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Religion and Pandemic: Shifts of Interpretation, Popular Lore, and Practices. An Introduction

Alexander Agadjanian
Yerevan State University, Armenia; Russian State University of the Humanities

Konrad Siekierski
King's College London

ABSTRACT In this Introduction, the guest editors discuss the main themes of this special issue and relate them to the growing field of research on how the extraordinary social conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic affected the practices of religious individuals, groups, and institutions. As we suggest here, the pandemic revealed and catalysed important trends within religious traditions and also exacerbated the issues of specific religious identities as confronted against, or negotiated with, the dominant frame of secular state-controlled public health priorities, policies, and protocols.

KEYWORDS Covid-19 pandemic, religion, theology, rituals, lockdowns and restrictions, Islam, Christianity, Jainism

The Covid-19 pandemic affected all aspects and spheres of human societies and cultures; religion has been one of them. In this special issue, we address various reactions to the pandemic from religious institutions, communities, and individuals, as well as the respective transformations in religions that this extraordinary situation triggered or accelerated. [1]

The range of these reactions—and reactions to the reactions—was huge. From the shock many Muslims experienced at the sight of the closed and empty Kaaba as well as Catholic or Orthodox priests flying with relics or monstrance over infected cities and blessing them from above, to the public outrage at religious groups ignoring restrictions and becoming "superspreaders," the pandemic left no one indifferent and religion was often in the centre of debate. Like in less challenging times, from a secular perspective the visibility of religious actors and the importance of religious responses to the pandemic was mainly boiled down to the question of their "being either problematic or useful" (Hjelm 2014, 203). For religious persons, however, questions such as "What does it mean to be a good Christian/Jain/Muslim during this crisis?", "What is the moral meaning of the pandemic?", "How should one practice their faith in times of lockdowns and social distancing?" posed a real and serious challenge. [2]

Not surprisingly, religious responses to Covid-19 attracted the attention of scholars from [3]

various disciplines. When we announced the call for papers for this special issue in the fall of 2020, there already existed several websites presenting initial academic reflections on the spiralling crisis and the role of religion in addressing and managing it.[1] Since then, the number of publications has grown exponentially (we refer to some of them later in this Introduction). The interest in our call was also overwhelming—we received around forty proposals dealing with all major religious traditions. However, the road from this initial interest to the final version of the current issue took longer than we planned and was strongly affected by the continuing pandemic itself. Some of us suffered from infections and their aftereffects, others found it difficult or impossible to work because of lockdowns and increased family obligations, yet others realised that although the topic is fascinating and extremely important, the research (including fieldwork) on what was going on—and its conceptualisation—was more demanding and difficult than initially expected.

The eight papers included in this special issue come from various corners of the world and address religious reactions and responses to Covid-19 from different religious communities. Among the latter, the one that received the most attention is Islam. Two articles examine German Muslims' experience with the pandemic. While Arndt-Walter Emmerich discusses institutional responses to the pandemic and state-imposed restrictions, Simone Pfeifer offers a more intimate view of Muslim women's religious engagement. In her turn, Sofya Ragozina focuses on pandemic-related Muslim online debates in Russia. Furthermore, two papers coming from Africa—Ghana and Nigeria—address both Muslim and Christian reactions to Covid-19. Kauthar Khamis describes the appropriation of religious veiling—*niqab* and *khijab*—as a safety measure against the virus. Dauda Abubakar, Maigari Abdullahi Muhammad, Ibrahim Murtala, and Ibrahim Arafat analyse the intertwining of religious reactions (both Muslim and Pentecostal) with mass culture imagination in Nigeria. The discussion of Christian responses to the pandemic is complemented by Alexander Agadjanian's article on the Russian Orthodox Church's answers and actions to the crisis and David Robichaux, Jorge Martínez Galván, and José Manuel Moreno Carvallo's study of the impact the pandemic had on traditional Catholic *ex-voto* dances in Mexico. Finally, beyond the Abrahamic tradition, the paper by Claire Maes offers an insight into Jain discursive and ritual responses to Covid-19. [4]

In the rest of this Introduction, we sum up important and recurring themes raised in this special issue, combined with references to similar studies published elsewhere. [5]

One theme is what we would call a theology, or sometimes a sort of semiotics, of the pandemic—the ways religious imaginations dealt with the disaster referring to the authority of religious specialists and scriptures; how they explained it in providential terms as signs of a transcendental logic. We can see the usual theological tropes presenting the pandemic as punishment for committed sins—either self-critically recognizing believers' own depravities or more willingly shifting the blame onto external agents. As Ragozina shows in her paper on Russian Muslims, the general trope that the Doomsday's menace would only be withstood by impeccable piety can be reinforced by a specific anger against the Chinese anti-Uighur policies that allegedly triggered the pandemic. Nigerians, both Muslims and Pentecostals, as Dauda et al. discuss, entangle the traditional Doomsday narratives with anti-liberal and anti-Western conspiracy schemes and images gleaned from blockbusting Hollywood dystopias. Jains, in [6]

1 For example: Kravel-Tovi and Özyürek (2020); Meyer (2020); Public Orthodoxy, Tag Archives: Coronovirus. Last accessed 14 November, 2022. https://publicorthodoxy.org/tag/coronavirus/; Covid-19, Religion in Global Society blog, London School of Economics. Last accessed 14 November, 2022. https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/category/covid-19/; CoronAzur blog, National University of Singapore. Last accessed 14 November, 2022. https://ari.nus.edu.sg/coronasur-home/.

Maes study, claim that the cause of the pandemic is a general lack of adherence outside their community to the Jain principles of non-violence and non-possessiveness. Overall, the suspicion of humanity's growing vices, often with anti-western connotations, as the origin of the virus has been common for more conservative communities, such as not only the aforementioned Muslims but also Orthodox Jews or Orthodox Christians. As other research shows, it might have also been central for the moralizing argument of some state bodies dealing with religion, such as in the case of Dyanet in Turkey.[2]

[7] For most of the religious communities, however, the "theological" discourse as such was not the only one in the perception of the pandemic: They would usually accept the medical arguments provided by health authorities and state officials and follow the respective policies.[3] In many cases, the religious actors carefully justified their positions theologically through the idea of the compatibility of religion with science, as it happened, for example, in the case of the Society for the Support of Islam in Nigeria, mentioned in the paper by Dauda et al. At the same time, these restrictive arrangements were accepted with strong regret, reluctance, and sometimes resistance, fueled by popular convictions such as that quoted by Emmerich, "if you don't go three times to the *jummah* [Friday prayer], your heart will close." In this respect, the Jain case in Maes' paper seems to stand out, as for the members of this community the outbreak of the pandemic was an occasion to strengthen the already developed pre-pandemic discourse claiming the compatibility and consent between the principles of their faith and that of natural science. In all other cases, the attempts of negotiation coexisted with deep embarrassment.

[8] The main reason and the central point of the embarrassment and skepticism—and this is the second major theme discussed in this issue—was the blow that the epidemic inflicted on the very heart of religious life: its rituals, its sensual and material procedures, its corporeality, its sense of bodily communion with the divine and with believing fellows. Whereas before the pandemic believers engaged in different religious practices (the reception of Holy Communion at Mass, pilgrimages to sacred places, veneration of relics, icons, or holy figures) with the hope that this would give them "access to the sacred through the contagious effects of the material objects" (Kormina 2018, 155), now the same objects were presented to them as transmitters of a contagious and deadly disease. Agadjanian's paper provides a story of bitter debates in Russian Orthodoxy over the closing of churches for Easter celebrations, the cancelling of the Eucharist, or introducing hygienic rules into the ritual sequence—all measures that seemed to be an impossible intrusion of medical materiality into the sacral materiality of religion.[4] Robichaux et al. address the same issue of disrupted sacred materiality, taking as their example a powerful Mexican tradition of *ex voto* dances offered to local saints in supplication for health and prosperity.

[9] As the authors of another special issue on religious responses to the Covid-19 pandemic show, the sensorial, bodily "presence" and its possible substitution—what they call "negotiating the presence"—has been the main concern of all kinds of communities during the pandemic, including Pentecostals, Mormon, Hindu, Sufi, Shi'a Muslims, spirits devotees in

2 The Dyanet's discourse referred to gay pride parades as signs of decay and the cause of global troubles. See Alyanak (2021); see also a chapter of the same collection: Tsipy Ivry and Sarah Segal-Katz (2021).

3 For a detailed study discussing the engagement of one religious institution—the Romanian Orthodox Church—in anti-Covid public health measures, see Dascalu et al. (2021).

4 For another study discussing the impact of the pandemic on Orthodox Christian practice, see Papazoglou et al. (2021).

Singapore, or Burning Man celebrants (Lorea et al. 2022).[5] The authors refer to Birgit Meyer's (2009) emphasis on sensational forms, which is also relevant to some papers in our collection. For instance, Pfeifer writes that for the Muslim women she studied, "the worst experience of the lockdown was being unable to come together in the mosque" and share the soundscape of a Friday prayer. In turn, Maes shows regarding Jainism how the believers "negotiated the bodily presence" by domesticating the key practices of *pūjā* and *darśan* in the situation of the physical restrictions of the pandemic. This last case resembles the Greek Orthodox "domestication" of the Easter shroud (*epitaphoi*)—the central element of the Good Friday ceremony in Orthodox Christianity—to substitute the "presence" of the sacred in their homes when the churches were closed (Papantoniou and Vionis 2020).

[10] Another big theme that appears in this collection, as in many other similar studies, and that is closely related to the same dialectics of presence and distance, is the rapid growth during the Covid pandemic of the virtual, online-mediated forms of worship and devotional assembly. The pandemic inspired an accelerated trend toward what has been called "the distanced Church" (Campbell 2020). It might at first be perceived as a temporary, involuntary suspense of physical actions and gatherings, but in fact meant a continuation of the old trend of translating old practices into the new language of the digital, and thus became an area of creativity that may have lasting effects beyond the time of the quarantine (Berger 2018). Jains in Maes' paper are inventing the "third space" between the physical and the virtual; so are Mexicans whose video-recorded dances become an accepted ritual innovation. As Robichaux et al. put it, "a combination of digital and in-person media [made] it possible for local Catholic communities to maintain during the pandemic the relationship with their patron-saint, based on the principle of *do ut des*, 'though differently.' "

[11] The domestication of worship and new spacial arrangements have been widely reported in the pandemic time (Manmit and Tiffany 2021). The new media also changed the borders of the worshipping community. For example, the national ummah, in Ragozina's paper, tends to merge with the global (digitally-connected) community while discussing personal piety and commitment to rules. In fact, the new media's effect proved to be complex: they can be both subversive (in relation to the 'old' practices) but also reinforce conservative mobilisation. They are also ambivalently related to the issue of individual versus communal religiosity. On the one hand, they may give rise to individualised—personal or domestic—forms of worship and spirituality (which seems obvious when gatherings are forbidden)—and this trend was chronicled in this special issue as well as in other studies (Baker et al. 2020; Musa, Neuve-Eglise, and Tavakoli 2020). On the other hand, because of their public openness and connectivity, they widen the community, redraw boundaries, or even create new communities (Lorea et al. 2022, 182–83). Overall, the resulting paradox, brought to all religious groups, is that of growing hyper-connectivity as opposed to (and, in a way, as substitute for) sensory deprivation.

[12] Yet another effect of the pandemic time has been the adjustment, or a certain reconfiguration, of religious authority and respective institutional structures. Emmerich shows how the German Muslim institutional hierarchy was challenged by the new rules, which brought about renegotiating authority and decision-making between individual mosques and Muslim bureaucratic bodies while simultaneously testing relations with German state authorities in a time of extraordinary and uncertain regulations. Agadjanian discusses similar issues raised in the Orthodox Christian hierarchy, when vague and contradictory guiding rules generated on

5 The referred paper is the introduction to the special issue of *Religions*, "Religion and the Covid-19 Pandemic: Mediating Presence and Distance", Vol. 52 (2), 2022.

the top (of both religious and secular authorities) led to uncertainties in reactions of various grassroots groups. Ragozina shows how the traditional authority of the ulemas was amplified by what she calls "popular ijtihad"—the explosive growth of spontaneous opinions of common Muslims through internet forums and blogs.

[13] An interesting turn found in several papers is that of the pandemic as a "blessing in disguise." Such positive aspects of the otherwise challenging situation can be traced in Emmerich's paper, where he shows how dealing with the pandemic crisis by leading German Muslim organisations helped them to present themselves as reliable partners to state authorities; as well as in Pfeifer's work when she quotes one of her respondents exclaiming "I would never have thought it possible that the Azan could be allowed in Germany!" However, they are the most clearly expressed in the case studied by Khamis in Accra, Ghana. There, the pandemic made Muslim veiling a protective garment against the virus rather than a symbol of Islamic extremism, as it was seen earlier.[6] Furthermore, in a clear case of inter-religious entanglement, the veil also began to be used by some Christian women from a mixed Christian-Muslim neighborhood.

[14] Finally, the cross-cutting theme that runs throughout all the papers of this issue is the question of how the very religious *identity* of individuals and groups endures, either being shattered or reinforced in the situation when they faced a health crisis globally interpreted in clearly non-religious—medical, rational, and scientific—terms. People who identified with a religion were stuck between resistance and compliance. It was more or less discreet or open resistance, rooted in their religious persuasions and habitus, and a compliance with policies imposed by (mostly secular) states and international institutions. In a way, it was a dilemma of ontological and epistemological security (the ability to retain a specific identity, a specific way of knowing or interpreting the world and one's place in it) as well as of an existential insecurity caused by the epidemic. The compliance with restrictions, too, needed to be justified in religious terms, referring to religious tradition as the special and most efficient source to cope with the insecurity, fear, and mourning. Also religiously justified were the inevitable changes, shifts, and transformations in practices. In any case, the pandemic revealed or even accentuated religious identity, which was particularly opportune for scholarly observation.

[15] This outline obviously does not exhaust all the themes explored in this special issue. Some other topics, essential for a more complex and nuanced understanding of religious reactions to the pandemic, were not examined by our contributors. The most obvious example of such a topic are the varied responses to Covid-19 vaccines—the issue that came up on a later stage. The further exploration of the pandemic and its challenges and consequences for religious individuals, communities, and institutions is yet to be continued.

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6 This phenomenon somewhat reminds us of an interesting recent study about how the *Shi'a* pilgrimage centers in Mashhad and Qum, Iran, have been remodeled for carrying new functions of vaccination or medical help-centers during the Covid pandemic, thus "legitimising" the new agendas with the grace they traditionally possess; see Neuve-Eglise & Tavakoli (2022).

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Calling to Prayer in 'Pandemic Times': Muslim Women's Practices and Contested (Public) Spaces in Germany

SIMONE PFEIFER
University of Cologne, Germany

ABSTRACT This article explores how the regulations imposed during Germany's first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 impacted on gendered mosque spaces and the digital spheres relating to those spaces. Examining the call to prayer as a sensory form that establishes "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009), the article unpacks gender-specific Muslim perspectives on space within mosques and the contested position mosques occupy in German public space. Paying particular attention to the temporalities of the pandemic restrictions, the article reflects on women's (digital) practices and relates them to ongoing debates about the contested presence of sonic markers of Muslim religiosity in public space in Germany. It argues that the heterogeneous digital practices and discourses that emerged in 'pandemic times' should not only be viewed as extraordinary responses to an exceptional situation, but as exemplary of ongoing debates over gendered Muslim spaces and publicness in Germany.

KEYWORDS digital practices, gendered spaces, call to prayer, COVID-19, Muslim women, Islam in Germany, anti-Muslim racism, digital ethnography

Introduction

> #goosebumps. I would never have thought it possible that the Azan could be allowed in Germany. Because of Corona & the ban on assemblies, supporters of AfD or Islam haters can't even demonstrate against it. SubhanAllah (post forwarded to author in German in a shared WhatsApp group on 25 March 2020) [1]

This brief quote was extracted from a longer post that was shared in a WhatsApp group I had established as part of my ethnographic research on Muslim everyday life and social media practices. Ebru,[1] the woman who forwarded the post, was a young mother of third-generation [2]

1 To protect privacy, all interlocutors' names in this contribution are self-chosen pseudonyms and the exact geographic locations of fieldwork sites are not mentioned.

Turkish descent in her mid-thirties who often posted statements relating to Turkish-Muslim communities to the group of friends, which included up to five young women with very heterogeneous ethnic and language backgrounds conversing in German. The quote relates to the permit obtained by the central mosque of Duisburg, the Merkez Mosque of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), to publicly call to sunset prayer (*adhan al-maghrib*, Turkish spelling in German *azan*). This permit was granted shortly after mosques in Germany had been obliged to close temporarily as part of the restrictions imposed in March 2020 during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Muslim communities in Germany heralded the Duisburg mosque's permit as a gain that would boost solidarity within their congregations as well as in relation to other religious communities.

[3] More widely, permission to sound the *adhan* in the city must be seen as a political development within a longer history of controversies about the (sonic) presence of Islam in public places in Germany (e.g., Kuppinger 2014; Klingelschmitt 2010) and other European cities (e.g., Lundsteen 2020; Baumann 1999; see also the special issue by Cesari 2005). The forwarded statement concisely evokes the multiple entangled issues implicated: of religiosity, the contested sonic presence of Islam, anti-Muslim discrimination, and the lockdown regulations in Germany. The significance of the call to prayer and its affective potency for Muslim spirituality is emphasised by the hashtag "goosebumps". This also alludes to the role of mosques as a space for spirituality and prayer and for the communal experiences of believers in Germany. The comment "I would never have thought it possible" references the contestation of sonic presence in public space in Germany, which in turn impacts upon the degree to which Muslim populations feel a sense of inclusion and solidarity as part of Germany's urban centres. Contestations over such public presence involve anti-Muslim and racist groups in Germany that continually seek to promote 'othering' discourses and discrimination against Muslim sections of the German population (Shooman and Spielhaus 2010). Lastly, the quote sets this positive news with a light touch of irony against the negative impacts—such as restrictions on assembly, protest, and social life—of Germany's lockdown regulations.

