

Chapter 11: Religion and COVID-19

As discussed in this chapter, an important component of most religions is that they bring communities together in a shared experience. The emergence of COVID-19 and the stay-at-home measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus have had an enormous impact on religious communities and their ability to participate in the communal and ritualistic practices that make up this shared experience. Stay-at-home measures were in place as Christians celebrated Easter, Jews marked Passover, and Muslims began the holy month of Ramadan, all of which are occasions where communities and families often come together.



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The limitations created by the pandemic elevated the tension between the ability of religious institutions to act as agents of positive social change during difficult times and the tendency of some religious institutions to act as more intolerant or retrograde social actors. UN Secretary-General António Guterres [appealed](#) to religious leaders of all faiths “to join forces to work for peace around the world and focus on our common battle to defeat COVID-19.” However, in the United States, some evangelical Christian ministers refused to follow state orders not to congregate and held services for thousands, leading to the [arrest](#) of a Florida pastor. In the early days of the pandemic, the Pope [battled](#) with the Italian government over his desire to continue to allow individual worship in churches, despite the ban on gatherings. And a choir practice at the Mount Vernon Presbyterian Church in Mount Vernon, Washington turned tragic when [87%](#) of the singers developed COVID-19 and at least two members died.

At the same time numerous religious groups provided incredible examples of charity and service to their communities. In China, religious organizations [donated](#) medical equipment to undersupplied communities;

Jewish organizations in the state of California [collected](#) donations for low-income families, refugees, and isolated senior citizens; Catholic charities [in Italy are running soup kitchens for the poor](#), with modifications to prevent the virus’s spread. In Canada, the Canadian Muslim Response Network (CMRN), a coalition of Muslim civil society organizations, launched a campaign to [support](#) vulnerable Canadians affected by the COVID-19 crisis.

As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- Some religious communities rose to the challenges the pandemic presented and were a huge social support for their faith community and the community at large. Other religious communities railed against the strictures the virus imposed upon their faith and practices. What factors do you think might have impacted individual religious communities' reactions to the pandemic?
- A Pew Research report from March 2020 indicated that 24% of US adults felt their faith has become stronger because of the pandemic. Just 2% said their faith had become weaker. Using Durkheim's sociological approach to religion as a guide, can you think of some reasons why this outcome is or is not surprising?
- Many religions have rituals that accompany death and the loss of a loved one. Seeing a casket lowered into the ground, sitting shiva or holding a wake, or having people visit your home are often vital parts of the grieving process, even for those individuals who do not consider themselves religious. COVID-19 limited the ability of people to gather, participate in rituals, and, most cruelly, visit the death bed of sick or dying relatives. Technology filled some gaps for families, but many chose to put off funerals and other rituals until they were able to gather, provide comfort, and share memories in-person—important therapeutic steps in the grieving process. Thinking of Durkheim's observations on the sacred and the profane, can you explain why people believe that religious traditions and locations are an important part of the grieving process?
- During the pandemic, many religions shifted their services from in-person to online worship. Time magazine [reported](#) on another trend: the popularity of drive-in church services. Do you think COVID-19 will have any long-term impacts on religion? Will individuals be more likely to worship from home, the same way they may be more likely to work from home? Consider what differentiates the social role of work from the social role of religion.



Additional online resources

Do you think religion and science can complement each other?

- Barmania, S., & Reiss, M. J. (2020, June 11). [Religion and science in a time of COVID-19: Allies or adversaries?](#) Scientific American.

Even Canadians who did not lose a loved one during the pandemic may have experienced grief. The article describes different types of grief and loss and ways to cope.

- Canadian Mental Health Association. (n.d.). [Loss and grief during the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

This news report illustrates some of the ways rituals and social practices around death changed during the pandemic.

- Global News. (2020, April 15). [Funeral directors adjusting to COVID-19 changes](#) [Video].

A UBC professor and chair gives her thoughts on how COVID has affected religion and future trends.

- UBC Faculty of Arts. (2020, May 6). [Religion in the age of COVID-19](#).

Some grieving rituals moved online during the pandemic, but their effectiveness in helping people heal from loss is still uncertain.

- Ungerleider, S., & Bidwell Smith, C. (2020, May 22). [Grief in the time of COVID-19](#). Scientific American.