 2021: 170.

117 “Protection from Corona and Islamic Teachings” 05:00–08:20.

118 “Protection from Corona and Islamic Teachings” 11:40–13:20.

119 “Protection from Corona and Islamic Teachings” 21:10–22:30.

120 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=195079198591245>; <https://www.facebook.com/JIHMarkaz/videos/627552101179333/>.

121 <http://jamaateislamihind.org/eng/corona-crisis-message-from-religious-scholars/>; “Re-Telecast || Messages from Religious Scholars”; in Kerala, Muslim scholars participated in an interreligious anti-Corona prayer organized by Christians: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/religious-leaders-come-together-in-kerala-for-joint-online-prayer-to-overcome-covid-19/articleshow/75519983.cms>

122 Gugler 2011: 99–103.

scholars). The highly Sanskritized Hindi of many of the contributions transcend the linguistic abilities of the author, therefore no analysis of these is provided here.¹²¹

Ilyās Qādrī

The leader of Da‘wat-i islāmī, a Barelwi missionary organization modelled after the Tablighī to counter its influence,¹²² addresses his followers’ questions in YouTube videos. Here, he also addressed questions regarding the COVID-19 several times in March and April 2020. His answers differ considerably from the statements of those discussed above as they reflect his very traditional religious outlook. Whereas the Tahir ul-Qadri, Naik, and the Jamā‘at-i islāmī Hind emphasize the importance of science for combating COVID-19 and their grasp of the scientific approaches involved, Ilyās Qādrī declares that with the COVID-19, which has brought the world to a standstill, God has taught the great powers, and also science, a lesson, demonstrating that everything is under his power.¹²³ He does not address questions such as the closing of mosques, but takes the lockdown for granted when he condemns hoarding, and urges that food be provided for the poor.¹²⁴ His attitude to established medical science remains unclear. On the one hand he promotes remedies based on hearsay: To protect themselves, people should inhale steam, something he has heard from various sources, but hot tea also works as a preventive;¹²⁵ on the other hand, he urges his followers to donate blood, to prevent a shortage of blood needed by thalassemia patients.¹²⁶ In another video he stresses that there is an illness that is worse than COVID-19—sin—hence, one should be more concerned with this. Missing prayer once is enough to lead to Hellfire.¹²⁷ Like other Barelwis, he has also published a *du‘ā* against COVID-19 on YouTube.¹²⁸

123 “Coronavirus Ka Challenge | Coronavirus Ne Science Ko Bhi Hara Diya | Duniya Me Coronavirus Ka Khauf”; “Coronavirus Pori Duniya Ke Liya Khatarnak | Aik Corona Ka Sab Ko Harana | Allah Ki Qaudrat Or Corona.”

124 “Coronavrius Or Gareebon Ka Haq | Gareebon Ki Khidmat Karny

Walon ko Maulana Ka Mashwara.”

125 “#Covid19 Se Bachne Ka Behtreen Tarika | Asan Nuskha Corona Sy Bachna Ka | Mualana Ilyas Qadri.”

126 “Thalassemia Ke Mareez ko Khoon Den | Lock Down Or Thalassemia Kay Mareez | Blood Donations Needed!”

127 “Aik Beemari Jo Corona Sey Bhi Bari Hai | Coronavirus Ki Waja Sey ALLAH Sey Daren | Coronavirus Or Hum” 03:55–end.

28 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_DGito4eAQ.

129 Ahmed 2020: 258; Boaz 2020: 135.

Final remarks

One common characteristic of South Asian Islamic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is that the reality of the pandemic and its status as a transmissible disease are generally acknowledged. At an early stage of the pandemic, some scholars doubted that it was a transmissible disease,¹²⁹ but the systematic denials uttered by conservative Christian groups in the West, Latin America, and Africa, or by esoteric/new religious circles were not found. In no source that has come to my attention has reference been made to humoral medicine (*yūnānī ṭibb*) promising relief, although in both India and Pakistan numerous ‘ulamā’ practice this, in addition to their religious activities. This contrasts with Ayurvedic remedies for COVID-19 being promised among Hindus.¹³⁰ No actor whose statements have been analyzed clings to the traditional Sunni position that transmission does not exist (a sub-aspect of the denial of natural causes).¹³¹ Apparently, modern science has much authority among South Asian Islamic actors, when its usefulness is apparent, as in cases of biomedicine. Nevertheless, this does not apply to less practical, but theologically more charged questions: Both Tahir ul-Qadri and Naik are advocates of Islamic creationism.¹³² The hadith material chosen is interpreted in a way that makes it appear to anticipate modern medical knowledge.

Non-compliance with government imposed COVID-19 related measures occurred due to either a demonstrative lack of interest in current or “worldly” affairs, as in the case of the Tablighī Jamā‘at, or they were justified by the argument that even a pandemic is not a sufficient reason to prohibit congregational prayer, as was the case of Pakistani Sunni leaders’ resistance to closing the mosques. Furthermore, the latter only opposed the cancellation of Friday prayer, not the closure of public life in general, including other religious meetings. No religious group or leader tried to assume the role of a spokesperson for those economically harmed by the lockdowns, as Pentecostal churches did, with some success, in Latin America.¹³³ Those who justified the closing of mosques did so based on analogies related to the hadiths; no references to the concept of *maṣlaḥa* and the five objectives of law – a minority position in pre-modern legal theory, which has become very influential since the late 19th century – were to be found. In the framework of this legal approach danger to life trumps the necessity of rituals. This ar-

130 Fibiger 2021: 173; Riexinger et al. 2021: 134; Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 156.

131 Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 156.

132 Riexinger 2020: 52–53, 55–58

133 Thorsen 2021: 146.

134 Begović 2020: 247–248; Fibiger & Riexinger 2021: 155–156; Opwis 2019.

135 Riexinger et al. 2021: 137–138; Kühle in this issue.

gument played an important role legitimizing the closing of mosques in the Arab World, South East Asia, and Bosnia.¹³⁴

The opposing attitudes of Sunni scholars in India and Pakistan to the suspension of communal prayer highlights the completely different positions of Muslim leaders in these societies. As in other countries where Muslims are a minority that many regard with suspicion, in India, most Islamic organizations, institutions, and public figures tended to emphasize their willingness to follow instructions and often to do more than necessary, to present Muslims as committed and responsible members of society.¹³⁵

In Pakistan, a Muslim- and more precisely, Sunni-majority country, where religious scholars and most institutions are largely autonomous, the COVID-19 crisis was a welcome opportunity for the Sunni religious establishment to demonstrate their power vis-à-vis the government. And as on many previous occasions, they succeeded. Hence, the situation also differs considerably from that in most Arab countries, where the religious sphere is controlled by the state. Ahmed ignores this dependence on the state in other countries, when he argues that the position of the Pakistani scholars reflects a distrust of the state nurtured by British rule.¹³⁶ Actually the—admittedly not completely consequential—British policy of non-interference in the religious sphere was a precondition for the significant autonomy of religious organizations in Pakistan.¹³⁷

Notably, of the prominent Pakistani Sunni scholars, the one who took a different approach was Tahir ul-Qadri, who considers the sensibilities of more secular, better-educated groups, particularly abroad. Shiite religious leaders in Pakistan took on the “responsible minority” role, and thus followed a similar pattern to that of Muslim religious leaders in India, reflecting the fact that for Sunni sectarians in Pakistan, Shiites represent “the other,” undermining the nation, similar to the role Hindu communalists in India ascribe to Muslims. In both cases, the stance also reflects that the communities had become suspect because of super-spreader events.

Finally, South Asian Islamic debates influenced developments abroad. Tahir ul-Qadri’s *Minhaj ul Qur’an*, which is strongly represented among Pakistani Muslims in Denmark, and has a special “health branch” with a medical doctor as its main contributor, very actively urged Muslims to comply with government rules.¹³⁸ In contrast the opposition to the closing of mosques in Pakistan has apparently influenced the reluctant at-

136 Brown et al. 2020; Fahmi 2020; Galal 2021; Ahmed 2020.

137 Riexinger 2004: 335, 607, 611; Zaman 2018: 14–23; although the autonomy alone cannot completely explain the obstinacy as governments succeeded in convincing fairly autonomous Islamic organizations: Sukamto & Parulian 2020; https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/senegal-le-coronavirus-au-confluent-du-politique-et-du-religieux-14-03-2020-2367166_3826.php.

138 “Live om corona i lyset af koran og hadith”; <https://www.facebook.com/MinhajSundhed/>

139 Birt 2020, with links to three relevant Deobandi fatwas.

140 South Africa: North Gauteng High Court, Pretoria 2020.

titude of South Asian linked organizations to in Great Britain, in particular those with a Deobandi background, to the closing of mosques,¹³⁹ and in South Africa they even tried to sue for a repeal of the ban on communal prayers.¹⁴⁰

Danish Abstract:

Ligesom i verdens fleste lande reagerede Indiens og pakistans regeringer med nedlukninger på spredning af COVID-19 virus som i princippet skulle også inkludere religiøse institutioner og ritualer. I Pakistan blev de sunnitiske moskeer dog åbne fordi regeringen havde ingen hjemmel for at gennemtvunge nedlukningen imod de autonome religiøse organisationer. I Indien fulgte de muslimiske organisationer dog, og forsøgte at vise sig som det “ansvarlige mindretal” grundet spændinger med den hindunationalistiske regering og også fordi en forsamling af Tablighī Jamā'at havde bidraget betydeligt til spredning af smittet i landet og udenfor. I Pakistan var det derimod shiiterne som spillede rolle som det “ansvarlige mindretal” ved at lukke moskeerne. I det hele set viste muslimiske organisationer og ledere ingen stor interesse i tage til sygdommen, dem som ytrer sig på internettet henvender sig i forvejen til et højere uddannet publikum og er mere positivt indstillet over for nedlukninger.

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Med bønnens kraft: Et islamisk og kristent arabisk perspektiv på covid-19

Nøgleord

Covid-19, coronavirus, islam, islamisk tv, Fiqh, Sharia, Al-Azhar, religiøse lærde, kristen tv

Resume I de arabiske lande har covid-19, ligesom andre steder i verden, ført til restriktioner af den religiøse praksis, blandt andet i form af periodevis lukkede kirker og moskeer. Ligeledes har religiøse autoriteter med henvisning til religionen deltaget i debatten om covid-19's betydning og håndtering. På denne baggrund analyseres i denne artikel, hvordan religiøse argumenter bekræfter henholdsvis udfordrer de arabiske staters håndtering af covid-19 i foråret 2020, og hvordan disse afspejler samspillet mellem stat og religion. Mens staterne gør brug af sundhedsvidenskabelig og sekulær argumentation, identificeres tre positioner blandt religiøse autoriteter: de, der støtter op om og med henvisning til religionen legitimerer staternes håndtering af covid-19; de, der finder alle svar i religionen og undgår at tale om politik; og de, der afviser og mistænkeliggør statens linje. Således afspejler debatten om håndtering af covid-19 i de arabiske lande gængse religiøse positioner i spørgsmålet om religionens rolle i samfundet.

It is permissible for states and governments to impose restrictions on individual liberties in a manner that serves the public interest, whether by preventing entry into and exit from cities, imposing a partial or complete lockdown, imposing a travel ban, banning financial operations using notes and coins, suspending businesses, services, schools, and closing markets.

Ovennævnte citat legitimerer en statsreguleret praksis, som man kan genfinde i lande verden over, der har forsøgt at forhindre spredning af covid-19. Citatet stammer dog fra en liste med 24 punkter, der udstikker retningslinjerne for, hvordan

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man håndterer covid-19 i overensstemmelse med islamisk lov.¹ Listen er udarbejdet af Det Internationale Islamiske Fiqh Akademi (IIFA)² og illustrerer, hvordan covid-19 har igangsat en diskussion af forholdet mellem tro og håndtering af sygdom. Som en supranational islamisk organisation kan IIFAs udlægning af covid-19 samtidig siges at afspejle en generel forståelse blandt muslimske lande af forholdet mellem religion og en pandemi som covid-19.

Ligesom i andre dele af verden har tilstedeværelsen af covid-19 i de arabiske lande ført til analyser, diskussioner og restriktioner, hvor ikke blot politikere og eksperter, men også religiøse lærde og autoriteter har deltaget.³ I første omgang afviste flere af de arabiske stater, at virussen eksisterede hos dem. Inden længe tvang realiteterne dog staterne til at håndtere endnu en krise i rækken af kriser, der har ramt dem de seneste årtier (Sawaya et al. 2020). Ligesom under tidligere kriser blev religion hurtigt et aspekt og et redskab til håndtering, samtidig med at religion endnu engang blev genstand for kampe om fortolkning i tæt samspil med politiske interesser.

Blandt de kriser, de arabiske lande har været ramt af, inden covid-19 fik fat i januar 2020, var Det Arabiske Forår i Tunesien og Egypten i 2011, der spredte sig til Bahrain, Syrien, Libyen, Yemen og Irak. De fire sidstnævnte lande har siden været ramt af borgerkrig med dårlig økonomi, mange døde, oprør i fængslerne og millioner på flugt og i eksil til følge. I andre stater lykkedes det de gamle regimer at genetablere sig med nye ansigter. Regimernes brug af ufortøvet magtanvendelse gav politiske aktivister to muligheder: at blive fængslet eller flygte. Oveni disse politiske kriser fulgte ustabile oliepriser, krigen mod ISIS, udenlandsk (amerikansk, fransk, russisk, tyrkisk og iransk) og rige arabiske oliestaters indblanding, og senere i 2019 opstod nye protester i Algeriet og Sudan, mens de fortsatte i Irak og Libanon. Som Marc Lynch formulerer det: “The COVID-19 pandemic swept through a region already struggling with the effects of a decade of uprisings, failed or struggling political transitions, state collapse, civil war and international conflict” (Lynch 2020, 3). Covid-19 kan gå hen og blive det sidste søm i de gamle arabiske regimers ligkiste (Alterman 2020; Muasher & Yahya 2020).

Flere arabiske stater har tradition for politisk at nedtone eller fortie *dårlige nyheder og censurere* whistleblowere. På trods heraf har de arabiske regimer, som i andre nyere kriser, måttet sande, at de ikke er i stand til at holde, i dette tilfælde, sundheds-

1 Se https://www.oic-oci.org/topic/?t_id=23480&t_ref=13985&lan=en (tilgået 31. oktober 2020).

2 Det Internationale Islamiske Fiqh Akademi har hjemme i Saudi-Arabien og er en organisation under Organisationen for Islamisk Samarbejde, som består af 57 medlemsstater. IIFA har særligt fokus på at undersøge sammenhænge mellem medicinsk viden og islamisk lov, og udarbejdelsen af listen om håndtering af covid-19 var resultatet af en videokonference om samme emne afholdt den 16. april 2020.

3 Når jeg bruger udtrykket “religiøse lærde og autoriteter” i artiklen, bruger jeg det som en samlebetegnelse for både kristne og muslimer og for både uddannede og selvbestaltede religiøse autoriteter. Hvis det specifikt handler om enten muslimer eller kristne, specificeres dette.

krisen hemmelig. De rige arabiske olielande anerkendte generelt hurtigt eksistensen af covid-19, blandt andet på grund af deres kontakt til internationale virksomheder og deres store multinationale arbejdsstyrke samt den deraf følgende daglige brug af internationale medier og kontakt til oprindelseslande. Til gengæld reagerede andre arabiske stater først, da ikkestatslige og sociale medier begyndte at bringe historier om pandemiens konsekvenser i de arabiske lande. Lande, som tidligere havde afvist pandemiens tilstedeværelse, ændrede således kursen 180 grader, da det rygtedes på sociale medier, at der var flere hundre-detusinde ofre for covid-19.⁴ I stedet for at fortie pandemien blev landenes strategi nu at forsøge at styre informationsstrømmen og bruge alle midler til at oplyse om og få befolkningen til at agere, som staten ønskede det.

På den ene side har pandemien endnu engang synliggjort de strukturelle uligheder både inden for det enkelte lands befolkning og imellem de arabiske lande. I de rige arabiske olielande, som f.eks. De Forenede Arabiske Emirater og Saudi-Arabien, har borgerne adgang til et velfungerende sundhedssystem. I fattige arabiske lande, som f.eks. Sudan og Egypten, kan man tale om tre grupper af borgere. Den ene, bestående af den politiske elite og velstillede overklasse, har adgang til eksklusive militær- og privathospitaler med det nyeste moderne udstyr. Den anden består af en middelklasse, der enten bruger deres livs opsparede formue eller låner penge til at få behandling på det privathospital, som de har råd til at betale. Den tredje gruppe består af fattige og den lavere middelklasse, som må kæmpe om de begrænsede sengepladser på statshospitaler, som er kendetegnet ved begrænsede ressourcer og manglende renlighed (Anonymous 2020). På den anden side satte de arabiske stater ind med samme typer af restriktioner som andre lande globalt i form af begrænsning af forsamlinger, lukning af skoler, universiteter og andre statsinstitutioner, hjemmearbejde og lukning af kirker og moskeer.

Netop spørgsmålet om religionens rolle under covid-19 i de arabiske lande er afsættet for denne artikel. De arabiske staters interesse i at styre koblingen af religiøse og sundhedsvidenskabelige argumenter gør religiøse statsinstitutioner eller supranationale institutioner, som f.eks. IIFA, til centrale allierede for staterne. Som så ofte før bliver religionen således et redskab for staten til at legitimere eller vinde opbakning til egen håndtering af en krise, her covid-19. Langt fra alle har dog været enige i den enkelte stats linje, og trods staternes forsøg på kontrol har de se-

4 En af dem, der på et tidligt tidspunkt var kritisk over for statens håndtering, var den palæstinensiske, karismatiske prædikant Mahmoud al-Hasanat, der på sin egen YouTube-kanal (13. marts 2020) kritiserede de arabiske ledere for ikke at tage pandemien alvorligt.

neste årtiers samspil af ny teknologi og vækst i antallet af religiøse lærde og prædikanter, der blandt andet optræder i diverse medier, skabt et medie- og religionslandskab, der er langt vanskeligere at kontrollere. Derfor stiller jeg spørgsmålet: *Hvordan har religiøse argumenter henholdsvis bekræftet og udfordret statens håndtering af covid-19, og hvordan afspejler disse samspillet mellem stat og religion?*

For at besvare dette spørgsmål vil jeg i denne artikel undersøge arabiske religiøse autoriteters offentlige reaktioner på covid-19 og på statens håndtering. Efter en præsentation af min analytiske tilgang identificerer jeg fire positioner inden for håndteringen af covid-19. Den første af disse er staternes sundhedsvidenskabelige og sekulære tilgang til covid-19, der suppleres af tre forskellige positioner blandt religiøse lærde: de, der følger og bakker op om statens linje; de, der ikke udfordrer statens linje, men udfordrer deres begrundelse; og endelig de, der afviser og mistænkeliggør statens linje.

Religion og medier i en arabisk kontekst

Studier af religionens rolle i den arabiske verden under den aktuelle covid-19-krise er endnu stort set ikkeeksisterende. Denne artikel bidrager således til et felt, der stadig er i gang med at blive dannet, samtidig med at den bidrager til eksisterende forskning om religion og medier, herunder ikke mindst, hvordan religion fungerer som et politisk redskab i en krisesituation.

Mindst fire aspekter af den eksisterende viden om religion og medier i de arabiske lande er i denne forbindelse vigtige at holde sig for øje. For det første har de sidste 30 års udvikling af nye teknologier udfordret de nationale mediers monopol på at dække aktuelle kriser og konflikter. Transnationale massemedier i form af satellit-tv på den ene side og sociale medier på den anden side har ikke blot skabt grænseoverskridende nyhedsstrømme, men også udfordret statens envejskommunikation målrettet befolkningen. I modsætning til da staten havde monopol på medierne, har enhver borger nu mulighed for at kommunikere sit budskab via sin blog, sin egen YouTube-kanal, Facebook-konto eller andre sociale medier. Det har blandt andet betydet, at den reelle udvikling af en konflikt eller krise ikke længere kan holdes skjult af statsmedierne (selv om de forsøger), blandt andet fordi borgere er hurtige til at bringe øjenvidneberetninger, der udfor-

drer den officielle version. Denne form for borgerjournalistik så man under Det Arabiske Forår (Al-Ghazzi 2014; Arafa & Armstrong 2016; El-Nawawy & Khamis 2016; Wall & El Zahed 2015), og det gør man igen under covid-19.

For det andet har udviklingen af nye teknologier tilbudt nye platforme for både etablerede og selvbestaltede religiøse lærde og autoriteter. Det har udfordret et religiøst landskab, hvor de religiøse institutioner traditionelt har været en allieret til staten, og hvor den religiøse lærde ikke mindst har fået autoritet gennem en religiøs uddannelse, som har været udbudt af de statsstøttede religiøse institutioner (Skovgaard-Petersen 1997). De nye medier har således eksponeret ikke blot mange flere, men også en langt større mangfoldighed, af religiøse lærde og autoriteter, som konkurrerer om seere, lyttere og læsere, samtidig med at staten får sværere ved at opretholde kontrol med religionen (Brinton 2015; Galal 2009; 2011; 2012; 2015; Moll 2017; Qu-neis 2012; Sætren 2010).

For det tredje er viden om forholdet mellem stat og religion i de arabiske lande derfor en forudsætning for at udforske religionens rolle under covid-19. Samtidig med at arabiske stater har interesse i at styre informationsstrømmen under kriser og konflikter, har de interesse i at kontrollere religion og religiøse autoriteter. Velvidende om religionens mobiliserende kraft og med Det Arabiske Forår i frisk erindring har arabiske stater det seneste årti arbejdet hårdt på at minimere religiøst baseret oppositionel indflydelse, blandt andet gennem fængslinger og via sanktionering af medier (Galal 2021; 2011). Covid-19-krisen eksemplificerer dog, ligesom Det Arabiske Forår, at en sådan kontrol kun delvist rækker.

For det fjerde har relationen mellem kontrarevolutionen i kølvandet på Det Arabiske Forår i 2011, den dybe stat og de gamle regimers nye ansigter medvirket til, at flere politiske aktivister, politisk engagerede og ikke mindst arabiske menneskerettighedsforkæmpere enten er endt i fængsel eller flygtet til udlandet, hvorfra de kæmper videre. Gennem etableringen af frie, kritiske og oppositionelle medieplatforme har de forsøgt at formidle viden om, hvad der foregår i deres hjemlande, til disse landes befolkninger og til resten af verden. Typisk har sådanne medier etableret sig uden for deres hjemland, så hjemlandets regime ikke på samme måde kan begrænse dem. De transmitterer fra f.eks. europæiske lande som Storbritannien og Frankrig, mens andre sender fra Tyrkiet, Iran eller Qatar. Som regimekritiske medier

har de fungeret som hovedkilder i afsløringen af spredningen af covid-19 i de lande, hvor staterne forsøgte at skjule faren og spredningen i februar og marts 2020. På samme måde kritiserer de fortsat arabiske regimers håndtering af covid-19.

De mange medieplatforme umuliggør den totale kontrol, og det er derfor blevet endnu vigtigere for staterne at understøtte og alliere sig med religiøse kræfter, der er statsloyale. Således kan transmission af religiøse debatter via statslige tv-kanaler forstås som et forsøg på at imødekomme befolkningens efterspørgsel på medieret religion. Det giver mulighed for at udbrede statens forståelse af den "rigtige" islam til millioner af mennesker, som ikke kun befinder sig inden for, men også uden for, landets grænser. Valget af statsloyale religiøse lærere i de religiøse programmer kan således ses som statens støtte til ideen om, at religion kun er legitim inden for en bestemt religions sfære, nemlig den statslige.

Dette samspil af ny teknologi, diversitet af religiøse autoriteter, oppositionsmedier og statens forsøg på at opretholde kontrol med dem alle danner baggrund for forståelsen af religionens rolle under covid-19. Det er derfor også den mediebårne fremstilling af religionens rolle, som danner grundlaget for denne artikel. Artiklen bygger på materiale, der primært er indsamlet fra YouTube. YouTube er blevet en populær medieplatform, som ligeledes er blevet brugt til at anklage, forsvare samt fremme islamiske perspektiver (se f.eks. Al-Rawi 2015; Hirschkind 2012; Mosemghvdlshvili & Jansz 2013; StySzyński 2016). Artiklen er baseret på udtalelser, prædikener og videoer, tilgængelige via YouTube, med og af religiøse lærere og autoriteter i de arabiske lande med hovedfokus på muslimer. Jeg har derudover inddraget et par eksempler med ortodokse koptere for at illustrere, hvordan religiøse argumenter deler positioner på tværs af religioner.

Analysen bygger på i alt 150 medieuddrag med religiøse lærere, indsamlet i perioden fra marts til maj 2020. Materialet er hentet fra religiøse læreres egne websider og især fra deres YouTube-kanaler, som f.eks. den egyptiske salafi-prædikant Mohammed Hassans,⁵ samt fra tv-programuddrag uploadet på YouTube, f.eks. med den koptisk-ortodokse præst Anba Rafail fra den koptiske tv-station CTV. Som det vil fremgå, er der en overvægt af religiøse klip og programmer med egyptiske og saudiske prædikanter. Dominansen af disse på YouTube skyldes, at

5 Se <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr4Kz8-cozLWzGYa1W-ICePw> (tilgået 1. november 2020).

Egypten er det største arabiske land med en historisk dominans inden for både medieproduktion og islamisk lærdom, hvor Al-Azhar som verdens ældste islamiske universitet har spillet en helt central rolle. I Saudi-Arabien ligger til gengæld de vigtigste muslimske helligsteder, mens landets olierigdomme er en del af forklaringen på dominansen af saudisk ejede islamiske medier.

Mediematerialet analyseres med fokus på den måde, religion bruges til at argumentere for, hvordan man bør forstå og forholde sig til covid-19 og restriktioner begrundet med covid-19. På tværs af materialet identificerede jeg først de mest gennemgående temaer, som overordnet berørte:

- a. Guds rolle, herunder hvordan eller hvorvidt pandemien skal forstås som Guds værk.
- b. Hvordan muslimer skal opføre sig under en pandemi, herunder hvordan de skal praktisere de obligatoriske ritualer.
- c. Hvordan stat og myndigheder skal og må agere for at mindske konsekvenser af pandemien.

Dernæst har jeg på tværs af lande identificeret, hvordan forskellige religiøse lærde forholder sig til disse emner og herunder især, hvordan de herigennem positionerer sig i forhold til staten.

Staternes position: En sekulær logik

Ligesom resten af verden har de arabiske lande skullet finde en måde at håndtere covid-19. Følger man udviklingen i de arabiske medier i perioden fra marts til maj 2020, finder man fortolkninger og legitimeringer, der kan placeres inden for en sekulær henholdsvis religiøs argumentationsstrategi. På de forskellige arabiske landes sundhedsministeriers hjemmesider finder man introduktioner til covid-19, som ligner dem, man finder i andre lande. Der er information om virussen, om forebyggelse, om smittespredning, og der er tal på udvikling af smittetal. Gud eller religion nævnes ikke.⁶ Det er karakteristisk, at siderne er på flere sprog. I Emiraterne er informationerne således på både arabisk, engelsk, urdu, kinesisk og farsi, hvilket afspejler Emiraternes internationale arbejdsstyrke. I Marokko er sundhedsmyndighedernes side om covid-19 på både arabisk og fransk. Derudover er det generelt eksperter inden for de berørte områder, der officielt udtaler sig om sygdommen og dens kon-

6 Se f.eks. United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Health and Prevention: <https://www.mohap.gov.ae/en/AwarenessCenter/Pages/COVID19-Information-Center.aspx>, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Health: <https://www.moh.gov.sa/en/HealthAwareness/EducationalContent/PublicHealth/Pages/corona.aspx> og Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de la Santé: <https://www.sante.gov.ma/Pages/activites.aspx?activiteID=326> (alle tilgået 2. november 2020).

sekvenser for samfundet.

Religion spiller dermed ikke som udgangspunkt en rolle i de arabiske staters håndtering af covid-19. Det sekulære perspektiv er baseret på en videnskabelig, socialpolitisk og økonomisk argumentation, som også afspejler et syn på pandemien som en sundheds-, socialpolitisk og økonomisk krise. Når det religiøse perspektiv inddrages, er det i stedet en narrativ og metafysisk argumentation, der trækkes på. Det indikerer, at covid-19 for nogen ikke kun er en sundhedskrise, men også en religiøs og religio-politisk identitetskrise. Fra denne artikels perspektiv er det interessante, hvordan disse forskellige aspekter bringes sammen.

De arabiske staters prioritering har naturligvis, som i resten af verden, været at mindske smitte, dødsfald, kollaps af sundhedsvæsenet og kollaps af samfundsøkonomien. Men den har også været at sikre opbakning fra befolkninger, der aktuelt har udvist vilje til modstand og opstand. Her har religionen spillet en central rolle som et redskab til at legitimere de sekulært motiverede restriktioner, modvirke oppositionelle religiøse og politiske fortolkninger og berolige den del af befolkningen, for hvem religion spiller en afgørende rolle. Når religion også kommer til at spille en rolle, skyldes det, som allerede beskrevet, samspillet i udviklingen af ny teknologi, vækst i selvbestaltede religiøse lærde og en politisk opposition, hvoraf dele definerer sig religiøst. Det betyder, at staten mere eller mindre tvinges til at forholde sig til religion og tage religion i betragtning, når en specifik politik skal legitimeres. Når håndteringen af covid-19 derudover direkte rammer centrale religiøse ritualer og institutioner i form af forbud mod større forsamlinger samt lukninger af moskeer og kirker, kommer religiøse autoriteter på banen med enten opbakning eller modstand. Det er med til yderligere at øge trykket på staten, ligesom det tvinger staten til at forholde sig til religionens betydning i samfundet. Statens måde at håndtere dette på er at læne sig op ad de statsloyale religiøse lærde, som finder religiøse argumenter, der understøtter og legitimerer statens håndtering. Det er dog ikke alle religiøse lærde og autoriteter, der støtter denne linje, og i det følgende vil jeg identificere tre forskellige positioner blandt de religiøse lærde i forhold til religionens og statens rolle, når det kommer til covid-19.

Den første position indtages af de religiøse lærde, der typisk er ansat af staten, og hvis religiøse argumentation for håndtering af covid-19 ikke strider mod statens sekulære argumentation. Den anden position indtages af religiøse lærde, der generelt und-

går at blande politik og religion og i stedet argumenterer med afsæt i, at religionen for længst har givet svar på, hvordan en krise som covid-19 skal håndteres. Den tredje position indtages af religiøse autoriteter, der generelt er kritiske over for staten, og hvoraf nogle ser staternes håndtering af covid-19 som et angreb på religion. Disse tre positioner uddybes i det følgende.

Den statsloyale position: Religion legitimerer statens håndtering

En af de aktører, der kan ses som repræsentant for en supranational, men statsloyal, position, er Fiqh-akademiet (IIFA), der blev omtalt i introduktionen. Den udarbejdede liste med anbefalinger til håndtering af covid-19-krisen afspejler således i stort omfang de enkelte arabiske landes forsøg på at få covid-19-krisen, håndteringen heraf og islam til at hænge logisk sammen. De 24 punkter på listen fremhæver en række medicinske anbefalinger, der samtidig legitimeres som værende i overensstemmelse med islam ved under hvert punkt at henvise til et eller flere koranvers eller hadither. Det første punkt på listen er en anerkendelse af WHO's definition af covid-19, mens det andet punkt helt overordnet fastslår, at islamisk lov (sharia)⁷ giver redskaber til blandt andet at overkomme modgang. De resterende punkter dækker følgende fem overordnede tematikker:

For det første angives, hvordan islam allerede har givet svarene på, hvordan muslimer bør agere i situationer som under en pandemi. De bør gøre brug af tilgængelige midler:

Muslims must protect themselves as much as possible against diseases. Prophet Muhammad said, "O servants of Allah! Use remedies. For indeed Allah did not make a disease, but He made a cure for it except for one disease, old age." (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Muslim & *Musnad Imam Ahmed*)

Senere understreges det, hvordan personlig hygiejne som et helt centralt element i islam virker smitteforebyggende, ligesom isolation af smittede allerede er foreskrevet i hadith, og er noget, den individuelle muslim har ansvar for.

For det andet angives, hvordan muslimer skal forholde sig til obligatoriske og andre religiøse ritualer, som indebærer, at mennesker mødes i *fællesskab*. Med henvisning til læger og eksperter bekræftes, at forsamlinger kan føre til smittespredning,

⁷ Jeg forholder mig i denne artikel ikke til de forskellige forståelser og praktiseringer af sharia i muslimske lande. Om den politiske brug af sharia efter Det Arabiske Forår, se Tibi (2013).

hvilket betyder, at man må tage sine forholdsregler i forhold til at forsamles. Dette underbygges med et kort korancitat "I, der tror! Vær på vagt!" (Wulff 2006, sura 4, aya 71). Hvordan ritualerne skal overholdes med sådanne forbehold in mente fremgår af følgende punkter:

Kaldet til bøn skal opretholdes, men troende skal bede i deres hjem.

