

Contagious crowds: religious gatherings in the age of coronavirus

*Governments have used considerable power to restrict the freedom of their citizens as they try to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the temporary closure of places of worship and restrictions on social gatherings have imposed secular authority on public, communal religious life. **Michal Kravel-Tovi (Tel Aviv University)** and **Esra Özyürek (LSE)** consider the tensions inherent in this collision of the secular and religious realms, from the vilification of religious groups as irresponsible and dangerous to a future digital reordering of religious hierarchy and community.*

One of the most compelling areas for social inquiry into the meanings and consequences of the *War on Coronavirus* is religious life. The media presents us with images of closed and inaccessible holy sites, houses of prayer, and religious institutions. Think of [the image of Pope Francis](#), leading the traditional Stations of the Cross in a near-empty Saint Peter's Square on Good Friday; [the twinned before- and after-coronavirus satellite photographs](#) of the Kaaba, the Imam Ali Shrine, and the Western Wall; or the numerous empty mega-church auditoriums, bare pews in local churches, and empty neighborhood mosques. Think of the bakery in Rome, known for its excellent Easter pastries but now shuttered; or the streets of Bnei Brak, the ultra-Orthodox city on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, usually packed on the days leading up to Passover with residents kosherising their kitchen utensils and dishes before the holiday – but now empty.



A church in north London. Photo: Ros Taylor

These images, of empty public religious life, warrant closer scrutiny. To begin with, this emptiness is a reality imposed by the sovereign state—a rather tenuous achievement on its part, it must be said. From the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, numerous religious groups have been identified, and vilified, as virus clusters. Mass religious gatherings and festivals, most notably of those connected to religious enclaves and transnational pilgrims, have been linked to infections and contagion. A [Tablighi Jamaat gathering](#) in Malaysia, a [mass meeting of the secretive sect of Shincheonji Church of Jesus](#) in South Korea, [pilgrims returning](#) from the holy city of Qom in Iran or from Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and [ultra-Orthodox Jews indulging in Purim celebrations](#) in the USA, Israel and the UK; all have been linked, epidemiologically, with the spread of COVID—19. In all of these cases, the epidemiological and scientific discourses seem to intersect with social stereotypes, xenophobic hostility, and a discourse of suspicion directed towards foreigners and minority groups as being dangerous and possibly uncontrollable populations. These anxious articulations conflate medical uncertainty with moral panic; the danger of contagion with the threat of symbolic pollution; biological risks to public health with threats to the social and political order.

Nowhere do these forms of discursive conflation seem more intense and volatile than in relation to the religious groups who have breached the measures of social distancing decreed by the state. Across religious denominations and faiths, religious leaders and audiences have contested, negotiated, and negated the bans on gatherings. Cases in point include [the Louisiana pastor who hosted hundreds of believers](#) on Palm Sunday; the Tampa pastor who, in an act of defiance after his arrest for violating virus orders, [broadcast to his congregants](#) the message that in closing the church his objective was to protect them “not from the virus, but from tyrannical government”; [megachurches in Nigeria](#), closed down only after the forceful intervention of the police; and the numerous ultra-Orthodox synagogues, and yeshivas, that, [for a while](#), resisted virus orders.

The refusal of religious leaders and congregations to close their gates has repeatedly been framed in public discourse as an outrageous act of civil disobedience, a provocative marker of ill and irresponsible citizenship. To be sure, secular public events and leisure conduct—from the now infamous [Champions League tie between Atalanta and Valencia](#), to the [defiant Australians flouting social-distancing rules](#) on Sydney beaches—have been cited as examples of less-than-perfect civil responsibility. However, by and large, religious communities are all-too-easily identified and demonized by vast secular and liberal publics for displaying a compromised citizenship, and for favouring communal doctrines and authorities over the dictates of the state.

Alongside the somewhat exoticising stories of those who (allegedly) fear God more than they fear coronavirus, or those who offer alternative, theologically-based (whether messianic or apocalyptic) narratives about the impending world catastrophe, we are presented too with broad coverage of religious groups, some more mainstreamed than others, who have refused to recognize liability and to comply with the coronavirus biosecurity regime. The unavoidable result, more often than not, is robust encounter, and direct collision, between state authorities and the religious community. These flash points are manifested in the invasive inspection of bodies, the visible presence of military forces in civil spheres, financial penalties, and the enforced (albeit belated) closure of religious institutions. Underlying these collisions are divergent cultural understandings of reality, authority, sovereignty, community, social responsibility, freedom of religion, and citizenship. These all have the potential to create conflicting construals and hierarchies of religious gatherings. In Turkey, for example, the Directorate of Religious Affairs' solution between closing mosques for Friday prayers and helping COVID—19 to spread was to institute [VIP Friday prayers](#). Select people close to the government were able to have access to the scarce coronavirus test and could then fulfill their religious requirement. By doing so, the Turkish directorate of religion helped to establish inequality not only in the wellbeing of their citizens in this world but also in the next. The question of how and why—or indeed, whether—public health concerns should be prioritized over other considerations, including the mental wellbeing and religious needs of believers, constitutes a loaded site for the explosive reconfiguration of the already extant cracks and tensions running between the state and religious communities.

The pandemic has not only strained relations between the state and religious communities but has also brought out tensions within religious communities as well. For example, in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, one can hear a growing swell of voices critical of fellow ultra-Orthodox Jews and even senior leaders who have recklessly breached or ignored state restrictions. In the UK, some religious figures [publicly resented the Anglican church closures](#). These critiques build on, and elevate, existing conflicts and fractures, between the more modern, mainstream and state-oriented religious actors and those from the more isolationist, and often radical, fringes.

This generalised set of problematisations regarding an ongoing reality—in fact, multiple realities—opens up a wide range of questions about religious gatherings in the age of coronavirus. What will be the consequences, formations, and implications of disrupted religious gatherings? What will it mean for religious groups located on the margins of the state and the margins of the global order? What will this do to transnational religious affinities? If Saudi Arabia decides pilgrimage to Kaaba is not to be done this year or the next, how will other Sunni Muslims react to this decision? How will emergent forms of digital gatherings transform the existing hierarchies in religious communities, especially when not all members are necessarily digitally literate? What will the implications be for the financial maintenance of religious institutions? Anthropologists of religion will have much to discover.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE. It [first appeared](#) on the [LSE Religion & Global Society blog](#).