[4] In this article, I reflect on these issues by focusing on the media practices of Muslim women in a German city and in German-language social media interactions more broadly. I examine responses that express the impact of the first lockdown regulations imposed in Germany from March to May 2020 upon these women's everyday religious lives. Considering their statements in relation to wider ongoing debates about the presence of sonic and visual markers of Muslim religiosity in German public spaces and within semi-public mosque spaces allows me to highlight how their reactions are also shaped by their pre-pandemic (digital) religious practices. To contextualise my ethnographic examples, I draw on anthropological literature that explores the significance of sound and listening in Muslim spiritual experiences and public space.

[5] The main part of this article is divided into three sections. First, I offer an overview of female Muslim religiosity in Germany, with particular attention to female mosque spaces as spaces for sociality and spirituality. Against this backdrop, I then outline how women were affected by restrictions limiting their access to the mosques during the pandemic, and the digital practices that they established in response. Finally, I return to the opening quote and the public call to prayer in order to elaborate my discussion by examining judgements expressed about contested sonic spaces during the pandemic. By bringing together the two big themes of female religiosity during the pandemic and the sonic presence of Islam in Germany,

I cannot fully address the broader political issues and implications of the public presence of Islam in Germany, but I am able to point to female perspectives on these debates.

I propose viewing religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the notion of 'epidemic times'[2]: not only as an exceptional response to an extraordinary situation with "particular temporal dynamics" (Roth 2020, 13), but also as part of longer-term ongoing debates around gendered mosque spaces and Muslim publicness in Germany. This 'bifocal' lens allows me to explore how pandemic-specific issues were enfolded into pre-pandemic practices with sometimes surprising consequences: First, during the pandemic, spaces within mosques were more contested than ever, with men often encroaching on women's prayer spaces. This did not, however, spark immediate changes in gender-related attitudes, but was attributed to men's obligation to attend Friday prayers, which women do not have. Second, pandemic restrictions shifted many religious practices to the 'online' realm and later to hybrid forms of engagement for whole communities. While younger women in particular benefited from these transformations, the temporary loss of access to the embodied communal and social experiences within female mosque spaces could only partially be compensated for by gatherings in digital environments. Thirdly, while contestations over the public call to prayer during the pandemic restrictions were usually not related to gender but to wider debates about the presence of Islam in Germany, ways of listening and responding to the call for prayer are nonetheless structured along gendered lines. [6]

This article is based on a digital ethnographic fieldwork that I have been conducting since September 2019 on Muslim everyday life and social media practices in Germany with heterogeneous groups of mainly German-speaking women between 18 and 40 years old. Most of the women whom I initially met in different German-Arabic-language and German-Turkish-language mosques[3] in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia had very different migratory backgrounds, with roots in countries such as Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as European or Latin-American countries.[4] In addition to participant observation in three female mosque spaces where I took part in learning circles, Friday prayers, and celebrations, like those for childbirth (*ʾAqīqah*), holding in-depth individual and focus group interviews enabled me to gain further insights into everyday media practices. After this initial focus on 'offline' fieldwork that mainly took place between September 2019 and March 2020, my participant observation shifted more to different German-speaking social media and messenger services, using Instagram profiles and WhatsApp groups of up to five participants that were set up exclusively to enable the ethnographic study to digitally continue exchanges started during the offline focus group interactions. Setting up these dedicated groups and research profiles with women whom I had first met offline enabled me to obtain informed consent from indi- [7]

2 Jordheim, Helge, Anne Kveim Lie, Erik Ljungberg, and Einar Wigen. 2020. 'Epidemic Times'. *Somatosphere* (blog). 3 April 2020. Last accessed 22 August 2022. http://somatosphere.net/2020/epidemic-times.html/.

3 I use the terms "German-Arabic-language" and "German-Turkish-language" as the Friday prayer is preached bilingually and the women primarily use German to communicate with one another. Moreover, given the heterogeneous groups of women who came together in the mosques during my research and who were not necessarily connected to the board or the umbrella organizations of the mosques, this designation seems the most applicable in order to avoid overemphasising ethnicity, culture of origin, or associational theological positioning (Klapp 2022, 225; Yildiz 2021, 49; see also Herz and Munsch 2019). Elaboration on differing everyday practices in these different mosques exceeds the scope of this contribution.

4 Much of this ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in tandem with my co-researcher Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann, to whom I am indebted in more ways than I can express here. I am infinitely grateful for her insights, reflections, and conversations. Additionally, gaining access to female mosque spaces and particularly to friendship groups was often facilitated through friends who were part of these communities, to whom I would like to express my deepest gratitude.

viduals to use material shared in digital contexts on a weekly basis.[5] This digital ethnography structure proved unexpectedly fortuitous when pandemic-related restrictions on face-to-face meetings came into force in Germany on 16 March 2020. With physical meetings in mosques no longer possible, the research of WhatsApp groups and personal chat conversations and phone calls enabled me to stay in touch with selected participants and continue the fieldwork at a distance during Germany's first lockdown from mid-March until May 2020, and in the months that followed. This article is largely based upon ethnographic material gathered between January and October 2020, but I also draw selectively on later digital ethnographic work, e.g., from the WhatsApp groups and on Instagram, that became part of ongoing research.

Digital Publics, Aesthetic Formations, and the Call to Prayer in Public Spaces in Germany

A growing body of anthropological works address the sonic dimensions of religion and how sounds relate to public spaces and religious and political belonging (e.g., Jouili and Moors 2014). Among these, the Islamic call to prayer has received particular attention and has been seen as a way of sacralising space as well as of claiming religious space in heterogeneous urban settings. There have been heated societal debates over the public presence of the *adhan*, the Islamic call to prayer, in non-majority Muslim contexts, and its recordings and radio broadcasts have also been contested (Tamimi Arab 2015; Larkin 2014; Lee 1999). [8]

The anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2006) has identified the call to prayer as well as other quotidian sounds of religious sermons and qur'anic recitations as foundational to the self-styling and subjectivity that form the bases of a moral and political community for Muslims in Cairo. As scholars of Islam have done (e.g., Schulz 2012, 24), he notes the importance of auditive learning, recitation, and speech as modes of transmitting authoritative religious knowledge while also highlighting the affective and intersubjective dimensions of listening. According to Hirschkind, listening to audio cassettes is not merely a cognitive activity but an embodied experience that incorporates multiple affective and emotional sensations. The voice and its technical processing serve as a principal mediator between speaker and listener, and in this process of mediation what is heard and experienced depends not only on what is said and who is listening, but also on the context and the publics the listener is set in. Hirschkind (2006, 117) argues that an "Islamic counterpublic" has emerged as a domain of discourse and practice disjunctive to the public sphere and the media of the (secular) nation state. [9]

Hirschkind's analysis can be seen as part of a broader shift in the anthropology of religion from the study of the doctrinal content of scriptures to public (and private) practice and especially the embodied, sensual, and affective dimensions of religion (Asad 2009). It also belongs to the growing body of literature on the anthropology of religion and media (e.g., Meyer and Moors 2005; Eisenlohr 2011; Schulz 2012) that focuses on either visual or sonic dimensions of religious everyday life. In this contribution, I would like to leave behind this separation of visual and aural senses and media to expand on the aesthetic dimensions of [10]

5 For reflections on ethnographic research profiles and ethical challenges in digital ethnography, see Pfeifer (2021): 'How Can You Approach the Field Digitally? Reflections on Using Social Media Profiles in Ethnographic Research'. *Digital Ethnography Initiative Blog* (blog). Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://digitalethnography.at/2021/04/29/how-can-you-approach-the-field-digitally-reflections-on-using-social-media-profiles-in-ethnographic-research/; Fuhrmann and Pfeifer (2020).

multi-sensory perception as a means of knowing. To this end, Birgit Meyer's (2009) notions of "sensational forms" and "aesthetic formations" appear particularly pertinent. Meyer pays attention to the role played by things, media, and the body in processes of establishing social formations. This focus allows her to "grasp the particular modes through which the imaginations materialize through media and become manifest in public space" (Meyer 2009, 6). She describes the senses, experiences, and aesthetics as sensory forms[6] that, in combination, shape the shared subjectivities that hold religious communities together. Building on Meyer's discussion, I argue that the call to prayer—like other bodily sensations—can be approached as a sensory form that always stands in interdependent relationships with social relations, materialities, and configurations of power. Taking this into account when examining gender-specific Muslim practices and responses to the pandemic restrictions enables me to explore the link between "auditory sensory perception and our physical and social environment" (Riskedahl 2020). I thereby expand upon the idea that digital technologies encourage individualisation (Slama and Barendregt 2018).

[11] When looking at these dynamics in relation to digital media, Hirschkind's notion of an independent "Islamic counterpublic" can be adapted to include publics established in different digital contexts. By focusing on the different (digital) spheres in which the making of publicness takes place in (female) mosque spaces, WhatsApp groups, in public places, or on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, it is possible to distinguish different "scaled socialities" (Miller et al. 2016) and imaginaries of the social. Hence, I analyse the public presence of Islam in urban centres in Germany as "contested" and "graduated publics" (Zillinger 2017), which are distinctly structured around gender and overlap in significant ways. This focus on practices and contested and graduated publics enables me to elaborate on the gendered regimes of specific religiosities and thereby offer a more nuanced perspective than that of other studies that observed the shift from 'offline' to 'online' religious activities during the pandemic (Kühle and Langholm Larsen 2021, 3; in this special issue, see also Ragozina 2022).

[12] Public societal debates on the role of Islam and Muslims in Germany have often revolved around issues such as the building of mosques, the height of minarets, or, as discussed in this contribution, the public call to prayer. What they all have in common is that they arise when moves are made to claim greater visibility and a greater (sonic) presence of Islam in German urban centres.

(Digital) Religious Practices and Sociality in Germany in 'Pandemic Times'

[13] The above-mentioned restrictions imposed during Germany's first lockdown in 2020 came into force shortly before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which lasted from 23 April until 23 May that year. The suspension of religious services in places of worship were lifted just in time for *eid al-Fitr*, the festival of breaking the fast, and thereafter Friday prayers could be held and practised in mosque spaces as long as certain regulations were adhered to. Yet, many Muslims continued to stay at home and only slowly began meeting face-to-face. Most mosques in Germany were only able to accommodate a very limited number of persons in order to uphold the stipulated 1.5 m between each person praying. This also meant that prayers could not be carried out with the usual bodily proximity, whereby worshippers

6 To avoid misunderstandings, instead of sensational, which can also be read as amazing or shocking, I use the term sensory form to refer to sensory experience and knowing.

stand so close to one another that, depending on the religious practice, they (almost) touch, signifying the communal body of believers. Additionally, older people and others with health conditions that made them vulnerable to the virus were advised to stay at home, no youth or children were allowed in the mosque, worshippers had to bring their own prayer mats, and the use of disinfectant was obligatory. Most mosques began keeping records of visitors, with some even installing digital registration via smartphone and a barcode that had to be scanned upon entering. This served to limit the number of people but also to facilitate contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 case among attendees.

[14] These different phases, from closing mosques completely to reopening with limited opportunities for communal prayer and none for social gatherings or learning circles sparked a diverse range of initiatives to take communal spiritual experiences online. Some mosque organisations expanded their existing social media engagements to include the use of Telegram, YouTube, and Instagram, making their Friday sermons available in written form, as audio podcasts or videos, and even offering learning circles online. Yet these efforts could only partially replace the social support networks that mosques usually offer. For certain groups of women in particular, limited access to mosque spaces starkly curtailed their opportunities to interact with other women socially and for communal religious experiences. In the next section, I will first outline how a mosque as a gendered physical space offers a setting for communal spirituality as well as for sociality. This will enable me to demonstrate how the (partial) closing of religious spaces impacted Muslims in Germany in gendered ways. In the final subsection, I will expand upon my introductory example of the permitting of the public call to prayer and relate it to responses articulated by different groups and publics associated with two different mosques.

Gendered Mosque Spaces in Germany

[15] I regularly met for Friday prayers with a heterogeneous group of women with family links to Turkey and different north African countries in a German-Arabic-language mosque. About thirty to forty women of different ages, some with small children, came regularly for Friday prayers. Upon arrival, each woman usually prayed two cycles of prayers (*rakʿa*) in solitude, after which she would walk around, greet everyone, and sit down with her friends to chat while waiting for the call to communal prayer. On one of those Fridays, shortly before the lockdown was imposed, a woman in her fifties came in brandishing two packets of toilet paper like a trophy and announced, laughing, in German: “Look what I managed to get today [for the mosque]—the last two in the whole supermarket!” Everyone nearby laughed in response; some even playfully tried to grab the scarce goods. Jokingly, the women commented on hoarding and panic buying; toilet paper was indeed hard to obtain in Germany at the time. Soon after, the call to prayer was announced via the loudspeakers in one corner of the ceiling. The unmistakeable form and text of the call to prayer, always recited in Arabic, usually with four repetitions of Allahu Akbar (*takbīr*) followed by the Islamic creed (*shahada*), was called out by a trained and accomplished prayer caller. Some of the women had previously praised his beautiful voice. But the loudspeaker in the women’s space was often distorted by a hollow echo and sometimes, as on this day, the volume was set so low that the voice failed to catch the women’s attention immediately; their conversations continued. Some of the older women in the room asked the others to be quiet and soon everyone was solemnly listening to the sermon, which lasted about twenty minutes and was delivered in Arabic; a language that some of the women did not understand. The sermon was immediately followed by the communal

prayer, for which most of the women got up from the floor to gather in the rows marked by the carpet. They carefully arranged their bodies so that the feet of those standing next to each other in a row were almost touching. Some of the more knowledgeable women regularly oversaw and instructed the others on how to perform the gestures and postures correctly (not always with consent), and made sure that no one was ever alone in a row. As soon as the praying started, all the women synchronised their bodies with the prayer leader and with each other, performing the movements of two prayer cycles: standing, bowing, prostrating. After the communal prayer, participants could stay sitting in the rows for as long as they liked. Some left straight away, but most, like the group I became best acquainted with during my fieldwork, stayed longer. They could then listen to the broadcast of the German translation of the sermon and later chat together, drinking tea and sharing food.

[16] This ethnographic vignette captures the importance of female mosque spaces for women's spiritual practice as well as for sociality and community. While it is not obligatory for women to take part in communal Friday prayer, doing so allows them to enact and experience their relationship with God, not least in its embodied and affective dimensions (Pontzen 2020, 192). The call to prayer and the communal praying in this semi-public space serve, in line with Birgit Meyer (2009), as sensory forms, mediating between the women and the realm of God while at the same time forging a particular kind of community among very different groups of women who all attend this particular mosque for Friday prayers.

[17] It also emerges in the description above that the women (and also men) do not always agree about the correct way to perform the prayer, instructing each other on how to perform and listen to the *adhan* and the sermons. The women did not necessarily carry out all the gestures of the prayer in exactly the same manner.[7] As Khadija, a young woman of Moroccan descent and part of the above-mentioned WhatsApp group, told me: "there are several ways that can be right, there are always permissible differences." Yet, nonetheless, performing their practices together within a shared space served to attune their bodies and routines to the others present. The distinctive voice, amplified by the loudspeaker, the synchronised bodily movements, and not least the scent of tea and the sharing of food are key to the multi-sensorial experiential realm within which the female community is established.

[18] Mosques, especially in places with stringent interpretations of Islam, have often been segregated according to gender, with women carving out their own spheres of authority, religious knowledge, and interpretations of religious sources in dedicated female spaces (Jouili 2015; see also Mahmood 2005). It is only relatively recently, however—at least in the German-speaking context—that researchers' attention has been focused upon the participation of women in regular prayers in mosques and their claiming of female prayer spaces within those mosques. Islamic scholar Ayşe Almıla Akca (2020, 198) observes that female prayer areas have only recently, in the last twenty years, become common in German mosques, and that the predominant focus on female imams or leaders of prayer in public debates (see also Spielhaus 2012) fails to recognise the significance of the non-leading women's participation in communal prayers and the daily activities of mosques.

[19] Most mosques with female praying spaces have a separate entrance for women, which is often at the side or back of the building and not clearly signposted. "I see this as a sign of appreciation and discretion for our particular needs," Khadija told me in one of our regular

7 These forms of learning bodily comportment during and after the prayer are closely tied in with other modalities like bodily comportment and dress that are part of the "pious subject" Saba Mahmood (2005) describes in her groundbreaking work.

conversations. Sometimes, older or more knowledgeable women use the prayer space to host learning circles and offer guidance to other women on a voluntary basis. In addition, some women choose to clean up after the sharing of food. The regular cleaning and provision of necessities for the female area is usually taken care of by men, however, unlike the toilet paper mentioned in the narrative above. Often, it is the board and sometimes the imam of the mosque who decide upon the decoration of the female prayer room; women can suggest their preferences and make changes in consultation with the board.

[20] These observations support Akca's (2020, 198) argument that the practices in these spaces are shaped not only by the capacities and resources of the built environment but also by the activism and authoritative knowledge of the women who participate in day-to-day mosque life. This also points to recent reconceptualisation of mosques in Germany as 'transtopian' spaces (Yildiz 2021) in which innovative and transcultural practices thrive, also in relation to gendered dimensions. The significance of such female participation became strikingly evident when the lockdown was imposed in Germany and women suddenly lost their access to the embodied communal and social experiences described above; a loss that could only be partially compensated for by gatherings in digital environments.