I stedet for *jumu'ah*-bønnen (fredagsbønnen), som ikke må bedes hjemme, kan den troende bede *dhuhr* (middagsbøn).

Relevante autoriteter må afholde fredagsbøn i moskeerne, så længe de lever op til medicinske og sharia-begrundede hygiejneregler. Sådanne fredagsbønner kan transmitteres via tv, radio og internet til offentligheden. Dette argument er baseret på hadith, hvori profeten Muhammad citeres for at have sagt, at muslimer under storm, stærk regn og lignende situationer bør bede i deres hjem (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, 666, 668; *Muslim*, 697, 699).

Hvad angår den obligatoriske faste, er det ikke tilladt at droppe denne med henvisning til corona, så længe man ikke er syg af corona eller andre livstruende sygdomme.

I forbindelse med dødsfald gælder de samme regler som normalt. Hvis den døde er blevet syg af en epidemi, er det tilladt at vaske den afdøde med redskaber, der muliggør fysisk afstand, så længe man overholder både de religiøse samt sundheds- og miljøkrav.

I forbindelse med kondolencer skal man for at undgå smittespredning undlade personligt fremmøde og i stedet gøre brug af et af de mange eksisterende kommunikationsmidler.

I forbindelse med bryllupper skal *gældende regler* overholdes, mens kravet om vidner er uomgængeligt. Selve bryllupsfesten bør afholdes med det mindst mulige antal af brudeparrets nærmeste slægtninge og med overholdelse af de sundhedsfaglige retningslinjer.

For det tredje understreger en række af punkterne statens og regeringens rolle. Som det fremgår af det indledende citat til denne artikel, har staten ret til at pålægge befolkningen restriktioner, hvis det tjener almenvellets interesser. Ligeledes pålægges det staten og regeringen, med henvisning til islams opfordring til godgørelse, at hjælpe dem, der har mistet deres

levebrød på grund af pandemien. Lande og hjælpeorganisationer, der har overskydende medicinsk udstyr, bør donere denne til andre lande og samfund. Regeringer må overvåge udvikling af prisniveau, så der ikke opstår monopollignende forhold og sikre sig imod prismanipulation eller hamstring med salg for øje. Privatpersoner bør også hjælpe andre ramte. Dette begrundes med flere koran- og hadith-citater, f.eks. "Hvem vil give Gud et smukt lån, så Han kan gøre det mange gange større for ham?" (Wulff 2006, sura 2, aya 245).

For det fjerde udpeges andre aktører med særlige forpligtelser. Således skal læger og forskere med hensyntagen til gældende regler arbejde på at udvikle medikamenter og vaccine mod coronavirussen. Medier, og muslimer i al almindelighed, skal undgå at sprede rygter samt utroværdige informationer. Med et citat fra Koranen angives: "så siger han ikke et ord, uden at en vogter står hos ham" (Wulff 2006, sura 50, aya 18).

Det femte og sidste aspekt er betydningen af Guds almagt. De troende opfordres til at bede og søge Guds beskyttelser og stole på Guds evne til at helbrede dem, der er ramt af corona. Det er Gud, der helbreder og hersker over universet: "A Muslim does not encounter fatigue, tiredness, concern, sorrow, injury or grief, or even a thorn which pricks him without Allah expiating his errors for him by that" (*Hadith Sahih al-Bukhari* og *Muslim*). Ifølge dette argument er der noget godt at finde i alt, hvad den troende udsættes for og derfor bør takke Gud for.

Man kan undre sig over, at hajj⁸ og 'umra⁹ ikke indgår i de 24 punkter. Det skyldes tidspunktet for IIFAs liste, hvor hajj og 'umra stadig lå noget ude i fremtiden. Til gengæld har IIFA med ovennævnte udlægning givet staterne retten til at indføre nødvendige restriktioner. Derfor kunne Saudi-Arabien tilbage i juni med religiøs legitimitet begrænse antallet af pilgrimme til 10.000 og ikke de sædvanligvis to millioner besøgende. Desuden var der kun adgang for troende, som befandt sig inden for Saudi-Arabiens grænser (Masud 2020). Ifølge det saudiske indenrigsministeries webside er 'umra siden 4. oktober 2020 gradvist blevet genoptaget med 6.000 daglige besøgende, hvor hver person tildeles tre timer til at gennemføre ritualerne.¹⁰

8 Hajj er det arabiske ord for pilgrimsfærd til Mekka. Denne foretages mellem den 8. og den 12. dag i den tolvte måned i den islamiske kalender (dhul hijjah) (Hoffmann 2008a).

9 'Umra er rituelt enklere end hajj og behøver ikke at foregå på et bestemt tidspunkt på året (Hoffmann 2008b).

10 <https://www.my.gov.sa/wps/portal/snp/pages/news/newsDetails/CONT-news-041020201> (tilgået 25. november 2020).

Wali al-amrs rolle

Listens kobling af konkret håndtering af covid-19 med islam bliver på den ene side en argumentation for, at der ikke er nogen modsætning mellem islam og en håndtering af virussen, der griber ind i den religiøse praksis. På den anden side uddelegerer listen også ansvar til forskellige aktører, og ikke mindst tildeler den staten ret til at handle.

Netop statens ret til at gribe ind er et spørgsmål, som andre religiøse lærde tager op. Den nuværende egyptiske stor-sheikh af Al-Azhar Universitet og stor-imam af Al-Azhar moske og tidligere leder af Al-Azhar Universitet, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, uploadede således den 5. april 2020 en video på YouTube, hvor han opfordrede egyptere til at hjælpe hinanden og adlyde statens regler vedrørende corona-virussen. Han sagde blandt andet:

Alle borgere bør nøje overholde alle de regler, der udstedes af de relevante ministerier, herunder først og fremmest Ministeriet for Sundhed, samt følge statens og de offentlige institutioners instruktioner.

El-Tayeb henviser til det øverste råd ved Al-Azhar, der angiver, at folk modsiger sharia og de etablerede retsregler, når de ikke overholder de af staten udstukne regler i forbindelse med covid-19. Sharia befaler ikke, at folk skal mødes for at bede eller søge tilgivelse, når en epidemi rammer.¹¹

Et udbredt argument er, at man skal adlyde *wali al-amr*. Ifølge Brown refererer begrebet wali al-amr til "værge", "autoritet" eller "betroet", dvs. en person eller enhed, der er betroet at handle på vegne af en anden parts interesse. Wali al-amr kan således være den person eller institution, der er ansvarlig for det politiske samfund. Det kan være præsidenten, men det kan også være det officielle sæt af embedsmænd eller statsinstitutioner, der er betroet at behandle et spørgsmål på vegne af samfundet (Brown 2020, 4). Wali al-amr er nævnt i Koranen: "I som tror! Adlyd Gud! Adlyd Udsendingen og dem blandt jer, der har myndighed!" (Wulff 2006, sura 4, aya 59).

At henvise til wali al-amr er samtidig et politisk greb, som den enkelte religiøse autoritet synes at gøre strategisk brug af. Det er således værd at bemærke, at Al-Tayeb ikke per automatik støtter præsidenten i kraft af hans position som wali al-amr. For det første omtaler han ikke direkte den nuværende egyptiske præsident Sisi som wali al-amr. Dette kan skyldes

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBB46z4dCiY> (tilgået 9/11/2020).

hans uenighed og konflikt med Sisi omkring dennes udtalelser om nødvendigheden af en “religiøs revolution” og fornyelse af den “islamiske diskurs”.¹² Sisi har af samme grund forsøgt at fjerne ham, uden at det endnu er lykkedes. For det andet henviste Al-Tayeb til den tidligere egyptiske præsident Morsi, der var medlem af Det Muslimske Broderskab, som wali al-amr. Det skete, da han støttede fjernelsen af Morsi i 2013, fordi denne ikke bøjede sig for et tidligt præsidentvalg. Avisen *Al-Watan* skrev i juni 2013, at al-Tayeb til egyptisk tv havde udtalt, at “fredelig modstand mod en legal wali al-amr er halal (religiøst tilladt) og intet har at gøre med tro eller vantrø” (Hashim 2013). For det tredje modstrider dette hans tidligere holdning under præsident Mubarak, da Al-Tayeb var medlem af politikudvalget i Mubaraks Nationaldemokratiske Parti. Under demonstrationerne imod Mubarak i 2011 udtalte Al-Tayeb sig på egyptisk tv: “Disse demonstrationer er imod islams regler, fordi de skaber kaos. De er imod staten, det politiske system og borgerne.”¹³ Med andre ord så synes Al-Tayeb forståelse af wali al-amr at ændre sig i takt med hans politiske ståsted. Under Mubarak legitimerede han præsidentens rolle som wali al-amr. Under Morsi gjorde han det legitimt at udfordre hans rolle som wali al-amr, mens han under Sisi snarere fremhæver sundhedsmyndighederne end Sisi som wali al-amr, da det handler om landets problem med covid-19.

En anden, der har peget på betydningen af wali al-amr, er den unge saudiske wahhabi-prædikant Abdulaah Al-Salmi. Han understregede den 13. marts 2020, at man bør følge statens retningslinjer.¹⁴ Med henvisning til profetens anbefaling om at bede hjemme, hvis der var storm eller stærk regn, argumenterede han i et tv-program for, at hvis staten siger, det handler om at bede hjemme, skal man gøre det. Al-Salmi roste den saudiske konge og kronprins flere gange i løbet af 5 minutter, samtidig med at han understregede deres rolle som wali al-amr.

Det er typisk for de religiøse lærde, der hører under denne kategori, at de i stedet for at fokusere på selve problemstillingen bruger denne som et springbræt til at tale om og rose statslederen og regeringen – i dette tilfælde for deres håndtering af situationen. Den syriske prædikant og tidligere professor ved Damaskus Universitet, Mohammed Rateb Al-Nabulsi,¹⁵ brugte en lignende argumentation, da han flere gange i et interview i programmet “Sawt al-Mamlaka” på den jordanske tv-kanal *Al-Mamlaka* understregede, at man skal følge Gud, profeten og

12 <https://themuslim500.com/profiles/ahmad-muhammad-al-tayyeb/> (tilgået 9. december 2020).

13 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWLkZl1V778> og <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxNNi1IEUyU> (begge tilgået 20. november 2020).

14 I programmet Yastfoonak d. 13. marts 2020, på den saudiske kanal *Alresalah TV*. Programmet er uploadet på Alresalah TV's egen YouTube-kanal.

15 Efter den syriske revolution i 2011 bosatte Al-Nabulsi sig i Jordan. Interviewet er uploadet på YouTube 07/04-2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06be44YoiTo> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06be44YoiTo> (tilgået 16. november 2020).

wali al-amr. Det gjorde han med henvisning til en aya i Koranen (sura 4, aya 59). Samtidig nævnte han flere gange, at flertallets interesser er vigtigere end individets interesse. Derfor skal man ikke gå ud, når der er smitterisiko. Man skal følge de regler, som wali al-amr udstikker, og her henviste han altså til statslederen. Her kan man dog stille det kritiske spørgsmål om, hvilken wali al-amr han henviser til. Er det den syriske præsident, som han protesterede imod, eller den jordanske konge, som gav ham husly i Jordan?

Et eksempel på, hvordan andre end muslimske religiøse lærere udtaler sig og bakker op om statens linje, findes inden for den koptisk-ortodokse kirke. Pave Tawadros II blev således interviewet i programmet "Specielt møde" på den egyptiske tv-kanal *Extra News* den 25. juli, hvor han gav fuld opbakning og ros til statens håndtering, herunder lukning af forsamlingssteder, som han valgte at kalde det i interviewet. Han mente, at præsidenten, den politiske ledelse, politiet, hæren og alle egyptere arbejder sammen frem mod klare mål, der handler om bevarelse af nationen.¹⁶ Pavens udtalelser fortsætter således traditionen for, at kirkens ledelse bakker op om landets politiske leder, ligesom den gjorde under det egyptiske forår i 2011, blandt andet med henvisning til, at koptere og muslimer er "en nation" (watan waahid) (Guirguis 2012; Hager 2018, 296).

Guds rolle

Et andet gennemgående spørgsmål handler om, hvordan vi skal forstå Guds rolle i pandemien. Er den udtryk for Guds straf? De statsloyale prædikanter afviser generelt, at dette er tilfældet. Det gælder f.eks. de to egyptere Khaled al-Gindi og Mabrouk 'Attia, der begge er meget loyale over for den egyptiske stat. Al-Gindi argumenterer i sit program *La 'Alahum Yafqahun* (I håb om, at de forstår) for, at covid-19 ikke er Guds straf. Han siger, at hvis Gud var vred på menneskene, kunne han udslette dem helt. Han henviser til Koranen: "Hvis Han vil, lader Han jer forsvinde og frembringer en ny skabelse. Det er ikke svært for Gud." (Wulff 2006, sura 35, aya 16 & 17). Al-Gindi argumenterer videre, "at der sikkert er nogen, der vil sige, at Gud sendte epidemien for at udslette os". Han svarer på den ene side på denne påstand med, "at muslimer ikke bør tale dårligt om en katastrofe som en epidemi, for det er det samme som at tale dårligt om skaberen".

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bb6Roy3buo> (tilgået 9. november 2020).

På den anden side svarer han, "at hvis det viser sig at være rigtigt, hvad vil du miste ved at vælge at være optimist? Hvis i morgen bliver en god dag, så takker jeg Gud for, at jeg ikke havde det dårligt under krisen". Al-Gindi peger således på to måder at reagere på. Den ene ser covid-19 som en straf, hvilket ifølge Al-Gindi skaber bekymringer, der igen skaber yderligere sygdomme. Resultatet er, at troen bliver usikker. Den anden måde at reagere på er at stole på Gud og undgå at være bange. "Fejlen ligger hos dem, der er bange."¹⁷

En anden egyptisk prædikant, Mabrouk 'Attia, er fast gæst på den saudiske tv-kanal *MBC Masr* og berørte i en episode af programmet *Yahduth fi Masr* (Det sker i Egypten) ligeledes spørgsmålet om Guds rolle i pandemien. Han spørger, hvorvidt Gud er vred på verden og viser sin vrede gennem denne pandemi. Ligesom al-Gindi afviser han dette med argumentationen, at Guds vrede ifølge Koranen vil føre til ødelæggelse af hele verden. Så længe der er mindst et menneske tilbage på denne jord, er Gud ikke vred. Han taler også om misbrug af begrebet *al-qada' wa al-qadar* (forudbestemmelse). Ifølge ham er 99 procent af de begivenheder, hvor folk taler om *al-qada' wa al-qadar*, et resultat af folks egne handlinger frem for Guds indblanding. Han opfordrer muslimer til at angre og at bede Gud om tilgivelse i stedet for at antage, at pandemien er resultatet af Guds vrede.¹⁸

En anden variant af diskussionen om Guds rolle kommer fra den tidligere nævnte syriske prædikant, Al-Nabulsi. Han udtaler, at mennesket ikke bør have det dårligt, når de bliver udsat for noget, som de tror er dårligt. Det kan alligevel ende med noget godt. Det er Gud, der ved, hvad der er godt og dårligt for dem. Han understreger, at alt, hvad der er sket på jorden siden Adam, er endt med at være noget godt for menneskeheden.¹⁹

Disse statsloyale prædikanter bakker altså op om statsledernes ret til at definere nødvendige restriktioner. Derfor har de heller ingen indvendinger imod f.eks. lukning af moskeerne. Og som det fremgår af IIFAs liste, har disse islamiske retslærde ingen problemer med at finde grundlag i Koranen og hadith for det konkrete indhold af sådanne restriktioner. De statsloyale prædikanter sætter ikke spørgsmål ved Guds almagt, men frem for at udlægge pandemien som Guds straf, er deres budskab mere positivt. Pandemien er muligvis en prøvelse, men den vil i sidste ende bringe noget godt med sig.

17 Den 29. marts 2020. Programmet, La 'Alahum Yafqahun (I håb om, at de forstår), titel er hentet fra Koranen. Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liEOHGFoQ54> (tilgået 1. november 2020).

18 Se https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_MwkexfqRE (tilgået 20. oktober 2020).

19 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06be44YoiTo> (tilgået 29. januar 2021).

Den hengivne position: Religion frem for staten giver svar på covid-19

En anden position, der tegner sig, når man lytter til de religiøse lærdes bud på en forståelse og håndtering af covid-19, er en position, der forsøger at undgå at blande religion og politik ved at finde svar alene i religionen. Uden direkte at lægge afstand til staten fremhæves religionen som svaret på alle de spørgsmål, som covid-19 rejser, og positionen afviser dermed indirekte en sekulær dagsorden. Det er karakteristisk, at de religiøse lærde med denne position i et vist omfang trækker på samme uddrag fra Koranen og hadith som de statsloyale, men deres konklusion er en anden.

Der synes at være tre hovedargumenter, der gør sig gældende inden for denne position, og som på hver deres måde implicit afviser staternes sekulære dagsorden. Det første er, at islam for længst har givet samme svar på udfordringer med pandemi, som videnskaben nu kommer med. Det andet er, at ikke kun staten, men også religionen (eller religiøse autoriteter) bør inddrages i beslutninger. Det tredje er, at hvis man er troende, er der ingen grund til bekymring. I det følgende vil jeg uddybe og eksemplificere disse tre argumenter.

Det første argument for at se bort fra den sekulære dagsorden lyder, at islam allerede er kommet frem til det, som videnskaben først nu finder ud af, og at det, at videnskaben finder ud af det nu, er et bevis på, at islam er en sand religion, og at Gud på et tidligt tidspunkt fortalte sit sendebud sandheden. Således, lyder argumentet, er covid-19 ikke den første epidemi, som de arabiske lande har stået overfor. Læser man den arabiske islamske historie, er der flere videnskabsmænd, som har forsøgt at finde en forklaring på, undersøgt og skrevet om epidemier (Al-Khatib 2020). Det gjaldt også de religiøse lærde, som undersøgte, hvad der stod herom i de hellige bøger, og hvordan profeterne, f.eks. Jesus, hans disciple, helgener eller profeten Muhammed og hans fæller forholdt sig til katastrofer og epidemier.

Et af de gentagne citater, som de lærde, der indtager denne position, bringer, er af profeten Muhammed, der angiveligt sagde: "Hvis du hører om et pestudbrud i et land, skal du ikke gå ind i det; men hvis pesten bryder ud et sted, mens du er der, skal du ikke forlade stedet."²⁰ Citatet bruges til at vise, hvordan profeten Muhammed var bevidst om, hvordan man skulle forsøge

20 Bukhari book, Volume 7, Book 71, Number 624, PurpleButterfly

at stoppe spredningen af en epidemi til andre områder. Et andet udsagn bruges ligeledes flittigt af islamiske lærde i medierne, hvor de med henvisning til profeten udtaler, at mennesker med smitsomme sygdomme ikke skal blande sig med andre raske mennesker. I den forbindelse fremhæves det, at profeten Muhammed var den første i menneskehedens historie, der indførte karantæne. En tredje yndet eksemplificering fra islams historie er henvisningen til Umar Ibn al-Khattab, som var den anden muslimske kalif efter profeten, og som måtte håndtere en epidemi, der havde sit udspring i en lille palæstinensisk by, 'Amwas, i ca. 638. Epidemien fik samme navn som byen. 'Amwas spredte sig til resten af Levanten og dræbte ifølge historiebøgerne mellem 25.000 og 30.000, heriblandt mange af profeten Muhammeds fæller. Umar italesættes som eksemplet på, at islam meget tidligt udstak retningslinjer for en klog håndtering af en epidemi (Al-Khatib 2020).

Det andet argument for at afvise den sekulære dagsorden sætter især fokus på statens lukninger af moskeer, som anses for at være ubegrundede og til tider ulogiske. Argumentet lyder, at der ingen grund er til at lukke alle moskeer og kirker, når offentlige transportmidler stadig er åbne, hvor folk er endnu mere fysisk tætte. Det gælder bare om at holde afstand og være fornuftig.

En af de prædikanter, der udtaler sig herom, er den egyptiske salafi-prædikant Sheikh al-'Adawi. Han tilhører det egyptiske politiske salafi-parti Hizb al-Nour, som accepteres af regimet. Alligevel sætter han spørgsmålstegn ved statens håndtering, dog uden eksplicit at henvise til staten. Efter hans mening er det kun moskeer i områder, der er berørt af smitte, der skal lukkes, mens et generelt krav om lukning og forbud mod fredagsbøn vil stoppe livet. Her anvender han henvisningen til Umar Ibn al-Khattab til at argumentere for, at eftersom epidemien ikke dengang stoppede hverdagen og heller ikke stoppede folk i at gå til bøn i moskeerne, burde corona heller ikke gøre det i dag. Selv om den, der er syg, og derfor risikerer at sprede virussen til andre, skal bede derhjemme, behøver hele samfundet ikke at lukke, siger al-'Adawi.²¹

På den saudiske islamiske tv-station *al-Resalah TV* kommenterede Sheikh Souleymane Abd Allah al-Majed også på et tidligt tidspunkt (16. marts 2020) spørgsmålet om bøn i moskeerne. Al-Majed er en kendt salafi-prædikant fra Saudi-Arabien, der tidligere har arbejdet som dommer i sharia-retten samt været medlem af al-shura-komiteen i otte år. Han er nærmest fast

gæst i programmet *Yastaftunak* ("Spørg om fatwa") og programmet *al-Jawab al-Kafi* ("Det fuldendte svar") på al-Resalah. Han udtalte, at hvis kravene om desinfektion var opfyldt i moskeerne, var der ingen undskyldninger for ikke at deltage i fredagsbønnen. Han kom altså i dette tilfælde til at stå i modsætning til, hvad det saudiske politiske organ havde besluttet. En position han næppe ville have kunnet indtage, hvis han stadigvæk havde været medlem af al-shura-komiteen.²²

Den 15. marts uploadede den algeriske statskanel *Ennahar TV* et interview med den algeriske religiøse lærde Abd al-Karim Ghol fra programmet "120 Minutters Nyheder" på YouTube. Interviewet handlede om regeringens beslutning om at lukke moskeerne. Hvor Ghol ikke umiddelbart er uenig med regeringen i beslutningen, fremgår det, at enigheden heri først og fremmest er begrundet i islam. Han understreger således også, at islam allerede har udstukket de nødvendige forholdsregler. Ifølge islamisk sygdomsforebyggelse skal en syg person slet ikke, heller ikke ved "en normal influenza", gå i moskeen. "Når den islamiske fortolkning siger, at du ikke skal genere folk med din løg- og hvidløgsånde, hvordan er det så ikke med at forårsage deres død?", spørger han retorisk. Han fortsætter med at understrege, at gruppens interesse i islam står over individets interesse, og corona ikke er den første epidemi, som muslimske lande har skullet håndtere. I forhold til statens beslutning er Ghol mere subtil end de statsloyale religiøse autoriteter. Regeringens beslutning er først og fremmest legitim, fordi den er i overensstemmelse med islam. I den forbindelse nuancerer han begrebet wali al-amr, idet han refererer til, at Gud siger: "adlyd Allah, profeten og wali al-amr", hvor wali al-amr ifølge ham er sultanen (den politiske leder) og de religiøse ledere.

Hvis landets religiøse ledere er enige om noget, skal hele folket adlyde, men hvis de religiøse ledere ikke i fællesskab kan komme frem til en konklusion, er det statens leder, der afgør, hvad der er bedst at gøre.

Ghol er her et eksempel på en religiøs lærd, der i modsætning til de statsloyale lærde ikke kun refererer til den ene første sætning af ayaen: "I som tror! Adlyd Gud! Adlyd Udsendingen og dem blandt jer, der har myndighed!", men tilføjer resten af ayaen: "Hvis I så strides om noget, så fremlæg det for Gud og Udsendingen, hvis I da tror på Gud og den yderste dag! Dette er bedre og giver det smukkeste udfald." (Wulff 2006, sura 4, aya

21 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-aHhmB6LXI> (tilgået 23. oktober 2020).

22 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFnmF1UAX6E> (tilgået 14. april 2021).

59). Det bliver en fortolkning af wali al-amr, hvor betegnelsen henviser til den ansvarlige institution i den specifikke sag. Det kan f.eks. være sundhedsvæsenet, når det drejer sig om en sygdom, og en religiøs leder, når der er tale om en religiøs sag. Man kan hermed sige, at den position, som Ghol er repræsentant for, forsøger at trække spørgsmålet om håndtering af covid-19, og især håndteringen inden for rammerne af religiøs praksis, i retning af at være en religiøs sag og ikke en sekulær.

Det tredje og sidste argument for at afvise den sekulære dagsorden omhandler Guds rolle og den troendes eksistentielle tilgang til covid-19. Det udbredte budskab er her, at hvis man er troende, behøver man ikke bekymre sig om covid-19. Hvor de statsloyale prædikanter afviser, at pandemien skal ses som Guds straf, er prædikanterne under denne position mindre entydige.

Abu Ishaq al-Heweny, en egyptisk salafi-prædikant, der i 2014 blev citeret for at opfordre religiøse lærde til at undlade en sammenblanding af religion og politik (Hijazi 2014), gav den 11. marts 2020 en lektion på sin YouTube-kanal om, hvornår man kan tale om, at en skade gør godt. Med henvisning til covid-19 mente han, at mennesker er begrænset i at forstå Guds visdom. Gud lader både den ikketroende og den troende lide. Den ikketroendes lidelser er også til gavn for den troende. Disse gør det muligt for den troende at erkende sin begrænsning, tænke på det gode og lade være med at begå synder. Lidelsen er også godt for den troende, som den rammer. Den renser ham for hans synder.²³

En lignende argumentation kommer fra en koptisk præst, Daoud Lamèi, som prædikede om covid-19 den 11. marts 2020. Denne prædiken blev vist godt en halv million gange på YouTube. Ligesom de muslimske lærde henviser han til de hellige tekster, i dette tilfælde til, hvordan epidemier også er kendt fra Biblen. I modsætning til de muslimske lærde understreger han det særlige narrativ, som følger af den religiøse tilgang: "Vi, Guds børn, taler ikke om disse spørgsmål, ligesom andre folk gør. Vi har vores eget sprog, vores logik og vores spirituelle tankegang." Det er ifølge Lamèi helt klart, at epidemien er en af himlens forbandelser. Men med henvisning til 5. Mosebog (22: 28) synes pesten dog at ramme hedninge og afgudsdyrkere. Løsningen er bøn, som kan stoppe epidemien i hele verden. Og med henvisning til både Lukas (21: 9) og Matthæus Evangeliet (24: 6,7) beroliger han med, at katastrofer, krig eller oprør ikke er et tegn på verdens ende. Derfor er der ingen grund til at frygte nyhederne om corona.

23 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTrEnV6cZ2s&t=122s> (tilgået 14. april 2021).

Det vigtigste er at frygte Gud; det vigtigste er dyrkelsen af det spirituelle. Husk, man kan dø uden en epidemi og uden en virus. Derfor skal man ikke blive forvirret eller skrækslagen over verdensnyheder om corona-virussen. Er du parat eller ikke parat til at møde din herre Jesus?²⁴

En anden koptisk præst, Al-Anba Rafa'il, blev den 4. maj 2020 interviewet på den egyptiske kristne tv-kanal CTV. Her svarede han på spørgsmålet om, hvorvidt det er smittefarligt at drikke fra den samme ske, når man modtager nadveren i kirken. Ifølge ham kurerer nadveren alle sygdomme i menneskets kerne, krop og sjæl. At tænke på nadveren er noget andet end at tænke på videnskaben.

Vi har tidligere oplevet epidemier som f.eks. pest, hvor der ikke var sundhedsfaciliteter og videnskab som nu. Vi har aldrig hørt, at nogen er døde, fordi de tog imod nadveren. Derfor skal vi ikke tvivle på nadveren. Set fra den troendes perspektiv, smitter nadveren os ikke med sygdom. Til dem, der tror mere på videnskaben, kan jeg pege på, at der i vinen er alkohol. Den dræber virusser og mikrober. Man skal altså ikke frygte for smitte. Der er andre ting, der er meget mere farligt end nadveren, og som vi skal holde op med. Det gælder f.eks. at give hinanden knus og kys, når vi mødes.²⁵

Allerede den 23. marts 2020 havde Anba Rafa'il understreget, at lukning af kirkerne ikke skyldtes nadveren, men trængslen i kirken pga. mange menneskers tilstedeværelse.

Også inden for shiaislam finder man eksempler på, at det religiøse sprog udkonkurrerer det sekulære og videnskabelige, når håndteringen af covid-19 skal defineres. Således kunne man den 18. marts 2020 høre en prædiken af den shiitiske prædikant Haider al-Bayaati fra Irak.²⁶ Han åbnede med at henvise til Ba'ath-partiet, som styrede landet i mere end 35 år: "Ba'ath kunne ikke forhindre os i pilgrimsfærd. Ved Gud, corona vil ikke holde os tilbage. Profetens husstand er kuren." Den pilgrimsfærd, han her henviser til, er besøgene ved de hellige steder i Najaf og Karbala i Irak, hvor shiitiske martyrer ligger begravet. Han fortsatte med at fremhæve, hvordan de specifikke helligsteder og martyrer både beskytter imod og helbreder sygdom: "Dem, der har Imam Ali²⁷, har ikke brug for et hospital. Kuren imod corona er helligdommen. Den, som kysser helligdommen, vil blive helbredt," lyder argumentet. Han henviser her til den praksis,

24 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHKP0jDCIMU&t=182s> (tilgået 22. oktober 2020).

25 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-65ocWsO3Fo> (tilgået 7. november 2020).

26 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrXmavWurSU> (tilgået den 14. april 2021).

27 Shia-islams første imam og profetens Muhammeds svigersøn.

hvor pilgrimme kysser helgenskrinet i den helligdom, de besøger. I løbet af talen nævner han en række shia-helgener, som man på denne måde godt kan besøge uden risiko for corona: Al-Khadim, Al-Murtada, Abu-Fadel og Hussein.²⁸ Med andre ord synes argumentet at være, når ikke engang det stærke og undertrykkende Ba'ath parti kunne stoppe shiitter med at dyrke deres religion, så kan corona-virussen heller ikke.

I den lidt mere kuriøse afdeling finder man Mahmoud al-Hifnawy al-Ansary. Al-Ansary er en kendt salafi-prædikant i Alexandria, som af moderate muslimske lærde kritiseres for sin til tider virkelighedsfjerne islamfortolkning. Hans prædiken med titlen "Takker corona" kunne ses fra den 24. marts på hans YouTube-kanal. Her takker han corona, fordi

[Corona] er med til at lukke værtshuse, cafeer, bordeller og biografer, og alle de steder, hvor man begår synder. Corona får familien til at samles igen. Corona får mennesker til at opføre sig renligt og dannet, når de hoster, og til ikke at blande sig med de syge. Corona har gjort alle lige, idet alle går med mundbind.²⁹

Holdningen til covid-19 inden for denne position er, at religionen har svarene, og hengiver man sig til sin tro, er der ingen grund til at frygte corona. Det er ikke mindst salafi-prædikanter, i et forsøg på at forholde sig politisk neutralt, der taler ind i denne forståelse med henvisning til den islamiske tradition. Som vist, finder man dog en lignende religiøs argumentation blandt både koptere og shia-muslimere, der ligeledes ikke direkte kritiserer det politiske styre.

Den statsoppositionelle position: Staternes covid-19-håndtering ødelægger islam

En sidste dominerende tendens er de religiøse lærde, der er kritiske og mistænksomme over for staten og statens motiver for håndteringen af covid-19. På trods af forskellige perspektiver deler denne gruppe en opfattelse af, at staten har en skjult dagsorden bag deres måde at takle covid-19 på. De religiøse lærde i denne gruppe adopterer således en konspiratorisk argumentation.

Palæstinenserer Mahmoud al-Hasanat udtrykte i sin fretdagsprædiken d. 13. marts 2020 kritik over for de arabiske lan-

28 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrXmavWurSU> (tilgået den 3. marts 2021). Se desuden Takim (2004) for betydninger af helgenbesøg i shia-islam.

29 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LArvAOarq14&t=67s> (tilgået den 17. oktober 2020).

des håndtering af corona-krisen. Han afviser ikke eksistensen af epidemien og fremhæver ligesom mange andre prædikanter på tværs af de tre positioner, at man skal følge profeten Muhammeds og hans fællers lære. Men han kritiserer de arabiske stater for deres langsommelig indgriben over for covid-19. Han siger, at selv om WHO har erklæret corona-virussen som en pandemi, er der stadig nogle arabiske lande, der slet ikke er begyndt at indføre sundhedsmæssige foranstaltninger, f.eks. i lufthavne, skoler, på universiteter eller i forhold til forsamlingssteder. På trods af mange dødsfald i de arabiske lande har nogle sundhedsministre blot ignoreret disse, fordi de er ligeglade med befolkningens liv. Andre arabiske stater har i stedet bedt befolkningen om at slappe af, fordi virussen ikke eksisterer i deres land. Og de statsledere, som valgte frivillig karantæne, var i virkeligheden blot interesserede i at sikre sig selv, skal man tro Al-Hasanat. Ikke blot er staterne ifølge Al-Hasanat ligeglade med befolkningen, de lyver også, og de sørger for at sikre sig selv.³⁰

Ét argument er således, at de arabiske stater ikke interesserer sig for deres befolkninger. Et andet argument er, at den sekulære arabiske stat ikke bare er ligeglad, men ønsker at begrænse eller ødelægge islam i ledtog med hele verden og bruger covid-19 som dække herfor.

Et prototypisk eksempel på denne konspiratoriske tilgang er Abdullah Nahari, som er en marokkansk islamisk prædikant. Han er kendt under betegnelsen Sheikh Kishk al-Maghribi ("Den marokkanske Kishk"), hvilket er en henvisning til den afdøde egyptiske prædikant Sheikh Abdel Hamid Kishk. Kishk var kendt for sin satire, sine populære prædikener og for sin åbenlyse kritik af staten og sekulære strømninger som f.eks. musik og begrænsninger af polygami, ligesom han åbent kritiserede uretfærdighed og undertrykkelse i de muslimske lande (Esposito 2009). Nahari er også berømt for sine agiterende prædikener hver fredag, for sin kritik af regimets politiske reformer og for åbenlyst i sine prædikener at fortælle, hvor mange mennesker der er blevet kidnappet og fængslet uden lovhjemmel.

I en tale uploadet på YouTube d. 4. februar 2020³¹ sætter Nahari corona-virussen ind i en geopolitisk dagsorden, hvor Kina truer Vesten, især USA, økonomisk og har aflyttet amerikanerne via Huawei-mobiltelefoner, og hvor russerne har påvirket det amerikanske præsidentvalg i 2016. Han mener, at Vesten står bag skabelsen af virussen, ligesom Vesten tidligere i historien har stået bag det, der var værre. De vestlige medicinalvirksom-

30 Se https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiW_Zvmd7cg (tilgået 13. marts 2021).

31 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5aqiJ3oYOo> (tilgået 9. november 2020).

heder vil tjene milliarder på vacciner og medicin. Samtidig mener han, at kinesere er forbryderiske ved at have dræbt og interneret en million uighur-muslimer i torturlejre i Kina. Og nu har Vesten gjort det samme mod Kina. De vestlige lande har stoppet all flytrafik til og fra Kina. Ifølge Nahari vil det resultere i et økonomisk tab for Kina svarende til en 20 år lang krig. Han fortsætter med at sige, at Gud lader de uretfærdige slå de andre uretfærdige med brug af et koranvers: "Således gør Vi nogle af dem, der handler uret, til venner med andre på grund af det, de bedrev." (Wulff 2006, sura 6, aya 129). De uretfærdige er her henholdsvis Vesten og Kina.

Senere forklarer Nahari, hvordan det store fokus på corona er en måde at få alles opmærksomhed væk fra andre store politiske sager. Det gælder f.eks. den amerikanske århundredepan for overgivelse af Palæstina til Israel. Et andet eksempel er Den Muslimske Verdensligas første fællesbøn nogensinde for jøder på tværs af sunni og shia. Nahari sidestiller dette retorisk med, at ligaen samtidig ignorerer, "at vores børn og søstre bliver dræbt og moskeerne revet ned i Idlib i Syrien". Et tredje eksempel er russernes, amerikanernes og shia-islams støtte til general Hafter i Libyen, ifølge Nahari med det formål at udslette islam i Libyen. Et fjerde eksempel, Nahari giver, er den egyptiske præsident Sisis angivelige nedrivning af moskeer i Egypten og den samtidige bygning af en ny kirke hver måned. Ifølge Nahari dræber Sisi muslimer og overgiver arabisk jord til zionister. Pointen for Nahari er, at corona er magthavernes måde at få muslimer til at tænke på noget andet end disse katastrofer.³²

Sådanne konspirationsfortællinger skriver sig ind i veletablerede konspirationer i de arabiske lande om kolonisering, imperialisme, zionisme og Vestens forsøg på at ødelægge den muslimske verden (Gray 2010). Det er derfor heller ikke overraskende, at samme type argumentation blev brugt af lignende prædikanter i deres "revolutionære khutbaer" i tidsrummet umiddelbart efter israelske angreb på henholdsvis Libanon i 2006 og Gaza i 2014 (Galal 2016, 95). Heri blev de arabiske stater også anklaget for ligegyldighed og manglende loyalitet over for den muslimske umma (Galal 2016, 95-98).

32 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5aqiJ3oYOo> (tilgået 9. november 2020).

Konklusion: Religionens rolle i en corona-tid

I denne artikel har jeg undersøgt, hvordan religiøse autoriteter i de arabiske lande forholder sig til pandemien covid-19. Jeg har ud over statens sekulære tilgang identificeret tre tilgange, der på forskellige måder relaterer til statens håndtering. Således bakkede den største gruppe af religiøse lærde op – med henvisning til islam – omkring statens håndtering, når staten f.eks. lukker moskeer og kirker. En anden gruppe domineret af salafi-prædikanter undlader direkte at kritisere statens håndtering, men argumenterer i stedet for, at den islamiske tradition for længst har givet svaret på håndtering af epidemier. På linje med nogle koptiske præster og shiamuslimske lærde giver de desuden udtryk for, at religionen og dens praksisser forhindrer den troende i at blive smittet. En tredje gruppe placerer sig i direkte opposition til staterne, som den mener svigter de troende, hvor håndteringen af covid-19 bliver endnu et eksempel på staternes ligegyldighed over for befolkningerne og islam.

Den første position, der er loyal over for staten, kan siges at trække på en moderne rationel islamforståelse, der samtidig kommer til udtryk i denne positions kritik af de to andre. Et eksempel herpå er den bahrainske Sheikh Hassan al-Hussainys tale på YouTube, uploadet den 29. marts 2020, hvori han kritiserer overtro og nogle muslimers sammenknytning af corona-virusen med sura 74 i Koranen, som om covid-19 var forudsagt på profeten Muhammeds tid. Han advarer folk mod falske nyheder og fristelsen til at tro på hvad som helst.³³ I stedet for en rationel fortolkning lægger den anden position vægt på den religiøse praksis. Mens den religiøse tradition giver svarene, er det den enkelte troende, der gennem sin fromme og moralske praksis, kropsliggør traditionen. Den tredje position er den, hvor islamforståelsen er tæt forbundet med og udspringer af en politisk fortolkning af den aktuelle verdenssituation, og hvor islam bliver et redskab i legitimeringen af politisk modstand. Således synes covid-19 at aktivere de gængse religiøse positioner, hvor islam og kristendom bruges til at legitimere handling, om denne så er i form af opbakning til staten, insisteren på troens fuldkommenhed eller modstand mod lokale og globale magthavere.

33 Se <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHDxVBEX58c&t=43s> (tilgået 12. november 2020).

Abstract

Like other places in the world, Covid-19 has led to restrictions of religious practices in the Arab countries, for instance by closing mosques and churches for a period of time. Likewise, religious authorities have with reference to religion participated in the debate about the meaning and way of dealing with Covid-19. Against this background, the article analyses how religious arguments are used to confirm or contest the Arab states' ways of dealing with Covid-19 in the spring 2020, and how these reflect the interaction between state and religion. While the states use scientific and secular arguments, three positions among religious authorities are identified: Those who support and with reference to religious dogma legitimise the states' ways of dealing with Covid-19; those who find all their answers in religion and avoid talking about politics; and those who reject and are suspicious towards the states' conduct. In this manner, the debate about how to deal with Covid-19 in the Arab countries appears to reproduce common religious positions in the ongoing discussion of the role of religion in Arab societies.

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Katharina Nötzold

Temasektion

“Deafening silence of theologians” vs. creative local parishes during the Corona pandemic?

A case study of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)¹

Keywords

Covid-19, Evangelical Church in Germany, EKD, secularisation, Protestant theology, German media

Abstract 21 million Germans belong to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). This report will highlight initial official theological reactions of the EKD to the Corona pandemic. The Protestant Church faced widespread criticism from prominent figures for its handling of the pandemic. This paper gives an overview of the major objections and it looks at how the EKD and its representatives reacted to it. Yet this report also looks at the numerous resourceful initiatives of churches to react in creative formats to social distancing measures issued by the German Länder and/or the federal government. In sum, Covid-19 has had a huge impact on each congregation – as a community and for individual believers but also on the self-perception of the Protestant Church and its social relevance in an increasingly secularised society.

“Theologians are keeping a deafening silence” – this quote by the Jewish historian Michael Wolffsohn (2020) was taken up by the Protestant pastor Alexander Brodt-Zabka (2020) who added his personal opinion that this “deafening silence” by theologians “hurts”. The image this conjures up is distorting and disturbing. In fact, this accusation upset many people working in

¹ Please note: Although this might be confusing to readers from an Anglo-American context, the author will use the term evangelical as is standard usage in Germany and how the Evangelical Church of Germany is describing herself on the church body's English website. In Germany “evangelisch” refers to mainline Protestantism, i.e. mainline Lutheran, Reformed or Union Protestants in opposition to “evangelikal”, which in the German context is often translated as Free Evangelical churches and in English would be considered evangelical Protestants.

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and for the Protestant Church², either as ministers or in the wide area of Diakonie (social-welfare) who have actively sought to find ways to continue religious life and service for their parishes in the face of lockdown measures imposed by the federal government and the *Länder* (federal states). These people feel that they have not been silent at all, but busy, active and innovative – showing everyone that “the church”³ is not just for a few old ladies who regularly attend Sunday church services, but that it is still relevant, trying to use new media and new approaches to listen to people’s daily concerns in times of crisis and social lockdown. In fact, the Corona pandemic has highlighted the different expectations “the church” has to manage – with her message(s) and also in her public presentation. Some authors expected clergy, especially bishops, to produce immediate and clear theological answers in response to the global pandemic; some seemed to hope that “the church” would actively resist Corona restrictions laid down by the state; others saw an obligation for “the church” to stand with the weak and the dying; and several people wished for a more forceful and more visible role of “the church” in public discussions.

This report looks at the different positions and reactions taken within the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) mainly during the first six months of the Corona pandemic in 2020. Social, or rather physical, distancing rules and all regulations defining the lockdown measures taken by the German government and/or *Länder* have had a huge impact on organised religion. Worship services no longer took place in churches but were streamed online. Pastoral care had to find new ways in time of crisis. Life rituals, which are major events in people’s lives, and which are expressions of organised Christianity, such as baptisms, weddings, confirmations and even funerals had to be cancelled or at least delayed. So how did the EKD as the umbrella organisation of 14,412 parishes or congregational communities react to Covid 19 in the first half of 2020?

2 Protestant Church, which in German is “Evangelische Kirche”, and which is the short version of all regional member churches of different traditions under the organisational roof of EKD. Moreover, the author uses throughout the text the term Protestant interchangeably for the German “evangelisch” – terminological differences to the

Anglo-American context have been explained in footnote 1.

3 The author purposefully uses the generic term “the church” throughout the article and in this sense can be used interchangeably for the two big church organisations (EKD & Roman Catholic Church) in Germany. It is meant as a reflection of everyday speech by people who

have clear expectations of what “the church” should stand for, but vague ideas and knowledge of the actual functioning of either the EKD churches or the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps “the church” terminology could be best compared to the equally generically used term “elites”.

The Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) – One Body with Different Members

Although Germany is considered the Land of the Reformation which took place over 500 years ago when Martin Luther demanded reform of the existing (Roman Catholic) church, there exist two major Christian denominations in Germany: Protestants with around 21 million faithful and Roman Catholics with around 22 million believers (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020). There are also around 2 million other Christians – such as Orthodox Christians, members of Free Evangelical Churches and other Christian communities (EKD 2016, 6). In contrast to Scandinavian countries where the Lutheran church used to be or still is the state church, churches in Germany, Protestant ones in particular, have had a different history with many regional variations. The EKD can even refer to the Bible to reflect these differences. “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many.” (1 Corinthians 12:14, NRSV). “The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) is a union or an umbrella organisation of the Lutheran, Reformed and United regional churches within the Federal Republic of Germany.” (EKD 2016, 6). The federalism of Germany is also mirrored in the structures of regional churches, with each of the member churches having “a distinctive character shaped by its respective confessional tradition [e.g. Lutheran, Reformed or United] and is constrained to a particular region.” (EKD 2016, 6). The Protestant Church is overseen by elected representative bodies. In the congregations, elected volunteers work together on an equal footing with clergy within the Parochial Church Council. This principle of shared leadership responsibility is also applied in the synods, church districts, member churches and throughout the whole structure, including the bodies of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD 2016, 9). The synods (church parliaments) in regional churches and at EKD level are made up of clergy and non-theologians. All churches of the EKD are thus jointly governed by lay people and clergy, which may be difficult to understand for those unfamiliar with the structure of the Evangelical Church and accustomed to a more hierarchical organisation such as the Roman Catholic Church. “In the public sphere, the Chairperson of the EKD acts as its legal representative and official speaker. The Council issues public statements on matters relating to life in church and society through memoranda, studies and other publications.” (EKD 2016, 10). Consequently and increasingly, German mainstream media mainly cover quotes of the chairperson of the EKD or some of the more prominent and

media-savvy bishops of the regional churches as they are usually seen as the most authoritative voices for public statements. This fact is also reflected in the quotes used in this paper.

Methodology

This report is an overview of official statements and discussions that took place mainly between March 2020 and August 2020. Discussions on ethics, the role of the churches and religion in contemporary secular German society during the Corona pandemic were to be found in daily newspapers with a nationwide appeal such as *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Tagesspiegel*, or in weeklies such as *Die Zeit*.

Official websites, *EKD.de* and *evangelisch.de*, and those of regional churches were analysed for Corona-related content, as were religious programmes of German public radio and television. Protestant publications such as the monthly *chrismon plus* and regional Protestant weeklies including *Die Kirche*, *Der Sonntag*, *Sonntagsblatt*, *Unsere Kirche* and others belonging to the regional churches were also consulted as they are read by Protestants in their particular regions. To better gauge the ongoing theological discussions, the theological monthly magazine *Zeitzeichen* was also included in this report. Although the author is not a theologian, some theological discussions will be interspersed to better understand the theological struggle inside the EKD to come to terms with the Corona pandemic. Interviews with and personal accounts by parish pastors add some subjective authenticity. This study does not aim nor does it claim to be an academic paper drawing on theories of religion and society. Instead, it is a snapshot of ongoing discussions among Protestants belonging to the EKD, the second-largest organised religious group in the country, and to which the author belongs. Despite closeness to the subject, the author has tried to describe the situation as objectively as possible.

The EKD – Evangelical Church in Germany – No longer system-relevant?

Most Germans realised that the Corona pandemic was having serious effects on their everyday lives when schools, universities, nurseries and most of public life went into lockdown in

mid-March 2020. It was in these weeks before Easter that churches were also affected by the lockdown measures. From 16 March, 2020, all social gatherings, including public worship services, could no longer take place. Loved ones could not be visited in care homes by their families, as they were under complete lockdown for fear of infecting care home residents.

The gravity of the situation was underlined by Chancellor Angela Merkel addressing the German public in a televised speech on 18 March, 2020. Apart from her annual televised New Year’s message, this was the first time in Merkel’s 15-year reign as Germany’s chancellor that she directly addressed the German public. She appealed to the public for solidarity in tackling the pandemic together, to stick to the rules that were based on the advice of virologists and epidemiologists. She thanked several professional groups, such as people working in the medical sector but also those working tirelessly on the supermarket tills. She also pointed out that “[w]e want to be close to each other, especially in times of need. We know affection as physical closeness or touch. But right now, unfortunately, the opposite is true. And that’s what we all need to understand: Right now, distance is the only way to express caring” (General-Anzeiger 2020).

It was during these initial weeks that everyone, including church staff, had to adapt to the new circumstances. Some seemed to enjoy the new experience of a slower pace of life, whereas others were under extreme emotional stress: many had to entertain and home-school children while also managing their workload, often under adverse working conditions. Some worried about loved ones in care homes, who they could no longer visit; many worried about losing their jobs and, for some, the thought of death and their own mortality entered their lives for the first time. In such a time of crisis, when old certainties no longer appear so strong, expectations usually arise that religion and philosophy will provide answers to important life questions.

4 There will be no further reference to the Orthodox Church in Germany throughout the paper as membership is low in comparison to EKD and the Roman Catholic Church. In Germany, journalists often speak of “the two big churches”, they then refer to the Protestant EKD and the Roman Catholic Church.

5 Assistance, Comfort and Hope

The Churches’ Joint Statement that no one seemed to notice

As early as 20 March 2020, the Evangelical, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches⁴ in Germany released a joint statement “Beistand, Trost und Hoffnung”⁵. In it, the bishops tried to give clear guidelines on the necessity of abstaining, for a limited pe-

riod, from holding worship services with congregations, despite the inherent need for physically meeting together for worship. They appealed to the faithful for their solidarity and sense of Christian charity. Moreover, they also gave theological explanations that the current pandemic was not God’s punishment and they quoted from the Bible to underline that Christians, when they prepare for Easter during Lent, should trust in God and look to the future in hope (EKD et al. 2020). Yet despite this early statement touching both theological and practical questions of the pandemic, both the EKD and the Roman Catholic Church in Germany faced heavy criticism for being too silent, or for no longer being relevant in contemporary German society for adequate answers to questions of life and death. Confronted with the accusation that bishops and the churches had been silent, the EKD chairperson, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, voiced his surprise that almost no newspaper had taken notice, either in March or later, of this joint statement. When it was suggested that newsrooms would have noticed if the churches had set out clear demands, Bedford-Strohm replied that “we have worked together on a common solution, often behind the scenes, and in this way, we have helped more people than by attacking policies or politicians (...) Should I really stand up in public and publicly accuse [the authorities, K.N.]? This would have certainly ensured my presence in newspapers but what kind of service would I have offered to anyone?” (Kosch & Mawick 2020)

There appears to be a mismatch between what the big churches actually do and say, whether or not this reaches the public and, in turn, how it is then perceived. In researching this paper, the author found much criticism of the EKD’s handling of the Corona pandemic. This paper will outline the main points of criticism in the following subchapters. However, there is also a different, more enthusiastic view about the creative energy set free in the churches during the pandemic. Consequently, the paper also highlights some of these examples.

Spirituality and pastoral care not deemed relevant and churches are standing by

It was critically remarked that in her speech to the German public, Angela Merkel did not mention the need for pastoral care nor the need for spiritual guidance and finding answers to ethical

questions in times of crisis: for example, when hospital doctors may have to resort to triaging patients in case of limited hospital capacity. Some theologians interpreted Merkel’s silence such that she considered churches or organised religion in general as insignificant. Others commented that it was not for Merkel to point out the churches’ importance but for the churches themselves to prove their relevance in times of crisis (Finger 2020).

Ulrich Körtner, professor of theology at the University of Vienna, claims that Corona has illustrated the declining significance of both churches in everyday life, “there were no exemptions for churches and other religious communities during the shutdown.” (Körtner 2020). Deckers calls it the “religiously pain-free society” (Deckers 2020), where leaders of organised religion have accepted painlessly the interference of the state in their basic rights of religious freedoms. Further, large parts of society do not seem to miss religion and religious life in their everyday lives (Ibid.) During this crisis, politicians have been advised by virologists and epidemiologists, who have a dominant presence in the news media, on talk shows or with their own podcasts. When people have looked to the future, they referred to forecasts by economists or scientists in their “role as secular prophets” (Körtner 2020). Only later on was there room for (child) psychologists and sociologists who spoke of the negative impacts of a continued lockdown. The list of essential key workers included those employed in journalism and banking, but it excluded pastors/priests who are essential in pastoral care. This was taken as proof of the increasing secularisation of society, in which churches are no longer considered relevant for a functioning social system (in German *systemrelevant*) (Körtner 2020). It did not make a difference that the managing director of the German Association of Towns and Municipalities (*Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund*), Gerd Landsberg, voiced his surprise and anger that pastors were not included in the long list of key workers issued by the *Länder* and who asked for this to be rectified (chrismon 2020). The editorialist, Matthias Morgenroth, complained that everything spiritual had been declared as dispensable (Morgenroth 2020), even though many people felt lost for answers during lockdown.

Corona as punishment of God?

Several theological, philosophical and ethical discussions took place in the pages of the respected conservative daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, which later found entry in theological periodicals such as *chrismon plus* and *Zeitzeichen*. They provided space for theologians to discuss the idea of theodicy and whether Corona could be considered as God’s punishment of humankind. Most theologians who belong to the mainstream Protestant spectrum rejected such an idea. In a sermon-like commentary published in *chrismon plus*, its publisher and chairperson of the EKD, Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, wrote about quite often hearing questions such as “Where is God during the Corona crisis?” or “Why does God let it happen that the Corona virus can bring so much suffering?” from people who do not consider themselves overly religious (Bedford-Strohm 2020, 10). He countered this by quoting the Prophet Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (New International Version). This image of a punishing God is not compatible with the one described by Jeremiah (Bedford-Strohm 2020, 10). For him, it was unimaginable to see God as the perpetrator of numerous deaths, when Jesus who Christians perceive as God’s essence in human form did not kill but rather healed, raised and comforted people. He pointed to the fact that our destructive behaviour towards our environment may play a big part in the creation of new deadly viruses and therefore we should not blame God for them. Moreover, he adds that we should generally say goodbye to the image of a punishing God who sits somewhere in heaven and who, according to his whims, decides to push a Tsunami button or to create a new virus which he then catapults to earth (Ibid.) Instead, Bedford-Strohm outlines his belief that God has not yet finished his creation and that it is an evolving process. Thus, he says that we can trust that God will provide us with strength to grow even from difficult experiences (Bedford-Strohm 2020).

Jörg Herrmann, managing director of Evangelische Akademie Hamburg, wrote the guest commentary “Corona and the Church – A Struggle at God’s Side” in *FAZ*. It is a very theological piece about why the Corona pandemic is not God’s punishment. He refers to several Christian and Jewish theologians who all struggled with the question of why God accepted human suffering, for example in Auschwitz or in Rwanda. After these

events, many believers felt a sense of a powerless or even an impotent God. But Herrmann goes on to describe several attempts by theologians and philosophers of religion to understand the concept of God after Auschwitz. They no longer adhere to the image of an omnipotent God who stands – Zeus-like – on the turntables of world history punishing people. Instead, the evangelical theologian, Dorothee Sölle, talks about “the compassionate God” who suffers with us.

Even if most mainstream Protestant theologians did not perceive Corona as God’s punishment, there were some voices, such as the former military bishop of the EKD Hartmut Löwe, who, although he did not see the pandemic as a punishment, interpreted it at least as an affliction from God. His opinion piece, published in *FAZ*, received much attention within the church when he wrote that he missed a wide-ranging theological interpretation of the current Corona pandemic from leading theologians, especially bishops who, according to Löwe, “usually outbid each other by making statements on anything and everything but now don’t seem to find any spiritual words” (Löwe 2020). In his opinion, this would also have to include the question on whether or not the pandemic is God’s punishment. He referred to Martin Luther who quite naturally viewed the plague as God’s punishment. Löwe rejects the image of God as a revenge-seeking autocrat; instead he uses the word *Heimsuchung*, which can mean visitation or affliction. According to Löwe, “God wants to be found in and amongst everything that is happening, even if we have difficulty in understanding his actions or if we cannot understand it at all. But whoever cannot speak of God’s wrath will spoil the talk of God’s love. Then this becomes diffuse emotional drudgery, an unstable commonplace wisdom without any concrete basis in life experience.” He continues that “in the cross of Jesus Christ, the foundation of Christianity, the love and wrath of God are shown as two sides of one action. You can’t have one without the other.” He asks, “What can Christian faith do to help weather the current crisis? What does faith tell us beyond scientific, economic and social statements? (...) Cultural Protestant trivialities fail to give answers in a crisis that has come upon us. Here we have to dig much deeper theologically and spiritually. Are our current church leaders able to do it in their busyness? So far we have heard nothing of it.” (Löwe 2020).

One of the scolded church leaders, namely EKD chairper-

son Bishop Bedford-Strohm, strongly replied in several media that church leaders had sought theological answers in the joint statement issued on 20th March, as well as in many more public statements, interviews and in sermons. In an interview, he pointed out that he has a very different view from Löwe in that “we experience God in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ has healed, not killed. (...) We have to say goodbye to an image of God as someone who is in charge and control of everything. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has described it with challenging words, ‘Only the suffering God is able to help.’ This is an awesome statement. We have to overcome the image of God holding us like marionette puppets on strings or as a *deus ex machina* who chimes in by force.” (Kosch & Mawick 2020). He goes on in a lengthy, yet very interesting, theological discourse about his personal image of God expressed mainly in the life of Jesus Christ who expressed radical love, who wanted to end suffering and who has healed people. When the interviewers also refer to Jesus’ anger and wrath in reference to the “wrath of God”, which was also used by Löwe, Bedford-Strohm does not accept it. Instead he differentiates between Jesus’ holy rage versus a rage often interpreted as God’s wrath. He views Jesus’ sacred rage directed “against people who sabotaged the reign of God” and, according to Bedford-Strohm, this “holy rage descends from radical love. It is a completely different form of rage interpreted as God’s wrath, who sees his authority undermined and who would reprimand humans for it. This is not God who comes towards me in Jesus Christ. The latter is a loving, a suffering and even a powerless God who has touched billions of people through his power which was extracted through his suffering on the cross. These people [touched by the loving God; K.N.] change the world. This is a power which has risen from powerlessness and not from the strength of military legions.” (Kosch & Mawick 2020).

Church not announcing their core messages better

Several theologians have complained about the churches’ disregard towards talking more about hope, which should be the core message of Christianity. The theologian Ulrich Körtner described the situation when, at a talk show, the writer Thea Dorn, who describes herself as an atheist, spoke about the day she walked past a church in Hamburg on her way to the TV studio and saw a big banner quoting 2 Timothy 1:7. She said, “I didn’t think I would sit

in a television studio and would say: The best sentence that I saw today was a quote from the Bible. And it said on it: ‘For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’ This sentence really blew me away because my impression is that currently we are massively led by a spirit of fear and not by the spirit of power, love and a sound mind. And I don’t think that it is good that our society is more and more defined by a spirit of fear.” (Körtner 2020). He continued that Dorn had hit the nail on the head of a core theological message better than many theologians in the past months (Körtner 2020).

Overall, it became clear in several proclamations by theologians that they were missing the willingness of the church to “use the pandemic as an occasion to think anew and intensively about the spiritual meaning and the depth of our Christian faith.” (Brodt-Zabka 2020). For him, it is worth reflecting thoroughly on, for example, the central biblical sentence from Psalm 90:12 “So teach us to consider our mortality, so that we might live wisely.” (New English Translation). The *memento mori* (the reminder of one’s own mortality) has been an essential part of the church’s message since its inception. It leaves Becker (2020) puzzled that the churches were so quiet about it these days. As the former EKD chairperson, Margot Käßmann, pointed out, a lot of people were confronted for the first time with thoughts about their own death, something they have avoided before. “I have seen it as a parish priest. People are no longer familiar with rituals at the cemetery. There is a huge feeling of awkwardness. There is a growing number of anonymous burials. People no longer put death notices in newspapers so that others would have a chance to participate in the funerals. We have pushed away all questions surrounding death, to care homes, far away, also to hospitals. We don’t let people die at home. (...) so this phantasy arises that dying will not affect me and therefore it is like a blow of the hammer that there is a virus which could affect me and then all of a sudden it gets very personal.” (Käßmann 2020b) Becker quotes from a survey conducted in November 2019 that 74% of people asked were afraid of dying alone with no one caring for them in their final hours in care homes or hospitals. Becker muses that the majority of Germans are no longer aware that pastors can accompany them in their last hours, something that went without saying in the past (Becker 2020). She and others complain about the churches’ inability to convey the core message that their staff, pastors, deacons and

social workers have the ability, competency and willingness to be with people at the end of life and to comfort the bereaved in times of crisis (Becker 2020). This focus on people in crisis would have been an opportunity to recall the social and caring role of “the church” in German society; instead, critics chided both churches for not being more visibly present at deathbeds in care homes and hospitals during the pandemic.

Neglecting Pastoral Care for the Dying?

Christine Lieberknecht, former Prime Minister of Thuringia and until 1990 a Lutheran parish pastor, heavily criticised the churches for “having neglected more than hundreds of thousands of people”, “the sick, lonely, old and dying” in an interview with *Die WELT* newspaper (Malzahn 2020). She was particularly critical that the dying had been left alone in care homes without any pastoral care, “There was no prayer of a last psalm, no consolation was given and no final blessing happened on deathbeds.” (Malzahn 2020). This criticism was firmly rejected by the EKD chairperson (dpa 2020) as inappropriate and unjustified. The Speaker of the Catholic German Bishops, Matthias Kopp, proclaimed that the exact opposite had in fact been true (dpa 2020). According to him, “pastoral care workers in hospitals have done an unbelievably hard job” under these conditions. Bishop Bedford-Strohm referred to the many pastors who had taken personal risks and worked themselves into the ground to be there for all those in need (dpa 2020). Peter Dabrock, the previous chair of the German Ethics Council, and himself a Protestant theologian, heavily criticised Lieberknecht for accusing churches this way, without having proof for her exaggerated numbers. Moreover, he considered it very “unfair to accuse pastors in such a generalised attack” as many of them “have gone to great lengths to reach people in need via phone, letters or various means of communication.” (dpa 2020). This anger about Lieberknecht’s generalisation was also expressed in personal communication with the author by pastors serving in pastoral care units at hospitals. In another reply, Bedford-Strohm also pointed out that some care home administrators had been very restrictive by not letting in pastors, priests or end-of-life doulas⁶, in part due to fear of increasing the risk of more deaths. According to him, pastors have always approached care homes to underline the need for pastoral care, and bishops and everyone in charge raised these

issues in many meetings with local and regional politicians (SWR2, 2020). A report by *Deutschlandfunk* radio highlighted that hospital administrations of two big Berlin hospital trusts refused to talk to the media about how they were dealing with dying patients during the second lockdown in November 2020, and whether they had learned lessons from the criticism that people had died alone in the spring. Usually, relatives do not have access to see their loved ones, but the hospital pastor is devoting much more of his time to Covid-19 patients now that he has protective equipment. He regularly visits and hums church hymns that some people know as he considers singing too difficult under all the protective gear (Engelbrecht 2020).

A more technical issue also played an important role in the early days of the pandemic: many care homes and hospitals did not have enough protective medical equipment for their own staff in March and early April, let alone for pastoral care workers who, in some cases, work on secondment contracts via the Evangelical or Catholic Churches (Theresa Brückner, interview, 22 August, 2020). Bishop Friedrich Kramer emphasised that “[w]e could not get hold of protective gear and testing equipment [in the early weeks, K.N.], which in some singular cases did not permit pastoral visits in some care homes” (epd 2020).

On an official level, regional churches and the EKD already had working groups for social work for the elderly for a long time. Their websites have an additional Corona-tab featuring news and information from the regional churches and the EKD about how to continue the very important care work for senior citizens during the pandemic. The pages contain very specific (health) recommendations about how to hold visits and meetings with elderly parishioners, according to the rules set out by each Land (EFA 2020; Nordkirche 2020). There is also spiritual guidance for staff members on how to deal with the Corona pandemic from a theological position. Yet it seems all these efforts were not visible enough to counter the distorted image of a church neglecting pastoral care for the elderly.