Constraining and Expanding Religious Space in 'Pandemic Times'

[21] On 12 March 2020, at about half past eight in the evening, a post was forwarded to the above-mentioned WhatsApp research group by Sarah, a student of Tunisian descent. It was a post that had been issued via Telegram by the mosque where we regularly met: The mosque requested all parents to refrain from coming to evening prayer that day and also to the Friday prayer the next day. Men and women without children were still allowed to come. In addition, adults with cold or flu symptoms and elderly people were asked to stay home because of the virus. After a short exchange of comments within the WhatsApp research group, yet another message from the mosque was forwarded. It referred to an unnamed "committee of great scholars"—as Khadija later explained to me, this meant the senior council of the Ulema of Saudi Arabia—having made a statement regarding the coronavirus and Friday prayers. The statement forbade infected persons or those quarantining to enter mosques, and basically exempted anyone who feared infection from their obligation of regular communal prayer. Two days later, the mosque followed federal state and council regulations, announcing that there would be no communal prayers in the mosque until at least 10 April, hence everyone should pray in solitude or only with household members at home. The women in the research WhatsApp group reacted with shock and sheer disbelief. Sarah said "I'm sad and appalled, but it is good that the measures are there. And of course, we abide by the rules of the country." With this statement she anticipated and invalidated prejudices that Muslims would not abide to German law. Moreover, missing out on their regular meetings in the women's space of their local mosque would not only deprive them of their communal religious experience but also of the sociality and support of other women. During the weeks that followed, WhatsApp became an increasingly important means of connection for the women to communicate with one another, and evolved into a channel for mutual support and reflection on the effects of the pandemic on their religious community.

[22] With the fasting month of Ramadan, the situation changed again. For many women participating in my research, Ramadan is a month of collective praying, reflection, and experiencing of religious community. Many expressed views like that of the young mother, Ebru, who told me: "I miss my family and the community, eating together and breaking the fast is some-

thing I miss so dearly, I feel so lonely at times." Most women particularly missed the shared *Iftar*, the nightly communal feast that breaks each day's fast, and is usually enjoyed in the mosque or with extended family and friends. Unable to come together for communal prayers and festivities, for most women who shared their experiences with me, this first Ramadan during the pandemic was marked by solitude and retreat to just their closest family circle. Many reported that the worst part of the lockdown was being unable to come together in the mosque as a religious community. But besides meeting with a few close family members, they did find ways to socialise via WhatsApp and other digital applications. Not only did they break the fast together via video calls, some women also called each other while preparing the evening's food. Some even listened together to the same digital recordings of a call to prayer that they had found online, evoking the familiar soundscape of their daily prayers, and sharing that experience in real time. They thus found ways to digitally synchronise their spiritual and more mundane activities, regaining a sense of sociality and community despite physical separation.

[23] At the end of Ramadan 2020, when German federal states began to slowly ease restrictions, gatherings for religious services became permissible, albeit under strict physical distancing regulations. Some of the younger women, like Sarah and Khadija, were overjoyed to be able to end Ramadan with their prayers in the mosque—despite the lack of bodily contact and the obligation to wear masks throughout the whole prayer cycle. Subsequently, they commented in our WhatsApp group that "it was still not the same" and that they "wanted to touch each other": they missed the intercorporeal experience and the communal and social activities associated with the prayers and *eid-al fitr*, the feast held at the end of Ramadan. People with small children or vulnerable to COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions were still not permitted to enter the mosque.

[24] As restrictions were eased further over the course of summer 2020, mosques were still not allowed to accommodate as many people as before. In some instances, this led to women's mosque spaces being partially opened to men. One newlywed woman reported during one of our regular calls and exchanges of voice messages: "I feel uncomfortable with men praying in the same room as women, it feels like they are encroaching (*eindringen*) on our space." Although there were curtains visually separating men from women, she still felt the presence of men as an intrusion into the female space. The visual markers of separation were insufficient: she knew and felt that men were present, and the sound of their prayers disturbed the spiritual experiences of many women. Another research participant remarked that she had decided to attend prayers in a larger mosque that still maintained gender segregation. She was a German woman with Turkish roots who had been praying regularly in a German-Arabic-language Mosque where her Arabic-speaking husband prayed; now she chose to return to one of the bigger German-Turkish-language mosques she had attended before marriage. She did not even return when the female space was once again fully dedicated to women following the easing of restrictions. Women's decisions regarding which mosques to pray in are often influenced by friends and family members as well as by the amount of space and the opportunities offered for active participation, such as learning groups. Even pre-pandemic there were many mosque communities where the women's area was mainly used by men for Friday prayers or, for example, separated only by a curtain in some Bosnian mosque communities (Rückamp 2021, 182), but under the pandemic restrictions space for women in mosques became even more contested.

[25] Before the restrictions, especially for younger women, social media like Instagram and

YouTube had already been important sources of spirituality, religious knowledge, and advice on how to live a pious life as a Muslim woman in Germany. Many women who met during Friday prayers in the female areas of mosques also joined women's groups on WhatsApp for spiritual guidance, took part in online learning circles, or just kept in touch through phone and video calls, voice messages, and texting. In accordance with the increasing digitalisation of most aspects of daily life, in recent years many mosques have been developing ways to engage with their communities online via social media. They have publicised prayer and teaching schedules on their Facebook and Instagram pages or Telegram channels, and some have reached out to the wider community by making audio recordings and videos of their Friday sermons available online. Mosques that had previously engaged in these kinds of social media activities were the quickest to adapt to the closing of communal spaces under lockdown by expanding their programmes to include livestreaming of prayer sessions on YouTube, online teaching formats like webinars, or podcast streaming on SoundCloud. Some even took measures to enable personalised responses to direct questions; answering and fostering interaction within their communities, in order to reach older people in particular. Even though women had always participated in learning sessions, the newly established offers were even more inclusive, expanding to incorporate sessions that had previously largely been only accessible to men. The chance to ask questions via different kinds of comment functions enabled women to directly engage with the imam or teachers and "follow the duty to search for knowledge," as Khadija put it to our group. In most gender-segregated mosque spaces, this had previously been much more difficult, with the preaching usually transmitted unidirectionally to the women's spaces without any possibility for interaction. The opportunities opened up by digital infrastructures enabled some of the younger women to even start participating in more formalised religious study groups, learning how to read and recite the Qur'an in weekly digital sessions and engaging more closely with the imam and teachings of their particular mosque.

[26] The observations presented above can be seen as evidencing different moments of rupture that transpired during different phases of the pandemic restrictions, reshaping the everyday religious practices of the women who took part in my research. While rupture has been defined as a "radical, sometimes violent and even brutal form of discontinuity" (Holbraad, Kapferer, and Sauma 2019, 2), I do not mean to imply a necessarily negative impact. Rather, I choose the term to reflect on the lockdown restrictions as a constitutive element of the women's social realities and experiences, which intersected with their individual biographical situations, as in the example of the woman who returned to the German-Turkish-language mosque. The physical space available for communal practices, not only in order to relate to the divine but also to experience being part of the community, was severely curtailed by the restrictions, yet that impacted upon the heterogeneous group of women who took part in my research in different ways. Some synchronised their religious practices by digital means, such as by listening simultaneously to the same *adhan* or participating in shared religious learning experiences; such adaptions sustained the sensory forms by transforming them to flourish in the new context. Others felt shut out from their communal female religious spaces but were unable to find compensation in the digital realm. My interlocutors' different strategies and reported experiences suggest that it would be too simple to see the rupture of the pandemic as radical discontinuity. Although the turn towards digital or hybrid online/offline engagement or the increasing 'individualisation' of religion due to pandemic constraints are not specific

to women, it is important to note that these transformations were shaped by ongoing contestations of gendered spaces within the mosque and digitally.

Contested Sonic Public Spaces

As described above, the semi-public spaces within mosques and the digital spheres that relate to those spaces are structured in gendered ways that are not fixed but are constantly being renegotiated. Broadening the outlook, the public spaces surrounding mosques in Germany are also contested in particular ways that relate not only to the mosques' physical buildings but also to the wider sonic urban space. This brings me back to my introductory example about the call to prayer in Duisburg. The post cited was part of an exchange of other currently significant spiritual and sensorial visuals, such as dramatic videos of the deserted Kaaba in Mecca. The message referred to the permission granted for publicly sounding the *adhan* of the mosque in Duisburg as well as for the ringing of neighbouring church bells at seven o'clock each evening, in order to create a shared religious city soundscape. The women in the WhatsApp group responded to the post emotionally with a range of affirmative expressions and emoticons with red hearts; one woman was so touched that she expressed her excitement in a direct message to me: "I am totally touched, I almost started to cry when I heard that." [27]

Duisburg was one of over seventy cities in Germany where (often for the first time in their history) the call to prayer was temporarily allowed to be sounded publicly during the first COVID-19 lockdown in Germany.[8] In most cases, both the *adhan* and the Christian call to prayer, the ringing of church bells (see Weiner 2014, 2014), were permitted. Before the pandemic, municipalities had often prohibited the Muslim public call to prayer, referencing local noise regulations or arguing that unlike Christian church bells, the *adhan* proclaimed a theological message. Yet, German federal laws pertaining to freedom of religion explicitly allow public calls to prayer, as long as certain regulations are adhered to regarding, for example, the volume and frequency of the call. [28]

During the lockdown, mosques were able to obtain permission to broadcast the public call to prayer through non-bureaucratic processes at the municipal level. It was generally the larger, centrally organised Turkish mosques that did so. In their statements, most imams and spokespersons argued that the public call to prayer would raise morale within their own [29]

8 There are no official statistics for the number of German cities that have allowed the call to prayer. Estimates from before the pandemic lie at around thirty cities Herrmann, Andreas (2020). 'Stellungnahme zum Muezzinruf'. *Zentrum Oekumene*. Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://www.zentrum-oekumene.de/fileadmin/redaktion/Religionen/Stellungnahme_zum_Muezzinruf-final.pdf. Whereas the call to prayer sounded temporarily in approximately seventy cities in Germany during the first pandemic restrictions in 2020: Graver, Michael (2020). 'Ja, Wo ruft er denn? Temporäre Gebetsrufe während der Covid19-Pandemie'. *Adhan Statistik* (blog). Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://freies-verlagshaus.de/adhan/#statistik. The first documented public call to prayer in Germany took place in a prisoner-of-war camp in Wünsdorf, Brandenburg, on 30 December 1916, where the call to prayer was called five times a day (Lange 2019, 221–36). It is unclear whether there was ever another public call to prayer until 1970, when documentation states that a Muslim caster worker called to prayer with a megaphone every noon and every evening at a mosque in Allendorf (Hessen). Better known is the case of the Faith Mosque in the city of Düren, where in 1983 permission for the public call to prayer was granted by the trade inspectorate. After a lawsuit that lasted until 1989, the court cited freedom of religion as grounds for allowing the call to prayer five times a day: Akdemir, Feyza (2018). 'Die Geschichte des ersten erklingenden Gebetsrufes in Deutschland'. *IslamiQ - Nachrichten- und Debattenmagazin* (blog). 7 November 2018. Last accessed 22 August 2022. https://www.islamiq.de/2018/11/07/die-geschichte-des-ersten-erklingenden-gebetsrufes-in-deutschland/. Out of consideration for the neighbourhood, however, the mosque refrains from the morning and night call. To this day, the Düren call to prayer is considered the first public call to prayer in Germany.

communities and would also serve as a sign of interfaith solidarity and dialogue.[9] It is rather paradoxical and perhaps ironic that where permission was granted and the call to prayer was publicly broadcast, the amplified voice called to prayer at a time when communal praying inside the mosque was not allowed.

[30] Nonetheless, many mosques that broadcasted the *adhan* publicly were visited by people who gathered in front of the buildings. They listened attentively to the voice and recorded videos on their mobile phones to document the unprecedented public event and send it to family members and friends. Some of these videos were also shared with me in the research group on WhatsApp, for example, a mobile phone video showing a prayer-caller (Turkish muezzin; Arabic: *muʾaddin*) of the famous Cologne Central Mosque, run by the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB). He was calling to prayer, standing all by himself outside the mosque, with a microphone in his hands and cables leading inside the mosque. It was again Ebru, the young mother, who had forwarded this record of the exceptional event. She had not been able to attend it herself, yet she told me: "Just knowing that this is taking place nearby makes me happy, so unbelievably happy! It fills me with such a warm feeling." Even more so, as she pointed out in the same conversation, because heated disputes over the heights of the "silent minarets" had taken place during the building phase of the mosque (see Gorzweski 2015).[10]

[31] The technical set-up meant that the man's voice was overpowered by its amplified version emitted by the loudspeaker; the smartphone recording distorted the audio quality further before any listener could replay it in a different time and place. The original intercorporeal experience and signification of calling a community to pray together in a shared physical space had been transformed in multiple ways. This mediated call to prayer, disseminated via WhatsApp, was imbued with further significations as the group's members reacted and discussed it in relation to past and ongoing debates about religious public presence in German urban spaces. In a different digital conversation, a young woman with Muslim-Greek roots explained her feelings in more general terms: "When the call to prayer is heard in a country that is not predominantly Muslim, I think it shows that the country tolerates and accepts people of other religions. […] I think it's a great gesture and promotes multicultural coexistence." While these responses feed into more general discussions about the visibility, presence, and acceptance of Islam in Germany, and might not appear to be particularly shaped by gender, such voices tend not to be heard in male-dominated public debates.

[32] In some places, such as one Berlin mosque, the public call to prayer was broadcast during the day (*ṣalāt aẓ-ẓuhr*) and was intended to be heard by the local neighbourhood as well as livestreamed on Facebook. The mosque announced on its website that the public call to prayer was a sign of support and consolation to help people feel spirituality and cohesion in a time of crisis. Many people gathered on the street in front of the mosque to hear the exceptional sonic event. Some were simply curious passers-by, others had come to witness the occasion having read the online announcement—even though it had not been meant as an invitation

9 See, for example, the statements in these international online journalistic outlets: https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20200403-039 (Imam Mehmet Taha Sabri); https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/diaspora/mosque-in-germany-joins-call-to-prayer-to-raise-morale-amid-virus-lockdown, https://www.islamiq.de/2020/03/21/erster-gebetsruf-als-zeichen-der-solidaritaet/ (Spokesperson Hülya Ceylan). Last accessed 22 August 2022.

10 As a particularly visible and prominent mosque, the Central Mosque of Cologne had made an agreement with the city council to install only silent minarets as part of the representative building. The settlement allows public call to prayer within the inner courtyard of the mosque, yet the mosque had never before made use of this right.

to congregate. Up to 300 persons came to the street in front of the mosque, according to police reports, despite lockdown regulations and physical distancing rules. People listened to the *adhan* with respect, awe, and fascination; some with curiosity and some barely able to believe that the public call to prayer had been allowed to resound in that urban space. Most who came held their mobile phones in their hands, ready to record the extraordinary event.

[33] As Diane Riskedahl (2020, 5) has argued in relation to the Canadian context, where the call to prayer was allowed during Ramadan 2020, "there is, through listening, an alignment of self with God and self with community"; she sees this as a soundmark that "sonically remakes public space." Likewise, the people in front of the Berlin mosque participated physically in a multi-sensorial event, creating a sense of belonging to a community, and maybe also sensing an alignment with God, but not in the usual way, as no one was preparing to pray in public because communal praying was forbidden at the time. The meaning and experiences of the call to prayer therefore shifted from communal experiences of alignment with God to the emphasis of solidarity at a time of physical distancing measures that, for many, were associated with sensory deprivation and social isolation.

[34] At the same time, people were also participating in different kinds of highly contested discourses about the sonic (and audiovisual) presence of Islam in public space. The *adhan* was experienced as a particularly intense public presence in the city during the lockdown regulations. According to my interlocutors, the sound of the *adhan* was all the more prominent due to the relative quietness and emptiness of the streets. As Meyer (2009, 18) has noted, the public presence of religion always has to be analysed in relation to state and other institutions' regulation of the role of religion in society. What I must add here are the unique circumstances of the 'pandemic times.' In Berlin's particular socio-cultural and historical context (and that of Germany more generally), a "turn to Islam" has been observed in recent years, asserting the presence of Muslims in the city (Bendixsen 2013; Sounaye 2021). Most strikingly, the construction of mosques with minarets serves as a symbolic testimony to Muslim life in the city, increasing the visibility of Muslim communities. This has led to controversial debates and polarisation, provoking intervention from municipalities, city administrations, various civil society organisations, and ordinary citizens (Akca 2020; see also Spielhaus and Färber 2006). The sound of the *adhan* in Berlin and many other Germany cities in 2020 thus connected to more deeply rooted ongoing debates and reinvigorated them in the charged pandemic situation.

[35] As the crowd in front of the Berlin mosque grew ever larger on that day, with many people not heeding distancing measures or wearing masks, the mosque's security guards and police collaborated with the local imam, who ended the call to prayer early, before they intervened to disperse the gathering. Consequently, the mosque's permission to broadcast the call to prayer publicly was withdrawn by the municipality; health councillor Falko Liecke announced the decision on Twitter[11] that very day. In his tweet, as in most press coverage of the event, the "extensive violations of measures to impede the corona pandemic" were cited as justification for the reinstated prohibition. Before even reaching that statement, however, the first sentence of Liecke's tweet pointedly mentioned that the mosque was under observation by the German domestic intelligence services (*Verfassungsschutz*). This single tweet thus discursively intertwined the *adhan* and violations of pandemic regulations with federal security issues, offering fertile ground for anti-Muslim sentiments and conspiracy theories associat-

11 Translation by author. The post is accessible here: https://twitter.com/falkone1/status/1247166248577691656. Last accessed 22 August 2022.

ing the corona pandemic with Muslims (for similar observations in the Indian context, see Rahman 2020, 135).