Human dignity vs. right to physical integrity

Former EKD chairperson, Margot Käßmann, chimed into the discussion about human dignity as a basic right during the Co-

6 Death doulas or End of Life
Doulas are people who support
people in the end of life process.

rona pandemic. This was in response to Wolfgang Schäuble, President of the Bundestag, and a practising Protestant, after he mentioned in an interview “when I hear that the protection of life is above all else, and everything else has to take a back step, then I have to say that this is not right in its absoluteness. Basic rights constrain themselves. If anything at all has an absolute value in the German constitution, then it is human dignity. This is inviolable. But this does not exclude that we have to die.” (Birnbaum & Ismar, 2020). In an interview with national radio *Deutschlandfunk*, Käßmann agrees with Schäuble about the constraints of the basic rights in the German constitution where article 1 refers to inviolable human dignity and article 2 refers to the right to physical integrity. Käßmann points out the ethical dilemma between these two rights, for example when families worry that their relatives in care homes might not die from the Corona virus but from loneliness and isolation. For her, it is not easy to ethically weigh the risk as to which is the higher good of the two at a particular moment (Käßmann 2020b). In early May, some Corona restrictions were lifted but visits to care homes continued to be heavily limited for relatives, with the argument of “protecting human lives”. It was then that the EKD chairperson, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, suggested that people in care homes should be able to decide for themselves, if possible, which risk they would be willing to take and whether they would like to receive visitors. He said that these restrictions put relatives in terrible agony, especially when they were not allowed to be with their parents during their final days. He noted that relatives were becoming increasingly despairing and heart-broken because they will never be able to make up for not being there (RND 2020c). In another interview, Käßmann demanded the easing of restrictions for funerals where only 10 people could be present – even outdoors. She referred to her experience as a parish pastor when she saw that it was “essential for widows, widowers or children to be surrounded by a large group of mourners, to experience this union”. She saw a discrepancy between the permitted small numbers of attendees at outdoor funerals and the larger numbers of people shopping in crowded supermarkets. According to her, “it shows respect and dignity when mourners have the opportunity to pay their final farewells at a funeral.” (Käßmann 2020a). High-profile representatives of the EKD were not silent on these complex issues but, given ethical questions rarely provide simple answers, it was difficult to get a clear message across.

Corona measures as attack on religious freedom?

There exists a broad consensus that freedom of religion is one of the most important basic rights and therefore it should only be suspended for a very limited time. Yet on 10 April 2020, the German Supreme Court rejected an appeal to lift the ban on worship services on the grounds that the protection of life and limb has supremacy – albeit for a restricted time period. (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2020) This decision raised the ire of many, with some even comparing it to the limited religious freedom in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Bishop Friedrich Kramer of the Evangelische Kirche in Mitteldeutschland (EKM), which spans parts of the former GDR, strongly rejected such a comparison as “completely unacceptable” (*Die Welt* 2020). He pointed out that the state prime ministers in some former East German Länder had lifted restrictions and allowed worship services to take place inside churches earlier than some western Länder. He saw a specific sensitivity at work which resulted from the experience of restricted religious freedoms in the GDR (*Die Welt* 2020).

In the run-up to Easter, discussions about the ban on holding traditional Easter services in churches became tenser. Peter Hahne, a prominent former political journalist at German public service TV ZDF and a former board member of the EKD, accused the two big denominations of having “banned church services already in anticipatory obedience” (Ewert & Rotkehl 2020) in an article headlined “Open church doors for Easter”. He mused that it was weird that “beverage shops are open whereas churches are not” (Ibid.). He went further in this article stating that “a ban [of opening churches] by the state [...] is an attack on religious freedom.” (Ibid.) Later, Hahne also said that he no longer thought it was worth paying church tax since churches closed down and they only reopened to collect money. Hahne’s statements led to strong and often angry reactions by church officials as well as many worshippers.⁷

The local bishop of Osnabrück, Superintendent Joachim Jeska, criticised Hahne for ignoring the “responsible role of our church, which puts the welfare of people centre-stage, as we don’t want to expose them to the danger of infection.” (RND 2020b) The chairperson of the EKD, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, said that saving human life should be the guiding principle. He therefore accepted the temporary ban on big Easter services in churches (Unsere Kirche 2020). He also pointed out that most

⁷ For example, several letters to the editor reached the regional church newspaper *Der Sonntag* (2020) where the writers, lay people of parochial parish councils, complained about Hahne’s ignorance and strongly rejected his claims. Instead they pointed to all the innovative formats and highlighted the commitment of staff and volunteers alike to keep congregational life active during the pandemic.

regional churches had decided to cancel church services to protect human lives before the state-led lockdowns came into force. He said that “due to Christian charity we will do everything that helps to contain the virus and at the same time we will still be able to celebrate Easter together – be it via televised church services, livestreams or telephone services – the message of Easter will not be stopped.” (Unsere Kirche 2020).

Quite a number of people criticised Hahne for complaining about closed churches, when worship services in churches were only banned temporarily. Critics like Bishop Friedrich Kramer or Bishop Beate Hofmann rightly pointed out that worship had never been forbidden during the pandemic, that it was only services with worshippers inside churches that had been cancelled. Churches had remained open throughout lockdown for quiet contemplation, for prayer and for personal conversations with pastors (albeit under physical distancing rules). Pastors, church secretaries, deacons specialised in working with children and other staff, in addition to many volunteers, all helped to keep churches open, to staff telephones in parish offices, to reach out to older parishioners via phone, mail or even physically-distanced talks over the garden fence. These groups felt accused for the wrong reasons.

Role of German Media

After looking at all the criticism described above, it is noticeable that only a few prominent bishops and some outspoken critics had the chance to express their views in the mainstream media, especially newspapers and some religious affairs radio programmes. Moreover, their views were often reduced to negative snippets to attract attention. Such examples include Christine Lieberknecht’s exaggerated claim that the church neglected hundreds of thousands of dying people, and Peter Hahne’s complaint about closed churches. Bishop Bedford-Strohm reflected on this tendency in relation to the joint statement of the three Christian denominations at the beginning of the Corona crisis (Kosch & Mawick 2020). It was quite unusual that the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Churches issued a joint statement, but most media chose to ignore it. Perhaps editors did not understand just how exceptional such a statement was, or found it to be too non-controversial to warrant publishing. Consequent-

ly, the statement did not generate the coverage necessary to reach the faithful who did not read church weeklies. More meaningful religious discussions have been relegated to guest editorials and commentaries in a few quality newspapers and weeklies. Christiane Florin, religious affairs editor at *Deutschlandfunk*, pointed out that, in the 1980s, Protestant thinking was publicly expressed by prominent Protestant personalities, including politicians, who were not necessarily theologians or clergy. Nowadays, German media mainly focus on a few bishops and a few outliers to represent religion. This hierarchical and very clergy-focused media presentation actually runs counter to the more decentralised Protestant understanding of the “Priesthood of all believers”, where clergy and lay-people equally represent the church. Perhaps it reflects an ignorance or an increasing religious illiteracy of editors in regards to the intricacies of Protestantism. Several people mentioned the absence of representatives of the EKD or the Roman Catholic Church in the main political talk shows such as *Maybrit Illner* or *Lanz* (e.g. *Länderzeit* 2020) during most of the Corona pandemic. Johann Hinrich Claussen, cultural ambassador of the EKD, spoke of how he had a chance to talk about the church’s pastoral care during the first lockdown in the religious affairs programme “Tag für Tag” on *Deutschlandfunk*. He had the impression that this was a unique occasion where editors showed genuine interest and were not looking for an angle to create confrontation – as with Lieberknecht’s statement. Although Claussen tried to highlight the problem of the isolation of the elderly in care homes and perhaps dying alone during lockdown in other contexts with journalists, he realised that most editors did not consider the topic relevant. Only several months later did he feel that some quality media had begun to show greater interest in more “difficult” topics. Taking these examples together, it can seem a bit unfair to accuse the churches of no longer being relevant. When churches make relevant statements they are ignored if they are not sufficiently catchy, provocative or challenging. Perhaps this is because of editors’ lack of knowledge about religion/church affairs and the phenomenon that scandals and crisis will easier find their entries on news agendas.

Creative Ideas to Reach Parishioners

After the extensive discussion above, it may appear that the EKD and its affiliated 14000+ parishes have mainly struggled with the Corona pandemic. However, it would be a very incomplete picture if the success stories were left out. As soon as it became clear that churches would have to stop traditional worship services on Sundays, many pastors decided to offer services online or in different ways. Public radio *Deutschlandradio* and regional broadcasters such as WDR, SWR, RBB, MDR, etc., along with national public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF increased airtime for religious programming, especially worship services (Stalinski 2020).

There have been numerous creative ideas to bring God's word to the people and the internet is full of videos and reports. From the abundance of initiatives, only a few can be explained here: parishes offered “devotions at the garden fence” – where people could pick up prepared sermons or spiritual devotions left on the fence around the parsonage and take them home. In Rheinland-Pfalz, a local deaconess offered to come to people's gardens with her guitar and give them spiritual food for thought for about 10-20 minutes, keeping social distancing rules (Pieroth 2020). In Suhl, a city in Thuringia, the pastor visited a church-run care home for a “devotion at the garden fence” in mid-March, standing outside, singing and playing her guitar, giving some spiritual input, with the care home residents sitting on balconies wrapped in blankets and listening (Gartenzaunandacht 2020).

The Corona pandemic not only influenced regular Sunday worship and pastoral care. All parish activities were affected: confirmation classes and Sunday school could no longer take place; choral activities ranging from children's, youth, Gospel to regular church choirs had to stop; youth-worship services, get-togethers for pensioners and bible-study courses had to be cancelled. Normally, confirmations take place each spring, often on Palm Sunday or Pentecost. In 2020, most spring-time confirmations were cancelled and postponed until autumn 2020 or spring 2021. Nevertheless, some parishes decided to celebrate confirmation services for 14-year-olds outside the church building or in smaller groups (Bayer-Gimm 2020; Riesterer 2020). Even parochial council meetings, church committee meetings on the parochial level and synod meetings on the regional level were

cancelled or quickly transferred to online platforms. The author herself has been taking part in online committee meetings of her local church and her older child regularly takes part in weekly online Sunday school classes and choir practice. Due to the prescribed pausing of confirmation classes⁸ and youth worship services, staff of the Youth Ministry of the Evangelical Church in Munich, for example, came up with the project “Sexy Bibel” (EJaM Podcast). Its intention was to reach out to teenagers who had not been attracted by the more conventional online worship services. It is a 20-minute video format where stories from the bible are shown in mini clips and their meaning then discussed by staff of the youth ministry.

The “*Sieben Dörfer – Sieben Kirchen*” YouTube channel is a rather humorous collection of videos where a local pastor and a pastor-in-training talk about their church-related activities in Corona times, having to serve seven parishes in rural Brandenburg in the so-called Pfarradies⁹. They even created a dog puppet who is played by the pastor and who in the storyline is the pastor’s dog. This dog is usually in conversation with the trainee pastor and talks with him about the meaning of life or about missing the fun of not having children around for Sunday school due to lockdown. Since the dog is usually a bit cheeky, they also talk about forgiveness, etc. During the school lockdown, the pastor and the ethics teacher from the local primary school also used this channel to introduce their respective subjects (ethics or religious education) to parents and pupils before they made their subject choice for the next school year (Sieben Dörfer).

Older worshippers who are not familiar with digital offerings could tune in to television or radio worship services. Numbers speak for themselves: whereas pre-Corona around 700,000 viewers watched a televised worship, during the early months of the pandemic, it rose to 1.4 million viewers (Stalinski 2020). The *Wort zum Sonntag*, a televised spiritual talk, scripted in turn by the Evangelical and Roman Catholic churches, and broadcast each Saturday evening on the ARD public service channel after the main evening show, normally has around 1.25 million viewers: in March 2020, it was watched by around 2.1 million viewers (Stalinski 2020). There were even telephone devotions for people who did not have internet access, where people could call specific phone numbers to listen to the services that took place, for example in Dresden and other places (MDR.DE).

A pastor couple from the rural Emsland had been touring

8 Preparatory course before young adults have their confirmation when they are around 14-years-old.

9 Pfarradies is a humorous made-up composite noun of Pfarrer (pastor) and Paradies (paradise)

their parishes with a SUV, jokingly referred to as “Pappamobil”, a reference to the Pope’s mobile, which had a loudspeaker installed. They stopped outside care homes and on public squares to hold devotions. Viewers of the video can actually see and hear how much the villagers appreciated this activity (NDR 2020). Many parishes delivered letters, prayers or instructions for celebrating devotions at home in people’s letterboxes, or they hung little bags with words of blessing, with candles and Easter eggs at garden fences. It was an especially difficult time around Easter, the most important celebration of the church and for family gatherings. The bishop of Hannover, Ralf Meister said, “When, if not now, do we need this hope that derives from Easter: Life is stronger than death.” (RND, 2020a). The author’s parish prepared lovely designed paper bags for “Easter in a Bag”, which contained little bags for each special day filled with service sheets containing hymns and prayer: for Maundy Thursday a family ration of bread and red grape juice to celebrate Holy Communion live with the pastors via the church’s YouTube channel; a little wooden cross for Good Friday; an Easter candle for Easter Sunday to be lit “together” when watching the pastors celebrating Easter via YouTube; and a children’s story and some wooden figures to perform a children’s service on Easter Monday. Before Easter, some parishes had erected Easter crosses and they invited parishioners and everybody to decorate them with flowers and prayer requests. Church bells were tolling more often as a sign of presence. Trombone bands, which form an important part of Protestant churches by providing musical components of worship services, have played in front of parsonages or from balconies of church spires. In his monthly column “Going to church”, *chrismon* columnist, Burkhard Weitz, writes and comments about his Sunday worship experiences in different parishes around Germany. For Pentecost, he went to a drive-in-worship service at an Aldi supermarket parking lot in Frankfurt, which allowed greater attendance than in a local church since people were sitting physically distanced in their cars with open windows (Weitz 2020). In Ebersberg, Bavaria, the Lutheran minister, Edzard Everts @PfrEverts, tweets under the heading “flatten the curve”, in reference to flattening the Covid-19 infection rate, about spiritual needs and opportunities during the pandemic (Kessel 2020). Pastor Corinna Zisselsberger talked about how online worship services from her St. Marien Church in central Berlin suddenly had new participants –

viewers from different parts of the world and also older church ladies who are computer illiterate but who had asked younger people to help them watch online worship via their smartphones (Länderzeit 2020). Theresa Brückner, a Berlin pastor and in charge of the “Church in the digital sphere” programme (EKBO) in her church district, is also known as “God’s influencer” as she has a wide reach over her YouTube channel and Instagram profile @Theresaliebt. She said that she was increasingly approached for pastoral care by many of her followers on social media channels during the early days of lockdown (Theresa Brückner, interview, 22 August, 2020). According to Brückner, her followers are not all Protestant, nor Christian. After all the criticism outlined above, these examples have in fact shown a vibrant and very creative EKD at local and regional levels.

What next?

It seems that both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Church in Germany have heard some of the criticism and are trying to react to it. In Berlin, for example, both churches joined Wall AG, a big commercial advertiser, to put up 1500 billboards in waiting areas for Berlin public transport. 24,000 free postcards were also distributed in pubs and restaurants to advertise their joint “Corona-Crisis Line”. They advertised it as being available by phone from 8am to 12 midnight every day. The first ads were put up in central Berlin by the Berlin bishops of the Evangelical and Roman Catholic Churches in August. Up to five people are available at the same time when the crisis line is open. Both churches reported that, as of July, 1500 people had called in and the average duration of a call was around 24 minutes. In August, the number of callers had gone down but calling times were longer. People were increasingly concerned about a second lockdown, worried about their economic wellbeing, and struggling with loneliness and suicidal thoughts. (Lassiwe 2020) According to Michael Hillenkamp, spokesperson for the Catholic Conference for Crisis Lines, the number of callers to these helplines throughout Germany rose from 2,500 per day on 22 March 2020 to 3,200 in April (Lenz 2020). At the same time, these traditional telephone crisis lines extended their services to offer online services via chat functions and email replies. Hillenkamp also mentioned that 40 per cent of conversations were about Corona and

50 per cent more people wanted to talk about loneliness than pre-Corona (Ibid.)

After the initial shock of the first few months of the pandemic, the EKD has been taking stock of its new initiatives, but also about what went wrong so that things can be improved in the coming months. A long interview with Bishop Bedford-Strohm in the August issue of *Zeitzeichen* was one such an opportunity to talk about mistakes but also lessons learnt. He expressed his joy at the commitment of so many church staff members and volunteers in so many parishes who thought and acted quickly about how they could fulfil the fundamental mission of the church: to be with people and not leave them alone. He saw a lot of vitality and dynamism in the very same church that had been declared dead by some people some time ago. Specifically, he acknowledged that more than 80 per cent of parishes had offered worship services and devotions online (Kosch & Mawick 2020). At the same time, he acknowledged the pain of not being able to celebrate worship services in church in the physical presence of the faithful. He clearly rejected the criticism by some prominent people such as the journalist and former EKD-council member, Peter Hahne, who had demanded official and vocal protests from the churches about the temporary ban on holding traditional services. The bishop defended the official stance of not protesting loudly as being “an indispensable part of our message, the message of charity, that we [the Church, K.N.] have supported – from a standpoint of inner freedom – what the politicians in charge have tried to do throughout this time: to do as much as possible in times of uncertainty to avoid similar situations as in (...) Spain or Italy, where intensive care units were overcrowded and the dead were piled up on trucks. (...) Therefore people who reject or even sabotage all these measures which are meant to protect life, under the cover of religious freedom, are the ones who should justify themselves, not the other way around.” (Kosch & Mawick 2020).

Like the majority of Germans, most parishes were caught by surprise with the lockdown measures in mid-March. Adapting to the new situation forced many parishes to quickly change their usual routines. This released a lot of creative energy in many parishes. Suddenly, churches had to make a giant leap in their digital strategies as this was the only way forward in times of physical distancing. However, this also sapped a lot of personal energy from staff and volunteers at local level. For others who

favour a traditional pastoral model, these new digital formats and activities were superficial and didn't sit alongside their understanding of church. It does not come entirely as a surprise that several pastors and other staff members would like to return to some sense of imagined 'normalcy', pre-Corona (Brückner interview). However, many pastors and others active in the church see this as a chance to adjust the EKD and its regional member churches to the social realities of today with falling memberships. Instead of shrugging their shoulders in resignation, these advocates of change demand from their church leadership discussions about how to reach out and engage those who are not among the faithful and have no contact with the church yet.

Despite an assumption that clergy are rather hesitant to use digital formats in their work, a survey commissioned by an EKD-affiliated research institute and conducted among regional churches in June 2020, found out that 2/3 of respondents would like to keep at least some digital formats for proclamation of the Gospel, perhaps as an extension of existing services (Hörsch 2020, 47). This finding may be supported by the chairperson of the Bavarian Pastors' Association, Corinna Hektor, who suggests that the digital programme of the church, especially worship services, should be “a supplement or an extension to the existing services rather than a replacement of it” as most of the digital services so far felt “more like makeshift versions.” (Staffen-Quandt 2020). Despite the criticism of digitalisation, the temporary ban on physical gatherings for Sunday worship and other church activities has actually fast-forwarded the digitalisation of regional and local churches on an unprecedented level. If it is taken up by active media-savvy pastors and other staff and volunteers, and combined with the spreading of the Christian message on different channels, this may reach people who have not had any contact with faith or organised religion before, but who may crave spiritual meaning in their lives. Brückner talked about several colleagues who had been sceptical about her role as an influencer on social media pre-Corona. However, they have since seen her work in a different light and some had not realised how hard it is to create meaningful social media content (Brückner interview).

In early summer 2020, traditional worship services in churches started again, although worshippers had to wear masks while singing due to fear of spreading the virus. Attendance has

not increased. It is a projection of a tendency that Petra Bahr describes as the image of the empty church aisles, which has become a visual sign of the Corona pandemic (Bahr 2020). It highlights that the trend of low attendance at church services may continue because of Corona. Due to the pandemic, even those who used to attend church services may become accustomed to no longer attending regularly. She also points out how performing a service in front of a hand-held camera, with no interaction with a congregation, has had an effect on pastors, organists and all those who conduct services (Bahr 2020). So despite the yearning for a sense of normalcy, parochial life will stay in a state of uncertainty and unpredictability, as the Corona pandemic is far from being over. This is why Brückner demands that the EKD, leaders of the church at regional and local levels, as well as the synods, become more vocal about the situation, one that may continue until 2022. This would make it clearer for local parishes to plan ahead and adapt their parochial community life (Brückner interview). In the author's parish, Sunday school and children's choir activities had been very cautiously taken up again, though under strict physical-distancing rules in small groups, with attendance lists and choir activities only taking place outdoors. However, this requires extensive planning by staff, with arrangements potentially collapsing if someone was tested positive for Covid-19. Many parishioners have been very thankful for the resumption of activities but also cautious at the same time. There was a mix of excitement that some forms of activities restarted, but some staff members also expressed exhaustion. Many had worked tirelessly during lockdown to reach as many members of their congregations as possible via different channels. With the second lockdown in November 2020, many activities had to pause or were transferred again to online formats. However, due to a worse economic situation, churches now have less income via church tax, which affects parochial budgets for staff and activities. Brückner reports about a “nervousness at the top” of each church administration about reduced budgets in the coming years, which will mean an inability to invest in more jobs in pastoral work especially for the vulnerable, children, youth and the elderly.

With renewed lockdowns in place having started in November and December 2020, a new topic of discussion has arisen. Contrary to the first lockdown in March/April, worship services are allowed to take place, albeit under Covid-19 conditions,

which means that each worshipper has to leave his/her contact details and wear a mask. Seating plans are according to physically-distanced hygiene rules and, if there is any singing, it must be with masks on. Many artists and people interested in the arts complain that cinemas, theatres and concert venues, which had all invested in sophisticated hygiene standards, suffered from the second lockdown whereas churches were allowed to continue worship services. Many speak of double standards, accuse Angela Merkel of “making lobby politics in favour of churches” (Stollowsky 2020), demand the “same rules for all” and an end to the exemption of churches from lockdown measures (Betschka/Volknant 2020). For Martina Steffen-Elis, a Berlin pastor, the accusations do not make sense because “during the first lockdown we were accused of just accepting the cancellation of worship services and this time around, we are accused of not showing solidarity” (Ibid.). She and many other clergy report increasing requests for pastoral care. Johann Hinrich Claussen, in charge of culture at EKD headquarters, describes how many churches have offered their space to local artists. He rightly states that this does not compensate artists for lost income, but, nevertheless, it is a show of solidarity of getting through the pandemic together (Claussen 2020).

In conclusion, the Corona pandemic has unleashed creative energy among staff and volunteers in parishes throughout the EKD, with the aforementioned examples testament to this. In a live call-in programme, Christiane Florin, editor of the religious affairs department at *Deutschlandfunk*, pointed out “that the people who were engaged and active in pastoral care in their parishes before, accepted the pandemic as an opportunity to try new forms for reaching out to their parishioners in different ways and to reach perhaps also people who had not found their way into churches before. Whereas for some others, the image of the empty church [during the first lockdown, K.N.] has been the projected image of fear of what will be the new norm in five or ten years [when even more people will have left organised religion, K.N.]” (Länderzeit, 18.11.2020). Despite the positive examples of numerous activities, several people expressed their surprise and frustration that they never received any personal message from their parishes during the pandemic, which means that it all depends on the personal activism and engagement of staff at each parish. Moreover, there is a feeling of a certain unease among some church members, and some major criticism

by several theologians and writers, that bishops and other leaders of the church did not speak up loudly enough for the vulnerable, the sick and the dying during the pandemic – at least in its early days. This criticism was directed at the two major Christian churches in Germany. For many, it was a sad acknowledgment that the Protestant and Catholic churches are no longer perceived as relevant in answering spiritual questions about life and death in an increasingly secularised German society. Yet some clergy also see these discussions as an important wakeup call that churches must focus more on the central messages of Christianity, perhaps with the help of new digital strategies and formats, which they hope will help people in complex life situations. The lockdown measures have also shown that parochial life thrives mainly through personal encounters and friendly personal communication.

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The Russian Orthodox Church and the Pandemic: Problems, Challenges, Responses

Keywords

The Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, messianism, fundamentalism, eschatology

Abstract The article discusses the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church on the pandemic of COVID-19. This research identifies and analyzes major ideological cleavages on this issue, such as the possibility of transmitting viruses via the Eucharist, the religious meaning of the pandemic, and possibilities of digitalizing the rituals. The article pays special attention to the camp of Orthodox fundamentalists, whose reaction to the corona-crisis partially follows the international model of “COVID-dissidence” and partially taps into the domestic Russian sources, such as the mainstream ideology of geopolitical Messianism, entertained by the authoritarian regime. The author argues that the Orthodox take on COVID-19 magnifies major problems of the post-Soviet Church, including the excessive reliance on the state, “magical-fundamentalist” inclinations of the religious believers, and fears of digitalization.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), after a period of hibernation under communism, accompanied by anti-religious campaigns, prosecution of the believers, and pushing religion into the margins of society, rapidly recovered during the past three decades.¹ There were less than 20 per cent of the population which identified itself with Orthodoxy in the late 1980s, whereas, since 2009, the percentage of Orthodox believers (self-identified as such) stabilised itself between 70 and 80 per cent (Velikii 2020).²

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¹ Literature on the return of the ROC to the center of social and political life in post-Soviet Russia is vast. See among others: Bremer 2013; Daniel 2006; Richters 2012; Knox 2004.

² All webpages in this article were accessed on 16 March 2021.

The Church continued to consolidate itself institutionally since the enthronement of Kirill Gundiaev as the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in 2009 (the number of parishes increased from 29 thousand to 39 thousand in the period between 2009 and 2018), and more significantly – it has latched on to the idea of becoming the ultimate moral authority in society, or, as one of the Church bishops put it, ‘the voice of people’s consciousness’ (Alfeev 2014, 85). The ROC’s presence in schools, army, artistic production, and mass media is quite palpable, while its self-anointed role as the major ideology supplier underpins the ‘traditional values’ agenda of the Russian leadership.³ The Russian Constitution was amended on 1 July 2020, by adding a block of ideological statements. The main country’s document now specifically requires the state to ‘keep the memory about ancestors who passed their ideals and the belief in God to us’ (Art. 67.1, para. 2), and establishes the traditional understanding of ‘family’ as a union of a man and a woman (Art. 72, para. 1.Ж⁴). Thus, in contradistinction to Art. 14 of the same Constitution which proclaims Russia a secular state, the aforementioned amendments documented the increased role of the ROC, and the traditional morality in the current Russian political regime.

Relationships between the secular and religious authorities are not always harmonious, however, in spite of the high degree of symbiosis and ideological compliance between the Russian regime and the ROC. The socio-political doctrine of the ROC, adopted in 2000, created a time-bomb for the Church-state relations, as it declared (Art III. 5, para. 4) that, ‘if the authority forces Orthodox believers to apostatize from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the Church should refuse to obey the state (Basis of the Social Concept 2000; Richters 2012, 18-35). The quarantine measures during the COVID-19 crisis became precisely such a pretext for the fundamentalist constituency of the Church to call for dis-

³ The reigning narrative about the ROC’s role in Russia is that separation of the Church from the State does not mean separation of the Church from society. Metropolitan Hilarion, Patriarch’s vicar, argues, ‘the Church may have and must have its own position on

societal issues, it plays its role in society and it has possibilities to collaborate with the state’ (Alfeev 2014, 23). On the role of the ROC as a moral and ideological trendsetter see: Agadjanian 2017; Laruelle 2020; Mitrofanova 2005; Simons&Westerlund 2015; Stoeckl

2016; Suslov 2014.

On the ROC’s influence in army, schools and culture see respectively: Adamsky 2020; Shnirelman 2012; Suslov 2016.

⁴ “Ж” is the letter in the Russian alphabet, which indicates this sub-paragraph.

obedience, and even, as it will be shown below, to ‘anathematise’ the authorities. This call was considered as the stab-in-the-back by the political and religious élite by those who used to be the pillar of the Kremlin’s social basis – politicised religious fundamentalists. The pandemic, thus, not only exposed internal splits in the ROC, but also turned the tables on its leadership, challenging the concept of the cordial alliance (‘symphony’) between the Church and the State in Russia (Chapnin 2020a, 96). The article argues that, the ROC magnifies secular political ideas, propagated by the mainstream ideologists, and then mirrors them back into the public sphere. These are geo-political, Messianic, conspiratorial, anti-Western, and identitarian ideas. When the fundamentalist constituency of the Church reflects on these ideas, however, they can seem intimidating and repugnant to the political leadership itself, which fails to recognise its own creatures in these visions.

The ROC has, of course, also its own, Church-specific attitudes to, and accounts with, the corona-crisis. To start with, the Church was hit hard by COVID-19. The project Sobornost, run by Sergei Chapnin, calculated the number of clerics, monks, and religious activists who died as a result of contracting (confirmed) COVID-19 as of 16 December 2020. The number is 334, including 235 in the territory of Russia.⁵ The ‘Russian’ list includes seven Metropolitans (out of 70): Varnava Kedrov, Iona Karpukhin, Isidor Kirichenko, Feofan Ashurkov, Iov Tyvoniuk, Sofronii Dmitruk, and Evlogii Smirnov; two bishops: Veniamin Korolev and Serafim Glushakov; and 17 hegumens (or abbots) and archimandrites (i.e. heads of the monasteries). These figures provide dramatic statistics of the death rates from COVID-19 in the ROC, which, in order of magnitude, is more than the world death rates in connection with the pandemic (e.g. Luchenko 2020). The corona-crisis had yet another, economic, effect on the ROC. The closure of churches meant the radical reduction of parish revenues, which otherwise took donations for performing services and selling candles and other religious items to the believers.

During the pandemic, religiosity increased, especially among the people with some kind of religious training received during their childhood and youth, and among those whose family members contracted the virus (Molteni 2020). According to the theory of terror management, religion helps people to make sense of the dramatic changes in their lives beyond their con-

⁵ ‘Proekt sobornost’, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/sobornost.project/>

trol. Quarantine measures, at the same time, considerably limited freedom to practice religion, attend services, take communion, worship relics, and participate in pilgrimages and processions. The Christian Churches, in the context of this paradox, re-launched the discussions about the societal relevance of religion in the world stricken by COVID-19. The relatively insignificant part of the religious community, mostly among the fundamentalists, embraced the eschatological viewpoint, and reinvigorated the concept of *'il Dio punitore'* – God who punishes us for our sins. The conservative Catholics, on the other hand, advanced an interpretation of the corona-crisis as a deed of Satan, intent on pursuing people, and driving them away from churches, and eventually from salvation (Sena da Silveira 2020).

The mainstream debates repudiate the 'punishing God' interpretation (Paura 2020). Magnus Striet, for example, professor of Catholic theology from the University of Freiburg in Germany, clearly expressed the idea of the virus being irrelevant to religion: 'The epidemic is fought by medicine, not prayers' (Striet 2020). The importance of the new social reality for Churches, however, is undeniable; many religious intellectuals cautiously probe new ways of thinking about Christianity in the context of the pandemic. They honed in on, for example, the issue of the Churches' humanitarian and charitable roles during the pandemic, on digitalisation of the church services and mission, and on the legal rights to limit religious freedom in this state of emergency (Moser 2020). Catholicism, historically and theologically prone towards a vision of the Church as a provider of sacrality, rites, and a mediator between God and humanity, found the inability to perform the usual collective services during the pandemic, actualised a new, quasi-Protestant understanding of the salvific mission of the Church as primarily a role model for humility and morally-informed behaviour (Cimbalo 2020, 19). The pandemic simultaneously prompted Western Churches to rethink spatiality of religion, and to turn decisively towards sanctification of the 'new temple of the confinement – the home' (Flores 2020, 52) – and towards inclusion of the digitalised religious practices into the everyday life of a believer.

The pandemic serves to justify radical proposals of the Church renovation on the reformist flank of Christianity. A Catholic philosopher, Tomas Halik, adopts the 'punishing God' concept on a more symbolic level. He sees the empty churches during the pandemic as the metaphor of internal emptiness of

the Church, which cries out for both the personal transformation and the transformation of the Church (Halik 2020). The corona-crisis also prompted reflections on whether the model of a ‘priestless Church’ could sustain individual religiosity, and retain religious motivation in the focus of human lives (Vogt 2020, 34).

The world Orthodoxy demonstrates even greater disunity regarding the issue of the pandemic, and the influence of fundamentalists is more palpable here. A part of the explanation for this, is the emphasis on the physicality of the communion, and on the communitarian practices in Orthodox religious rites, such as kissing icons, kissing the ciborium (Host bowl) after receiving the Eucharist, the tradition of common confession, and so on. The dilemma between heightened religiosity and inability to practice religion as usual during the pandemic is being perceived especially painfully by the Orthodox Churches; additionally, the religious situation in post-communist Russia is marked out by important specificities. First, most of the Church’s bishops, who came of age and received the religious education under the Soviets, tend to see the world as a hostile environment around them – the chosen few true believers. This semi-sectarian vision of a ‘cosmic war’, characteristic of all fundamentalist religious movements,⁶ distorted the ROC’s perception of the quarantine measures as another attempt of the belligerent, secular state and society to suppress their religious freedom (Luxmoore 2020). Second, the post-Soviet population – broadly speaking – has the long-term tendency to embrace survival values, and to practice adaptive behaviour.⁷ This inclination has been reinforced by the estrangement of the people from political decision-making in the present authoritarian regime (See, among others: Dawisha 2015; Gel’man 2015; Taylor 2018). An immediate result of this is the popularity of conspiratorial thinking in society. The conspiratorial explanations of the COVID-crisis have, therefore, found a very receptive soil in Russia (See, for example: Laruelle 2012; Ortmann&Heathershaw 2012; Shnirelman 2019). Finally, ideological debates in contemporary Russia are immersed in the identitarian discourses and geo-political style of thinking. The question ‘what is Russia?’ attracts considerably more attention from the experts and general public than questions about the essence of freedom, equality, justice, and so on. Debates about the religious meaning of the pandemic paradoxically coalesce with the debates on Russia’s confrontation with ‘the West’ as a result.⁸

6 On the concept of ‘cosmic wars’ see: Juergensmeyer 2003. See also studies on the ROC in the context of ‘cosmic wars’: Adamsky 2020; Mitrofanova 2005; Zygmunt&Knorre 2019; Verkhovsky 2003.

7 ‘The Inglehart-Welzer World Cultural Map (2020)’ and ‘Live Cultural Map over Time 1981-2015’, available at: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>

8 Here ‘identitarian’ implies that, political debates are steered towards discussions of Russia’s cultural authenticity and geopolitical sovereignty. On Russian political imagination see, among others: Suslov 2020; Lewis 2020.

It is important to stress that, by way of making the last methodological caveat, the article focuses on the religious worldview, which is specific for the post-Soviet Orthodox Christianity in contemporary Russia. This means that, the article is not concerned with the complex and sometimes overlapping jurisdictions of different Orthodox Churches outside the territory of the Russian Federation. The important marker of relevance of the article's sources is their presence in the Russian-speaking, religious media. The bulk of material for this article comes from the ROC inside Russia, whereas references to the discourses, originating in the Orthodox world outside Russia, are only occasionally made, when the Russian-speaking audience engages with them.

Official-conservative position

The outbreak of the coronavirus in Italy in February 2020, meant that, the administration of the Orthodox parishes in this country issued a statement, ordering priests to rigorously follow the government's quarantine instructions, including closure of the churches (Sevriuk 2020). The liberal approach to the problem, epitomised by archimandrite Cyril Hovorun, a professor of theology at the Loyola Marymount University in California, maintains that, viruses are part of God's creation, and they are not essentially 'evil', even if they can and do kill people: the same could be said of lions and bears – dangerous for humans as they might be, they are part of God's creation, not devil's work. This means that, there is no theological obstacle to accept the Eucharist itself (i.e., wine and bread) can transmit contagious diseases, and that necessary sanitary measures are due in the churches during pandemics (Hovorun 2020a; Nedelescu 2020).

The reaction of the ROC within Russia was different, oscillating between two extremities: unconditional acceptance of the quarantine measures introduced by the secular authorities, and decisive repudiation of the idea that, the holy objects and rites can transmit a disease. Representatives of the ROC in the press conference in Moscow on 3 March 2020, unequivocally said that, the Eucharist could not transmit viruses, but it did not mean that, believers, praying in the same premises, would not spread diseases among them ("Na press-konferentsii" 2020). The highest clerics and functionaries of the ROC, Metropolitan

Hilarion Alfeev, the vicar of the Patriarch, and Vladimir Legoida, chair of the PR department of the ROC, worked out and voiced the official position of the Church along the same theological lines: the Eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ, cannot infect people, but physical containers of the Eucharist can. The Church leadership introduced disposable ritual objects, and instructed the priests to regularly sanitise them; at the same time, they emphatically denied the possibility of closing down churches (Alfeev 2020a; Legoida 2020b).

The situation in the Russian capital and elsewhere were heightened during the spring of 2020. The Church came up with specific sanitary instructions for the priests on 17 March. This included disinfecting the spoon for the communion, laying of the cross on the heads of the communicants instead of allowing them to kiss the cross, using hygienic, disposable gloves and glasses to wash down the Eucharist, and more (“Instruktsiia nastoiateliam...” 2020). Metropolitan Hilarion admitted that, the Church would not confront the secular authorities, if they decided to close churches as part of the extraordinary, anti-epidemic measures (Alfeev 2020b); meanwhile, on 18 March, Russia banned foreigners from entering the country and flights and train connections with other countries were gradually being cancelled. The quarantine (the word ‘quarantine’ was not used – it was called ‘self-isolation’) was introduced in Russia on 25 March 2020, a decision taken by its President Vladimir Putin for the period 30 March – 3 April, which was later on extended to 30 April. To make matters worse, Easter in 2020 was on 19 April, during the quarantine, which created a painful dilemma for many practising Orthodox people; not attending the main religious celebration was utterly abhorrent.

The official position of the Church on the matter of closing churches was considered by some religious analysts as indecisive and self-damaging, driving the leadership into deadlock. Alignment with the state position led to alienation of masses of believers, while assuming the position of intransigence meant open disobedience of the state. Patriarch Kirill Gundiaev, head of the ROC, reacted to these measures by urging the clerics and lay people to follow the example of Maria of Egypt, and refrain from attending churches (Gundiaev 2020). Many believers, however, understood this address as a recommendation, and ignored it. Referring to the words of the Patriarch, one of the priests responded to the question of a parishioner about the pos-

sibility of attending services: ‘You can follow his call [and stay home]’.⁹ It is difficult not to hear a note of disapproval in this recommendation. Critics of the Patriarch’s address argue that, he could have said with greater finality that he ‘blessed’ (i.e., ordered) them not to go to the church (Fedosov 2020; Soldatov 2020). Dodging responsibility, the Church authorities delegated the decision on closing churches during Easter to the lower level. The common trope of the leaders of the Russian Orthodoxy had always been to ‘go out of the church fence’ and make the Church’s voice loud in societal debates (for example Rediger 2007). When the crucial time came, however, it turned out that, the ROC’s voice was faltering; as a result, many religious centres whose leaders and monks were sceptical about the quarantine, turned into infection hotspots, which ultimately decimated the inhabitants. This happened, among others, in the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius and the Kiev Pechersk Lavra – the most venerated monasteries in the ROC.

The second front on which the official-conservative line fights against the ‘reformist opposition’ in the ROC, is the interpretation of the religious meaning of the pandemic. Reformists say that, the pandemic is God’s punishment for the priests’ and bishops’ sumptuous lifestyle, emphasis on the ritualistic forms of practising the religion, strengthening ties with the Russian political regime, and other vices (e.g. Badmaev 2020; Velikanov 2020). The COVID-crisis, according to this understanding, should trigger major internal rejuvenation of the Church. To undermine this demand for reforms, the conservative Church publicist Aleksandr Shchipkov pontificates: ‘epidemics have no connection with the will of God. This is an ordeal, one of many, which we overcome in our lives’ (Shchipkov 2020a). The official interpretation of the religious meaning of the corona-crisis, thus builds on the concept of ‘normalisation’ of the crisis as one among many other ‘trials’. The whole life of a Christian, in this vision, is nothing more than a sequence of ‘trials’, which people should use in order to prepare for eternal life after death. Priest Igor’ Sil’chenkov explains in his sermon, God is using the corona-crisis like any other calamity to check one’s virtuousness. He argues, in people’s daily lives, individuals rarely commit overt and grave sins such as murder, fornication, or theft, and they tend to lull their consciousness into the false belief that, they are righteous, but they are not. The epidemic shows that, people easily fall into ‘minor’ but still pernicious sins of dejection, resent-

9 Father Aleksandr Oblaukhov’s response to the question, 31 March 2020, available at: https://vk.com/topic-25505827_37176345?offset=600

ment, and irritation, for instance. Thanks to this ‘test’, therefore, people can recognise their hidden sins, eradicate them, and thus save their souls (Sil’chenkov 2020).

Vladimir Legoida, the head of the PR department of the Moscow Patriarchate, put forward a similar argument. He simultaneously mounted criticism against the global, secular world, when he called the pandemic a necessary ‘shakeup’ for humanity. Humanity, he believed, had become too infatuated with consumerism, and had forgotten about really important things (Legoida 2020). This approach is also in line with the model of the post-Soviet proclivity for adaptive behaviour, discussed above (Levada 2001): a moment of hardship is part of God’s plan to train people as good Christians and prepare them for heaven; the task of a believer is to endure this trial with humility. The official position, however, fails to account for the uniqueness and the massive scale of the present crisis, and the ROC’s representation of it as something usual and relatively unimportant. The Church differs from the expectation of the believers who are affected by the virus and the quarantine, and crave to understand their religious meaning. Banalisation of the corona-crisis is another sign that, the ROC, contrary to its claims of setting the public agenda, avoids speaking about matters of concern for the Russians.

It should also be admitted here that, the ‘normalisation’ narrative serves the purpose of avoiding panic moods among the population. Indeed, the Orthodox clergy is (numerically) dominated by those who hold sober and rational views on the corona pandemic. The sample of 16 priests, who regularly responded to the believers’ questions on social media, shows that, only one of them denied the possibility of contagion via the Eucharist, while the rest of them espoused a more science-informed attitude. They insisted that, religion deals with spiritual illnesses, and cannot guarantee physical health. This means that, people who believe they are so righteous that God would save them from viruses, fall into the deadly sin of pride.¹⁰ The priests (respondents) from the sample said that people should follow the calls of Patriarch Kirill and other dignitaries to observe all sanitary measures. Priests such as Georgii Khristach, Andrei Mekriukov, and Sergei Shirapov, for instance, called conspiracy theories about COVID-19 ‘nonsense’.

At the same time, four out of 16 priests expressed cautious apprehension: they suggested that, this might be ‘preparation’

10 E.g., Father Petr Gur’ianov’s response to the question, 15 March 2020, available at: https://vk.com/topic-25505827_31794807?offset=2740

for the Anti-Christ. They gave some specific recommendations on how a believer would recognise the last days. Hegumen (abbot) Luka Stepanov, for example, mentioned that, the Anti-Christ would come when the world was unipolar, and governed by one president.¹¹ Father Sergii Romanov admitted that, the corona-crisis was the sign of the impending ‘last days’, but we were not yet ‘there’ because many other things should happen first.¹² Archpriest Aleksandr Oblaukhov said that, vaccination ‘is not yet the stamp of the Anti-Christ’, because when the last days came, people would be explicitly, not metaphorically, asked if they would renounce Christ or not.¹³ The sample shows that, the ‘grassroots clerics’, unlike many lay people, did not display any tendency towards fundamentalist beliefs in the magical powers of the Eucharist, but, it is also remarkable that, many of them were, nevertheless, thinking about the corona-crisis in the context of the Apocalypse.

The third front of debates between the reformists and the conservative hardliners runs across the issue of digitalisation, spurred on by the closure of churches. Transmission of sermons and religious services online is nothing new for the Orthodoxy, but the possibility of the communion online is vigorously debated. Two Orthodox priests in the Ukraine ministered the ‘online liturgy’ in May 2020; participants displayed the Holy Sacrament (wine and bread) via their cameras to the priest on the video-conference program (such as *Zoom*), who blessed it from a distance, and thereby performed transubstantiation (Guliamov 2020). The logic behind this procedure is, digital transmission of images is merely a medium between the eyes of a priest and the Holy Sacrament – similar to how a priest wearing glasses can still administer the Eucharist, despite the fact that, he sees bread and wine through the lenses. This practice met fierce condemnation and resistance by the majority of the ROC and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The ROC’s leadership proposed that, believers would invite priests to their private homes in order to perform the liturgy there, instead of online. The above-mentioned sample of 16 priests displayed a unanimous rejection of the possibility of the Eucharist online, and two of them categorically denied the validity of online confession. This ‘digital anxiety’ is hardwired into the ROC theology and religious practice (more on this: Suslov 2016). The new reality of the quarantine cannot simultaneously shake these complex beliefs and emotions.

11 Hegumen Luka Stepanov’s response to the question, 24 April 2020, available at: https://vk.com/topic-25505827_24476231?offset=3120>

12 Father Sergii Romanov’s response to the question, 20 April 2020, available at: https://vk.com/topic-25505827_37297023?offset=220>

13 Father Aleksandr Oblaukhov’s response to the question, 18 May 2020, available at: https://vk.com/topic-25505827_37176345?offset=600>

This section exposed three conflicting zones emerging from the corona-crisis in the Russian Orthodoxy: the possibility of contagion in the Church, the meaning of the pandemic, and digitalisation of the church services. The cleavage between reformist and conservative church thinkers was the focus here. The next section puts the spotlight on the ‘game-changer’ in these debates: the sudden, crystallised fundamentalist opposition to the religious mainstream.

Fundamentalist position

The ‘Fundamentalism Project’ carried out at the Chicago University between 1987 and 1995, viewed fundamentalism as an attempt ‘to arrest the erosion of religious identity’ (Almond, Appleby and Sivan 2003, 17). Fundamentalism’s basic features from this viewpoint are opposition to the processes of marginalisation of religion, intertwining of the elements of modernity and traditionalism, moral manichaeism, belief in absolute truth of the sacred corpus of religious texts, millennialism and Messianism, sharp boundaries between the apostate, secular ‘outside world’ and ‘true believers’, and the tendency towards authoritarian practices in organising religious communities (Marty&Appleby 1995, 399-424). Keeping this definition in mind, we can identify the fundamentalist interpretation of the corona-crisis as a belief that, this is the last warning and the last sign of the impending Apocalypse. The quarantine measures are a kind of God’s trial, in this sense, which is the very last and decisive one; if people fail to manifest their allegiance to God, skip the Church services, and are afraid to take communion, they will forfeit their ‘rights’ for salvation. This understanding pushes fundamentalists towards disobedience of the Church authority, and conflict with secular powers. The COVID-crisis highlighted the relatively insignificant group of fundamentalist Orthodox believer. It also made it obvious that, the actual core of Orthodox fundamentalism was not a handful of politicised, marginal activists who pillaged ‘blasphemous’ museum exhibitions, and threatened to impale the film director who represented the last Russian tsar as a romantic hero;¹⁴ the vast majority of churchgoers believed their faith would save them from infections. This ‘magical fundamentalism’, as religious analyst Sergei Chapnin dubbed it, saw the Holy Sacrament as having super-

¹⁴ Episodes, referred to here are: Aleksandr Kalinin, the head of the movement ‘Orthodox State’, spoke about punishing Aleksei Uchitel, film director, for irreverent portrayal of tsar Nicholas II in the film ‘Matil’da’ (e.g.: Kots&Chelyshev 2017). Dmitry Tsorionov, the head of the Orthodox movement ‘God’s Will’, violently attacked the art exhibition of the religious sculptor Vadim Sidur (e.g. Nazarets, Pal’veleva and Vol’tskaia 2015).

powers of sorts, which would make true believers immune to all harm and illnesses (Chapnin 2020b; see also Hovorun 2020b).

The fundamentalist approach found its magisterial way of expression in the theological belief that, infection could not be transmitted during the liturgy. The fundamentalist streak in Orthodoxy, dissimilar to the official line of the ROC, saw no distinctions between the Eucharist *per se* and its containers. It argues that, everything connected to the ritual of the communion is 'holy', be it the ritual itself, ritualistic objects, or even the physical building of the church. Father Makarii Markish, the founder of the online social media for Orthodox believers 'Elitsy', responded to the question about the Eucharist and COVID-19. He said, 'the Church states that the Holy Sacrament does not transmit contagion.'¹⁵ One of the parishioners expressed his thoughts on the Orthodox TV channel *Spas*, 'I firmly believe that the Eucharist transforms into the body and blood of Christ during the liturgy, so how can I possibly admit that Christ transmits contagion?'¹⁶

According to this logic, what is 'holy' is also 'healthy'. Bishop Amvrosii Skobiola claims, 'our Lord is our medicine and doctor' (Skobiola 2020). Indeed, there are some Orthodox priests, many of whom have access to various media channels, who are emphatic about the Church's ability to heal physical illnesses. The most common discourse around this topic is that, people never get ill after many decades of regularly taking communion together with others, and without any sanitary concerns. Father Andrei Lemeshonok, hegumen of one monastery in Belarus, repeatedly pointed at his own and his colleagues' experience of consuming the Holy Sacrament after communion, in which tuberculosis patients took part, with no obvious harm to the health of the priests (Lemeshonok 2020a and 2020b). Father Igor Latushko from Belarus confirmed this observation, adding his own: after the radioactive fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear plant, dosimeters went off in Belarus, but in churches, they showed zero radioactivity (Latushko 2020). Another assertion claims the ring of the church bells kills viruses, so, the best medicine against COVID-19 is to attend church as often as possible, and listen to the bells. This prejudice had to be 'officially' repudiated on the pages of the Church journal *Foma* (Bogdanova 2020).

Orthodox believers adhering to this 'magical fundamentalism' considered quarantine measures blasphemous, and sought

¹⁵ Father Makarii Markish's post, *elitsy.ru*, 18 May 2020, available at: <https://dialog.elitsy.ru/expert/15728/>

¹⁶ Elena Skorokhodova's remark on the TV show 'RE: Aktsiia', *TV channel Spas*, 25 March 2020, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-W5wJ8Eny4>

possibilities to manifest their unshakable faith by ignoring sanitary instructions altogether in churches. According to their creed, God would not allow His faithful believers to contract a disease, therefore, if priests and lay people become sick and die, this is because either their death is part of God's designs, and unfathomable for mortal humans, or because they simply are not faithful enough. The reverse is also true: if people are afraid to kiss crosses and the Eucharist bowl, or to take the spoon with the Holy Sacrament into their mouths, they have too little faith (Skobiola 2020). Ignoring the sanitary restrictions thus becomes a matter of testing people on the firmness of their religious beliefs. Archpriest and film director Aleksandr Novopashin, while criticising Father Cyril Hovorun's theological opinion, insisted on the impossibility for the faithful flock to contract the virus, and proffered an idea that, the corona-crisis serves as the ultimate test, separating those 'who truly believe in Christ... and those who betrayed and sold out everyone because of their cowardice and meanness' (Novopashin 2020). Father Roman Matiushin expressed the position of the Orthodox 'COVID-dissidents' in the axiom:

Nobody kisses crosses!
 People are avoiding holy icons as hotbeds of diseases:
 Holy relics are not holy for people of little faith!
 (Matiushin 2020).

When kissing relics and attending churches became a matter of testing faith, and manifesting one's readiness to suffer and die in the name (and in imitation of) Christ, the fundamentalist part of the flock immediately turned to dissidence to the state and to the Church leaders who collaborated with the state. Contrary to the established, post-Soviet tradition according to which the ardent, fundamentalist-inclined, Orthodox believers would automatically be supporters of the state in its struggle with the Westernised, liberal part of the population; the corona-crisis ushered in the new reality. Soviet-time memories about a repressive, atheistic state, imbricated with the growing dissatisfaction with the declining living standards, stalled economic growth, and the retirement-age extension reform thus became the new norm.¹⁷ Indeed, the rhetorical framing of the fundamentalist position often recycled the memories of the religious underground in the Soviet Union. COVID-deniers described themselves as 'dissidents' and '*inakomyслиashchii*' (non-orthodox thinking people,

¹⁷ Sociologists and political observers argue that, the so-called 'Crimean consensus' is over, when a considerable majority of the population supported the Russian leadership in exchange for the feeling of the regained pride as a 'great power'. Ratings of the Russian political leaders, Putin included, and state institutions are markedly falling; for example, trust in Putin dropped from 60% in 2017 to 25% in May 2020 ("Doverie politikam" 2020).

mavericks), juxtaposed to the oppressive secular majority (Druz' 2020). Fundamentalist disobedience to the state-imposed quarantine measures, in this context, exemplifies the broader atmosphere of distrust of institutions. This is especially true, when it comes to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which is traditionally more fundamentalistically-oriented than the ROC, and more suspicious of the Russian secular state and the Moscow Patriarchate. Bishops of this Church even relate to the COVID-crisis as an eschatological sign and the global plot against Christianity. Amvrosii Timrot, for example, spoke against wearing masks (because this was the ancient earmark of a slave), and against regular washing of hands, because it evoked parallels with Pontius Pilate's washing his hands before sentencing Jesus Christ to death (Timrot 2020).

The fundamentalist take on the pandemic caters to the feeling of exceptionalism among the radicalised flock. Exceptionalism could be 'positive' and 'negative'. The country can entertain the vision of the self as the best possible in the world – the 'city on a hill'¹⁸ – but it can also be motivated by the opposite self-perception as the worst – the most wretched, unhappy, disorganised, and worthless country and people. This second version of exceptionalism taps into the religious concept of *kenosis* – self-emptying and self-belittling in imitation of Christ: 'the last shall be first' (Mathew 20:16) and 'blessed are the poor' (Luke 6:20). One can observe multiple iterations of this *kenotic* exceptionalism in the past and present of Russian intellectual culture (e.g. Uffelmann 2010; Ely 2002). The *kenotic*-Messianic take on the quarantine measures becomes manifest in the words of Genady Dorofeev, an Orthodox writer and journalist, who described his participation in the Easter service in circumvention of the official prohibition:

We are sinners [...]. There are no righteous persons among us. The righteous ones are now welcoming the risen Christ in front of their TV sets [...]. This satanic illness has torn away masks from our souls [...]. Quiet and ridiculous persons turned out to be strong and manly. But it does not happen for the first time in the world. This is only the reminder of the Evangelical story. Apostles, Christ's most devoted disciples ran away in panic, locked them off, closed doors and windows [...]. Only shy women were together with Christ to the end and after the end (Dorofeev 2020).

18 U.S. exceptionalism provides an interesting case for comparison. See, among many other studies: Lipset 1996.

This excerpt unequivocally suggests that, violation of the quarantine prohibition, imposed by the secular and religious authorities, is a feat of kenotic glory, when the wretched sinners suddenly turn into the last faithful Christians; another aspect of kenotic reading of the COVID-crisis consists of discussions about the balance between spiritual and corporal health, and the role of faith in everyday life. According to the ‘magic fundamentalist’ position, quarantine measures represent excessive taking care of a body at the expense of the soul. The ‘cult of body’ is vocally castigated, while the conviction that, God attends to people’s bodily health, if they see to their spiritual health is propagated on the grounds that ‘even the very hairs of your head are all numbered’ (Matthew 10:30).¹⁹ All in all, an undisguised disobedience to the state in dealing with the COVID-19 condenses several layers of positive valorisation of such behaviour: dissidence to the Godless state, a sinner-turned-saint trope, and the role model of ‘saving the soul by killing the body’.

The most vivid example of the religious fundamentalist dissidence is the much-discussed case of hegumen Sergii Romanov, the former head of a monastery in Yekaterinburg, who not only denied quarantine measures in a church, but also publicly damned those who followed sanitary restrictions (Romanov 2020). Father Sergii overtly blamed President Vladimir Putin for ‘creating the fascist concentration camp of Satan’ by adopting digital identification of citizens, and closing down churches (“Otets Sergii prizval” 2020). The Church court decided to expel him from a priesthood status for disobedience (24 July 2020), and later on, excommunicated him from the Church (10 September 2020); however, he continues his schismatic activities, and rallies a tangible group of supporters around him (Chapnin 2020c).

Metropolitan Longin Korchagin of Saratov on a less dramatic note, condemned the state’s ‘mad decision’ to close churches, and declared that, by his decision, churches would not be closed in this diocese during the celebration of Easter. This would become, he stated in this Facebook account, the lesson for everyone, showing ‘the actual attitude of the state to the Church and the Russian people.’²⁰ He tried to cover up the harshness of his tone soon thereafter, but a reaction nevertheless followed: on 25 August 2020 he was removed from his See in Saratov, and sent to a less significant diocese as – presumably – an act of punishment for his dissidence (Faustova 2020).

19 Konstantin V’s response to the discussion thread of 16 November 2020, available at: https://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2020/11/14/o_aleksii_denisov_koviddissidenty_silno_zabluzhdayutsya

20 Metropolitan Longin Korchagin’s post of 18 April 2020, available at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=711098769625644&id=100021765816130

Another component of dissatisfaction with the political regime and personally with President Vladimir Putin came from the smouldering fears of digitalisation. The Russian Orthodoxy has always been susceptible to eschatological expectations, and time and again, exploded with panic around the ‘stamp of Antichrist’, predicted in the Book of Apocalypse. The quarantine measures in Russia included the need to obtain a digital code, which allowed people to exit their homes and move around in the cities. This code, together with the rumours about ‘liquid chips’, being injected into people during the vaccination campaign, aroused eschatological concerns among the believers that, the Antichrist had come, and hence, people faced the dilemma of surrendering to him and accepting his ‘stamp’ or remaining faithful to Christ by rejecting the quarantine measures and vaccination. Fears of the ‘liquid chips’ and other rumours were disseminated by the group of religious activists *Sorok sorokov*, archpriest Maksim Kolesnik (2020), and especially film director and propagator of conservative and religious ideas, Nikita Mikhalkov. Mikhalkov’s *Youtube* video clip with the alarming music in the background, argues that, the global government, presided over by Bill Gates and other American tycoons, intended to implant ‘liquid chips’ in order to reduce the Earth’s population (Mikhalkov 2020).²¹

Following the pattern established in the previous section, this one homes in on three focal points in the debates between the fundamentalists and the rest of the Church: impregnability of the holy relics by viruses, religious meaning of disobedience to the state-induced quarantine measures, and the perniciousness of digitalisation. The next and final section pays particular attention to one aspect of the fundamentalist thinking about COVID-19, namely, the relationship of the pandemic to the global geopolitical problems.

Geopolitical and conspiratorial interpretations

Orthodox fundamentalists merge eschatological and conspiratorial narratives with the claim of Russia’s spiritual superiority in comparison to other Christian countries; by extension of the fundamentalist logic, analysed in the previous section, the quarantine measures undertaken in Western Christian Churches, are considered as a weakness of faith. It should be noted that, the

²¹ Cf. another moral panic COVID vaccination was initiated by Cardinal Antonio Cañizares, who feared that vaccines would be produced from unborn fetuses (Lorenzo 2020).

vision of the West as the place of apostasy and moral corruption has been persistently circulating in the religious and secular Russian media in the past two decades. Metropolitan Hilarion, for example, called liberalising tendencies in Western Christian Churches ‘treason’, as a result of which ‘Christianity loses its internal force, and stops being attractive, so churches become empty’ (Alfeev 2014, 192). Patriarch Kirill likewise maintained that, empty churches in the ‘West’ were the sign of forgetting about the concepts of sin and morality, and pandered to the egoistic whims of the fallen man (Gundiaev 2009a, 19). Kirill also sees infatuation with the ideals of Enlightenment in Western theology; in his view, it is the sign of surrender to the spirit of secularism (Gundiaev 2009b, 129). Patriarch Kirill insisted elsewhere that, Russia should always remember its ‘spiritual primogeniture’ in relation to the West, meaning Russia’s superiority in religious issues (Gundiaev 2009a, 146-7).

When the religious leaders spoke about secularism, amoralism, and anti-Christian tendencies, they consistently kept in the back of their minds that, these evils originated in ‘the West’, and from there, they threatened to engulf Russia, implying primarily such things as women’s priesthood, acceptance of same-sex marriages, and tolerance towards LGBT+ people. Indeed, for Patriarch Kirill, all Western Europe is the hostile world, because, as he explicitly stated, European values as we know them today, emerged from the non-Christian grounds (Gundiaev 2010, 120). One of the Orthodox activists juxtaposed apostate Western Churches to faithful Russia in the following verses he created:

The soul is torn apart,
Will Paris, Rome, and Berlin fall?
They are sitting in the prison cells,
And believe that this is quarantine.

... I kiss the icon in the church,
I kiss the cross and worship it,
My Russia is standing in front of God,
And will always be standing until the end of time!
(Krasil’nikov 2020).

This juxtaposition to the West is aligned with the Messianic perception of Russia’s uniqueness, and its global salvific role.²² *Ruskline.ru* – the outspokenly fundamentalist Orthodox news

22 On Russian Messianism see, for example: Curanović 2019; Duncan 2002.

portal adopted the geopolitical-Apocalyptic interpretation of the COVID-crisis. This may vary in ideological articulation, but the bottom line is the same: the pandemic is the result of some geopolitically-external hostile, anti-Christian, and anti-Russian forces. Publicists of this news outlet argue, for example, that the pandemic is the result of the godless and Satanic tendencies in the West such as normalisation of trans-gender persons in Norway (Rybakov 2020); another publicist aligns God's pandemic ordeal with the cartoon of Prophet Mohammed in France, and offensive attitudes to religion in the secular 'West', in general (Chudinova 2020). The concept of God who punishes sinful humanity comes to the fore in all these cases, and acquires a geopolitical shade.

'Magical fundamentalism' absorbs elements of Russian geopolitical Messianism, and allies with the conspiratorial stream in Russian political Orthodoxy. The pandemic for them, as for many other COVID-dissidents across the globe, is nothing more but the media 'hype', initiated by some powerful and hidden financial centres for the purpose of consolidating their iron grip over humanity, and manipulating people's opinions and emotions (Timrot 2020; Prokhvatilov 2020). The narrative about COVID-19, as part of the information warfare (arguably targeting Russia), gained much traction in the fundamentalist milieu (Larina 2020). Aleksandr Shchipkov, for example, interpreted the quarantine measures as a gigantic experiment, initiated by the 'liberal fundamentalists' in the West, who wanted to implant fear in society, block critical thinking, and ultimately making Russia forget about its 'vocation' and civilization identity (Shchipkov 2020b). This secular version of the conspiratorial narrative in Orthodox believers' circles, is supplemented and reinforced by the idea that, the ultimate beneficiary of the 'corona-panic' is the devil. It becomes clear for the fundamentalist-conspirators in this context that, closure of the churches for quarantine purposes is the part of the devil's plan to hinder people's way to salvation.

Ruskline.ru also explores the conspiratorial angle of the geopolitical interpretation of COVID-19. Valentin Katasonov, one of its publicists, for example, maintains that, the pandemic was initiated and orchestrated by the global anti-Christian plot, acting through such international organisations as WHO and IMF (Katasonov 2020). The reality of the virus and the pandemic is a variable: some accept it as an empirical fact, others do not –

but the consensual opinion on *ruskline.ru* is that, the virus, real or otherwise, created a massive media-pandemic, which has its evil curators, hidden beneficiaries, and domestic agents (e.g. Romanov Igor' 2020a). One of the publicists of *ruskline.ru* penned, 'the more traitors, corrupt functionaries, and homosexuals there are in Russia, the greater the pandemic of COVID' (Romanov Igor' 2020b).

This section has related the Messianic, geopolitical, and conspiratorial thinking about COVID-19 with the broader ideological context of today's Russia. It has demonstrated that, the fundamentalist reaction to the pandemic had not come from the fringes of the public sphere, but instead, stemmed from the ideological mainstream of the last decade or so, which took its shape during President Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012, and the so-called 'conservative turn' in Russian politics (Suslov&Uzlaner 2019).

Conclusion

The period of the pandemic augmented the already present problems of the ROC, and made covert problems more visible and debatable. Observers point at the impending crisis, which is looming large behind the façade of the officially unassailable monolith of the Russian Orthodoxy. The contours of this crisis, which are becoming visible through the perspective of the pandemic, include the following components. First, the widening divisions between the centre-conservative part of the Church, and its reformist and fundamentalist flanks; on the one hand, the 'official ROC' is cutting itself off from the sources of renovation, and on the other, it is running the risk that, its social basis will shrink considerably. Second, the interrelationship between the religious fundamentalist camp and the secular regime ideology; in this light, the fundamentalist flock of the Church is nothing more than the amplified results of the state's efforts to nurture political passivity among the population, augmented by the ideologies of geopolitical exceptionalism and isolationism. Third, the Church's over-reliance on the state within the concept of the 'symphonia' of the secular and religious authorities. This questions the ability of the ROC to carry out a meaningful dialogue with society, and to take responsibility for advising on a religious way of actions in non-religious, everyday life. Finally, the continuation of

the ‘digital anxiety’ among the ROC’s clerics and lay people comes into obvious conflict with the increasing digitalisation of all social spheres as an instrument of mitigating the corona-crisis. The pandemic is the ‘moment of truth’ for the ROC, when it is able to meaningfully address the above-mentioned issues, and prove to be socially relevant to Russian society as a whole, lest it retreats into splendid isolation, and entertains the sectarian self-perception as an island of chastity in the sea of apostasy.

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Temasektion

GOD IS TELLING US SOMETHING

Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's Peshar and Socio-Political Pantheism of Coronavirus

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic, Modern Judaism, Ultra-Orthodoxy, Peshar, Midrash, Socio-Political Pantheism, Eschatology, Baalei Teshuva.