This relates the public call to prayer to yet another dimension that was snidely alluded to in the WhatsApp post cited in my introduction: "Because of corona & the ban on assemblies, supporters of AFD or Islam haters can't even demonstrate against it." Political parties like the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany) and other groups that spread Islamophobic messages have long been (re)signifying the call to prayer as a threat to society. Such groups portray the call to prayer as a sonic demarcation of Muslim presence in a soundscape that should supposedly be free of religious expression—or should only resonate with Christian church bells. Indeed, from their perspective, the sonic marker is an attempt to assert power over other religious groups; they reject the idea that it can foster interfaith solidarity and dialogue. Awareness of these and similar sentiments was enough to discourage many mosques from submitting requests to be allowed to publicly call to prayer during the lockdown and also at later stages of the pandemic. Some were so demoralised by hateful comments on social media that they even revoked requests that were in progress. [36]

These complex dynamics testify to the significance of sound and auditory spaces in orienting belief: firmly held notions of difference between self and other become explicit when people take a stance on the controversial presence of sonic forms of Muslim religiosity in public spaces in Germany. As a sensory form, the call to prayer thus becomes a viscerally experienced point of contention for these different kinds of debates. For German Muslims, listening to the call to prayer is part of their pious practices of religious community, while the sound itself controversially permeates urban places as well as digital spheres and through that takes on new social and political significance. Although public debates related to the public call to prayer are not gender-specific, they are dominated by male voices. Muslim women tend to listen to the call to prayer within female safe spaces and express their opinions with regard to the contestations in more semi-private contexts, like in our WhatsApp group. Yet, during the pandemic, young women in particular have become more vocal in different kinds of Muslim social media publics, including in debates about issues such as the public call to prayer. Communities and municipalities have also realised that they can use the public call to prayer to promote "diversity and integration", as is illustrated by the pandemic-inspired "model project" to allow the public call to prayer on Fridays under certain conditions by the city of Cologne. However, the related contestations seem to continue along the pre-pandemic lines. [37]

Concluding Remarks: Calling to Prayer in 'Pandemic Times'

As I have shown in this contribution, women's access to female mosque spaces and forms of community was drastically restricted not only by the regulations imposed in Germany during and after its first COVID-19 lockdown but also by men taking up space in female prayer areas. While this fed into long-term debates about gendered mosque spaces and prevented many women from experiencing important sensory forms and communal religious practices within the mosque, it did not immediately spark changes in gender-related attitudes. The different phases of the changing restrictions as the pandemic developed were felt by my interlocutors as a series of ruptures that intersected with their own biographies, varying with age and social status. The heterogeneous group of women who took part in my research was affected by the restrictions in different ways. For most, mainly young women, increasing the [38]

degree to which social media and messenger services were incorporated into their daily routines enabled them to maintain a sense of shared community and thereby also sustain a sense of religious self. Listening to the *adhan* and synchronising their everyday religious activities via digital infrastructures were key strategies that activated familiar sensory forms digitally. Some younger women expanded their practices to even participate in debates and learning sessions that, in physical settings, had been largely accessible only to men. Others, particularly women with small children, felt excluded from the religious practices and had difficulty finding compensatory experiences in the digital realm. In one case this even led to personal crisis and with the encroaching of men on female prayer spaces to reorientation to a different mosque. All my interlocutors' accounts implied that the ruptures of the pandemic restrictions were experienced not so much as exceptional events but rather as an intensification of ongoing contestations around gendered spaces within the mosque and in the digital realm, as the introductory example also suggests.

[39] I proposed conceptualising the call to prayer in the semi-public and public spaces in and outside the mosque as a sensory form that not only mediates between women and the spiritual realm but is also experienced as a shared reference point among a particular kind of community that brings together very different groups of women. In addition to the technically amplified voice that performatively brings forth the call on each occasion anew, the synchronised movements of the bodies praying together can also be seen as a sensory form, exemplifying how auditive perception is always about more than just hearing: sound pervades spaces and bodies, choreographing movement and mobilising affect. This kind of sensory form can only partially be transferred to the digital realm: While some women found ways to synchronise their everyday routines and prayer practices with other women in tune with the digitalised call to prayer, such practices were generally limited to the intimate sphere of selected close relationships and could not hold together a larger community of a more heterogeneous group of women. Even before the pandemic, a trend had already been observed towards the individualisation of religious life, with more personalised practices performed in the privacy of homes augmented by smartphones (Slama and Barendregt 2018, 6). Nonetheless, this apparent withdrawal to more private spaces is accompanied by digital practices that enable people to encounter and engage with religious material and communities that might otherwise be inaccessible. This is what Miller et al. (2016) address as the "scaling of socialities" in the digital realm. In my case, it also permeates physical locations: social formations are structured and fragmented by institutions and spaces located physically, such as the mosque or public areas of a city, as well as by digitally infrastructured media like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. In the examples presented above, the publics appear predominantly structured and fragmented around gender and age, but other social hierarchies and relations intersect in significant ways.

[40] Once the call to prayer enters urban public space and makes Muslim religiosity sonically present, it becomes embroiled in moral debates and municipal regulation of the place of religion—or, more precisely, the presence of Islam—in German society. During the pandemic, it was argued that the Muslim sounds would contribute to solidarity and interfaith dialogue, raising the morale of believers. Others, however, saw the public broadcast of the *adhan* as a threatening sonic demarcation of Muslim space and an attempt to assert dominance. Such perspectives were put forward in statements that discursively related the *adhan* to violations of measures to reduce infection as well as to the securitisation of Islam in Germany. Many of my interlocutors welcomed the opportunity that the pandemic brought for the sonic pres-

ence of Islam in German public spaces to be heard, cherishing the sound for its religious significance and as a symbol of solidarity, not only but especially for female communities. However, interminable wider debates indicate that the public call to prayer continues to mobilise emotionally felt principles and beliefs that shape secular and religious publics, as was also acknowledged in the post forwarded among the WhatsApp group.

Drawing upon the material presented, I argue that everyday religious practices during 'pandemic times' should not be viewed as an exceptional event or radical discontinuity, but as responses to a specific situation that bring to the fore and highlight key ongoing debates over gendered Muslim presence in mosque spaces and Muslim (sonic) publicness in German-speaking discourse. [41]

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Jain Life Reimagined: An Examination of Jain Practice and Discourse during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Claire Maes
University of Tübingen, Germany

ABSTRACT This article analyzes the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the religious practices and the public discourse of Jains in the U.S.A. and India. On the institutional level, I show how Jain organizations made extensive efforts to connect digitally with their community members when collective, in-person celebrations and temple visits were either reduced in number, limited in capacity, or cancelled because of the pandemic. Given the new importance of Jain online platforms, I address their potential role in both blurring sectarian boundaries and creating sacred spaces. On the individual level, I examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the everyday religious practices of Jains. I conducted eight semi-structured interviews over Zoom between November 2020 and January 2021. I argue that while there is a great diversity of individual Jain responses, a common feature appears to be a significant increase of Jains participating in scholarly religious activities. In terms of the ways in which some Jains talk, write, and reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic, I identify and examine a Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic that is characterized by environmental concerns and by the processes of scientization and universalization. Building on the work of Knut Aukland (2016) that examines the role of science in contemporary Jain discussions, I define scientization as the ongoing process where Jains underline the convergence of their religion with modern science. With the term universalization, I refer to the noticeable trend among Jains to argue for the need to teach Jainism beyond the Jain community by showing its contemporary relevance and applicability to overcome global problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS Jainism, scholarly religious activities, environmentalism, scientization, COVID-19 pandemic, universalization

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is in many respects the first global event in human history. Since [1]
January 2020, when the World Health Organization declared the outbreak an international public health emergency, the pandemic has in some way or other affected almost everybody. Branko Milanovic, an expert of socio-economic inequality, put it thus: “If, in a couple of

years—when hopefully it is over and we are alive—we meet friends from any corner of the world, we shall all have the same stories to share: fear, tedium, isolation, lost jobs and wages, lockdowns, government restrictions and face masks. No other event [in human history] comes close."[1] While the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on societies have yet to come into full focus, it is clearly a historic event. As such, it is an important moment to document.

Till date, there are only a handful of studies that examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Jain religious tradition.[2] The purpose of this article is to contribute to this emerging and important field of research by offering an examination of Jain practice and discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.A. and India (March 2020 – January 2021). As such, it seeks to complement the work of both Vekemans (2021) and Donaldson (forthcoming) that examines the early responses of Jain organizations in London and in North America respectively, as well as the research of Bothra (2020) and Prajñā (2021) that address the question how certain Jain ascetic communities in India adjusted to the life-style changes required during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. [2]

In part I, I focus on Jain practices. On the institutional level, I analyze the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Jain religious organizations in the U.S.A. The choice to focus on Jain organizations in the U.S.A. is informed by the fact that at the time I was conducting the research presented in this paper, I was living in the U.S.A. and teaching an academic course on Jainism, which involved a unit on "Jainism and the pandemic" (see also Maes 2022). In this section on Jain practices, I show how Jain temples and centers made extensive efforts to connect digitally with their community members when collective, in-person celebrations and temple visits were either reduced in number, limited in capacity, or cancelled because of the pandemic. I further argue that the Jain online religious platforms can blur sectarian boundaries and create authentic but temporary sacred spaces. On the individual level, I examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the everyday religious practices of Jains. To map out the personal experiences of Jains of the pandemic, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews over Zoom between November 2020 and January 2021. Given that in online interviews any geographical distance gets bridged in just one click, I took advantage of this fact by interviewing both Jains in the U.S.A. and in India. I argue that while there is a great diversity of individual Jain responses, a common feature appears to be a significant increase of Jains participating in scholarly religious activities. [3]

In part II, I conduct a discourse analysis to examine the ways in which some Jains talk, write, and reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic. I identify and examine a Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic that is characterized by environmental concerns and by the processes of scientization and universalization. Building on the work of Knut Aukland (2016) that examines the role of science in contemporary Jain discussions, I define scientization as the ongoing process where Jains underline the convergence of their religion with modern science. With the term universalization, I refer to the noticeable trend among Jains to argue for the need [4]

1 I wish to thank Alexander Agadjanian and Konrad Siekierski for their invaluable editorial input and their constructive feedback. I also wish to thank Tine Vekemans and the anonymous reviewer for their many valuable comments, corrections, and suggestions.

See "The First Global Event in the History of Humankind" by Branko Milanovic for *Social Europe* on 7 December 2020. Last accessed 31 July 2021. https://socialeurope.eu/the-first-global-event-in-the-history-of-humankind.

2 See Bothra (2020); Donaldson (forthcoming); Maes (2020b, 2022); Vekemans (2021); and Prajñā (2021). The Jain religious tradition (Jainism) originated in North India about 2500 years ago. It has a distinctive community of both male and female ascetics and a supporting community of laypeople, also referred to as householders. While fully ordained Jain ascetics live only in India, Jain householders live in every part of the world.

to teach Jainism beyond the Jain community by showing its contemporary relevance and applicability to overcome global problems, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

[5] It bears to note that while some of the developments I discuss in this paper, such as the boom of online lectures, are directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant restrictions of holding in-person temple activities and community events, others build upon earlier pre-COVID trends, such as the development of an environmental ethic and the processes of scientization and universalization.

Part I: Jain Practices and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Institutional Responses

[6] In the U.S.A., the federal government, under both the presidency of Donald Trump (January 20, 2017 – January 20, 2021) and the current presidency of Joe Biden, never issued a nationwide stay-at-home order. While the Trump administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued several coronavirus guidelines, these remained on the level of recommendations with no enforceable mandate. The implementation of the federal guidelines has been left to the discretion of state and local authorities. The result is a great diversity in policy responses among the various states. As one commentator put it: "50 different governors [have been] doing 50 different things."[3]

[7] During the stricter lockdown period (19 March – mid-May 2020), some states explicitly banned religious gatherings and asked religious organizations to temporarily shut down physical facilities.[4] Others prohibited religious gatherings only implicitly through orders regulating the maximum size of in-person gatherings or by qualifying houses of worship as "nonessential businesses." On the other hand, several states allowed religious services to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. The State of New York, for instance, exempted religious organizations from its stay-at-home orders, fearing that a ban on religious gatherings would violate the constitutional rights of individuals to freely exercise religion, granted under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment (Brannon 2020, 3).

[8] Given these divergent regulations, it is not surprising that religious organizations in the U.S.A. responded in a variety of ways. A few houses of worship defied gathering bans, holding services despite state quarantine orders. Several religious organizations also filed lawsuits, arguing that their constitutional rights regarding the free exercise of religion and freedom of speech were violated, or contending that state and local governments were not neutral in their application of gathering bans, claiming that some gave more leeway to secular gatherings in comparison to religious ones (Brannon 2020, 3). Most religious organizations, however, complied with the coronavirus-related emergency orders. Many have been making extensive efforts to reach their faith members in alternative ways, from offering remote services through online streaming, radio broadcasting, and phone conferencing to drive-in services where congregants drive to a common location and worship together from the safety of their cars.[5]

3 Andrew Noymer, Associate Professor of public health at UCI, quoted in The New York Times on 20 May 2020. Last accessed 19 March 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/20/us/coronavirus-reopening-50-states.html.

4 See, e.g., the *Order of the Governor of the State of Maryland. 30 March 2020*. Last accessed 17 March 2021. https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Gatherings-FOURTH-AMENDED-3.30.20.pdf#page=3.

5 See, e.g., *Creative Church Arts Ideas*. Last accessed 10 April 2022. https://creativechurchartsideas.org/drive-in-church-services-church-ministry-during-covid-19/.

Amidst these various regulations and organizational responses to the public health crisis, this paper focuses on the response of the Jain community. How did Jains in the U.S.A. navigate the COVID-19 pandemic? Which measures did Jain organizations take? I address these questions by means of a case study of the Jain Center of Northern California (JCNC). I start with a description of the common temple activities held at the JCNC prior to the pandemic, before proceeding to analyze the changes brought about by the spread of COVID-19. After having been closed for nearly one year, the JCNC reopened its temple complex in March 2021 with modified services. I discuss this reopening by highlighting specific guidelines of the California Department of Public Health for the reopening of houses of worship that impact the religious practices of Jains. [9]

Jains in the United States

In the 1940s, a few Jains, mainly male students, settled in the United States. The first significant wave of migration, however, was only in the late 1960s, when the United States liberalized its immigration policies for Asian, African, and other countries. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 initiated the emigration of especially highly skilled and educated Jains from India and East Africa (Vekemans 2019a, 174–75; Vallely 2002, 194–97). Since then, the Jain diaspora community in the United States has grown considerably, though its exact number has "always been somewhat of a mystery" (2019a, 176). While popular estimates assess the Jain population in the United States to be around 150,000 to 200,000, the "World Religions Database at Boston University estimates the 2020 population of Jains in the United States at 97,000" (Donaldson forthcoming, 5).[6] In comparison, India has nearly 4.5 million Jains (Census of India 2011). [10]

There are over seventy Jain centers in the United States. About fifty of these also have a temple. From the end of March 2020 onward, Jain centers and temples in the U.S.A. either closed entirely, suspending all in-person activities, or remained open but with imposed restrictions in accordance with the coronavirus guidelines of their specific state and county. For instance, both Jain temples in California, the Jain Center of Northern California (JCNC) and the Jain Center of Southern California (JCSC) closed their premises "for all visitations indefinitely until further notice."[7] In Massachusetts, on the other hand, the Jain Sangh of New England remained open but required members to reserve their place online to limit the numbers of attendees "as per the State of Massachusetts guidelines" and to social distance, wear masks, and use hand sanitizer.[8] Whether Jain places of worship were closed or open with restrictions, all tried hard to reach their members in different ways by offering alternatives to in-person temple visits.[9] [11]

Daily Temple Worship at the JCNC Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Within its temple complex, the JCNC has *mūrtis* (consecrated images) belonging to various Jain sects: the Śvetāmbara, the Digambara, and the Śrīmad Rājacandra traditions.[10] Prior to [12]

6 A part of the reason why the number of Jains in the United States will remain uncertain is because Public Law prohibits the U.S. Census from gathering data on religious affiliation in its demographic surveys.

7 See *JCSC Website*. "COVID-19 updates." Last accessed 22 March 2021. https://jaincenter.org/.

8 See *Jain Sangh of New England Website*. "Important Guidelines for JSNE Derasar Visit during COVID-19 Pandemic."

9 To consider how this is in line with the responses of Jain organizations in London, see Vekemans (2021).

10 Śvetāmbara ("white clad") and Digambara ("sky clad") are the two main sects in Jainism. The denominations refer to the facts that Śvetāmbara ascetics are clad in white robes, whereas the Digambara monks

the pandemic, Jains belonging to these three traditions could perform daily *darśan*, which is the auspicious and the reverential viewing of sacred images. For image-worshipping Jains, *darśan* is an essential practice (Babb 2015). Whether they visit the temple for a few minutes or a few hours, they, at the bare minimum, will perform *darśan*. "For many Jains," as I explained elsewhere, "[*darśan*] is a reflexive act. It is a viewing that reminds one of the qualities of the Tīrthaṅkara [or of other sacred figures] one ought to develop in one's own life" (2020a, 11).

[13] Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the JCNC used to host religious activities and celebrations of both image-worshipping and non-image-worshipping Śvetāmbara sects (such as the Sthānakavāsī and the Terāpanthī), the Digambara, and the Śrīmad Rājacandra traditions. For all image-worshipping Śvetāmbara Jains, the JCNC facilitated the worship of the principal Tīrthaṅkara images, enabling every morning the rites of *abhiṣeka*, *candana pūjā*, and *āṅgī*.[11] Every evening, the JCNC also organized *ārtī*.[12] It further provided accommodations to those who wished to perform the ritual of *pratikramaṇa*, which is a ritualized repentance for the harm committed to the realm of living beings. Monthly, it arranged several religious activities for the entire Śvetāmbara community, ranging from *bhāvanā* (contemplation on a particular theme) and *bhakti* (devotion) sessions, to the collective performance of worship rites (such as *snātra pūjā* and *ārtī*) and the communal recitation of mantras (such as the *namokar mantra jap*). For Digambaras, the JCNC made similar provisions. The temple has images fit for Digambara worship. Daily, it used to provide the necessary materials for Digambara devotees to perform *abhiṣeka* and *aṣṭa dravya pūjā* ("worship with eight substances"). Monthly, it used to coordinate a communal worship for the entire Digambara community. For followers of the mystical poet and reformer Śrīmad Rājacandra, the JCNC used to organize, twice monthly, a recitation of his celebrated Ātmasiddhi. For the non-image-worshipping Śvetāmbara sects, the JCNC held twice-a-month meditation sessions (*prekṣā*) for Terāpanthīs and a *namokar mantra jap* for Sthānakavāsīs.[13]

[14] Regarding the celebration of important religious festivals, the JCNC used to organize the yearly rainy season festival for both the Śvetāmbara and the Digambara community, called *paryuṣaṇa* and *daśa-lakṣaṇa-parvan*, respectively. Before the COVID-19 lockdowns, devotees, during these festivals, often spent parts of their days together in the temple performing the repentance ritual of *pratikramaṇa* and listening to religious sermons and the recitation of sacred texts. During these festivals, some Jains usually fast for a certain length of time. Dedicated lay followers may fast for the entire eight-to-ten-day long festival and drink only boiled water. The most sacred day of the year for Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras is the final day of this rainy season festival, called Saṃvatsarī. On this day, Śvetāmbaras collectively perform the repentance ceremony, known as the *saṃvatsarī pratikramaṇa*. Digambaras perform *kṣamāpanā*, a similar communal confession ceremony. Both these ceremonies used to be held at the JCNC temple complex. Other Jain festivals that used to take place yearly at the JCNC include the celebration of the birth of Mahāvīra (Mahāvīra Jayantī) and his final liberation (Dīvālī). For

wander naked. Śrīmad Rājacandra (1867–1901) was a mystical poet, lay reformer, and friend of Mahātmā Gandhi and propagated a non-sectarian form of Jainism.

11 *Abhiṣeka* is to ritually lustrate a Tīrthaṅkara image. *Candana pūjā* is a Śvetāmbara practice where the devotee dabs sandalwood and saffron paste on key parts of the Tīrthaṅkara image, symbolically seeking to cool her or his passions. *Āṅgī* is the Śvetāmbara rite of adorning a consecrated image.

12 *Ārtī* is the rite of offering lamps to a Tīrthaṅkara image.

13 The *namokar mantra* is the most sacred Jain mantra. It pays homage to the five worship-worthy beings: the *arihaṃtas* (omniscient ones), *siddhas* (liberated souls), *ācāryas* (mendicant leaders), *upādhyāyas* (preceptors), and the *sādhus* and *sādhvīs* (mendicants). *Jap* is the practice of meditatively repeating a mantra or sound for a set number of times.

the Sthānakavāsī and the Terāpanthī, the JCNC also used to organize daily repentance rituals during the rainy season festival and the biannual nine-day Āyambil Oḷī festival.[14]

This leniency of the JCNC to accommodate various Jain sects within a single temple complex is not unusual in the Jain diaspora. Jain temples and centers in North America sometimes accommodate *mūrtis* of different sectarian traditions and organize events around religious festivals specific to various Jain sects. Among the diaspora community, sectarian affiliation is not as strong an identity marker as among Jains in India, even though this seems to be changing even there.[15] When I asked my American respondents about their sectarian affiliation, I received answers ranging from "I used to know this" to "we are the ones who worship images" and "there are no sects in Jainism." Such answers, typically from young Jains, show how sectarian affiliation is either unknown or downplayed as irrelevant. It is important to note that the pandemic might further deepen this blurring of sectarian identities. As I discuss below, the pandemic prompted a large-scale shift to online platforms for conducting religious services and hosting cultural-religious programs and educational events. Unlike in-person activities where one is constrained by one's physical location, online events can be attended by everyone, no matter where one lives and one's sectarian denomination. [15]

The JCNC's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic: From Temple Complex to Online Platforms

When the JCNC closed its temple premises because of the pandemic, it was quick in adopting Zoom to reach its community members online. Only a few days after the governor of California issued a stay-at-home order, the JCNC offered daily *bhakti*, *svādhyāya* (religious education) and *shibir* (workshops) over Zoom, with sessions especially for children and others aimed at the entire community for a period of two weeks.[16] [16]

Since 2003, the JCNC has been offering its community members virtual darśan. While this digital service had initially a limited capacity,[17] today, after successful fundraising campaigns, there are five webcams livestreaming 24/7 footage of the temple's main images. Similar to the in-person temple activities, the JCNC offers virtual *darśan* images for Jains of various denominations; it has three webcams livestreaming Śvetāmbara images, one webcam livestreaming Digambara images, and another livestreaming images of the Śrīmad Rājacandra tradition.[18] Given the limited numbers of recorded viewers, the popularity of virtual *darśan* is yet to be shown, at least among the diaspora community.[19] If, however, it gains acceptance because of the pandemic-induced digital turn, its effect on blurring sectarian boundaries in veneration practices is worthy of investigation. The JCNC broadcasts the five webcams on two sepa- [17]

14 Āyambil Oḷī is a Śvetāmbara festival, during which devotees fast by eating only one meal a day consisting of sour foods.

15 One respondent pointed out that the response to the pandemic by Jains in India was, in general, "non-sectarian." This claim would need further investigation.

16 From 23 March 2020 to 5 April 2020. Last accessed 1 April 2021. http://www.jcnc.org/home/covid19.

17 In January 2003, for instance, the JCNC announced on its website that for the live webcast "there is a limit of 60 simultaneous users" and "[w]e need your financial support to go above the current capacity. Please donate…" (JCNC website on 23 January 2003, https://web.archive.org/web/20030123065031/http://jcnc.org/). I thank Tine Vekemans for bringing to my attention the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, which allowed to trace the starting date of this virtual *pūjā* service.

18 In the U.S.A., just as in India, the majority of Jains are Śvetāmbara, which most likely accounts for the fact that the JCNC has more webcams livestreaming Śvetāmbara images than Digambara and Śrīmad Rājacandra images.

19 On online worship practices before COVID-19, see Vekemans (2014) and Vekemans & Vandevelde (2018).

Figure 1 "Garbhara Darśan," simultaneously showing Śvetāmbara (top left and bottom right), Digambara (top right), and Śrīmad Rājacandra (bottom left) images. Livestreamed by the JCNC on 30 March 2021.

rate channels.[20] One channel alternates images every six seconds, rotating not only between Śvetāmbara, Digambara, and Śrīmad Rājacandra images, but also bringing all the different images together on one screen at the end of a rotation round (Fig. 1).[21] Inadvertently, Jain devotees using this digital resource for *darśan* perform auspicious viewing for all sectarian images, regardless of their own sectarian affiliation.

[18] Every morning, the webcams also livestream *pūjā* and *ārtī*. As community members were not allowed to worship inside the temple during the lockdown, the JCNC ensured that the *pūjārī* (ritual assistant) performed daily *pūjā* for the consecrated Śvetāmbara images as well as *ārtī*. Traditionally, a *pūjārī* helps Śvetāmbara Jains perform their daily worship by cleaning and preparing the images and *pūjā* implements. However, with the temple closed to visitors, the *pūjārī* was now standing in for the absent devotees (Fig. 2). Those wishing to participate in these rites from the safety of their homes and, in the words of the JCNC committee, accumulate "virtual *laabh*," or virtual merit, could do so by watching the livestreams.[22] Similarly, for the Digambara images the JCNC appointed a Digambara volunteer to perform daily worship.

[19] For the yearly landmark celebrations, such as the rainy season festival (the Śvetāmbara *paryuṣaṇa* and the Digambara *daśa-lakṣaṇa-parvan*), the birth of Mahāvīra (Mahāvīra Jayantī) and his final liberation (Dīvālī), the JCNC organized cultural-religious events over Zoom. For Dīvālī, for instance, the JCNC partnered with the JCSC to offer an online Dīvālī program, inviting Jains of both centers as well as from other places in California to participate. It further livestreamed various *bhāvanā* and *bhakti* performances.

20 See http://www.jcnc.org/livedarshan/gabharadarshan (last accessed 30 March 2021).
21 This is a screenshot taken on 30 March 2021 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boQeIdYg9hE.
22 On the role of *pūjārīs* in diaspora contexts, see also Vekemans (2021, 19, fn. 25).

Figure 2 "Pūjārī performing Pūjā." Livestreamed by the JCNC on 10 May 2021.

Reopening of the JCNC: Limitations and Challenges

One year after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the previously closed Jain temples in the U.S.A. reopened with modified services and limited capacity. The JCNC reopened in March 2021, but it only allowed devotees to perform *darśan* (Fig. 3). This, as we will see, is in line with the official guidelines issued by the State of California for places of worship. [20]

In July 2020, the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) issued detailed guidelines for the reopening of places of worship.[23] Many of these are by now familiar prevention measures, such as ensuring that disposable gloves, facemasks, and hand sanitizer are available; the screening of visitors for symptoms; and the regular cleaning and disinfecting of high traffic areas. A few guidelines, however, are unique to places of worship and may, in the long term, effect significant changes in the worship practices of Jains. Given the fact that singing and chanting activities increase the chance "for transmission from contaminated exhaled droplets," the CDPH ordered "[p]laces of worship […] [to] discontinue indoor singing and chanting activities" (CDPH, 8). Instead, it encouraged places of worship to continue such practices "through alternative methods (such as internet streaming)" (CDPH, 3). With respect to the use of material objects in rituals, the CDPH discourages both the sharing and the reuse of items in worship. For example, the CDPH guidelines advise places of worship to: [21]

> Discourage sharing items used in worship and services (such as prayer books, cushions, prayer rugs, etc.) whenever possible and provide single use or digital copies or ask congregants/visitors to bring personal items instead. (CDPH, 8) [22]

> Discontinue passing offering plates and similar items that move between people. Use alternative giving options such as secure drop boxes that do not require open- [23]

23 See *Covid-19 Industry Guidance: Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services and Cultural Ceremonies*. Last accessed 29 July 2020. https://covid19.ca.gov.

Figure 3 "The JCNC Reopens." Worshippers are only allowed to perform *darśan* or auspicious viewing. As *darśan* does not involve the touching of material objects, one who performs *darśan* complies with the CDC and the CDPH guidelines. (screenshot taken on 6 April 2021)

> ing/closing and can be cleaned and disinfected. Consider implementing digital systems that allow congregants/visitors to make touch-free offerings. (CDPH, 10)
>
> Consider limiting touching for religious and/or cultural purposes, such as holding hands, to members of the same household. (CDPH, 11) [24]
>
> Consider modifying practices that are specific to particular faith traditions that might encourage the spread of COVID-19. Examples are discontinuing kissing of ritual objects, allowing rites to be performed by fewer people, avoiding the use of common […] [items] in accordance with CDC guidelines. (CDPH, 13) [25]

It is not difficult to see how these CDPH guidelines directly impact the worshipping practices of Jains. Many of the rites I mentioned earlier, such as *ārtī* (the offering of lamps to a sacred image), are performed collectively. To share the merit of *ārtī*, several Jains, usually from multiple households, hold the tray with the candle together. Many rites that are performed individually, such as the worship of sacred images with material substances (the *aṣṭa dravya* and the *aṣṭaprakārī pūjā*), also go against the CDPH guidelines as others, performing the rite later, touch the same sacred image. On the other hand, *darśan* or auspicious viewing is in line with the CDPH guidelines. This is why the JCNC, when partially reopening its temple complex in March 2021, only allowed *darśan.* The question whether the CDPH guidelines will effect only temporary or also long-term changes needs to be followed up with future research. [26]

Individual Responses

How did Jains experience the lockdowns, the (partial) closure of their temples, and the large-scale introduction of new digital platforms for religious activities? To examine the way the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the everyday religious practice of individual Jains, I draw in this section from the eight semi-structured interviews I conducted over Zoom between [27]

November 2020 and January 2021. I interviewed four Jain householders from the U.S.A. and four from India. I knew four respondents beforehand (convenience sampling), while I selected the others on the basis of age (criterion-based sampling). Among the eight respondents, there are first-generation, second-generation, and third-generation diaspora Jains, as well as Indian citizens in their early forties, mid-sixties, and late seventies. Before the pandemic, two respondents used to go to the temple daily, one used to regularly take *darśan* of ascetics, while the remaining respondents either went weekly or bimonthly and on special occasions (such as the rainy season festival *paryuṣaṇa*) to Jain centers like the JCNC I described above. All eight respondents possess a solid technology literacy, which in part explains, as I discuss below, their high level of participation in online scholarly religious activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[28] In my interviews, I observed differences not only between Jains living in the U.S.A. and India, but also within one region, sect, and even household. As one interviewee pointed out: "The way the pandemic has been affecting my religious practices is different from both my mother-in-law who lives with me and from my sister who lives in a different state [in India]." If some of my interviewees negatively experienced the closure of their local temple or suffered from not being able to take *darśan* of ascetics, still others felt their practice did not change much during the pandemic. One respondent, for instance, in an interview held in November 2020, insisted that despite the fact that the pandemic cancelled the collective in-person celebrations of Saṃvatsarī (the final day of the rainy season festival *paryuṣan*) and Dīvālī in which he used to participate, and that he could not go to the temple, he did not feel that his personal practice was affected: "I am still participating in fasts and I [still] pray daily […] for me, nothing has changed."

[29] For many Jains, fasting is a ubiquitous practice. There are many types of Jain fasts, depending on the duration of the fast and the specific food and water restrictions. While some respondents increased their fasting practices during the pandemic, others refrained from it altogether. Four interviewees thus noted how they experienced the lockdown restrictions (in terms of travel and social activities) as an opportunity to increase their fasting practices. One young Jain student living in Houston, for instance, completed, for the first time in her life, an *atthai* (an eight-day long fast during the rainy season festival *paryuṣaṇa*), drinking only boiled water from August 15, 2020 to August 22, 2020. My interviewees motivated their fasts with both theological arguments and health reasons, arguing that the soul, unlike the body, does not need any food and that fasts are good for health. One even likened the practice of fasting to getting a vaccine. But while some thus increased their fasting, others suspended their fasting practices, counterarguing that it may negatively affect their immune system, something which should be avoided during pandemic times.

Scholarly Religious Activities

[30] A common trend across the various interviewees pertains to an exponential increase in what I call "scholarly religious activities." This development is in line with Vekemans' observation that the Jain organizations in London significantly increased their number of webinars and lectures (Vekemans 2021, 12). I asked all respondents about their online religious practices ("Which religious activities have you been conducting over Zoom or other online platforms?"). For many Jains, educational activities of various kinds (*pāṭhśālā*, *svādhyāya*, reading groups,

etc.) are central to their Jain religious identity.[24] This is also the case for my interviewees, who view their participation in lectures and workshops on Jainism as religious practices. In addition, they also consider their active involvement in Jain organizations to be a direct extension of practicing their Jain dharma. For my interviewees, being a president, trustee, or board member of a Jain temple or society is expressive of their Jain religious identity.

Since the start of the pandemic, there has been a significant growth of Jain lectures and [31] workshops. One respondent, in January 2021, remarked that there are so many that each day she needs to make a selection. Not only were existing Jain organizations quick to start organizing lecture series online, but several Jains established new associations.[25] Ramesh Kumar Shah, founder of the RK Group trading conglomerate, created, for instance, the nonprofit organization The Jain Foundation on 6 April 2020. Since its inception, it offered over 130 talks on Jainism, given by a wide range of speakers, from scholars and corporate giants to economists and Jain ascetics. According to The Jain Foundation's site, the lectures reached over 14,000 participants.[26] It explains the reason for creating a new online platform as follows:

> Technology has been used as a platform to bring forth the values of Jainism via … an App to appeal to the current generation. It has also been an endeavour to move away from preaching Jainism to highlighting the essence of what this religion stands for. A religion which today science is proving time and again to be accurate to the very last detail.[27] [32]

The claim that Jainism is in line with science is a prime example of the scientization of [33] Jainism, which I discuss in part II. The point I wish to emphasize here, however, is that The Jain Foundation is illustrative of the fact that the pandemic has effected an exponential increase of online classes organized by and for Jains. The topics vary greatly, ranging from the history and the philosophy of Jainism to the religion's contemporary relevance and scientific nature.[28]

This large-scale introduction of new online platforms raises questions about its long-term [34] influence on traditional sources of authority within the Jain communities. As seen from the mission statement, The Jain Foundation adopted technology to "move away from preaching Jainism to highlighting the essence of what this religion stands for." If this persists beyond the pandemic, such online lecture platforms may, I suggest, give rise to new types of authority, and create new religious leader figures within the Jain community.[29] In part II, I return to the ambivalent position of traditional sources of authority within the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, we need to consider how such online platforms create new avenues for Jains to be [35]

24 For a discussion of Jain religious education offered at *pāṭhśālās*, see Maes (2020a), Bothra (2018), and Donaldson (2019a, 2019b).

25 To give an example of each: during the COVID-19 pandemic the Gyansagar Science Foundation launched in November 2020 a monthly Zoom lecture series. The Jaina India Foundation, a sister organization of the Federation of Jain Associations in North America, launched *Jain Avenue*, a web-based and multimedia magazine in August 2020.

26 See *Jain Foundation Talks*. Last accessed 3 May 2021. https://www.jainfoundation.in/jain_talk_in.php.

27 *The Jain Foundation*. Last accessed 30 June 2021. https://www.jainfoundation.in/the_jain_foundation.php.

28 See, e.g., the following lectures hosted online during the COVID-19 pandemic by The Jain Foundation: "The Antiquity of Jain Culture in Sri Lanka and Buddhist Literature," "Tattvarth Sutra: The Bible or Gita of Jain Religion," "Jainism and Environmental Protection," and "The Spiritual Science of Shri Namaskar Mahamantra." Last accessed 30 June 2021. https://www.jainfoundation.in/jain_talk.php.