Abstract The conflicting and different reactions to Covid-19 pandemic, ranging from a willingness to cooperate with health authorities to a violent rejection of all decisions and measures suggested or taken by local and international authorities are but expressions of framing meanings of and finding answers to why Covid-19 broke out on a such global scale beyond biological boundaries. This is to show why epidemics such as Covid-19 deserve to be investigated within their broader cultural, political, scientific, and geographic contexts. Religion or the religious rationale once again has made itself a site of interest in the public space; both as one of the many competing explanatory frameworks and as a scapegoat for contributing to the breakdown of the social order and for promoting unscientific, irrational and superstitious understandings and interpretations of Covid-19. As a matter of fact, certain religious communities across all the Abrahamic religions do present theological and eschatological interpretations of the pandemic. As we shall see, Messianic Jewish groups actually present a hermeneutical framework that consists of a theological-eschatological framework of the Covid-19 pandemic and a socio-political pantheism plan of action the aim of which is to maintain the believer immune to the attacks of secularism and its ills. On the latter point, I find Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's explanatory framework of the Covid-19 pandemic very informative as both to how the religious rationale is still at work in post-secular societies, and why Jewish ultra-orthodoxy's theological-eschatological explanation and social pantheist response are worth investigating. In this article, Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's "perception, interpretation and response" to the Covid-19 pandemic and its global impact on both the biological and the social aspects shall be the primary subject of our analysis.

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In this article, I set out to investigate Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's response to this new virus – Coronavirus (Covid-19) through the lens of his political theology and biblical exegesis, particularly the latter's main components: **Pesher** – Eschatological exegesis – and **midrash** – socio-political pantheistic exegesis. Through a presentation of Rabbi Yitzhak's explanation of the cause(s), timing and meaning of this transnational deadly pandemic, this article will examine the religious rationale, its theological underpinnings and its political and social impact on the Jewish “ultra-orthodox” communities, chief among them the community of *Ba`alaei Teshuva* in Israel. The main reason behind this investigation is to show why epidemics – such as the one we are in the middle of – namely Covid-19 pandemic – needs to be framed beyond the biological boundaries. As we have seen, religious authorities, whether rabbis, clerics, or imams have responded to both Covid-19 pandemics and the measures taken by political and health authorities. We know also that their responses have a huge impact on the public. The response of Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak to the Covid-19 pandemic, its wide diffusion in primetime TV-programming, and its impact on a huge segment of the ultra-orthodox population cut to the heart of the history of religions, history of medicine and political theology. While attending to the spirituality of the flock, Rabbi Amnon caters to their social agency and political orientation by offering them an explanatory framework and requiring obedience to the divine office as a rabbi. As to the Covid-19 pandemic, which he considers an eschatological sign with a double meaning: a) a warning to the ungodly that the end is near, calling upon them to repent, and b) a fortification for the godly, that they are at the threshold of redemption. Epidemics and plagues, the Bible tells us, are double edged violent enunciations of God's wrath and blessings. Wrath against God's foes and blessings for his friends. To uncover Amnon Yitzhak's explanatory framework of the Covid-19 pandemic as an expression of the pastoral power that stands behind the religious rationale, I shall discuss two areas:

1. Socio-political pantheism (Midrash) as an ideology of non-compliance and change.
2. Eschatological exegesis (Pesher) of the Covid-19 pandemic

I shall also argue that Rabbi Yitzhak's interaction, understanding and interpretation of the Covid-19 pandemic, to which many Jews and non-Jews subscribe, is not a blunt rejection of science or rationality, but rather a rejection of secularism and modernism's tenet that "modern science is a practice which can only be fully understood on the basis of itself and performatively establishes the criterion of all that is true or false." (Habermas 2008:210) What goes for modernism's perception of truth and position towards religious epistemology, goes for secularisation theory's perception that religion's political theology and/or pastoral power are a thing of premodern societies. (Biale 1986; Büttgen 2007; Sabih 2016, 2019).

God is telling us something

Back in the month of April 2020 at the time when the death toll began to rise among the Haredi communities (tagged as ultra-orthodox Jews), the interior minister and leader of the Sephardi Haredi Shas party, Rabbi Aryeh Deri, said: "We need to do very deep soul-searching...*God is telling us something*." Overtly, Deri is catering to his Haredi constituency by addressing the Covid-19's pandemic impact upon them, but overtly proposing an explanatory framework that tallies with the rabbinic traditional understanding of, *inter alia*, plagues, epidemics etc. His question – as a propositional enunciation – could look like a **peshet** and/or **midrash question**. Overtly, Rabbi Deri's propositional enunciation "we need to do very deep soul-searching...*God is telling us something*" confirms that the infectious nature of Covid-19 pandemic is real, and the Haredi community and Israeli society are affected and impacted by it. At the same time, he, in his capacity of being an interior minister, Rabbi and leader of the Mizrahi Haredi political party Shas, proposes a practical course of action as how to deal with this deadly airborne virus. Addressing the Haredi community while catering to their spiritual and material needs, he frames his response within a theological and exegetical framework. Covid-19, in Haredi discourse – as we shall see – is packed in as a *mysterious* (heb. *raz*) and *violent* (heb. *hamas*) virus, but at the same time this pandemic is a fulfilment of a biblical prophecy (heb. *nevu'ah*) which at the time when it was given to the prophet in question was considered a mystery. Thirdly, a mystery that fulfils a prophecy is, according to religious

rationale, is a *confirmation* of the truthfulness of the sign/proph-
 ecy and a *revelation* of God's power. Covid-19 pandemic is God's
 message to humans and needs to be de-coded and its lessons to
 be heeded. In the Hebrew Bible, epidemics and plagues are God's
 violent language addressed to humans. To understand that God
 is telling us something – and if it is the case that Covid-19 pan-
 demic is a message from God – one needs not only to explain its
 immediate causes, content, implications – whether ethical, so-
 cial or political – but also propose an adequate course of action
 to be taken. For decoding this mystery – the Covid-19 pandem-
 ic-Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak proposes reading this as an eschatolog-
 ical sign (peshet exegesis) that requires drawing the right social
 and political management of this virus (midrash exegesis).
 Through the latter, Rabbi Yitzhak makes connections between
 new realities and the unchanging biblical text.

Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's pastoral power: "returnee to religion"

Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak (b. 1953) – a well-known preacher and
 politician – is one of the most outspoken neo-traditionalists,
 who is often associated with the Sephardi or Mizrahi Haredi ul-
 tra-orthodox movement in Israel (Lintl 2020). In addition, and
 this is what, in my view, is the most important point that illus-
 trate this Rabbi's pastoral power, he is considered one of the
 founders of the *Ba`alei Teshuva* movement in Israel¹. *Ba`alei Te-*

1 He himself is believed to be a
 returnee to religion (*ba`al teshuva*)
 at the age of twenty-four. In 1986,
 Rabbi Yitzhak founded the Shofar
 Society. He is believed to be a leading
 figure among ultra-traditional rabbis
 to use the new technology of the
 Internet. Before that, he was one of
 those preachers that we know from
 the Middle East to disseminate his
 sermons on cassettes, then on DVDs,
 and now via YouTube. Rabbi Amnon
 Yitzhak has proven to be an excellent
 communicator, who has a grasp of
 how to use technology, scientific
 topics such as the Evolution Theory

to promote a radical religious
 rationale: The Bible is always right.
 As a preacher of the end of time, or
 the end of the secular world political
 system, including Zionism he
 conjugates preaching with social and
 political activism. In one of his
 public lectures in 1988, he told a
 story from his own life about his
 conversion from being a Zionist and
 secularist Jew to becoming a
 practicing Jew. He said that state
 sponsored education schools taught
 unbelief and atheism. Here, he told
 the story of how a biology teacher
 told him that the young Amnon

Yitzhak's ancestors were monkeys
 (Darwin's Evolution Theory). his
 partial visual autobiography, his
 story about his becoming *ba'al*
teshuva see: <https://youtu.be/qFbY3hQdjyE>
 For instance, in 2011 In the year 2011,
 he and his followers smashed 1,000
 television sets in front of the
 National TV Broadcasting Service
 building in Jerusalem.
<https://www.theyeshivaworld.com/news/israel-news/1762075/rav-amnon-Yitzhak-claims-he-is-receiving-death-threats.html>

shuva (literally meaning *owners of return* [from a mundane lifestyle back to religious lifestyle governed by rabbinic halakha]) is a socio-religious phenomenon that began in the USA and later re-emerged on Israeli soil. In Israel *Ba`alei Teshuva* while tapping into the foundational myth of Zionism² and its political theology³ and, not all streams of this movement subscribe to its theological redemption ideology and socio-political pantheism project⁴. One thing is sure, *Ba`alei Teshuva* movement – Sephardi or Mizrahi streams in particular – represents a rising reservoir of “human material” for right and extreme right political parties⁵. In certain cases, conversion to orthodox Judaism means also a conversion to revisionist Zionism and/or religious nationalism and their settler colonialism. The power balance has been shifting to the right and extreme right since 1977 when Me-

2 On Zionism’s foundational myth, Piterberg analytically and critically deconstructs three enunciations or what I call the three “returns”: 1. The ‘negation of exile’ (heb. *shlilat ha-galut*), 2. The ‘return to the land of Israel’ (heb. *ha-shiva le-eretz yisrael*), and 3. ‘The return to history’ (heb. *ha-shiva la-historia*). (Piterberg 2008:94) Compare Zeev’s book *The Founding Myths of Israel* (Sternhell 1998) the religious Movement of *Ba`alei teshuva* as we see here bears marks of common political, theological and mythical referential site with Zionism. As Benslama has rightly observed with regard to radical Islamists – whom he calls supermuslims (fr. surmusulmans) – that they do not become (fr. deviennent) Muslims, but they return (fr. reviennent) Muslims. (Benslama 2016:92–93) In my opinion, radical Jews – ultra-orthodox, Haredi Jews of *Ba`alei Teshuva* are a kind of super-Jews who return to a radical interpretation of Rabbinic Judaism.

3 On Zionism’s political theology which conflate with Zionism’s foundational myth, is a national-colonial theology says Raz-Krakotzkin. (Raz-Krakotzkin 2007). Here, I should refer to David Ohana’s discussion of Messianism and

sovereignty in Hebrew: *Meshikhut ve-Memlakhut*. (Ohana 2003) With regard to the concept, *political theology*, my use of Schmitt’s term is both explicative and interpretative: In his sociology of juridical concepts, Carl Schmitt proposes the concept of political theology. Schmitt’s sociology of legal concepts, frames this sociology of sovereignty within what he calls “a radical conceptualisation, a consistent thinking that is into metaphysics and theology. The metaphysical image of a given epoch forges the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form by its political organization. The determination of such an identity is the sociology of the concept of sovereignty.” (Schmitt 2005:46) With regard the use of *political theologies* rather than *political theology*, see the introduction of Hent De Vries in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. (De Vries and Sullivan 2006)

4 These streams range from radical religious Zionism on the right to radical anti-Zionism of Haredi movement Naturei Karta. Between these two extremes one finds a constellation of other Haredi and Hasidic communities.

5 Concerning the dichotomy secular-religious in Israel, Raz-Krakotzkin, believes that there is a transposition of a euro-centric paradigm on Middle Eastern soil, according to which the Palestinians and oriental Jews have been excluded from it. The secular / religious opposition masks the theological and colonial aspects of the Israeli definition of secularism. (Raz-Krakotzkin 2007) From a sociological point of view, the Haredization of world Jewry is combined with a move to the right. (Lintl 2020; Waxman 2004, 2017) As far as Arab Judaism, Sephardi and Mizrahi, this Haredization or return to tradition/traditionalism/traditionism is characterised with its Ashkenazisation, which in the case of Moroccan Judaism, it began in beginning of the 20th century, and intensively after WWII due to many Haredi communities in Eastern Europe perished in the Nazi Holocaust. (Loupo 2006) I find Asad’s discussion of the secular-religious very interesting, in particular his criticism of the view that some apparently secular institutions were really religious.” The secular and the religious in his view, “are not essentially fixed categories.” (Asad 2003:25)

nahem Begin and his Likud party took power for the first time in Israeli history.

Actually, the term *teshuva*, a feminine noun derived from the root *sh-w-b*, means, in biblical Hebrew, *return or answer*. As a technical term it came to mean *repentance* as in returning from a sinful state and a turning back to a holy state. Literally, the expression *ba`al teshuva* (*ba`alei teshuva* in the plural) means *master or owner of return; a returnee or a repentant*⁶. The expression that illustrates best this meaning is *khozrim b'teshuvah* (literally: going back or turning back in return). The most plausible meaning would be returning to religion in repentance. To use Sagi's expression *Teshuva* would mean returning to traditionalism and to Haredi and accepting or obeying the pastoral power of the Rabbis and rejecting the political idolatry of Zionism.⁷

In the case of *Ba`alei Teshuva*, return to religion (Hebrew: *dat*), the returnees are called religious (heb. *datiyyim*) in Israel. Almost everything in Israel is divided into these two opposing categories: secular (heb. *hiloni*) or religious heb. *dati*): politics, education, public space...etc. So, returning to religion in this sense means more than repentance. As a socio-political pantheism concept it is paradoxical due to various reasons, the first of which, is the inherent anachronistic meaning of the concept *religion*. (Boyarin 2018; Schwartz 2011). As a second reason the concept of returning is a crossing from one worldview to another, from one a liberal secular kind of Jew to a totally different kind: a legalistically and theologically bound Jew. Return to religion in *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s perspective means return to tradition as orthodoxy. On the latter concept, I still maintain that the definition of the German theologian Arnold Gottfried is the most plausible:

Orthodoxy cannot be defined as dogma, but simply results from the privileged position obtained by clerics in exchange for unconditional support for political powers.

6 The Hebrew *teshuva* in the sense of repentance/repenting from the root *sh-w-b* is an equivalent to the Arabic term *tawba* from the root *t-w-b*. (See note 5) Both terms describe both a state and action, whence repentance/repenting. As such they stand for a socio-religious

phenomenon that unlike conversion from one religion to another it characterises the state and action of a person who to change from non-religious or non-practicing to religious or practicing ways of thinking and living within the same faith. In Judaism, this phenomenon,

Ba`al Teshuva would stand for person return to orthodox or ultra-orthodox rabbinic Judaism. In Evangelical Christianity, this phenomenon is called being *born again*.

Since then, we cannot speak of dogmatic objectification of a religious message, of a kerygma, but only of the organization of a political and clerical system. (Meslin 1973:31)

Since Jewish Haredi movement with all its colourings is called ultra-orthodox and/or fundamentalist, Sharot proposes a different concept to fundamentalism, namely neo-traditionalism⁸. *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s neo-traditionalism would then mean:

a self-conscious attempt to represent or reassert what they regard as their authentic tradition against what they perceive as threats in modern developments. A past society is believed to have embodied the authentic tradition, and this provides a model to be reconstituted or emulated. (Sharot 1992:25)

The paradox of returning to orthodoxy or to tradition emerges due to the will to render either orthodoxy as non-relational, i.e., the intimate relation between legitimacy – religious or political – and authority, (Sabih 2016) or tradition as normative. I do concur with both Sagi and Asad that the concept of tradition is paradoxical and discursive respectively. Sagi argues for a substitution of tradition with traditionalism.⁹

The paradox, Sagi explains, of the return to tradition emerges because traditionalism replaces the concept of tradition. The paradox, then, emerges due to the equation of two different and even contradictory concepts. (Sagi 2008:8)

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1UL-YD_TTE

8 As we shall see, the religious responses and the religious communities handling epidemics are often ridiculed by so-called mainstream media and branded as irrational and medieval. On a cautious note, I am aware of Hamnett labels “sociology of error” to describe social sciences fixation with marginal and sensational aspects of religion. We often see this emphasis in medias anti-clerical caricaturing of scandals and the nonsense of the clerics. (Hamnett 1973; Sabih 2016)

9 I consider Talal Asad’s concept of “discursive tradition” very pertinent to the discussion about tradition in Jewish Studies. Asad proposes to study Islam as a ‘discursive tradition’ that ‘consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history.’ (Asad 1986:14) Yidgar proposes a neologism, traditionism, which he defines as “a dialogical (yet surely not equal) stance in relation to tradition; it is a concept that denotes an individual’s or a community’s

loyal yet reflective—favorable and even sanctifying “in principle” yet interpretive, critical and selective in practice—attitude toward what they view as the tradition that constitutes their identity, that is: constitutes them as subjects. As such, traditionism, or a traditionist stance, embodies a certain understanding of the concept of tradition, as well as an interpretive and phenomenological argument regarding the viable and desirable nature of the relationship between tradition and its bearers.” (Yadgar 2015:2)

Furthermore, *Ba`alei Teshuva*, does not mean return to religion as spirituality or a return to Judaism, but also a return to the *land of Israel* as the only place where one can truly be Jewish (heb. *yahudi*) and practice true Judaism. (Hebrew: *yahadut amitit*). The paradox of return to religion is due to the inherent anachronistic meaning of these concepts: religion, Judaism, tradition, and the land of Israel. *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s calls for a return to religion corresponds to an ideological conflation of tradition and traditionalism on the hand, and a political theology that conflates pesher-midrash exegesis with socio-political pantheism in messianic nationalistic trappings. The dichotomy *dati/hiloni* (religious/secular) in *Ba`alei Teshuva*'s discourse, stands for two opposing states: while the first leads to salvation the second leads to perdition. The returnee or return to religion should not be confused with the postmodern concept of return of religion since it has never left us.

Amnon Yitzhak's explanatory framework of the Covid-19 pandemic

When Covid-19 hit Israel, political and health authorities began taking measures to contain and control the deadly virus: social distancing, lockdowns, travel and gathering bans were some of those measures that had a devastating impact on social order, and the economy. Non-compliance with these measures began to show from an early stage. These non-compliance reaction of some segment of society are always expected as part of Rosenberg's second act: managing randomness. The pandemic's sudden outbreak had a deadly and far-reaching impact upon the Orthodox communities in Israel as well. The Haredi Community of *Bnei Brak* neighbourhood was branded in the Israeli media as the capital of the Covid-19 pandemic. Other Haredi neighbourhoods suffered the same fate. Anshel Pfeffer wrote in august 2020 an article in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the title of which is very telling: *The anarchic ultra-orthodox Jews prepared to die for their pilgrimage*. (Pfeffer 2020) Responses to Covid-19 pandemic among Haredi and Hasidic communities were different and often contradictory. Some complied with health authorities' directives and others did not, despite the fact that both health and interior ministries were in the hands of United Torah Judaism and Shas parties. Dissident Rabbinic voices among the ultra-orthodox Jews in *Ba`alei Teshuva* movement – and Se-

10 For his quarrels with the Shas party, please see: <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4319429,00.html>. For further information on his split with the political leadership of Shas party, and his allegiance to the religious rabbinic authority of the late chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, see <https://youtu.be/nrdbidloGLw>. In 2012, He established his own political party – *koakh* lehashpe'a, which did not make in 2013 elections: <https://www.jpost.com/jewish-world/jewish-news/amnon-yitzhak-i-wont-stop-ill-save-the-jews>

phardi Haredi movement in particular¹⁰ – remain significant as the reasons for the non-compliance policy. Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's virulent response to both Covid-19 and the government's health and social management of the virus strikes goes beyond the question of the biological mechanism of the virus. The widespread scepticism and noncompliance among the public towards the secular worldly governments' catastrophic management of the Covid-19 pandemic has increasingly fed the feeling of mistrust, gave ammunition to conspiracy theories, and weaponized pastoral power with anti-secular and anti-science arguments. In response to and competition with world governments, including Netanyahu's "Jewish" coalition government, in the handling of Covid-19, Yitzhak's explanatory framework of this pandemic sustains and his pastoral power as an enunciation of God's sacred power. Any act of contesting the rabbis' explanatory framework would mean a contesting of God's sacred power articulated through the Rabbis' pastoral power. Now what does Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak say about the Covid-19 pandemic? How does his explanation inform the religious rationale on the one hand and sustain the pastoral power of the Rabbis on the other?

My take on Rabbi Yitzhak's framing of Coronavirus as both biological and social enunciations of sacred power in terms of terrestrial or mundane violence, which I call sacred violence, is as a kind of socio-political pantheism according to which the eschatologist sees in plagues (heb. *makkah* and *maggefah*) – biological and or social – God's hands and semiotic language. I would also argue that Yitzhak's explanatory framing follows a theological script that cast terrestrial powers in terms of powers divines or vice versa, in particular the power to create and maintain order and power over life and death. Representations of this sacred power in terms of the Covid 19 pandemic – as a non-verbal or semiotic, though ubiquitous enunciation of divine violence – is construed, in the political theology of messianic movements of the Abrahamic religions and their eschatological discourse, as site of the power of God and powerlessness of man. In Judaism, Israel's salvation's history God's sacred power is enunciated in the dialectical relations of redemption and exile. While awaiting the redemptive moment through the agency of the Messiah, Israel accepting being in exile is both accepting Israel being powerless with God and Israel being the agency of

God's redemptive hand. Israel as a nation of kings and priests is a sacred territorial community that marks God's immanence, a theophanic sign among the nations, and an instrument of God's redemption. In midrashic exegesis, socio-political pantheism means that sacred power, which is encoded in nature and biology and embedded in the holy writ, is revealed through an incessant conflict between the episodic quality of crisis, and the promethean attempt to restore order without God. The Jewish Bible maps this site of opposition and counter-opposition in two political theological principles:

1. Man's inherent inability to be master of his own destiny: "I know, O Yahweh, that man's road is not his [to choose], That man, as he walks, cannot direct his own steps." (Jer 10:23)
2. Sacred absolute power can be as both verbal and non-verbal violent enunciations of God's response to man's non submission to God's sovereignty and non-compliance with God's Law. Humanity is divided into God's friends and God's foes. In the redemption narrative of Exodus, the God of Israel had to demonstrate his power as a supreme God for all to see through the powers of nature: sacred violence. Foes were coerced to submit by recognising God's unparalleled power, and friends were led to submit to God's power through accepting sovereignty through his laws:
 - a. Foes: "For this time, I will send all my **plagues** (heb. *maggéfotay*) upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is **none like Me** in all the world. I could have **stretched forth My hand** and **stricken** you and your people with pestilence (heb. *daver*), and you would have been effaced (heb. *tikkakhed*) from the earth. (Ex. 9:14)
 - b. Friends: "As a well flow with water, so she keeps her wickedness. (heb. *rā`ātāh*) cool. Violence (heb. *hamās*) and destruction (heb. *sud*) are heard in her; Before Me constantly are sickness (heb. *huli*) and plague (heb. *makkā*). Be warned, O Jerusalem, Lest I come to loathe you, Lest I make you a desolation (heb. *shemāmā*, An uninhabited land (heb. *eretz lo noshava*)." (Jer 6:7-8)

In Jeremiah, friends – the nation of Israel – are not immune from being punished and being the target of God’s sacred violence. Jeremiah posits a theological law of causality: Because of Israel’s wickedness – rejecting Yahweh’s sovereignty (the political) and his prophet/king’s authority (politics)¹¹ – a series of punishing events are enacted. Natural, biological, social and political events befell his people. In the vocabulary of the religious rationale, epidemics such as Aids, Ebola, and Coronavirus are framed in biblical terms that we read in Ex. 9:14 and Jer. 6:7-8: **plagues** (heb. *maggefot, makkot*), pestilence (heb. *daver*), sickness (heb. *huli*).¹² The deadly infectious effect of human lives and the devastating impact on the social and political order are the logical consequences of God’s wrath and punishment. This reminds me of Rabbi Yitzhak’s constant warning to the Jews urging them to repent and become God’s real friends: Anyone who does not keep the biblical commandments would consequently be punished in hell.

Rabbi Yitzhak’s Peshar – Eschatological exegesis

Literally, Peshar means explanation or interpretation. In the history of Jewish hermeneutics, Peshar is one of five methods or techniques of interpretation: Literal, Allegorical, Typological,

11 See Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak’s commentary on *parashat shoftim* (Deuteronomy 17:15-20): 15. “You shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the LORD your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman. 16. Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the LORD has warned you, “You must not go back that way again.” 17. And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess. 18. When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. 19. Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the

LORD his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws. 20. Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel.” https://youtu.be/58_hVdk6bxo Rabbi Yitzhak’s interpretation of what is known in the Jewish tradition as *mishpat hamelukhah* (the law of kingdom) is basically ideological. In this connection, he discusses the issues of authority and power within the *edah* (community), which he identifies with *‘am yisrael* (nation of Israel): this authority is traditionally divided into three areas or domains: 1. *keter malkhut* (domain of kingship), 2. *keter torah* (the domain of God’s instructions and commandments), and 3. *keter kehunah* (the domain

through which the people reach out to God).” (Elazar 1998:4)

12 One of diseases that the Bible speaks about in detail is leprosy (Heb. *Tzara’at*). In the Book of Leviticus, chapters 13 and 14, the Bible gives a detailed description of the laws that regulate *how* to deal with leprosy – Hansen’s disease – and the people that are affected by it. Religiously, the leprosy is unclean and socially is shunned from the community (a form for social distancing). In the religious rationale, the answer to *why humans become sick* presupposes that human being is both body and spirit: (man cannot live on bread alone) two sets of causality and understanding: mechanical (apparent, obvious) and existential (mysterious, metaphysical, theological)!

Midrash, and Peshet. In short, Peshet exegesis consists of understanding present events in light of biblical prophecies. The latter point means that God reveals his purpose to his prophet, but He refrains from telling him when the prophecy will be fulfilled, but it has a reference to the time of the end or the last days, as it were. Since salvation history is about a theology of restoration and redemption (Gr. *eschaton*), history follows a semiotic script in which God's will is revealed through the agency of his Messiah-king. The World is still in waiting. Rabbi Yitzhak's Peshet or eschatological exegesis of Coronavirus – a current event – as a sign of the last days and a fulfilment of a biblical prophecy can be seen in one of his recent lectures, in which Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak presented what he considered to be a realistic scenario by which the Messiah-king would arrive.¹³ In this lecture, he offered a *peshet* interpretation of Micah 5:2:

Surely, he will leave them [helpless] until she who is to bear has given birth; Then the rest of his countrymen will return to the children of Israel. (Micah 5: 2)

Rabbi Yitzhak explains the Messiah will not come until the evil empire that rules over the whole world have been brought down. “It looks like the nation of Israel will be under the rule of an evil empire”, he said: “It is Edom.”¹⁴ At this point, Rabbi Yitzhak asks: how is it possible for an evil globalist empire to rule over Israel and over the entire world? He then makes reference to the social, management of a world empire and the various restriction measures that were imposed on people during the current coronavirus crisis. He refers to the decision or decree of the evil and ungodly powers to suspend its own laws of individual freedom, saying that “The decree that people should be isolated, controlled and ask them not to move and do what we say – it is called control.”¹⁵

13 Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak Paskins about Vaccines: <https://www.organicbakerymiami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-Yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rLjk7OjFII>

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 In Sandhedrin 98b, it is Rav who has said: “The son of David will not

come until the evil Roman kingdom will disperse throughout Eretz Yisrael for nine months, as it is stated: “Therefore will He give them up, until the time when she who is in labour has given birth; then the remnant of his brethren shall return with the children of Israel” (Micah 5:2). Once a period equivalent to a term of pregnancy passes, the redemption will come.” The Term

Romi stand for ‘Rome’, ‘romans’, Christians, and more specifically – the Vatican. In Rabbinic literature, the biblical terms, Esau and Edom stand for Christians, not as a religious term only, but as world empire as well. Similarly, the term Ishmael came to stand, in later Rabbinic literature for Muslims, Arabs. (Bakhos 2006).

He characterises the highly anticipated ‘second wave’ of coronavirus, which many world leaders, including Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have said would be inevitable, as a pre-conceived plan: “Now they are planning a new wave. If it lasts for nine months, redemption is likely to come after this period.”¹⁶ Rabbi Yitzhak then quotes Rabbi Yehuda as a source who said that the Messiah will not come until the kingdom of ‘Romi’ falls¹⁷. This evil empire, states Rabbi Yitzhak, will rule the entire world for nine months. He unveils the nature of this evil empire when he brings in an ancient tradition that states that the seed of Esau will rule the world for nine months until Jacob will rule over him.¹⁸ “Today we see that they – Western Christian powers – control us,” says Rabbi Yitzhak, and he continues: “We get orders from Edom and the whole world executes them: Everyone wears masks. Everyone is isolated.”¹⁹ In support of his line of reasoning, he quotes proverbs 22:8-9:

He who sows injustice shall reap misfortune; His rod of wrath shall fail. The generous man is blessed, for he gives of his bread to the poor.

According to Rabbi Yitzhak, the one who sows injustice in this passage is Esau – the father of Edom, who will also reap misfortune. After these seven months, the “generous man will be blessed.” The generous man is Jacob, the rabbi explains. He adds that all of Jacob’s blessings will be fulfilled at the end of days. He also invokes Isaiah 9: 2 in support of his interpretation of this prophecy²⁰:

You have magnified that nation, have given it great joy; They have rejoiced before You As they rejoice at reaping time, As they exult When dividing spoil. (Isaiah 9: 2)

18 In 2 Esdras 6:9 a similar tradition that explains why Jacob (Israel) is blessed despite the fact that his older brother Esau looks more powerful: “For Esau is the end of the world, and Jacob is the beginning of it that followed.” Applying this prophecy to our modern times is not to be mistaken.

19 Ibid. <https://www.organicbakerymiami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-Yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII>

20 It is well known that Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak has made many prophetic claims which proved to be false: In 2010, Rabbi Yitzhak foresaw a bloody war in the Land, but nothing happened. In 2014, he foresaw the imminent arrival of the War of Gog and Magog and warned that only a few Jews would survive this global conflict. In October 2018, he foresaw that in the end times, that is to say in this generation, 95 percent of all rabbis would be of “mixed race” (בר ברע), using a

biblical term from the Exodus to classify most of today’s rabbis as non-Jewish imposters. <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/the-rabbi-and-the-new-world-order/> On the latter point, one sees his anti-clerical religious discourse. For further discussion of Jewish anti-clericalism and Yitzhak’s see (Sabih 2017)

21 <https://www.organicbakerymiami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-Yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII>

In his *peshet* exegesis, there is a twist, an implied ellipsis: the Hebrew text does not say: “*lo lo*”, which means “not for them.” Rabbi Yitzhak explains that this means that although the nation of Esau, Edom, is great and powerful when they rule the world, in the end it will not be they who celebrate, but rather the nation of Israel.”²¹

In a virulent and combatant tone, the interpretation of this prophecy takes a new turn: namely a universal plot or the conspiracy of a secret society to rule the world: The freemasons, who built the Tower of Babel, are excited because they believe that their grand plans to depopulate the world will finally come true,” he concludes. “But in the end, the celebration will not be theirs, but rather the Jewish people.”²²

With regard to the debate surrounding the vaccine and the scepticism about it, Rabbi Yitzhak has joined those who accused Netanyahu of preparing “microchips and sensors to control the population and enslave them.”²³ He issued a *psak* (a legal ruling) recently that vaccines are *avodah zara* (idol worship).²⁴ Vaccines would not help just as nothing could help the Egyptians when the 10 plagues struck them²⁵. The religious rationale as it’s framed by Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak in his *peshet exegesis* of the issue Coronavirus pandemic and health and social management policies proposed and implemented by coercion are both a ful-

22 <https://www.organicbakerymi-ami.com/single-post/rabbi-amnon-yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>, and <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII>

23 <https://uwidata.com/10857-population-control-microchips-and-digital-currency-the-basis-of-coronavirus-conspiracies/>

24 <https://www.organicbakerymi-ami.com/post/rabbi-amnon-yitzhak-paskins-about-vaccines>

25 In Rabbi Amnon's commentary of the two *parashot*: *parashat Vaera* and *parashat Bo* (the two portions of the Torah: Exodus 6:2 – 9:35 and Exodus 10:1 – 13:16), he explains that there is a structural analogy between the metaphysical power (sacred power) and the terrestrial power. https://youtu.be/ic6It_AVFxA Each plague of the ten plagues is a demonstration and enunciation mode of God’s absolute power and

sovereignty. The identity of the plagues, the way and the manner God used them one after one – and not all at once – reveal God’s purposeful use of his power: liberation of his people Israel from slavery: “I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God but I did not make Myself known to them by My other name Yahweh. I established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan. I have heard the moaning of the Israelite slaves. I have remembered My covenant. Say, therefore, to the Israelites, ‘I am the Yahweh. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. I will take you to be My people and I will be your God. You shall know that I am God who freed you from your labours in Egypt and gave you the land promised to Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob.” Amnon, underlines two lessons to be learned here: God’s absolute power is seen by both friends and foes, and that God should not only be remembered as the creator of the universe but also as the liberator and saviour through the Egyptian experience. No Vaccine, as it were, could help them. <https://youtu.be/4rIjk7OjFII> The only thing that shielded them from God’s violent enunciation of God’s power was to be on his side. Here, Rabbi states that only 20% of the Israelites made it the exodus, and that 80% of the sons of Israel perished with the Egyptians. Likewise, not all Jews will be saved, only those who return to orthodox Judeity (*Ba’alei Teshuva*) (https://youtu.be/ic6It_AVFxA)

26 <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/the-rabbi-and-the-new-world-order/>

filment of biblical prophecy (*nevu`ah, raz,*), a violent enunciation of God's power, and a historical-eschatological event, the meaning of which is that we are living in the last days. The Covid-19 pandemic seems to be a cosmic war and enunciation of scared power in terms of terrestrial powers: ²⁶Time and again, Amnon Yitzhak warns world leaders of their downfall and the victory of God's people. He does not divide the world through ethnic lines, but through submission to God's commandments. Zionism, in his eyes, is not Judaism. It is rather an enemy of God, and as such it will suffer the same fate as the world order.