29 See Campbell and Evolvi (2020, 5).

exposed to different sectarian interpretations of texts, *stotras* (devotional hymns), and practices. As I pointed out above, online platforms can be attended by all, regardless of one's location or sectarian affiliation. In matters of access, they have a "democratizing potential," as Mallapragada noted for the Hindu digital context (see Mallapragada 2010, 115; see also Vekemans and Vandevelde 2018). One respondent, based in Jaipur, India, shared, for instance, how she attended four different lectures on the *Bhaktāmara Stotra* since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.[30] She explained how she found it fascinating to learn about the use and versions of the *stotra* in different Jain sects since, as she remarked, being a Śvetāmbara she had previously not been exposed to the Digambara interpretation of the *stotra*. While some online platforms created during the COVID-19 pandemic are strongly rooted in a specific Jain tradition or sect,[31] others, like The Jain Foundation, are not and offer lectures on Jainism that are either non-sectarian or sectarian but addressed to all. These new online platforms prompt the questions how the previous offline sectarian and local sensibilities are being reproduced and to which degree they (re)structure and (re)define Jain religious spaces. While answering these questions lies beyond the scope of the current study, it is worth noting that "the Internet complicates," as Vekemans observes, "geographic locationality, at times reproducing hyper-local practices and sensibilities, at other times utterly geographically untethered" (Vekemans 2021, 16). The same may be said in terms of sectarian boundaries. While (the new Jain) online platforms can reproduce the pre-existing offline sectarian or, in case of organizations such as JAINA, non-sectarian Jain identities, they can also blur and break such boundaries. Reflecting on the digital relocation of the Jain organizations in London during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vekemans argues that "Some of the factors that divide Jains into subgroups based on gender, language, sect, geographic location, and even migration history become less consequential (or at least easier to circumnavigate) when activities and events are removed from their in situ localization and transported to the online realm, opening up possibilities of global participation and potentially strengthening ideas of a unified Jain community" (2021, 16).

Online *Pūjā*

One respondent, a lay Digambara Jain living in New Delhi, specifically missed not being able to go to the temple during lockdown. Before COVID-19, his daily routine consisted of performing *samāyik* for 15 to 20 minutes in the early morning,[32] followed by a 45-minute morning walk, a bath, and a visit to his local temple to perform *pūjā*. On Sundays, he used to listen to the teachings of *sādhus* (*pravachans*) and teach young Jains about Jainism at the local school (*pāṭhśālā*). With his local temple closed, he started to livestream temple *pūjās* on his TV instead. Since then, every morning, he has been performing his daily *pūjā* to the Tīrthaṅkara images that are livestreamed on Jinvani, an Indian television channel of the Digambara sect to which he belongs (Fig. 4). To go through the various *pūjā* steps and *mantras*, he uses an app [36]

30 The *Bhaktāmara Stotra* is a Sanskrit hymn dedicated to the first Tīrthaṅkara Ṛṣabhanātha and accepted, with some variations, by both Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras. On the central role of this *stotra* in Jain devotional practices, see Cort (2005).

31 See, e.g., the *Gyan Jagrati YouTube Channel*, which is solely focused on the Digambara tradition as initiated by Acharya Shri Shantisagar (1872–1955). Last accessed 11 May 2021. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKLfz-VacvnnHxIqR5GMKtw?app=desktop.

32 During *samāyik* a householder temporarily becomes an ascetic, chanting mantras, listening to sermons, engaging in meditation or other suchlike practices.

Figure 4 "Jinvani Channel." Livestreaming of pūjā. Photo taken by my respondent in his living room on 4 January 2021.

on his phone.[33] To stay focused he turns off the TV sound. For this respondent, the livestream is not so much about being a passive observer of the live *pūjā*; he considers the livestream valuable insofar as it enables him to actively perform his own *pūjā*. The COVID-19 pandemic has thus exposed him to new digital modes of practicing his religion. Reflecting on his altered religious practices, he said with a sigh that "unfortunately, technology is very helpful" and while "it is not like [performing *pūjā*] in the temple, this is as close as you can get."

[37] Steven Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi (2014) introduced the concept of "third spaces" to refer to "religious venues that exist between online and offline settings, venues that believers approach as if they are authentic spaces of religious practices" (Campbell and Evolvi 2020, 7). While "third spaces" thus exist between online and offline settings, their "authenticity" or "sacredness" is acquired by their (real, imagined, or fabricated) links to offline, "real-life" spaces (Mallapragada 2010, 116–17). In their study of the role of online temple worship among diaspora Jains in 2018, Vekemans and Vandevelde observed how online temples are often "tied to the real world by the use of a picture of a recognizable murti of a famous temple or pilgrimage situation" (Vekemans and Vandevelde 2018, 190). Considering these facts, I think it is apt to conceptualize the religious space that the livestreaming effects each morning on my respondent's TV screen as such a "third space," the sacredness of which is established by its link to real, but offline, *mūrtis*. That he considers this space as an authentic religious venue is visible in the fact that he ritually approaches the livestreaming as if he were in the temple. To go to the temple, Jains traditionally take a bath and wear *pūjā* clothes. For men, traditional *pūjā* clothes can consist of unstitched orange or, if they are under the vow of continence (*brahmacarya*), white robes (*dhotī*), but any set of clothes set aside for *pūjā* can be worn. The main point is that the clothes one wears for *pūjā* are not worn for other activities. *Pūjā* clothes need to be "ritually pure." To ensure this, a Jain traditionally takes a bath before putting the *pūjā* clothes on and, once in *pūjā* clothes, refrains from worldly, nonreligious activities, such as taking water and food, engaging in chitchat, or going to the bathroom. Observing these multiple restrictions surrounding *pūjā* clothes, Whitney Kelting (2001, 126) argues that the creation of sacred space starts with the donning of the *pūjā* clothes itself:

> [38] While the pūjā space can often be most clearly marked by the lack of idle conversation and the items left outside (and, of course, the pūjā rituals themselves), the demarcation of pūjā time is most clearly represented by the donning of pūjā clothes.

[39] She further notes how during her fieldwork she witnessed a mother scolding her daughter for hitting her sister who was in *pūjā* clothes and about to go to the temple, observing that "[h]itting her sister in *pūjā* clothes was like hitting her in the temple" (Kelting 2001: 127). This anecdote illustrates well the power of *pūjā* clothes in effecting a sacred, religious space.

[40] Given this ritual significance of *pūjā* clothes, it is important to observe that my respondent would take a bath and "change his clothes" before livestreaming the *pūjā*. In other words, in terms of ritual preparations, he makes no distinction between the livestreaming and the temple. The livestreaming thus seems to transform his living room into a temporary yet authentic sacred space. Despite this, my respondent negatively experienced not being able to go to his local temple during the lockdown, explaining that the aura of the temple is instrumental in supporting his best *pūjā* practices. He clarifies: "I may be the primary cause of my actions, but there is also the efficient cause. The aura of the temple helps you. At home, if I feel thirsty

33 On the growing popularity of Jain religious apps, see Vekemans (2019b).

[while performing *pūjā*], I take a glass of water." For this respondent, the livestreaming is only a temporary, crisis-induced solution, which cannot fully replicate the experience and benefits of performing *pūjā* in his local temple.[34]

[41] Everyday Jain religious practice ranges from *darśan* and temple worship (*pūjā*) to fasting (*tapas*) and attending lectures on Jainism. Given the flexibility and fluidity of Jain practices, it is not surprising to see that the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the everyday religious activities of various Jains differently. In general, the way the COVID-19 has been impacting the religious activities of Jains depended on how their daily religious practice looked like before the pandemic, their technological literacy, amount of free time, social networks, and their level of engagement in local and (inter)national Jain communities.

Part II: Jain Discourse and the Pandemic

[42] Jains give various explanations for the COVID-19 pandemic. With regards to the diaspora context, one scholar observes that "North American Jains admit a diversity of Jain philosophical perspectives on the pandemic" (Donaldson forthcoming, 2, see also 10-11). Many Jains considering the pandemic's origin tend to acknowledge the dominant scientific narrative that explains the COVID-19 as a novel type of coronavirus that initially jumped from an animal source to humans before starting to spread between people. Many Jain accounts, however, do not end here, but discuss the deeper causes behind the pandemic and identify solutions to prevent future ones. It is in these discussions that a Jain lens on the pandemic becomes perceptible. Many Jains claim that the cause of the pandemic is a lack of adherence to Jain principles, such as non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*). Consequently, they suggest that the adherence to these principles can offer a solution. As one author writes: "The whole mankind would not have suffered by the COVID-19 pandemic if they would have followed the Jain teachings and moral values and virtues" (Garai 2020, 50).[35] This section takes a closer look at one distinctive Jain discourse on the pandemic that is characterized by environmentalism and the processes of scientization and universalization.[36] I expound these three characteristics individually before exemplifying my argument with a case study.

Environmentalism

[43] The Jain discourse under analysis is marked by environmental concerns. Many Jains consider the COVID-19 pandemic as being symptomatic of a broken ecosystem. They view it as man-made, being the result of the world's overexploitation of natural resources. As a theological explanation, several Jains writing and reflecting on the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic bring in the law of karma.[37] Connected to this, they imbue nature with a moral force and

34 This supports Vekemans' hypothesis that "most temple-going Jains will in all probability argue that physical proximity to a consecrated idol in a dedicated temple space cannot be replicated fully online" (Vekemans 2021, 17).

35 See also Jain, Shugan (2020); Jain, Pragya and Sayyam Jain (2020); Sanchetee, Pratap and Prashant Sanchetee (2020).

36 See also "Framing the Pandemic," where I show how some Jains during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic actively drew parallels between various WHO-guidelines and Jain tenets, and by doing so, present "Jainism as a practical, resourceful, and scientifically supported way of life" (Maes 2022, 2).

37 Also, various Jain *ācāryas* such as the late *ācārya* Gyansagar Mahārāj and *ācārya* Śivamuni explain the causes of the pandemic by reverting to the Jain theory of karma. See https://www.speakingtree.in/article/corona-karma (last accessed 30 June 2021) and Prajñā (2021, 7–8), respectively.

agency, suggesting that the pandemic is the revenge of an abused planet earth or that it is the outcome of nature trying to teach everyone a lesson.

[44] For example, in his video "Say No to More: A 3 Step Solution to Climate Change" posted in September 2020, Rahul Kapoor Jain, an international motivational speaker, mindset coach, and author,[38] sees the current crisis in the following terms: "[W]hat you give is what you get, and what you get is what you deserve. This is the law of karma. Anything said or done in this world, is echoed back with the same intensity. This ecological crisis that we are all facing, is an echoing back of our own thoughts, words, and actions."[39] For many Jains, like for Rahul Kapoor Jain, the disturbed ecosystem springs forth from a disturbed human morality. In another video, "Get Back into Your True Nature," published online on 15 May 2021, he further suggests that the coronavirus was purposefully created by nature "with the intention that we will think about our mistakes and make amends." He explains "our mistakes" as the misuse of nature's resources and its pollution caused by "the viruses of anger, ego, greed, and deceit."[40]

[45] Within this Jain environmental discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, the principle of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) is presented as a means to not only prevent future pandemics but also to overcome climate change. In this discourse, the principle of non-violence is first and foremost equated with a vegetarian diet and an active care for and restoration of the environment. This pandemic-contextual interpretation of *ahiṃsā* reinforces the sociocentric and ecocentric ethos in Jainism, which began to emerge in the 2000s as a prominent discourse among diaspora Jains about twenty years ago.

[46] Traditionally, the central ethic of *ahiṃsā* mirrors the ascetic ideal of renunciation. Aiming to purify the soul, it is focused on self-realization. Anne Vallely dubbed this orthodox interpretation of *ahiṃsā* a "liberation-centric ethos" (2002, 193). By contrast, in recent years, a new interpretation of *ahiṃsā* emerged, involving a "discourse of environmentalism and animal rights" (Vallely 2002, 193). Nonviolence, from this perspective, is not so much about the purification of the soul as it is about "alleviating the suffering of other living beings" (Vallely 2002, 205). Vallely aptly terms this interpretation of *ahiṃsā* a "sociocentric and ecocentric ethos" (2002, 193, 203–13), observing the emergence of this new ethical orientation among some Jain communities already twenty years ago. At that time, this environmental interpretation of *ahiṃsā* marked a sharp difference between not only diaspora Jains and Jains in India, but also among the first- and second-generation diaspora Jains (Vallely 2002, 204–5).

[47] In comparison, in the Jain discourse under discussion, environmentalism has become a pan-Jain theme. It is no longer uniquely characteristic of young western Jains. Contemporary Jains, whether living in India or elsewhere, whether first-, second-, or third-generation diaspora Jains, frequently express Jain principles in a language that stresses the importance of both maintaining a healthy ecosystem and protecting animal rights, showing the interconnectedness between human, animal, and plant life.

Scientization

[48] Knut Aukland coined the term "scientization" to refer to "processes by which adherents of

38 For a detailed description of Rahul Kapoor Jain's work, see https://www.rahulkapoor.in/best-motivational-speaker-india.html (last accessed 8 April 2022).

39 Rahul Kapoor Jain's *Say No to More: A 3 Step Solution to Climate Change*. Last accessed 17 May 2021. https://jainavenue.org/videos/.

40 Rahul Kapoor Jain's *Get Back into Your True Nature.* Last accessed 16 May 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zS_K02l75k.

Figure 5 Scientific and Modern Imagery in "Say No to More."

religions align their religion with the natural sciences" (2016, 194). He argues that appeals to the authority of science can be both in *form* and *content*, explaining how "[a]ppeals in form are found in the deployment of scientific-looking diagrams and scientific-sounding terminology, while appeals in content consist of claims that one's religion is 'scientific' or 'a science' " (2016, 199). In the discourse under analysis, both types of appeals occur frequently and in a variety of ways.

Appeals *in form* can comprise accounts that show the benefit of traditional Jain tenets for today's society by explaining these in a scientific, modern, rational, or health-oriented language. With respect to online talks and videos, typical examples of appeals in form are images of hi-tech or modern research centers. For example, in "Say No to More," the video I mentioned earlier, Rahul Kapoor Jain uses a collation of scientific diagrams and animations, such as a NASA simulation, to explain the greenhouse effect, next to pictures and short films of western industry, agriculture, livestock farming, and deforestation (Fig. 5). [49]

Appeals *in content* include claims that Jain principles and practices are scientifically proven solutions to the pandemic (and other world problems). Auckland classifies such types of appeals as "unspecific" (2016, 203–4). While they state that Jainism is scientific,[41] there is no systematic attempt to show why Jainism and science are in apparent harmony or why its principles are scientifically proven means in overcoming the pandemic. On the other hand, in the discourse under analysis, appeals in content can also involve arguments that show the global need and relevance of Jainism in an entirely scientific fashion, from formulating a hypothesis and collecting facts, to offering an analysis of these facts and making scientific generalizations. In contrast to "unspecific" appeals, I call these types of arguments "specific," as their authority rests on a scientific argumentation. [50]

Within this Jain scientific discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional sources of authority have, I argue, an ambivalent position. Jains who wish to substantiate their claims by [51]

41 Think, for instance, of the above quoted statement of the online platform The Jain Foundation: "[Jainism is] a religion which today science is proving time and again to be accurate to the very last detail." See https://www.jainfoundation.in/the_jain_foundation.php (last accessed 14 May 2021).

means of a traditional source of authority have a wide range of options available, from quoting the words of Tīrthaṅkaras and sacred texts, to referring to well-respected historical figures and ascetic leaders (*ācāryas*) of their community. Some Jains who write on the COVID-19 pandemic and draw upon the prestige of science leave out these traditional sources of authority. To return to our earlier example "Say No to More": Rahul Kapoor Jain does not refer to any traditional Jain source of authority, be it the Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra, a particular Jain scripture or ascetic. Also in his video's imagery, there is no characteristic Jain image in sight. The result is a Jain discourse on climate change and COVID-19 presented in a scientific and universal language. Others, however, unlike Rahul Kapoor Jain, can rest their claim that Jainism is scientific on the authority of a traditional source itself. One respondent, for example, told me how his *ācārya* says that the practice of Jainism is scientifically based and helps one avoid contracting disease. That Jainism is scientific and good for health rests, in this example, on the *ācārya's* authority. In the scientific discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional sources of authority are thus either ignored or drawn upon to rest one's claim that Jainism is scientific and pertinent for today's world. The choice of individual authors whether or not to appeal to traditional Jain sources of authority may be determined by their prospective (and imagined) audience, by their active endorsement (or rejection) of the scientization and universalization discourses within Jainism, and, in case their contribution was upon invitation, the views of those Jains who commissioned their work.

Universalization

With the term "universalization" I refer to the ongoing trend where Jains actively seek to promote the Jain way of life to non-Jains. While proselyting is not a part of the contemporary Jain agenda, there is this common idea that if more people knew about Jainism, the world would be less violent, greener, healthier, and more peaceful (see, e.g., Jain, Rahul, 15 May 2021 and 28 September 2021; R. Jain 2020; Jainuine YouTube Channel, 4 November 2019; Kumar 2018; Prajñā and Samanta 2015). As one respondent, living in New Delhi, said: "The basic tenets of Jainism should be widely publicized. They are useful, scientific, ecofriendly and they promote harmonious co-existence of human beings and animals." Similarly, Dipak Doshi, former Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Jain Society of Metropolitan Chicago (JSMC), in an interview with *Young Minds* for a special issue on Jainism and the pandemic, stated: "In the past 40+ years here in Chicago, I have witnessed Jainism evolve and mature, however, we have kept it predominantly confined to our temples and communities. It is time to take Jainism on a roadshow, educating the mainstream by showcasing Jainism and its values and principles" (Young Minds 2020, 7). [52]

With respect to the COVID-19 pandemic, examples of universalization include claims that Jainism offers universal solutions and tools to both endure and overcome the pandemic. Many Jains thus feel that Jain principles, especially the principle of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), should be spread beyond the Jain community (see, e.g., S. Jain 2020; Kumar 2018; Sanchetee and Sanchetee 2020). Underlying the process of universalization seems to be the assumption that non-Jains do not practice *ahiṃsā* simply because they do not know about it or because they have a misinformed dietary view about the need of meat consumption. It is interesting to note that in the past, Jains who were actively proclaiming the need to promote Jainism were mainly lecturing for Jain audiences and writing for journals, magazines, and websites published by and for Jains. In recent years, however, this audience has become diverse and international, [53]

consisting of both Jains and non-Jains alike. This, I argue, is due to the "academization" of Jainism.