In a TV-interview with the Journalist Amnon Levy about Coronavirus on the Israeli channel 13, Amnon Levy stated in his introduction that Amnon Yitzhak represented a dissenting voice among the Rabbis since he rejects the state's explanatory framework, and recommendation of a vaccine as the only solution for the deadly pandemic. His answer to Levy's question: "of course we did something bad if such a judgment (or decree) fell on us" Rabbi Yitzhak answered by stating that sometimes [bad] things happen in faraway places. Events that impact Israel in order so that Israel performs *Teshuva*, i.e., repent. He continues to say that everyone who sees these incidents should understand them as warnings from Hashem (God). But if that person does not heed the warning and carry on in bad ways, that person accepts to die. God gives signs to both Jews and non-Jews in accordance with their actions. And if you know gematria (the numerical values of Hebrew letters), eating a limb of a living animal has the numerical value of the word Corona²⁷. You know that in China, they eat living animals. And this is forbidden in the Noahide Law. When the gentiles (heb. *goyyim*) transgress this law they receive retribution. At that moment of the interview Levy asks the question, what about us – Jews – we do not eat bats, why should we be punished? Here, Rabbi Yitzhak answers: because we eat forbidden meat. The Midrashic lesson here is: what should we learn from seeing God striking the gen-

27 In another ultra-orthodox Gematria interpretation that blames women as the cause of Coronavirus (punishment) on the basis that: "Corona epidemic = lack of modesty," one such poster seen in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem announced, using gema-

tria, or Jewish numerology, which ascribes a numerical value to letters and words and draws significance from words or expressions with equal values. According to the poster, both "corona epidemic" and "lack of modesty" have a numerical value of 900, indicating a conceptual link." <https://www.timesofisrael.com/>

slammed-by-covid-19-ultra-orthodox-jews-try-to-understand-what-god-hath-wrought/ On Gematria see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6571-gematria>
28 On this point see the next section.

tiles when they transgress his commandments: to repent²⁸.

The Midrash of Coronavirus: Yitzhak's socio-political pantheism

The analysis of pastoral power begins by identifying the plurality of its dimensions: the pastoral structure frames the relationship between men and their sovereigns, between God and men, and between God and the sovereigns of men, who in this perspective are considered, delegated by God to shepherd men. (Foucault 2004) At the heart of pastoral power lies the paradox of post-secular conceptualisation of governmentality, the secular and the religious in modern societies. Büttgen, in his discussion of political theology and Foucault's notion of pastoral power, that when fundamental elements of pastoral power refer to diagnosis of current events, they actually mean that we are not free from pastoral power yet, i.e., we are building the salvation that we desire, the law we obey, the truth we speak, in a way that remains pastoral." (Büttgen 2007:1134). In other words, pastoral power is both a pre-modern period and a mode of governing. The modern age in opposition to the "pastoral age", in the vocabulary of secularisation would then constitute secularized versions of pastoral power, in which religion both is abolished and transformed taking the two sides of the concept of secularization, as liquidation and transfer of the religious. In his Political Theology, Carl Schmitt gives a radical interpretation of this Janus-faced conceptualization: liquidation and transfer of the religious stating that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts." A seemingly secular political system can operate with a pastoral mode of governing. The expression: "we are not free from pastoral power yet" indicates that the process of liquidation and transfer is not completed yet. As a discursive statement, it does not differ from messianic theology. According to the latter, secularization would never liquidate pastoral power as an enunciation of sacred power. In both discourses, the issue of sovereignty and of governing is a site of conflict between God and Satan, and that conflict has only one outcome. Using religious, theological, and eschatological vocabulary, this conflict will end with God's victory and the destruction of the Satanic world; so, Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's political theology! To understand the pastoral

29 <https://youtu.be/4r1jk7OjFII>

function of the Rabbi as the embodiment of Moses and an enunciation of God's sacred power, Rabbi Yitzhak conceives of his office as having the task of shepherding the flock according to his commandments. Calling Jews to perform teshuva is an exercise of pastoral power the chief aim of which is to vindicate God's sovereignty and transfer God's sacred power into what I call socio-political pantheism²⁹. The latter is a practical solution to the theological paradox of God's transcendence and immanence, God's wrath and love, the injustices of the world, and God's justice. Two of God's salient predicates: God's omnipresence and providence are at the heart of what I call here socio-political pantheism. God is everywhere and decides everything. While God's justice is very difficult to defend in our cruel world, the human agency today, in the ultra-orthodox religious rationale is explained and activated through the grids of law and theology. Law in the sense of practical application of Jewish law (heb. *halakha le-ma'aseh*), which in Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak's perception is also a socio-political practice.) Theology, in the sense why and for who's sake should, for instance *ba'al teshuva* obeys and perform the mitzvot. Pantheism, here, does not mean that God is identical with the natural and social worlds, but simply that God's sacred power (omni-power, omni-presence) can be enunciated politically and socially. (Mander 2020)

Rabbi Yitzhak's socio-political pantheism is both a theological explanation of the world and a conversion of this theology into social and political management of the world, including the way to understand, explain and manage the Coronavirus pandemic. In one of his recent sermons on YouTube, he warns that Coronavirus, coercive policies, together with the proposed vaccines are weapons of control and extermination that the new world order uses to conquer the world and have its hands on the world's human and material resources. Just after the Covid-19 pandemic in December 2019, he blamed, in a video, Bill Gates for the virus accusing him of using, according to the so-called "Agenda 21," it to reduce the world's population. In this video, that speaks of the new world order, Rabbi Yitzhak insists that "Bill is looking to make billions from the Corona vaccination."³⁰ For this reason, the rabbi rejects any form of vaccination, certain that they are all part of a plot in which the New World Order and Freemasons will use these injections to implant microchips into the population. In this new video, he unveils this new world order's goals and the time frame that it will take the lead-

30 <https://youtu.be/8U6xV4OFxhQ>

ers of this new world orders to implement it. At the same time, he calls upon his followers not to worry or be frightened because God in heaven, blessed be He, will destroy their plan. He reveals the twenty-six goals outlined in their document:

1. One world government
2. A cashless world currency
3. World Central Bank
4. One world military
5. End of national sovereignty
6. End of all privately owned property
7. End of family unit
8. Depopulation
9. Control of population growth and population density
10. Mandatory multiple vaccines
11. Universal basic income: meaning salary austerity
12. Microchip implantation for purchase, travel, tracking and controlling
13. Implementation of a global social credit system like the one China has
14. Trillions of appliances connected to 5G monitoring system
15. The government will raise the children
16. Schools and universities government owned
17. End of private transportation (owning cars)
18. All businesses will be owned by the government- corporation
19. Restriction on what is not essential (flights)
20. Human beings will be concentrated into human settlement zones – cities
21. End of irrigation
22. End of private farms, grazing livestock
23. End of family homes
24. Restricted land use that serves human needs
25. Prohibition of natural remedies that are non-synthetic and naturopathic medicine
26. End of fossil fuels

At the end of this short video, he sarcastically states that “we will be missing Pharaoh”. The Midrashic exegesis of Israel’s slavery in biblical Egypt – a trope of temporary exile and persecution – is that of God fighting on behalf of his people by sending his biological, animal, and natural soldiers to destroy Pharaoh and lib-

erate Israel. Socio-political pantheism, as a political Midrash, means, in this instance, that the lessons that we can draw today from the exodus narrative is that the pastoral power invested in the anointed shepherd (king, prophet, rabbi) are God's guarantee for both his presence and an enunciation of his sacred power.

Coronavirus pandemic's dramaturgical form postulates an initial scene, a cause and a sign. In rabbi Yitzhak's explanatory framework, the scene of the Chinese animal market and God's wrath and punishment – as in the biblical ten-plagues narrative – construed as a transgression of God's dietary laws, those that were given to Noah, and incumbent upon all humans in rabbinic perspective, and those that Jews should abide by: In Leviticus chapter 11 there is a description of all forbidden/unclean animals are that should not be consumed, as well as the command that forbids eating living animals. The seven Noahide commandments are prohibitions against (1) idolatry, (2) cursing of God's name; (3) unjustified bloodshed or murder; (4) forbidden sexual relations; (5) theft; (6) eating any limb of a living animal; and (7) the commandment to create a judicial system. These seven commandments are re-iterated in both the New Testament and the Qur'an. In particular, the commandment in Genesis 9:3-4: "Every moving thing that liveth shall be for food for you; as the green herb have, I given you all. Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat." According to the religious rationale of Rabbi Yitzhak the transgression of the sacred power as enunciated in his laws unleashes punishment – as we saw with this pandemic, and others such as Ebola and Aids – and would therefore require an act of atoning or cathartic action, a sacrifice, a scapegoat that should pay for the sins of the community³¹. Return to religion would mean an atoning that leads to the creation of a community that dedicates its life to the study of the Torah and prayer on behalf of the world.

Concluding remarks

From a post-secular perspective, this political theology as laid down in its two aforementioned components in relation to the issue of the Covid-19 pandemic and government's social and political management of this pandemic requires – as demonstrated in the present article – that secular reason opens up to reli-

³¹ See for instance the book of Leviticus chapters 9 and 10.

gious reason by renouncing the naturalist and scientific prejudice for which “Religious convictions are per se not true, illusory or meaningless” (Habermas 2008:56–57) Yitzhak, in his tireless missionary enterprise among Jews to make true brand of *Ba`alei Teshuva* – and anti-secular orthodoxy – advocating a total rejection of all sorts of secularism, including Zionism, branding it as political idolatry (*‘avoda zara*). He construes the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of political theology according to which God’s sacred power is enunciated in terms of terrestrial events; a cosmic war, as it were. According to this approach, plagues are what render God’s sacred power ubiquitous, and by being violent this ubiquity is felt by both God’s friends (Haredim) and foes (secular Zionism). Even government decisions such as social distancing, lockdowns, hygienic regulations that by and large are considered anti-liberal laws – a suspension of individual freedom – are interpreted in terms of eschatological exegesis (*peshet*) and socio-political pantheism (*midrash*): God’s intervention in man’s affairs through the very agencies that deny him that right and declare him dead.

This is the reason why I thought it worth investigating Amnon Yitzhak’s understanding, interpretation of and response to the Covid-19 pandemic;³² in order to discover that his blend of **peshet and midrash interpretative methods represents a critical reading** of his *activist interpretative approach*, a theology of crisis. Rabbi Amnon Yitzhak’s holistic explanatory framework conjugates both obeying God’s commandments and catering to the social and spiritual needs of the community. His proselytizing activism together with his theological framing of what is happening as an enunciative mode of God’s omnipotence and Justice provide a theological meaning together with social management action that work for a salvatory solution: return *to* religion, and not return *of* religion.

Peshet interpretation of Covid-19’s outbreak and transnational deadly impact frames this dramaturgic event as an eschatological sign according to which “a verse of Scripture is interpreted with reference to the interpreter’s own time and situation, which is usually seen as the last days.” (Patzia and Petrotta 2010:92) Now that Covid-19 is here, killing anyone – observant Jew or not – it has become clear that Covid-19 is both the sign and the weapon and that everyone is potentially injured and could be killed by Covid-19. The only solution is restoring God’s sovereignty by returning the lost sheep of Israel to Him.

32 As we have seen, the religious responses and the religious communities handling of epidemics crises are often ridiculed by so-called mainstream media and branded as irrational and medieval. On a cautious note, I am aware of this obsession which Hamnett calls “sociology of error” to describe the social sciences fixation with marginal and sensational aspects of religion. We often see this emphasis in media’s anti-clerical caricaturing of scandals and the nonsense of the clerics. (Hamnett 1973; Sabih 2016). 263 <https://journals.openedition.org/rhr/8490#text>

And that the rest of mankind should maintain the Noahide law.

Rabbi Yitzhak's explanatory framework represents a crucial paradox of all monotheisms: In Judaism, there is a fundamental paradox of *transcendence* of God of Israel and his *immanence* in Israel's history. The anthropomorphic language of the Jewish Bible, for instance, describes this immanence in terms of husband-wife, father-son and master-owner relations. Even the very conception of Jewish Law – Written and Oral – could be construed as a kind of socio-political pantheism, God's presence in men's lives is manifest or could be made manifest – in terms of obedience/disobedience, punishment and reward...exile/redemption. I have argued that the religious rationale, in general and Jewish religious explanatory framework of the Covid-19 plague as divine violence operates within the framework of the theology of redemption – or eschatology –³³ that can construe God's sacred power in terms of socio-political pantheism, national redemption, restoration of a lost perfect human society, and catharsis of a primordial anathema that keeps generating every anathema. Yitzhak's pesher exegesis of Covid-19 – as we have seen, kept conjugating revelation with reparation. Revelation of what has gone wrong and reparation of man's relations with God.

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Da krisen ramte: Genforhandlingerne af amerikansk-jødiske samfundsværdier

Nøgleord

Amerikanske jøder, covid-19, jødisk solidaritet, civilsfæren, kulturel grænsedragning, kultursociologi.

Resume Jeg viser i denne artikel, hvordan corona-pandemien sammen med sommerens raceuligheder har rystet de amerikansk-jødiske samfund i deres fundament. Nødvendighed og krise, usikkerhed, nye tankeformer og idealisme er tilsammen i gang med at omforme, hvordan jødisk liv bliver levet i dagens Amerika. Empirisk beskriver jeg fire forskellige faser, som det amerikansk-jødiske samfund foreløbig har undergået gennem krisen. Teoretisk argumenterer jeg for, at disse faser viser, hvordan krisen har igangsat en omkalfatring af amerikansk-jødiske kerneværdier, hvor jødisk solidaritet og enhed igen fremstår som centrale værdier, der samler det jødiske samfund og jøder som gruppe. Samtidig udfordrer denne nyfundne solidaritet jøderne i deres forhold til landets øvrige problemstillinger og befolkningsgrupper.

De seneste år har en række ledende historikere og sociologer beskrevet, hvad de ser som en igangværende splittelse i det amerikansk-jødiske samfund (se f.eks. Waxman 2016; Wertheimer 2018; Cohen 2006). Sekularisering, pluralisme, fravælgelse af jødiske partnere og/eller jødisk opdragelse er, ifølge disse forfattere, nogle af de faktorer, der har ledt til en fragmentering og atomisering af jødisk samfundsliv (se også Kelman et al. 2017; Samson et al. 2018). Andre forskere påpeger et manglende kollektivt samlingspunkt, en forenende vision, der kan mobilisere

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og styrke det jødiske samfund som helhed (Kelner 2019). Uanset de underliggende årsager bestod det amerikansk-jødiske samfund, før covid-19-pandemien ramte, i høj grad af en række forskelligartede og uafhængige enheder, praksisser og måder at organisere og leve jødisk på

Demografisk har de forskellige jødiske samfund igennem hele det 20. århundrede organiseret sig inden for deres respektive religiøse, regionale og socioøkonomiske grupperinger.¹ Disse interne forskelle er dog med tiden blevet gradvist mere signifikante. “Millennial” jøder har det seneste årti også i højere grad valgt organiseret jødisk liv fra; andre har valgt at stifte deres egne idiosynkratiske og ofte eklektiske jødiske grupper, der ikke nødvendigvis identificerer sig med jødisk samfundsliv som sådan (Wertheimer 2018, 10-11). Der syntes således ikke længere at være en teologisk, etnisk, social eller politisk fællesnævner, der holdt jøder sammen i USA (Wertheimer 2018). Det gav derfor bedre mening at snakke om amerikansk-jødiske samfund i flertal snarere end ental og som grupperinger, der relaterede sig til forskellige aspekter af jødiskhed frem for jødedom (Geller 2011, 2; Magid 2013).²

Covid-19-virussens indtog i USA har udfordret dette billede fundamentalt. Som jeg vil argumentere for i denne artikel, har ikke kun de fysiske og økonomiske betingelser for jødisk liv ændret sig siden pandemiens udbrud. Der er også sket en betydelig kulturel ændring i forhold til forståelsen af jødisk solidaritet og kollektivitet. Jødiskhed bliver igen italesat og opført (performed) som et fællesanliggende, der er autentisk, relevant, berigende og ægte for jøder i USA i 2020 (Feldt & Zuckerman 2019). Teologiske, regionale og politiske forskelle opvejes nu af et sammensurium af udtryk og former, der signalerer jødisk solidaritet. Som jeg viser i denne artikel, skal udviklingen ikke kun ses i kontrast til tiden inden pandemien, men også i forhold til den sundhedsmæssige, samfundsmæssige og moralske destabilisering, der har eroderet USA siden covid-19-krisen startede (Alexander 2020).

For at anskueliggøre og forstå de forandringer, som jeg påpeger, at amerikansk-jødisk samfundsliv har undergået i løbet af covid-19-krisen, anvender jeg en kultursociologisk ramme, der fokuserer på civilsfærens dynamikker, solidaritet, grænsedragninger mellem grupper samt oplevelsen og fremstillingen af minoritets- og majoritetssamfundets kulturelle koder. Jeg anvender sociolog Jeffrey Alexanders begreb “the civil sphere”

1 Traditionelt har de tre største jødiske samfund været Reform, Conservative og Orthodox, men som også Wertheimer (2018, 17) observerer, er disse samfunds interne grænsedragninger og regelsæt også i fluks, og det er blevet gradvist sværere at differentiere mellem nogle af de forskellige samfunds praksisser.

2 Jeg følger Jay Gellers (2011, 2) distinktion mellem “jødedom”, der refererer til religion, og “jødiskhed” til at beskrive oplevede eller tilskrevne jødiske karakteristika og disposition. Ligeledes bruger jeg “jødisk menighed” til at beskrive en jødisk gruppering, der definerer sig selv som religiøs, mens jeg bruger “jødisk samfund” til at referere til jødisk kollektivitet, der ikke er defineret udelukkende eller overhovedet i relation til “jødedom”. Det skal understreges, at disse termer er overlappende, og en for rigid forståelse af dem vil være vildledende.

(2006), som han definerer som “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time” (2006, 4). I modsætning til andre civilsamfundsteoretikere (f.eks. Putnam 2000 eller Habermas 1989), tilgår Alexander *ikke* civilsfæren (eller den offentlige sfære) som en sektor, der eksisterer uafhængigt af øvrige sektorer og som sui generis udgør et fælles samfundsgode for alle borgere (Egholm & Kaspersen 2020). I stedet viser han, hvordan historiske processer og begivenheder har været med til at forme, hvilke værdier, praksisser og samfundsgrupper der på et givet tidspunkt anses som civile eller ucivile i majoritetssamfundet. Alexander refererer til disse som samfundets “core values”, der gennem kommunikative og lovgivende institutioner er med til at forme de kulturelle koder, som borgere anser for naturlige og essentielle for at høre til. Disse kerneværdier skaber altid kontingente grænsedragninger mellem, hvad der fremstår som “in-groups” og “out-groups”, samt hvilke muligheder for solidaritet mellem og internt i disse grupper der synes naturlige og virkelige.

Centralt for nedenstående analyse er, at begivenheder og særligt kommunikationen omkring disse kan være med til forme borgeres forståelse og oplevelse af disse internaliserede kerneværdier. Alt efter hvordan en given begivenhed bliver fortalt og forhandlet i civilsfæren, og hvilken troværdighed og relevans folk oplever, at denne narrativ har, kan det skabe kollektiv identitetsstyrkelse eller -tab. Dette kan føre til kulturelle traumer, men også potentielt åbne op for, hvad Alexander kalder “civil repair” (Alexander 2006, 205-9; Alexander 2012). Alexander argumenterer for, at covid-19-krisen i USA har igangsat et gigantisk kollektivt trauma blandt den amerikanske befolkning, hvor folk har fået afkræftet en central myte om Amerika, nemlig om landets nationale storhed (Alexander 2020). Ifølge Alexander har krisen således sat gang i en massiv identitetsmæssig destabilisering, som potentielt kan føre til enten yderligere krise eller institutionelle ændringer.

Det er i denne kontekst, vi skal se, hvordan amerikanske jøder har reageret i forhold til covid-19-krisen frem til august 2020. Ingen ved, hvor længe covid-19-krisen vil fortsætte i USA, og hvor vidtrækkende konsekvenser, der endnu er i vente. Hvad jeg undersøger her, er udviklingen fra marts til august 2020, hvor jeg identificerer fire faser. I hver af disse ser jeg en distinkt forandring i forhold til, hvordan betydningsgenererende dele af

det amerikansk-jødiske samfund har relateret til krisen og til jødisk kollektivitet.³ Men for at forstå de forandringer, som covid-19-krisen har igangsat, skal vi først kort se på, hvordan amerikansk-jødisk kollektivitet var italesat, før krisen ramte.

Baggrund

Man kan lægge et internt eller eksternt perspektiv på, hvordan amerikansk jødisk liv tog sig ud i starten af 2020 og få præsenteret to vidt forskellige udlægninger. Fra et eksternt perspektiv, der sammenligner det jødiske minoritetssamfund med andre minoritetsgrupper i USA, stortrives de amerikanske jøder: De har aldrig været rigere, deres adgang til det amerikanske samfund har aldrig været mere åben og mulig, jødisk religiøse og etniske initiativer blomstrer op over hele landet, og jødisk kultur er blevet en integreret del af amerikansk majoritetskultur (Slezkine 2019; Alexander 2006, 539-543). Hvis jødisk integration i USA var et nøglemål, er det nået. Hvis jødisk økonomisk og uddannelsesmæssig stabilitet og succes var målene, er de også nået. Den jødiske minoritets organisations- og tilpasningsform, dvs. dens evner, muligheder og parathed til at omforme sig ifølge amerikanske majoritetsnormer, har igennem det 20. århundrede bragt amerikansk jødiskhed i næsten symbiotisk kontakt med amerikanske kerneværdier (ibid.). De er med andre ord blevet en *næsten* integreret del af det amerikanske majoritetssamfunds centrale, narrative selvforståelse.

Kontrasten til et internt perspektiv kunne derimod ikke være større. Mange jødiske samfund og menigheder over hele USA har de seneste år været præget af heftige diskussioner og splid omkring, hvad der definerer og forener det jødiske sam-

3 Jeg må her komme med et forbehold: Grundet det amerikansk-jødiske samfunds størrelse, interne forskelligheder og geografiske udstrækning, benytter jeg mig i artiklen til tider af generaliseringer, der ikke indfanger alle nuancer. Selvom artiklen argumenter for, at covid-19-krisen har bragt jøderne tættere sammen og fået dem til at fokusere mere på enskab, spiller

deres socioøkonomiske, regionale og religiøse forskelle stadig en afgørende betydning for, hvordan, hvornår og med hvilken intensitet både corona-krisen og sommerens raceuroigheder har påvirket dem. F. eks. var New Yorks jøder stærkt påvirket af covid-19-virusens smitte tidligere end andre jødiske samfund, mens Minnesotas jødiske samfund har været meget berørt af og

involveret i begivenheden omkring mordet på Georg Floyd, som fandt sted i deres hjemstavn. Religiøse dispositioner og økonomiske forhold har også påvirket, hvordan jøderne har forholdt sig til den samfundsmæssige destabilisering. Se Trencher 2020. Redegørelsen for udviklingen skal derfor forstås med disse forskelle in mente.

fund (Waxman 2016; Baron 2015). Det er diskussioner og uenigheder, der har udviklet sig siden midten af det 20. århundrede og kan på mange måder ses som en naturlig bagside af den førnævnte integrationsnarrativ (Krasner 2019, 37).

I meget korte træk blev den store jødiske immigration til USA fra 1880'erne til 1924, hvor mere end 2,5 millioner jøder rejste fra Østeuropa til Amerika, efterfulgt af et storstilet assimilationsprojekt (Diner 2004; Alexander 2006, 482-3). I løbet af mellemløbet og på under en generation rykkede størstedelen af jøder fra arbejderklassen til den nye ekspanderende amerikanske middelklasse (Diner 2004, 205-258). Fra 1960'erne og frem begyndte det imidlertid at gå op for det amerikansk-jødiske lederskab, at jødisk samfundsliv i USA reelt kunne forgå, hvis de amerikanske jøder ikke begyndte at omfavne deres jødiskhed på en mere aktiv og synlig facon. I tråd med tiden blev dette til de amerikanske jøders etniske og spirituelle "revival" (Kelner 2019, 202-3; Jacobson 2006, 206-26; Magid 2013). Som etnisk omdrejningspunkt i denne forvandling fra jødedom og jødisk religiøsitet til jødiskhed og jødisk identitet var staten Israel og holocaust (ibid.). Disse to vidt forskellige "begivenheder" og geografiske steder blev udgangspunkterne for at skabe en ny, fælles og "moderne" narrativ, der bandt jøder sammen som en *etnisk* gruppe i lighed med andre etniske grupper i USA, hvilket gjorde troperne omkring forfølgelse (Holocaust) og et "oprindeligt" hjemland uden for USA (Israel) essentielle.

Men i kernen af denne "genoplivning" af jødisk liv ligger også kimen til den splid og uenighed, som præger amerikansk jødisk liv i det 21. århundrede. Etnisk og spirituel innovation er kendetegnene for denne udvikling, hvilket har betydet et hav af nye traditioner, organisationer og måder at være, leve og blive jøder på. Det 21. århundrede har set fremkomsten af adskillige nye jødiske retninger, der ofte ikke har en entydig eller konsistent teologisk kerne, men i stedet fungerer som et *bricolage* tros-samfund, sat sammen af "tilsyneladende inkonsekvente, forskellige komponenter" (Wuthnow 2010, 15; Wertheimer 2018, 10). Sociolog Jack Wertheimer beskriver udviklingen af amerikansk jødiskhed i det 21. århundrede således:

Indeed, what characterizes the current religious environment is the declining influence of the major denominations and the rise of religious start-ups. ... Labels and neat categories are deemed artificial and therefore

expendable, while a spirit of innovation and tinkering is stimulating the creation of hybrid forms of Jewish religious identification. ... [U]nconventional approaches to Judaism now are flourishing – and increasingly influencing the core (2018,7).

I slipstrømmen af denne diversificering og genopdagelse har en parallel proces bidt sig fast, nemlig individualiseringen og personificeringen af jødedommen. I jødiske uddannelses- og policy-cirkler blev dette fra slutningen af det 20. århundrede kendt som “Jewish personalism” (Susser & Liebman 1999, 68-69). Det er blevet hver jødes individuelle valg at forholde til, orientere sig i forhold til og eventuelt vælge (og fravælge) den jødiskhed, som han/hun/de finder passende (Kelner 2019, 203).

Baseret på historiker David Hollingers begreb “post-ethnic” betegner Shaul Magid (2013) den nuværende situation for amerikanske jøder som “post-Judaism”. Han skriver:

... [W]hen the ethnic bond is broken or dissolves into a multi-ethnic/multi-racial mix, the age-old strategies Jews deployed to meet the challenges of survival of both Jewishness and Judaism become largely inoperative, since those strategies assume an “ethnic” root of Jewish identity as its foundation. ... In short, the success of Jews in America, and America’s own turn from inherited to constructed identity, has created a challenge that is distinct if not unique in Jewish history (Magid 2013, 1-2).

Magid fremhæver således en udfordring, som har rod i de følgende spørgsmål: Hvad binder de amerikanske jøder sammen i dag, med hvilket formål og med hvilken dybde? Hvad er det for en fortid og fremtid, de ser sig selv som en del af?

I mere Alexanderske kultursociologiske termer kan man beskrive det amerikansk-jødiske samfund som præget af atomiseret solidaritet og stærkt porøse meningsfællesskaber, da covid-19-krisen ramte. Jødisk kollektivitet fremstod situeret og som lokalt forankrede fællesskaber, der forholdt sig til fælles jødiske ritualer, praksisser og historie ud fra kontingente værdier og holdninger. Den sociale solidaritet omfattede de mennesker, der var fysisk og synligt aktive, og evt. andre ideologiske/politiske, teologiske og/eller regionale allierede. Jødiskhed fremstod derimod ikke som en fælles meningsgivende *signifier*, der kunne hjælpe med at skabe en grænsedragning mellem et jødisk og et ikkejødisk vi og dem. Da covid-19 begyndte at sprede sig i

USA, fik jødisk kollektivitet pludselig en ny betydning og relevans, som jeg vil vise nu.

Data og metode

Denne artikel undersøger som sagt, hvordan jødiske kollektive værdier er blevet genforhandlet i løbet af corona-krisen. Det gøres ved at analysere tre lag af sociale tekster (Reed & Alexander 2009, 30-32): jødiske nyhedsmedier, nye digitale sociale former og endelig jødiske samfundslederes og intellektuelles reaktioner og visioner vis-a-vis sundheds- og samfundskrisen og dens indflydelse på amerikansk-jødisk liv. Disse tekster og aktiviteter adresserer nogle af de centrale kulturelle genforhandlinger, som var fremtrædende i den specifikke fase. Selvom de ikke repræsenterede eller indkapslede det amerikansk-jødiske samfund som helhed, vil jeg plædere for, at de alle relaterede til et amerikansk-jødisk metasprog, hvorigennem jødiske værdier og positioner blev italesat og muliggjort. Denne metodiske tilgang giver således indblik i, hvilke værdier der var i fluks, og hvilke grænsedragninger mellem det jødiske og det ikkejødiske der syntes afgørende i de forskellige faser.

Jeg analyser først, hvordan tre ledende amerikansk-jødiske digitale nyhedsplatforme beskrev covid-19-krisens fremkomst, og særligt hvordan New York og jøderne her blev ramt. Dette fandt sted i krisens indledende dage, hvor et nationalt fokus samlede sig med lynets hast omkring byens ortodokse jøders høje smittetal. I denne del af analysen ser jeg på, hvordan de jødiske medier beskrev forholdet mellem sygdommen, den begyndende sundhedskrise og jødiske værdier og kollektivitet. I næste fase, hvis start jeg identificerer som ca. en måned efter krisens start, dvs. medio april, og frem til slutningen af maj, analyserer jeg de nye former for jødisk kollektivitet, der udsprang i løbet af foråret. Jeg undersøger, hvordan kulturelle værdier om jødiskhed kom til udtryk i disse aktiviteter, og hvordan de relaterede til den forrige fases begyndende genforhandling.

Som covid-19-krisen udviklede sig fra en national sundhedskrise til en samfundskrise, blev de jødiske samfund udfordret på nye parametre, særligt i forhold til racespørgsmål. I denne tredje fase, som begynder med politidrabet på Georg Floyd den 25. maj 2020, analyserer jeg, hvordan jødiske samfundsledere og intellektuelle udtrykte sig i forhold til den dobbelte kri-

se, og hvordan de derigennem fremhævede specifikke jødiske samfundsværdier. I den fjerde fase samler jeg op på de grænse-
dragninger og værdier, der er kommet til udtryk i de forrige fa-
ser og sammenholder dem med nogle af de økonomiske og so-
ciale forhold, som mange amerikanske jøder må forholde sig til,
da skoleåret starter (eller ikke starter) i august 2020.

Fase 1: Kommunikationen af jødiske forskelle og ligheder

New York var en af de første storbyer i USA, der blev ramt sig-
nifikant af covid-19. Den 2. marts 2020 blev det første bekræfte-
de tilfælde af covid-19 registeret i New York State, og seks dage
senere erklærede guvernør Andrew Cuomo undtagelsestilstand
i hele staten – seks dage før Præsident Trump erklærede natio-
nal undtagelsestilstand (Weinberger-Litman et al. 2020). I de
følgende dage blev borgerne først anbefalet en række ændring-
er i deres daglige liv, såsom at undgå offentlig transport og større
forsamlinger. Hurtigt blev disse anbefalinger dog til restriktion-
er og lovmæssige nedlukninger af skoler, spisesteder og offen-
tlige arbejdspladser. I løbet af de næste tre uger døde over 1000
mennesker i New York City af covid-19 (BMJ 2020: 369).

Hele den landsdækkende presse fulgte således udviklingen i
New York på tæt hold for at forstå og følge med i fremkomsten
af den stadig ukendte og dødelige sygdom på amerikansk jord.
Hurtigt begyndte en del af mediedækningen at koncentrere sig
om dele af New Yorks jødiske befolkning, blandt hvem smitten
syntes særligt udbredt (f.eks. Sharp 9. marts 2020, Orecchio-Egre-
sitz 20. april 2020; se også Pirutinsky et al 2020). New York City
huser USA's største jødiske befolkningsgruppe med mere end 1,5
millioner jøder, hvilket udgør en fjerdedel af den samlede ame-
rikansk-jødiske befolkning (Cohen et. al 2011). Af dem identifi-
cerer mere end 40 procent sig som ortodokse jøder (ibid.), og det
var store dele af denne befolkningsgruppe, der nu var i vælten.⁴

4 Ortodoks jødedom dækker over flere forskellige retninger. I denne kontekst er de mest betydningsfulde forskelle mellem de moderne ortodokse og ultraortodokse, også kaldt hasider. Disse grupperinger

bor som oftest adskilt fra hinanden og har forskellige teologiske forståelser og praktiseringer af jødedommen. De ikkejødiske medier slog ofte disse forskellige grup-
peringer over en kam, når de beskrev

den udbredte smitte blandt “den jødiske befolkning”. Der var snarere tale om flere smitteudbrud og epicentre. Se f.eks. Weinberger-Litman et al. 2020 og Pirutinsky et al. 2020.

Som forskerne Weinberger-Litman et al. påviser, blev New Yorks ortodoks-jødiske befolkning det første etno-religiøse samfund i USA, der kom i karantæne grundet covid-19-pandemien (Weinberger-Litman et al. 2020). New York States “patient one” tilhørte et af byens moderne ortodokse samfund, hvor smittetallene hurtigt gik op, og hvis medlemmer som følge af dette blev påbudt at gå i selvkarantæne (ibid., 2270). På næsten samme tid blev de ultraortodokse kvarterer i New York særdeles hårdt ramt. I disse områder er befolkningstætheden exceptionel høj og det fælles samfundsliv integreret i daglige sociale ritualer, rutiner og praksisser (Pirutinsky et al 2020). Ydermere har disse samfund taget bevidst afstand fra det omkringliggende ikkejødiske samfund. Da ikkejødiske medier begyndte at dække smitten blandt disse samfund, var det således med en naturlig grad af afstand og uvidenhed, da de fleste journalister simpelthen ikke havde adgang til eller viden om ultraortodokse leveformer.

Flere af de jøder, der var i karantæne, berettede om følelsen af stigmatisering og højnet frygt for antisemitisme (Weinberger-Litman et al., 2279). Spørgsmålet, som jeg i første omgang kigger på, er, hvordan de amerikansk-jødiske medier valgte at dække de høje smittetal blandt de ortodokse jøder i corona-pandemiens første uger. Hvad var den interne jødiske narrativ blandt de ikkeortodokse medier, der beskrev, forklarede og fortolkede pandemiens indtog i de ortodoks-jødiske samfund i New York?

Jeg ser i første omgang på, hvordan tre af de største amerikansk-jødiske nyhedsmedier – *The Forward*, *JTA (Jewish Telegraphic Agency)* og *Tablet* – dækkede disse begivenheder.⁵ Men inden jeg redegør for disse positioner, er det nødvendigt først at gå to år tilbage i tiden for at se, hvordan disse medier beskrev den selv samme befolkningsgruppe, da en mæslingeepidemi

5 Ingen af disse tre nyhedsplatforme tilhører de hasidiske samfund, som har en levende intern medie verden. *The Forward*, som blev grundlagt i 1897 af østeuropæiske jødiske immigranter og skrevet på jiddisch, har traditionelt været en arbejder-/venstrefløjsavis, men er de seneste år blevet mere midtersøgende og

publiceres nu kun digitalt og på engelsk. Se Zonszein 2020. *JTA* er udkommet siden 1917 og forsøger i dag at repræsentere en bred jødisk dagsorden med nyheder fra hele den jødiske nyhedsverden. *Tablet* er et jødisk online-magasin, der blev grundlagt i 2009. Det har vundet flere nationale mediepriser for dets

podcasting og blogging. Det anses generelt som mere højreorienteret end de to øvrige medier, men har særligt på kultur- og historiefronten en bred skare af bidragsydere, der dækker hele det politiske og religiøse spektrum.

bredte sig i løbet af 2018-19.⁶ Dette vil vise, hvordan jødiske mainstreammedier tidligere har beskrevet de ortodokse jøders og deres forhold til sygdom og sygdomssmitte.

The Forwards dækning i 2018-19 af mæslingeudbruddet fokuserede til dels på det sensationelle aspekt – at det var det værste udbrud i nyere tid – og dels på, at de hasidiske samfund nu udgjorde et epicenter for en regional sundhedskrise (Fischer 10. januar 2019; Feldman 10. april 2019). *The Forward* refererede flere gange til mulige forklaringer på, hvorfor mæslingeudbruddet netop ramte de ortodokse jøder. Her var en dominerende forklaringsramme, at de “hasidiske samfund er modtagelige over for misinformation omkring vacciner”.⁷ På *JTA*'s sider kunne man ligeledes læse beskrivelser af, hvordan de hasidiske jøder ofte var uoplyste og mistroiske over for moderne videnskab (Salles 29. marts 2019). *Tablet* skrev stort set ikke om udbruddet, men valgte i stedet at bringe en lang, undersøgende artikel om den stigende antisemitisme i New York mod den hasidiske befolkning (Rosen 16. juli 2019). Journalisten Armin Rosen kædede ikke disse angreb sammen med mæslingeudbruddet, selvom flere ikkejødiske medier foretog denne slutning (se f.eks. Nir & Gold 29. marts 2019; Green 25. maj 2019). Det gjorde til gengæld en af de hasidiske rabbinere, Avi Shafran, i *The Forwards* kroniksider, hvor han både angreb ikkejødiske og jødiske medier for at puste til antisemitiske stereotyper og frembringe misinformation om disse samfund i deres dækning af mæslingeudbruddet (Shafran 16. maj 2019). På jødiske medier tog teten op omkring den negative og stereotypiserende dækning af de hasidiske samfund i forbindelse med mæslingeepidemien. I stedet måtte disse samfund selv afværge de værste medieangreb.

Da covid-19 ramte USA under et år senere, blev den samme befolkningsgruppe midlertidigt centrum for en ny sundhedskrise, men denne gang var tonen en ganske anden fra de tre jødiske medier. I *The Forward* skrev historiker David N. Myers, at man skulle “stoppe med at dæmonisere de hasidiske jøder”

6 Fra 1. oktober 2018 til 30. april 2019 registrerede CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention) 242 epidemiologisk forbundne tilfælde af mæslinger i New York. Det var det største udbrud af mæslinger siden 1992. Smitten fandt primært sted

blandt ultraortodokse jøder, hvis børnevaccinationsrate, ifølge CDC, lå 21 procentpoint under det offentlige lokale skoledistrikt. Under udbruddet samarbejdede ortodoksjødiske ledere med lokale sundhedsmyndigheder for at dæmme op

for udbruddet og støtte op om vaccineringen blandt børn. Se McDonald et al. 2019.

7 Alle oversættelse fra engelsk er mine egne.

(Myers 23. marts 2020). Myers understregede, at det ikke var et spørgsmål om disse menneskers "tilbagestående", der havde gjort dem særligt udsatte, men i stedet sociale betingelser, såsom boligforhold og store familier. Eli Steinberg fik også spalteplads i *The Forward* og skrev en opsang til den amerikansk-jødiske befolkning, om at spredningen af covid-19 ikke burde ses som et særligt ortodokst problem (Steinberg 18. marts 2020). Steinberg afsluttede sit indlæg med en opfordring: "Vi burde alle stræbe efter en smule mere venlighed i denne svære tid. For nogle burde dette starte med, hvordan de portrætterer vores [jødisk] samfund." Både Myers og Steinberg appellerede således til en større solidaritet og identifikation blandt amerikanske jøder, uanset forskelle og uenigheder.

Steinbergs opfordring fandt også resonans i *JTA's* og *Tablets* tidlige dækning af covid-19 og de ortodokse jøder. *JTA* skiftede nu journalistisk tilgang til de ortodokse syge og undersøgte ud fra mere objektive parametre, hvorfor disse jøder syntes mere ramte end andre befolkningsgrupper (f.eks. Sales 2. april 2020). Avisen gav spalteplads til endnu en kritisk kronik af Shafran, hvor han gav udtryk for sin utilfredshed over, at hasidiske jøder blev usagligt bebrejdet for spredningen af covid-19 (Shafran 29. april 2020). Endelig kunne man i *Tablet* læse et længere essay af religionsforskeren Shaul Magid, hvor han udfoldede en rig, teologisk og historisk kontekstualisering af det hasidiske samfunds reaktions- og handlingsmønstre i forhold til covid-19 (Magid 30. april 2020). Magid forsvarede ikke det hasidiske samfund som sådan, men omskrev i stedet de grundlæggende præmisser for diskussionen og særligt kritikken af de hasidiske covid-syge. Han fremhævede betydningen af den jødiske tro for disse mennesker, og hvordan deres adfærd, praksisser og dedikation ikke skulle ses som uoplyst eller urelateret til jødisk liv generelt. I Magids udlægning forholder de hasidiske jøder sig til kerneværdier i ortodoks jødedom, og selvom andre jødiske samfund ikke deler denne overbevisning, handler de stadig inden for genkendelige jødiske parametre. De ikkehasidiske jøder bør derfor ikke afvise eller forkaste dem som tilbagestående, men i stedet forstå dem i deres anderledes, men essentielle, jødiskhed.

Dette var nogle af de kulturelle genforhandlinger, der var begyndt at finde sted blandt den amerikansk-jødiske offentlighed allerede i løbet af krisens første måned. Sammenlignet med dækningen af sundhedskrisen i 2018-19, træder forskellene ty-

deligt frem. Ved mæslingeudbruddet var der en tydelig optegning af et “dem” og et “os” – de ortodokse jøder blev syge grundet deres “uoplyste” og “umoderne” “andenhed” i modsætning til de ikkeortodokse jødernes civiliserede modernitet. Stemmerne, der kom til orde i de jødiske mainstreammedier, beskrev primært det hasidiske samfund som uden for deres egen kollektivitet. Det fælles jødiske var nedtonet til et minimum, mens forskelle var fremhævet som fundamentale.

Med covid-19-udbruddet ses en forandring i de tre nyhedsmedier i forhold til, hvilke værdier og syn på det jødiske og særligt det jødiske fællesskab der blev fremhævet. Medierne understregede nu de almene problematikker i forbindelse med covid-19-spredningen og tilsidesatte partikulære forklaringer, der gjorde hasiderne selv til problemet. Skribenterne skrev i stedet de hasidiske jøder og deres sundhedssituation ind i en større jødisk og amerikansk social kontekst. Det skaber både en mere empatisk fremstilling af disse jøder, og en mere ekspansiv forståelse af jødiskhed. I stedet for at optegne linjerne mellem et “dem” og “os” fremstillede disse artikler et mere inkluderende jødisk “vi”, hvor en venligsinde opmærksomhed blev rettet mod de ortodokse jødernes situation.

Sideløbende med at covid-19 spredte sig fra New York til resten af landet, stoppede sygdommen dog med at blive set som et “ortodoks problem” eller et “jødisk problem”. Det blev hurtigt klart for jødiske samfund over hele landet, at de alle ville blive ramt på forskellig vis. Spørgsmålet blev nu i hvilket omfang, og hvor man kunne finde den fornødne hjælp og støtte.

Fase 2: Reorganisering af jødisk liv

Covid-19 spredte sig hurtigt i USA fra en mere geografisk afgrænset sundhedsproblematik til en national sundhedskrise, der krævede massiv nedlukning af store dele af samfundet. Det gjaldt f.eks. offentlig transport, skoler, arbejdspladser, spisesteder og religiøse institutioner. Sociolog Randall Collins (2020) argumenter for, at man kan se den nationale nedlukning af store dele af det amerikanske samfund som et gigantisk sociologisk naturligt eksperiment: Hvad sker der med den sociale orden og betydningsfulde meningsfællesskaber, når fysiske interaktionelle ritualer, såsom religiøse forsamlinger og sekulære begebenheder, bliver bandlyst (Collins 2020, 478)?⁸ Hvilke former

8 Baseret på Émile Durkheim og Erving Goffmans tanker om ritualer og social orden har Collins udviklet teorien om “interaction ritual chains”, som fokuserer på den sociale betydning af verdslige og religiøse rituelle praksisser. Se Collins 2004.

for kollektiv solidaritet opstår eller forsvinder, når organiseret socialt liv pludselig ophører? Hvad sker der med jødisk socialt liv, når man fra den ene dag til den anden ikke kan mødes fysisk og opleve fællesskab sammen?

De amerikanske jøder blev en del af dette "eksperiment", da synagoger, jødiske skoler, pasningsinstitutioner og kulturcentre lukkede ned over hele landet omkring medio marts. Chicago Rabbinical Council beordrede den 15. marts alle områdets synagoger og jødiske institutioner til at lukke med øjeblikkelig virkning. LA's synagoger og jødiske forsamlinger blev aflyst eller lukket fra 16. marts. I San Francisco og de omkringliggende områder begyndte nedlukningen af jødiske institutioner allerede fra 12. marts, hvor jødiske privatskoler og Det Jødiske Museum blev lukket, mens shabbatgudstjenesterne den næste dag blev aflyst. I slutningen af april var alle synagoger i hele USA lukket. Selv i de fem stater Iowa, Nebraska, Arkansas og Nord- og Syddakota, hvor borgere stadig måtte forsamles lovligt, valgte menighederne at holde synagogerne lukket (Pink 24. april 2020). Historikeren Jonathan Sarna vurderer, at det var første gang i amerikansk-jødisk historie, at alle synagoger i landet var lukket ned samtidig (ibid.).

I denne anden fase fra midt marts til slutningen af maj, undersøger jeg, hvordan remobilisering af amerikansk-jødisk samfundsliv fandt sted, når fysisk samvær blev bandlyst. Udover nedlukningen af synagoger blev, som nævnt, alle andre centrale institutioner i jødisk liv også lukket ned, i hvert fald fysisk. Det omhandlede bl.a. de 164 landsdækkende Jewish Community Centers (JCC's), som før pandemien havde mere end 40.000 mennesker ansat og mere end to millioner brugere, jøder såvel som ikkejøder, årligt (Cohen 3. juni 2020). Mange af disse centre udbyder udover et stort kulturprogram også vuggestue, børnehaver og fritidshjem i jødiske rammer. Alt dette var sat på standby, ligesom jødiske skoler måtte lukke deres døre, og jødiske plejehjem måtte holde deres beboere isolerede fra familie og menighed. Med andre ord lukkede de fysiske betingelser for jødisk samfundsliv ned fra midten af marts ligesom det øvrige amerikanske menighedsliv.

Efter det første chok oven på pandemiens indtog og nedlukningen havde lagt sig, og den jødiske offentlighed havde rettet sin opmærksomhed mod andet end New York City, så et hav af virtuelle tilbud for jødiske fællesskaber dagens lys. Etablerede jødiske institutioner gik i kast med at konvertere deres norma-

le aktiviteter fra fysiske til virtuelle rum. Familier, der allerede havde betalt for jødiske privatskoler, børneinstitutioner og kulturtilbud, blev således forsøgt kompenseret og tilfredsstillet gennem en digital “rebranching” af præ-covid-19-programmer og -aktiviteter. Det gjaldt både de mere mainstream JCC’s og den proselytiske ortodokse bevægelse, Chabads⁹, mange sociale tilbud. Det drejede sig om alt fra virtuel børnepasning, underholdning og uddannelse til organisering og transmittering af daglige, ugentlige og højtidsbestemte ritualer og praksisser. Flere jødiske privatskoler blev fremhævet i ikkejødiske medier som særligt gode til at skabe mening, indhold og fællesskab på trods af de virtuelle betingelser (f.eks. Goldstein 9. maj 2020).

Konverteringen af de jødiske aktiviteter fra fysiske til virtuelle skabte imidlertid ikke nogen større forandring i det jødiske samfund, udover at det understregede den interne økonomiske ulighed blandt jøder: børnene af de familier, som havde råd til jødisk privatskole og kulturtilbud, havde således stadig mulighed for kvalitetsundervisning og meningsfuld tid med andre børn og mennesker, ligesom deres forældre havde mere tid til at passe deres arbejde (Zuckerman 2020). Denne form for jødisk virtualisering af allerede etablerede økonomiske og sociale grupperinger syntes således ikke at ændre eller rykke meget ved det eksisterende jødiske landskab, udover at undersøgelser pegede på en højnet interesse og glæde ved det jødisk fællesskab, der blev skabt i disse rum (Trencher 2020; Rubin 6. september 2020).

Men en række nye virtuelle tiltag, som blev udformet i løbet af foråret, pegede i en anden retning. Som reaktion på nedlukningen, social isolation, ensomhed og frygten for sygdom begyndte både privatpersoner og mindre grupper og organisationer at tilbyde jødiske sociale fora, som ikke var forbeholdt en betalende medlemsskare. Disse åbne jødiske platforme ønskede at favne bredere ved at tilbyde en lettere og uforpligtende adgang til nye former for jødiske socialitet, som man kunne klikke sig frem til hjemme fra sofaen (Keene 5. maj 2020). Disse tilbud udfordrede jødisk institutionelt liv fundamentalt ved at forsøge at skabe jødiske fællesskaber, der ikke var bundet op på dyre medlemsskaber, fysisk tilstedeværelse og implicite sociale normer og kulturelle koder. Der var ingen husleje, der skulle betales, og heller ingen skarpt defineret menighedsgruppe, der skulle tilfredsstilles. Til gengæld var der en rig jødisk kanon og et repertoire, der kunne tages i brug til at nytænke og nyskabe

9 I modsætning til store dele af den øvrige hasidiske bevægelse var Chabad også før covid-19-krisen positivt stemt over for internettet, som de ser som et middel til at nå flere folk og distribuere mere jødisk viden (Golan & Stadler 2015; Blondheim & Katz 2016).

et fælles sprog, og ritualer, der kunne samle de folk, der havde logget sig på til det pågældende arrangement.

Et væsentligt eksempel på en sådan jødisk platform, der forsøgte at gentænke jødisk samfundsliv under covid-19 var JewishLive, hvis digitale platform gik i luften allerede fra slutningen af marts. I stedet for at repræsentere en bestemt retning eller region af det amerikansk-jødiske landskab så JewishLive sig selv som en facilitator, en platform, der skulle samle det hav af forskellige virtuelle, jødiske tilbud, der var begyndt at skyde op over hele USA, og også lede jødiske borgere *sammen* ud i disse forskellige retninger. JewishLive beskriver sig selv som et “digital Jewish Community Center” eller “The Grand Central Station ... to the new land of online Judaism”.¹⁰

På en given uge i foråret kunne amerikanske jøder i hele USA således logge sig gratis på JewishLives hjemmeside, hvorfra de kunne finde jødiske aktiviteter, der dækkede hele ugen. De kunne f.eks. vælge om mandagen at deltage i Lab/Shul Soul Spa, som tilbød meditation, Storahtelling og poetisk bøn, om tirsdagen at deltage i jødedom og naturforbindelse, hvor rabbiner Daria guidede deltagerne i at “grounde” sig selv og jødedommen i naturen. Om onsdagen kunne man lytte med og lære om Talmud, når grundlæggeren af Traditional Radical Yeshiva, Benay Lappe, udlagde sine meninger og fortolkninger derom. Torsdag kunne man f.eks. deltage i Jødisk Kvindearkivs “Quarantine Book Club”, hvor der blev læst og diskuteret jødisk kvindelitteratur. Fredags- og shabbattilbuddene samlede JewishLive i en lang liste af shabbatarrangementer, der blev live-streamet fra hele verden.

På hjemmesiden skriver grundlæggerne af JewishLive, at det var erkendelsen af den nye, destabiliserende situation, som det jødiske samfund stod i, der hurtigt fik dem til at stable JewishLive på benene: “[W]e realized that we were about to experience months in which not one in-person Jewish event would take place. ... [W]e knew that physical distancing would bring loneliness and a sense of social isolation for many people.” Samtidig med erkendelsen af isolering og ensomhed, identificerede de også nye muligheder for jødisk solidaritet, samhørighed og innovation:

[T]his situation created an opportunity for many Jews, and non-Jews, to connect to Jewish experiences that they might have been intimidated to join in person. And it

10 Det skal understreges, at projektet var knyttet til The Institute for the Next Jewish Future, en jødisk fremtidstænkning, der er organiseret af den karismatiske Daniel Libenson. Selvom dette institut ikke er affilieret med en bestemt religiøs retning inden for jødedommen, var den overordnet form for eklekticisme, der blev repræsenteret gennem JewishLive-programmer, ikke i overensstemmelse med mange ortodokse samfunds teologiske grundlag. Se f.eks. Fader 2020.

created many other opportunities: to find commonality and community across distance; to create experiences for others; to re-think elements of Jewish life that may not have been working so well before but that had inertia.

Netop forbuddet mod fysisk samvær blev således vendt til en åbning for at skabe og muliggøre nye former for jødisk liv.

Vi ser således, hvordan bevægelsen af jødisk socialt liv fra fysiske til virtuelle rum delvist bekræftede og konsoliderede nogle af de eksisterende strukturer inden for jødisk institutionelt liv. Samtidig blev der også skabt helt andre, mere tilgængelige og nye måder, hvorpå jødiske individer kunne finde og blive del af jødiske fællesskaber. Disse nye rum gjorde op med årtiers mere privilegerede jødiske fora, hvor økonomi og klasse, geografi, normer og interne etniske forskelle har spillet en afgørende rolle for adgang og oplevelse af det fælles jødiske. Nu blev fællesskabet åbnet radikalt op.

Jødiske borgere søgte meningsfællesskaber til at hjælpe med at forstå, fortolke og strukturere deres situation. Krisetiden tydeliggjorde, at fællesskaber, særligt trossamfund, også har en historie, en bredde og et rigt repertoire af ritualer og praksisser, gennem hvilke de kunne genskabe mening og stabilitet.

Fase 3: Grænsedragninger

Jeg har foreløbig vist, hvordan covid-19-krisen var med til at ændre kommunikationen omkring jødisk kollektivitet og solidaritet og samtidig igangsatte nogle nye organisationsplatforme, der muliggjorde denne solidaritet på et virtuelt plan. Men som både Det Hvide Hus' rådgivende immunolog, Dr. Anthony Fauci, og Jeffrey Alexander påpeger, kan man ikke forstå covid-19-krisen i USA uden også at se på de raceuroligheder, der eskalerede med politimordet på Georg Floyd den 25. maj 2020 (Grady 9. juni 2020; Alexander 2020). I et jødisk samfundsperspektiv frembragte demonstrationerne og diskussionerne omkring raceulighederne i det amerikanske samfund også spørgsmål om grænsedragningerne mellem jødiske og ikkejødiske fællesskaber og bredden af jødisk solidaritet.

Jødiske samfundsledere, aktivister og forskere på tværs af det religiøse og geografiske spekter har de seneste år brugt den digitale platform *E-Jewish Philanthropy* til at udtrykke og udveksle meninger om aktuelle dagsordener samt give deres offen-

tlige indspark til, hvor de mener, amerikansk-jødisk liv skal bevæge sig hen. I fase 3 ser vi, hvordan jødiske meningsdannere i dette og lignende fora fortolkede relationen mellem covid-19, raceurolighederne og “den jødiske position”.

Under to uger efter mordet på Floyd gik Andrew Keene, en ung leder fra den jødiske reformbevægelse, til tastaturet og beskrev den unikke mulighed for mobilisering, som han så for sig:

The Coronavirus crisis has created a seismic opportunity to connect Jewish people to other Jewish people after a long period of isolation. The Black Lives Matter Movement has created an urgent opportunity for networks of Jewish people to actualize their Jewish values in a way that creates a more just and equitable world (Keene 9. juni 2020).

Keene understregede her, at sundhedskrisen havde ført til en større jødisk samhørighed, men at det var BLM-bevægelsen og den moralske og sociale uretfærdighed, som de bekæmpede, der skulle være med til at aktualisere jødernes samhørighed som andet og mere end blot jødisk gruppedannelse. Keene uddybede, at han så BLM som en testballon for jødiske organisationer til at tage “the first uncomfortable leap into the future”. De sortes kamp for retfærdighed kunne således blive jødernes “wake up call” til at finde tilbage til deres grundlæggende etiske værdier og historie og samtidig engagere sig i den større samfundskamp. Keene skrev ydermere: “Guided by a clear and compelling sense of purpose, values, and heritage, Jewish platforms will provide the framework for Jews to communally engage in the Black Lives Matter movement”. Han argumenterede således for, at jødisk solidaritet burde hvile på et dybere moralsk grundlag og vision og samtidig række udover jødernes egne rækker og være relevant i en større civil sfære.

Denne bevægelse – fra jødisk overlevelse og trivsel under covid-19 krisen til en fremtidsvision om jødisk medborgerskab efter krisen – blev påpeget af flere ledende jødiske stemmer (se f.eks. Moore 11. juni 2020; Newman, Samuels & Sumekh 12. juni 2020; Fieldman 21. juni 2020). På forskellig vis så disse ledere en forbindelse mellem raceurolighederne og det amerikansk-jødiske samfunds behov og mulighed for at redefinere sig selv i forhold til en større verden.

I en mere selvkritisk version handlede spørgsmålet også om

de interne jødiske grænsedragninger, hvor race og hudfarve har spillet en væsentlig rolle. Cheryl Cook og Nate Looney fra organisationen Avodah skriver således på *E-Jewish Philanthropy*:

For too long the Jewish community has approached racial discrimination as being separate from the fabric of American Jewish life. However, in 2020, with mass quarantines in effect, we can no longer look away or turn our backs. The reckoning of our proximity to white supremacy requires us to take a deep and often painful look at the ways our institutions have excluded Jews of color at every level (Cook & Looney 16. september 2020).

Organisationslederne Cook og Looney sammenstillede her sundhedskrisen og racespørgsmålet til at påpege den interne jødiske grænsedragning mellem hvide og farvede jøder. Solidaritetsspørgsmålet handlede i deres øjne således ikke kun om at række ud over egne jødiske rækker, men også om at forstå den diskrimination og differentiering, der fandt sted internt i jødiske samfund.

Professor i historie Susannah Heschel formulerede et af de mest gennemgribende kritikskifter, da hun i et essay på SSRC's (the Social Science Research Council) hjemmeside skrev:

The central question is whether Jews have anything to contribute to ending our racism crisis or whether we have rendered ourselves irrelevant. Without mobilizing principles of justice, we will emerge from this pandemic in a far deeper epidemic, sickening and bringing death to Jewish principles (Heschel 18. juni 2020).

Hun argumenterede for, at hvis det jødiske samfund ikke forholdte sig og handlede i forhold til racediskrimination, ville det jødiske samfund ikke have noget moralsk grundlag, der kunne holde jøderne sammen. Hun kædede denne refleksion sammen med en kritik af jødisk magelighed, der, ifølge hende, havde fulgt i hælene på den succesfulde skabelse af virtuelle jødiske fællesskaber i løbet af covid-19-krisen. Hun skrev:

In early June, I listened to a panel of white Jewish leaders discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the American Jewish community. A renowned journalist bemoaned that Jewish summer camps might not reopen this year. Another praised Jewish day schools for handling online

learning so effectively. A rabbi enthused about his daily Zoom religious service that now attracts a larger group than had attended in person when his synagogue was open. A communal official rejoiced that his grandfather can listen to Torah study all day every day from his home. One might think the pandemic was a gift to be celebrated. They were cheerleaders for Jewish life: Torah study, day schools, synagogue services—all on Zoom, while masses of people endanger their lives working in hospitals, factories, grocery stores, and pharmacies, using public transportation, enabling the lives of those who stay at home. All are disproportionately black and brown people. Is the United States becoming one big slave plantation?

Heschel påpegede, at det nye forstærkede jødiske fællesskab, som covid-19 forårsagede, og internettet muliggjorde, samtidig havde skabt nye skodder mellem det jødiske og omkringliggende amerikanske samfund. Det vendte jødisk solidaritet indad på et tidspunkt, hvor uligheden og desperationen rasede i landet, men også på et tidspunkt, hvor rettigheder og solidaritet stod øverst på mange amerikaneres dagsorden. Heschel spurgte med andre ord, hvordan det styrkede jødiske fællesskab ville forholde sig til den omkringliggende krise.

Selvom de ovenstående positioner ikke opsummerer bredden af jødiske reaktioner på sommerens raceuroligheder, understreger de nogle af de kulturelle forhandlinger, der blev sat i gang i denne tredje fase. En styrket og/eller genopfundet jødisk kollektivitet skulle stadig forholde sig til, hvordan det jødiske samfund relaterede sig til de samfundsmæssige udfordringer, som krisen enten igangsatte eller forværrede. Som disse jødiske ledere italesatte, kunne denne dobbelte krise dog bruges til at enten genopdage og styrke kollektive jødiske værdier eller forskanse sig bag eksisterende normer og kulturelle grupperinger.

Fase 4: Ny normalitet? Konkluderende bemærkninger

I starten af august 2020 dominerede nye spørgsmål amerikansk jødisk samfundsliv. Covid-19-krisen havde fået amerikanske jøder til at tilsidesætte de problemer og udfordringer, der syntes så altoverskyggende før marts 2020. Religiøse og sekulære for-

skelle, individualiserede og atomiserede former for jødedom og regionale, politiske og socioøkonomiske skel var under krisen tilsyneladende blevet marginaliseret til fordel for et kollektivt fokus på jødisk solidaritet og fællesskab. BLM-bevægelsens genkomst og den fornyede fokus på racediskrimination understregede i mellemtiden, at jødisk solidaritet også havde sine begrænsninger, hvis den ikke samtidig kunne oversættes og udvides til større samfundsproblemer og en bredere befolkningsgruppe. Ydermere blev det fremhævet i denne proces, at også jødiske fællesskaber havde og har eksklusionsproblemer vis-a-vis farvede jøder (Jews of color).

Jødiske intellektuelle og samfundsledere udtrykte håb om, at denne nyorientering og nyorganisering også kunne bane vej for en nyaktualisering af jødisk liv i USA. At amerikanske jøder ville kunne begynde at se sig selv og deres jødiskhed som en del af en større vision, der kombinerer jødiske værdier og praksisser med et aktivt amerikansk samfundssind og medborgerskab. Dette er den mere end 300 år gamle europæisk-jødiske oplysningsdrøm (i den jødiske tradition kaldet *Haskalah*), genoversat i en amerikansk kontekst anno 2020 (Feiner 2011; Alexander 2006, 459-488). Men visionen om både intern og ekstern, partikulær og universel solidaritet skulle først og fremmest overkomme de kolossale daglige praktiske udfordringer, som størstedelen af amerikanere stod over for ved skoleårets start i august 2020. Udover skyhøje arbejdsløsheds- og fattigdomstal stod størstedelen af amerikanske familier over for et efterår og en vinter uden børnepasning og fysiske skoletilbud. Et pres uden fortilfælde hvilede på alle familier om, hvordan de kunne løse den daglige Sisyfos-opgave, der bestod i at udføre sit arbejde, passe og uddanne sine børn, samtidig med at man for alt i verden måtte forsøge at holde sig selv og sin familie raske gennem hele forløbet.

Sjældent har behovet for solidaritet været så presserende og så afgørende for individuel og kollektiv trivsel, og samtidig syntes det stadig at være socioøkonomiske forskelle, der spillede en essentiel rolle for, hvilke ressourcer og muligheder familier havde til rådighed til at organisere sig i denne fortløbende situation. Det amerikansk-jødiske samfund formåede at organisere sig som en ressourcestærk og velhavende kollektiv enhed, der i løbet af krisens første 5-6 måneder knyttede endnu stærkere, interne sociale bånd. Men én ting er at organisere sociale (virtuelle) mødesteder, skabe moralske fællesskaber og proklamere

stærke solidaritetserklæringer, en ganske anden er at redistribuere økonomiske ressourcer. Covid-19-krisen i USA gjorde det krystalklart for mange amerikanske jøder, at de havde brug for dybe, pålidelige og autentiske etno-religiøse fællesskaber. Hvad de ikke fik svar på i løbet af disse måneder var, hvordan og hvem der kunne afhjælpe dem med den bredere sociale og økonomiske destabilisering, som krisen også igangsatte. Tiden må vise, hvordan forskellige samfundsgrupper forsøger at løse den fargrenede sundheds- og samfundskrise.

Abstract

This article shows how the Corona pandemic together with the demonstrations against racial injustice have unsettled the American Jewish communities in their foundations. Necessity and crisis, uncertainty, innovation, and idealism are all elements that are part of reconfiguring how Jewish lives can be lived in the US today. Empirically, I describe four distinct phases which the American Jewish community so far has underwent since the beginning of Covid-19. Theoretically, I argue that these phases show how the crisis has initiated a change of American Jewish core values, where Jewish solidarity and unity again appear as central values that connect the Jewish community and Jews as a unified collective. Simultaneously, this newfound solidarity challenges the societal outcry for solidarity and problem solving across group divisions.

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