Aukland (2016, 209) defines "academization" as the "processes by which proponents of a religion establish institutions and practices modeled on mainstream academia, actively use markers of such institutions and their scholars, and invite academic appraisals of their religion." He further notes how some of these institutions can work together with recognized universities in India and abroad (Aukland 2016). The example of the Bhagawan Mahavira International Research Centre shows how the universalization (as well as the scientization) of Jainism can go hand in hand with the process of academization. The center was established in 2014 at the Jain Vishva Bharati Institute in Ladnun (Rajastan, India) with the vision to "integrate science and Jain philosophy and to evolve a scientific approach to [the] understanding of Jain traditions" (ICSJP *Event Brochure* 2016, 2). In March 2021, the center organized the Second International Conference on Science and Jain Philosophy (ICSJP) in partnership with Florida International University (FIU). As mentioned on the conference site, the purpose of this conference was "to connect scientists working on the interdisciplinary field of consciousness studies to scholars of the Jain religious tradition […] [in] the hope to better understand the human mind and explore new pathways towards a more peaceful, just, and verdant world."[42] Participating in the conference were Jains, many of whom have a background in the natural science or the humanities, but also western scholars of Jainism and scientists. This collaboration of Jains with western scholars and scientists is a typical aspect of the academization of Jainism (see Aukland 2016, 211). [54]

Case Study: "Corona Pandemic in the Perspective of Non-Violence"

In this section, I analyze the article "Corona Pandemic in the Perspective of Non-Violence." The article was published in the summer of 2020 and written by Rajmal Jain, a lay Digambara who grew up in a middle-class family in a small town in Dungarpur district, Rajasthan. As a young child he went daily for one hour to *pāṭhśālā*, but he learned as much about Jainism from his mother who, in his words, was a "high order practicing Jain." While he is Digambara, he did not experience the sectarian division between Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras much in his childhood. During a Zoom conversation, he explained that he used to eat at both Śvetāmbara and Digambara temple *bhojanālay* ("restaurants") and that his family allowed intermarriage (both his grandmother and sister-in-law are Śvetāmbara). As a student, he studied Physics (MSc) at the then Udaipur University. Having graduated with first class, he was selected to the Ph.D. program of the Physical Research Laboratory at the Indian National Research Institute for space and allied sciences in Gujarat's megacity Ahmedabad, where he has been living since. After a successful and international academic career in astronomy, Rajmal Jain started to dedicate himself more fully to his religion. Under the encouragement of the Digambara *ācārya* Kanaknandi, he began to apply his scientific education to Jainism, actively contributing to the scientization of Jainism by seeking to scientifically prove various Jain tenets, such as the doctrine of *karma* or, as we will see below, the importance of *ahiṃsā* to curb climate change and prevent future pandemics.[43] [55]

42 *FIU Conference Website*. Last accessed 4 March 2021. https://icsjp.fiu.edu/. It is worth noting that one of the organizers of the event, Samanī Chaitanya Prajñā, is a strong proponent of the universalization of Jainism.

43 This short biography of Rajmal Jain is based on a semi-structured Zoom interview I conducted with him on the topic of the scientization of Jainism on 1 February 2022.

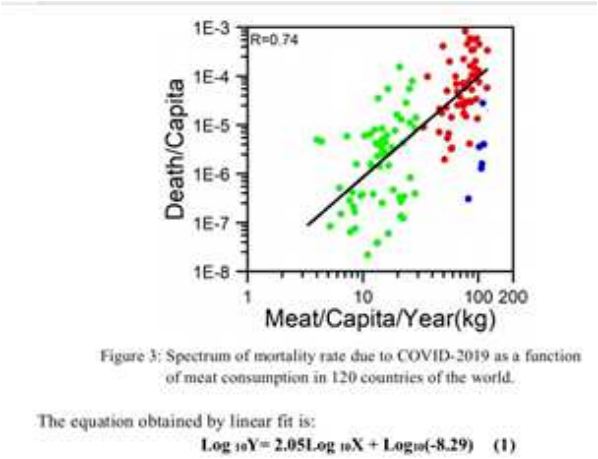

Figure 6 Rajmal Jain's graph depicting the correlation of meat consumption and the COVID-19 death rate and his logarithmic equation.

In his article, Rajmal Jain examines the correlation between meat consumption and the COVID-19 death rate in a scientific fashion. He argues that "low meat eater [sic] countries have about 4 times less mortality relative to high meat eater [sic] countries" (2020, 8). Rajmal Jain frames the COVID-19 in ways I described before as typical for the Jain discourse under analysis. [56]

Rajmal Jain views the COVID-19 pandemic as the result of a broken ecology, which, in turn, is the outcome, he writes, of a wrecked morality. He considers the human tendencies for greed and violence as the main culprits. "Greed," he writes, "not only destroyed trees, plants and large forests but also killed small (one sense) to big (2-5 sense) animals that are surviving on the earth, flying in the air and living inside the oceans" (2020, 2). With respects to violence, he stresses the non-vegetarian diet. Like Rahul Kapoor Jain, Rajmal Jain sees the COVID-19 pandemic as manmade and frames it within the Jain theory of karma. He further puts forward the hypotheses that the current pandemic is the "revenge by [the] geosphere or [the] biosphere" and that it is a lesson of Mother Nature teaching us to curb the destruction, pollution, and abuse of the planet's life and resources (2020, 3, 12). [57]

To prove the positive correlation between meat consumption and the COVID-19 death rate, Rajmal Jain appeals to the authority of science. His article is a scholarly paper both in form and content, from formulating hypotheses to offering a scientific analysis of the meat consumption per capita of 120 countries and coronavirus statistics (Fig. 6). He bases his analysis on datasets provided by the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization (R. Jain 2020, 3). Further, seeking to prove his hypothesis that the pandemic may be the karmic retribution for the killing of animals, Rajmal Jain investigates the theory that animals, when slaughtered, disperse infrasonic waves which, in due time, "take revenge." Regarding this point, he concludes: [58]

> We interpret our spectrum results … in the perspective of infrasonic wave energy deposited in the ecosphere as a consequence of [the] killing of a large number of animals by man every day. Obviously, high-power deposition from emotional tension infrasonic waves took place in high meat-eating countries and thereby according to *karmavāda*, the high mortality rate [due to COVID-19] has also been [59]

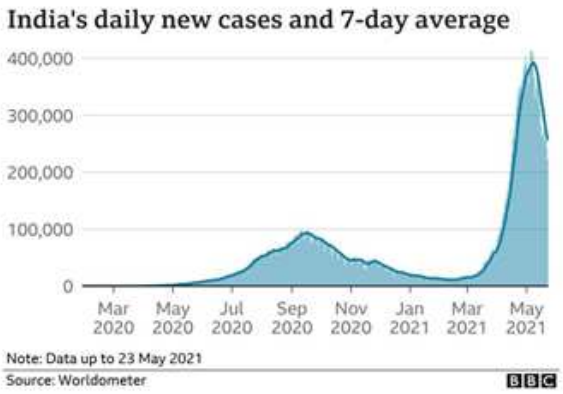

Figure 7 Graph illustrating the severity of the pandemic's second wave (beginning in March 2021) in contrast to the first wave (beginning in March 2020) in India. BBC: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-57225922 (last accessed 14 June 2021).

> observed in these countries. So we may interpret that the current corona pandemic is the revenge by animals and all other species killed by humans. (2020, 13)

To be clear, I am not seeking to examine whether Rajmal Jain's methodology and conclu- [60]
sions are scientifically valid. It is important to keep in mind that he conducted the research for his article in the summer of 2020. At that time, after a 10-week long nationwide lockdown, the government of India was implementing its second and third phase reopening plan (Unlock 2.0 and Unlock 3.0). During the pandemic's first wave, India was not affected as severely as during the second wave, which began in March 2021 (Fig. 7). If Rajmal Jain had written his article when India became the new epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2021), his hypotheses, analysis, and results would likely have been different. The degree to which the Jain discourse on the pandemic's second wave in India differs or agrees with the Jain discourse that emerged during the early stages of the pandemic is yet to be analyzed. The main point I wish to emphasize here is how Rajmal Jain's article fits within the ongoing process of the scientization of Jainism. Further, as I discussed above, traditional sources of authority have an ambivalent position within this discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, being either disregarded or, conversely, acknowledged. Rajmal Jain's article is an example of the latter. While his article is, in essence, a scientific paper, on several occasions, he also explicitly states that Jainism is scientific and rests these claims on the authority of traditional sources, such as the first Tīrthaṅkara Ṛṣabhanātha (2020, 11).[44]

In line with the process of universalization, Rajmal Jain feels that Jainism should be taught [61]
to non-Jains. To overcome the current COVID-19 pandemic and prevent future ones, we all need to focus, according to Rajmal Jain, on changing our lifestyle by practicing "*ahiṃsā* (non-violence) as well as *aparigraha* (non-possession) whole heartedly" (2020, 13, see also 9, 11, 14). He explains the core Jain concept of non-violence by drawing both on the traditional, liberation-centric and the socio-and ecocentric (or environmental) interpretation of *ahiṃsā*. Thus, he writes: "non-violence or universal love to all living beings is the foundation of the Jain's sacred life leading to the goal of liberation and self-realization called *mokṣa*" (2020,

44 Rajmal Jain's article contains thus both specific and unspecific appeals to the authority of science. Specific, because his article is a scientific paper that seeks to show the relevance of applying Jain principles. Unspecific, because Rajmal Jain equally makes several claims that Jainism is scientific, without explaining why this is the case.

3). Earlier in the article, we can read how applying non-violence means "stopping non-veg foods" as this "will protect our bio-sphere cycle and hence […] nature" (2020, 2). He further concludes that: "There is no need to teach non-violence to [the] Jain community. [R]ather it is […] necessary to motivate non-Jains to consider and practice non-violence in [their] daily life to save the biosphere and humanity" (2020, 11). For Rajmal Jain, there is a sense of urgency that Jainism should be spread and taught beyond the Jain community.

Conclusion

In this article, I sought to analyze the ways the COVID-19 pandemic has been impacting the Jain religious organizations in the U.S.A., as well as the everyday religious practices and public discourse of Jains in the U.S.A. and India. Given the unique nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as a historical event, it is important to document the state of affairs as it unfolds. I hope the case studies analyzed here, while limited, will enable future scholars both to better assess how the (online) religious practices of Jains during the pandemic overlap with or differ from other (online) religious practices, and to examine the long-term effects of the growth of Jain online platforms on various issues, from the question of religious authority to the ongoing democratization of access in online environments. We have seen how in terms of Jain practice, Jain organizations in the U.S.A. made considerable efforts to reach their members in various ways, from offering daily *bhakti*, *svādhyāya*, and *shibir* over Zoom to digital *darśan*. While some of these activities were offered for the first time on online platforms, others, like digital *darśan*, had been offered before the COVID-19 pandemic as well. Though the long-term effects of the pandemic-induced digital relocation remain to be seen, it is safe to suggest that it effected a shift of attitude towards virtual religious events. If before the pandemic online-only socio-religious events were either rare or rather negatively received in certain Jain communities, they gained in popularity and acceptance during the pandemic (see also Vekemans 2021, 11–12, 15). In our examination of the Jain Center of Northern California, we have seen how the changes and accommodations in its religious services were in line with the CDC and Californian state coronavirus guidelines. With regards to the manner in which the COVID-19 pandemic has been affecting the everyday religious practices of Jains, I showed that there is a great variation among Jains. A common feature, however, is the multifold growth of Jains participating in scholarly religious activities, which is directly linked to the fact that in-person events were either cancelled or severely limited during the early phases of the pandemic. I also discussed online *pūjā*, where I argued that Jain digital platforms can create authentic but temporary sacred spaces. [62]

In the second part of this article, I identified and examined a Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic that is characterized by an environmental agenda and by the processes of scientization and universalization. As we have seen, the recasting of traditional Jain tenets in an environmental language started already in the 2000s. If at that time, this was mainly a trend among second-generation diaspora Jains, the COVID-19 pandemic shows that environmentalism has today become a pan-Jain theme. The processes of scientization and universalization analyzed in this paper are also continuations of pre-COVID developments. Within the context of the pandemic, these two processes involve, as I have demonstrated, appeals to the authority of science to show the contemporary relevance of Jain principles and pleas to spread the Jain way of life to non-Jains in a collective effort to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. I further contended that traditional sources of authority have an ambiguous role within the [63]

scientization process. Several scholars have argued for considering appeals to the authority of science as a "legitimation strategy." While this is correct it is also more than that. The process of scientization offers, as Aukland contends, "a variety of resources with which people reformulate and re-represent, explore, and reinterpret and at times re-imagine their religion" (2016, 194). When appealing to the authority of science, Jains may do so to either "defend and preserve traditional beliefs and practices," or, conversely, "to argue against traditional beliefs and practices" (2016, 194). As I hope to have demonstrated, in the Jain discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic discussed in this paper, Jains appeal to authority of science to argue for the contemporary relevance and need of Jainism to both cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and to prevent other such global disasters in the future.

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Curtailed Worship, Conspiracy Theories, and Hollywood Dystopias: Reactions to the COVID-19 Pandemic among the Reformist Muslims and Pentecostal Christians in Nigeria

Dauda Abubakar
University of Jos, Nigeria

Abdullahi Muhammad Maigari
Al-Qalam University, Katsina

Murtala Ibrahim
Utrecht University, Netherlands

Arafat Ibrahim
Gombe State University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT COVID-19 has affected all spheres of human activities, including religion, in Nigeria. Due to its devastating effect, the state was compelled to introduce precautionary and preventive measures to reduce its spread in the country, including lockdown, ban on gatherings, and social distancing. This extraordinary situation caused different reactions among Muslim and Christian religious leaders, with some accepting COVID-19 and the restrictions and others rejecting them. This work focuses on the response to the pandemic by prominent reformist Muslim groups (the Izala and NASFAT) and two major Pentecostal Churches (Christ Embassy and Living Faith). As we show, despite many differences and even hostility between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, Muslim and Christian leaders formulated similar responses to COVID-19. Namely, they either interpreted the pandemic in spiritual rather medical terms (as God's punishment or the work of the devil) or rejected the very existence of the coronavirus and presented the pandemic as a Western conspiracy designed to stop Muslim and Christian religious activities in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS Religion, Islam, Christianity, COVID-19, lockdown, conspiracy, worship, Nigeria

Introduction

When the COVID-19 infection rate began to rise in Nigeria in April 2020, several state governments enacted social distancing regulations that included the lockdown of major cities, the closure of places of worship, and restrictions on religious congregations.[1] However, the compliance with these regulations was not strictly enforced by government officials due to the sensitivity of religion in Nigeria. Religious organizations are important social actors in the country, with the power to support or challenge the authority of the state. This is happening, first, because most Nigerians are religiously inclined and religion plays a vital role in people's lives. Second, Nigeria is a country characterized by insecurity and lack of social amenities; a situation that Daniel Lambach (2004) refers to as a fragile state. Fragile states are not only prone to conflicts but also lack the willingness or capacity to perform state functions in terms of the welfare of citizens and security, as well as the ability to maintain peace and stability (Lambach 2004, 3). For Nigeria as a fragile state, the major challenge is the existence of many religious and ethnic leaders that either compete for state power by supporting politicians of their choice (Abubakar 2014, 213) or question the authority of the state. Some religious leaders function as "second state" authorities backed by strong public support and control over their followers (Boege et al. 2008). The exercise of this power was clearly visible during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic when some influential Muslim and Christian religious figures opposed the secular discourse on the pandemic promoted by the state and proposed their own—highly popular—explanations and solutions. [1]

This article examines the responses to the pandemic from two sets of religious groups—Reformist Muslims and Pentecostal Christians.[2] We discuss these responses in the context of secular state regulations to counter the spread of the virus in Nigeria, on the one hand, and the official reaction to the pandemic by dominant Muslim and Christian groups in Nigeria, on the other hand.[3] First, we examine the position adopted by the NASFAT Islamic organization and the Living Faith Pentecostal Church, both of whom presented the pandemic as the result of spiritual deficiency. Consequently, they promoted unconditional faith in God and sincere prayers as the best antidote to the coronavirus. At the same time, they generally accepted government regulations aimed at reducing the spread of the disease. Second, we analyze denialist discourses on COVID-19 produced and promoted by two reformist religious leaders, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir (leader of the Izala movement) and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (the founder and leader of the Pentecostal church known as Christ Embassy). Sani Yahya and Chris Oyakhilome criticized the government for suspending mass religious activities and gatherings, which in their assumption was nothing but a Western conspiracy against religious communities and humanity at large. [2]

The Religious Landscape in Nigeria

Nigeria, with its population of more than 200 million, is an ethnically, linguistically, and reli- [3]

1 This article is based on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and participant observation in Nigeria from October 2020 to February 2021.

2 The term "reformists" refers to projects of change, i.e., aiming to re-order Nigerian Muslims' and Christian's worldviews and institutional structures against those produced by Western modernity (Osella and Osella 2007).

3 As of February 2021, 152,000 Nigerians have been confirmed to be infected with the virus. However, experts postulate that this number might grossly understate the real infection rate due to inadequate testing and other vital medical equipment in the country (Finnan 2021).

giously diverse state. Religion is an essential part of its socio-cultural landscape. Mosques and churches can be found at every corner of cities and villages and they are always full of believers (Abubakar 2014). The dominant position of Sunni Muslims and Christians (of different denominations) make Nigeria an "Islamo-Christian nation", as Opeloye Modupe (2000, 12) calls it.[4] Islam dominates in the northern part of the country among the Hausa/Fulani, Kanuri, and Nupe people,[5] while Christians make up the majority in the southern part of the country among the Igbo and the people of Rivers, Cross-Rivers, Benin, and Calabar. The Western part of the country, dominated by the Yoruba (one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria), has an almost equal share of Muslim and Christian population.

[4] According to a 2018 report from the CIA World Factbook, around 53 percent of Nigerians were Muslims and 46 percent Christians (11 percent are Roman Catholic and 35 percent belong to other denominations). The major religious groups among the Muslims in Nigeria are *Izalat al-bid'a wa iqamat al-Sunna*, known as Izala, the *ṭuruq*[6] (Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya), Salafiyya, NASFAT, and the Shi'ite. Among Christians, these are the Catholic Church, Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA), Anglican Church, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), and many Pentecostal churches like Christ Embassy, Living Faith Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, etc. However, it is difficult to give numbers for these various groups and denominations because of the lack of an official religious census in the country.

[5] The "Islamo-Christian" character of Nigeria has resulted in hostility and competition, often leading to bloody conflicts, between the adherents of Islam and Christianity, especially in northern Nigeria, including the Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba, and Adamawa states that are considered as meeting points for Muslims and Christians in the country (Mustapha and Ehrhard 2018, 226). In addition to inter-religious conflicts between the two major religions, there are also intra-religious tensions between different groups and denominations within the Muslim and Christian communities (Best and Sabastine 2007; Higazi 2007; Last 2007).

[6] In this context, it is important to note that the response to COVID-19 was neither uniform within the larger Christian and Muslim communities, nor could it be said that Christians and Muslims held opposite views on the pandemic. Rather, as we will show in this article, the more radical Christian and Muslim organizations adopted almost identical discourses based on anti-Western conspiracy theories, whereas more moderate Christian and Muslim groups, in a similar way, called for obeying state-introduced restrictions and refrained from gatherings, including religious congregations.

The 'New Normal' Form of Worship and Its Discontents during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Nigeria

[7] After the COVID-19 pandemic started in Nigeria in February 2020, the federal government imposed lockdown in March in three key states (Lagos, Ogun, and the Federal Capital Territory,

4 Besides these, there are other religions in Nigeria, such as African traditional religion, the Hari Krishna, Erckanka, Grail Message, Rucicrucians, Guru Maharaji, ChrisIslam, etc. African traditional religion is the original system of religious belief and practices in both the northern and southern parts of Nigeria before the coming of Islam and Christianity. They are still relevant among some ethnic groups, especially in rural areas. Also, some elements of traditional religion are practiced by adherents of Islam and Christianity.

5 However, northern Nigeria has a large Christian minority, some of whom are northerners themselves while others come from the south for work. Out of the twenty states in northern Nigeria (including Abuja), only three (Plateau, Benue, and Taraba) are dominated mainly by Christians.

6 *Ṭuruq* (sing. *ṭarīqa*) is a popular name for the Sufī Orders in Nigeria. Among them, the most popular are Tijāniyya and Qādiriyya.

Abuja). Governors of other states also imposed local lockdowns in their regions beginning from April 2020. This led to severe restrictions on religious gatherings in almost the entire country. In Plateau State, for instance, the number of participants at any religious or social gathering was limited to no more than 50, depending on the size of the worship place (Moti and Vambe 2020, 529). The situation presented an entirely new experience for Nigerian believers, regardless their religious affiliation.

[8] Theologically, the Qur'an emphasizes the importance of the mosque as a worship place where Muslims are expected to remember and glorify Allah (Qur'an: 24: 36), while the Hadith and Sunnah of the Prophet highlight the necessity to conduct daily and weekly worship in congregations (Sabiq 1995, 181). For example, the Prophet emphasized in one of his Hadith that: "Praying in congregation is better with twenty-six rewards than praying alone by an individual" (Yusuf 2009, 113). This form of worship has become a norm for Muslims everywhere in the world.

[9] The Maliki school of thought[7], to which Muslims in Nigeria belong, emphasizes the importance of praying together in mosques, standing in rows, shoulder to shoulder. The nineteenth-century Islamic reform of Usman Danfodio[8] further strengthened the culture of communal worship among Muslims in northern Nigeria. With the emergence of the Izala reform movement in 1978, the tradition of congregational prayer in mosques became even firmer, and loudspeakers started to be used to invite Muslims to attend congregational worship. Worshippers are regularly checked by mosque volunteers to make sure that they form proper rows and can touch each other. At the end of the prayer, worshippers exchange the *salām* (peace) greetings followed by the shaking of hands to sustain brotherhood in faith.

[10] There is a similar focus on communal worship among Christians in Nigeria. Most of them attend it on Sunday, although they can gather in the church throughout the week as well. Christian worship in church includes songs of praise, formal prayers, readings from the Bible, singing, and sermons by a priest or a pastor. When we discussed its importance with several Protestant ministers, Pastor Lucky Pam of the COCIN Church in Jos emphasized that worship in the congregation always bring blessings. A pastor of ECWA church in Gombe, Bitrus Maji, quoted verses from the Bible (e.g., Matthew 18: 20 and Psalm 99: 5) to show the importance of worshipping together in the church.

[11] During the lockdown in Spring 2020, all forms of mass gatherings were suspended, including congregational worship in mosques and churches. The ban was gradually relaxed from May 2020, and by the end of June it was eventually lifted, but new regulations restricted the number of worshippers (maximum of 50 in some places, depending on the size of the mosque or church) and stipulated the distance of two meters between them. After five months of strict restrictions, the regulations began to ease gradually, and eventually life returned to normal toward the end of 2020.

[12] Hence, for most of 2020, COVID-19 has challenged the culture of communal worship for Muslims and Christians. While it became clear that human-to-human contact is the major source of the virus' transmission within any community, many Muslims and Christians in

7 The Sunni Islamic world has four schools of thought, which are called *maḏhab* (pl. *maḏhāhib*): Māliki, Hanafi, Shāfi'i and Hanbali. The Māliki School is predominant in West and North Africa, the Hanafi School dominates in South and Central Asia, the Hanbali School in North and Central Arabia, and the Shāfi'i School in East Africa and Southeast Asia. These are mainly schools of jurisprudence.

8 Usman Danfodio was a nineteenth century Muslim cleric who started a movement for the reform of Islam in the Hausaland, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This reform led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, which is still a strong Muslim religious authority in Nigeria.

Nigeria viewed the restrictions and the fact that most religious services were transferred to the Internet as depriving them of their rights to practice their faith in congregation.

Malam Musa Shehu,[9] a regular worshipper in a mosque at Balarabe Street in the city of Jos, describes the way in which the two-meter regulation was practiced in their mosque: [13]

> We had to arrange among ourselves who attend which worship just to conform with the government restrictions. This has caused a lot of confusion and discomfort to some of the worshippers. We have equally faced criticisms from the other Muslims especially the Izala for accepting the COVID-19 and complying with these regulations. [14]

In her turn, Georgina Gomwir, a regular member of the St. Mary's Catholic Church in Jos,[10] indicated that in her congregation, worship was conducted at intervals—6:00–8:00 am, 8:00–10:00 am, and 10:00–12:00 pm—to avoid congestion and keep the necessary physical distance between the participants. Worshipers could choose which part of the day was suitable for them. However, this new form of worship became a misnomer for many Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. For example, according to Lawal Muhammad, an imam in Jos: "Adopting such a form of worship means that Muslims have neglected the Sunna of the Prophet for fear of death from disease, whereas Allah has stipulated the time and place of death of every person and no one will escape it."[11] In his turn, Audu Kenneth, a member and regular worshipper at the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Jos,[12] pointed out the negative effects that social distancing caused in their church during the lockdown and was confident that other worship places faced similar complications. First, according to him, it reduced the number of church attendees, especially because people without facemask were not allowed to enter the church. Second, communal worship was reduced to one hour for each group of worshippers instead of the normal two hours in order to reduce the discomfort of wearing a mask for a prolonged time. Finally, children were not allowed into the church, meaning that many parents had to stay home with them. [15]

These and other restrictions led to various forms of resistance and protest. For example, Lawal Dedee, a human rights activists and regular worshipper at Majema mosque in Jos, stated that during the COVID-19 lockdown he stopped attending congregational prayer for about two months. He explained the rationale for this decision: "The new form of worship that required two-meter gap between worshippers was completely a new experience for me. Therefore, I was confused and felt like I was not doing the right worship. Because of that, I restricted myself to praying at home with my family."[13] Another interviewee, Malam Babangida Lawal, described an incident at the Al-Bayan Mosque in Jos: [16]

> That week in November 2020, I went for a Friday congregational worship. After conducting the usual sermon, the Imam announced that he will not lead such a new form of prayer. He urged the congregation to form rows shoulder-to-shoulder and neglect governmental regulation. To my surprise, most of the audience shouted "*Allāhu Akbar*!" in praise of the imam and complied to his request.[14] [17]

9 Interview with Malam Musa Shehu, a teacher and worshipper at Balarabe Street Mosque Jos, November 2020.
10 Interview with Georgina Gomwir, a member of the St. Mary's Church Jos, February 2021.
11 Interview with Lawal Muhammad, an imam at Anguwan Rogo Jos, February 2021.
12 Interview with Audu Kenneth, a regular member of the Emmanuel Baptist Church Jos, February 2021.
13 Interview with Lawal Dedee, a humanitarian, Jos, February 2021.
14 Interview with Malam Babangida Lawal, a regular worshipper at Al-Bayan Mosque in Jos, November 2020.

This incident illustrates well the kind of discomfort with which most Muslims in Nigeria view the need for social distancing during worship. Similar acts of disobedience in many mosques and churches in different parts of the country have been reported in the media. For example, in November 2020, the National Television Network (NTA) broadcasted sessions of a mobile court in Abuja that issued an order to arrest some imams and pastors either for violating the lockdown by conducting worship in their churches or mosques or for not observing the social distance rule when meetings were allowed. [18]

After discussing an importance of communal worship for Nigerian Christians and Muslims in this section, in the following part of this article we will move to the responses to COVID-19 on part of influential religious leaders who shaped their Muslim and Christian followers' attitude to the pandemic. [19]

Religious Leaders' Responses to the Pandemic

The responses of Muslim and Christian religious leaders to the pandemic in Nigeria and the measures taken by secular state authorities to regulate the spread of COVID-19 varied between full compliance and strict rejection. The first attitude, which was presented by people such as Mansur Sokoto, an influential Muslim scholar and a professor at the Usman Danfodio University in Sokoto, accepted the reality of COVID-19 and advised the Muslim public to adhere to the health regulations stipulated by the state, especially the suspension of religious gatherings and worship in mosques. Mansur Sokoto drew on the historical *ṭā'ūn* (*epidemic*) during the period of the second Muslim Caliph Umar bin Khattab, known as the plague of Amwas (638–639). The plague had stricken the Muslim army at Amwas, a Syrian city, causing the death of more than 25,000 men (Dols 1974). In a video clip circulating on WhatsApp since November 2020, Sokoto narrated that during that epidemic Muslims were instructed to disperse into valleys and avoid contact to stop the spread of the disease. He then concluded that this example justified the suspension of congregational worship in mosques in Nigeria today due to the COVID-19 pandemic. [20]

Furthermore, Sokoto called for a collective Muslim *fatwa* on such a critical issue as COVID-19 and discouraged Muslims from accepting *fatwas* from individual Muslim scholars who might have limited knowledge about the pandemic. Sokoto's views were supported by the *Jamā'at Nasril Islam* (JNI or Society for the Support of Islam), an umbrella organization that represents all Muslim associations/groups in Nigeria. During several of their press conferences and media publications, representatives of JNI instructed Muslims to suspend congregational worship in mosques during the lockdown, accept the two-meter spacing between worshippers, and abide by health regulations such as avoiding handshakes after worship; these were regulations stipulated by the government. The President General of the JNI, Alhaji Sa'ad Abubakar,[15] who is also the spiritual leader of Nigerian Muslims and Sultan of Sokoto, often appeared in the media wearing a facemask and encouraged fellow Muslims to follow his example. In March 2020, the Sultan stated that "it is sheer ignorance for someone to disobey the measures put in place by health personnel and authorities" (Sahara Reporters 2020). [21]

In a similar vein, the Christian umbrella organization—Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)—emphasized that all churches in the country should strictly follow COVID-19 preven- [22]

15 Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar is the leader of the Qādiriyya Sufi Order in Nigeria and president-general of Jamā'at Nasril Islam (JNI) and Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA). He is the descendant of Usman Danfodio and now the Sultan of the Muslims in Nigeria.

tive restrictions. According to its president, Rev. Dr. Samson Ayokunle, "no sacrifice is too great to end the pandemic once and for all." With these words, it was reported in the Punch Newspaper of 13 November 2020 that the CAN President challenged Muslim and Christian religious leaders who downplayed the health aspect of the pandemic. The statement also criticized those rejecting the pandemic as a conspiracy against the faithful.[16]

[23] Two major Muslim and Pentecostal organizations—NASFAT and Living Faith Church—did not challenge the reality of the pandemic but interpreted it in spiritual rather than medical terms. NASFAT is the acronym of the Arabic phrase *Nasrul-Lāhi-Fathi*, which translates as "help of Allah is triumphant". The organization began as a worship group in Lagos in 1995. It was launched by young Muslim middle-class professionals who wanted to project a new image of Islam as a modern and sophisticated religion (Soares 2009). Living Faith Church Worldwide (also known as Winners Chapel) is one of the largest Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, with its headquarters located in Ota, Ogun State. This mega-church, according to its website, has a global outreach with congregations in 65 countries. The church was established in 1981 by David Oyedepo after he claimed to receive a message from God saying, "Now the hour has come to liberate the world from all oppressions of the devil, through the preaching of the Word of faith; and I am sending you to undertake this task" (Lindhardt 2014, 24). Living Faith and NASFAT are major players on the religious scene of the Nigerian urban environment and their view on the pandemic influences large numbers of people in the country.

[24] According to NASFAT's *ulama* (teachers), there are several layers of meanings behind pandemics and sickness such as COVID-19. The pain experience by the sick is not meaningless suffering but is rather encapsulated in the overarching divine plan by God. Suffering serves as expiation for sins a person committed in the past. In this understanding, pain has meta-empirical functions beyond bio-psychological discomfort. This theology emphasizes that pain cleanses sin. Another function of sickness is to move one closer to God. In NASFAT's teaching, the dominant belief is that suffering generates a feeling of powerlessness and forces the sufferer to invoke divine intervention in his or her life. Sheriff Abdulganiyu, a member of NASFAT, puts it as follows: "People suffering from pain always remark 'Oh God, help me' or pray fervently to God for relief."[17] In other words, through continuous consciousness of the presence of God resulting from sickness or pandemic, one can experience spiritual transformation and become more committed to the path of God.

[25] During the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Nigeria in March and April 2020, the imams of the NASFAT in Jos dedicated many of their Friday *khutba* (sermons) to the COVID-19 outbreak. Their central message was that the disease was a punishment from God because of widespread sin in contemporary times. They asserted that when humans turn their attention away from the path of righteousness, God uses all means available to make them rethink their unworthy deeds. The imams reiterated that a tragic disease such as COVID-19 forced people into spirituality. However, they continued, God's punishment of humanity with COVID-19 is not an act of divine revenge but a corrective measure.

[26] Imam Abdulkareem of the NASFAT's mosque in Jos emphasized that the teaching of Islam regarding epidemic outbreaks is remarkably consistent with modern medicine. The imam quoted the hadith of Prophet Muhammad which says: "If you hear the news of an outbreak

16 Only the two religious organizations in Nigeria, JNI headed by the Sultan and CAN by Rev. Dr. Ayonkunle, are state-funded purposely to be umbrella organizations representing Muslims and Christians in the country. In most cases, they support state policies and ally with the state. Apart from these two, no religious body receives any funding or regular government support.

17 Interview with Sheriff Abdulganiyu, a regular member of NASFAT, May 2020.

of an epidemic (plague) in a certain place, do not enter that place: and if the epidemic falls in a place while you are present in it, do not leave that place to escape from the epidemic." According to the imam, this hadith expresses the understanding of the contagious nature of diseases. The hadith also presents preventive measures to curtail the rapid spread of plagues through the restriction of movements in and out of the affected area. The imam quoted another hadith: "The plague was a punishment which Allah used to send on whom He wished, but Allah made it a blessing for the believers. None (among the believers) 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, but that Allah will grant him a reward similar to that of a martyr."[18] Most of the Friday *khutba* of NASFAT's mosques in Jos during the COVID-19 outbreak focused on urging the congregations to remain faithful and to know that Allah is in control of the pandemic situation.

[27] The true and lasting panacea to the COVID-19 outbreak, according to NASFAT's ulama, is repentance and refraining from sin. When people adopt noble behavior and become pious, Allah does not afflict them with deadly diseases. The imam in Jos encouraged the congregation to recite the following prayer for the victims of COVID-19 and other illnesses: "Take away the disease, O the Lord of the people! Cure him as You are the One Who cures, there is no cure but Yours, a cure that leaves no disease." The imam reiterated that illnesses resulting from demonic and witchcraft attacks or magical spells can be cured solely by different verses from the Holy Qur'an. However, with sicknesses that has a biological origin, such as COVID-19, Qur'anic therapy and prayer should be complemented with medical treatment.[19]

[28] In turn, according to Living Faith, in the Book of Exodus (23:25) God made a promise to the people of the Old Testament that if they obey his commandments and worship him, he will not afflict them with any disease. David Oyedepo (2008, 17), the church founder and leader, argues that the People of the Old Testament were given the gift of health in exchange for their faithful observance of rituals and unconditional obedience to God, but Christians receive health on the condition of faith alone. What follows according to Oyedepo is that Christians are not supposed to be sick, and if sickness befalls a given person, it means that there is a problem with his or her faith. Oyedepo teaches that diseases and pandemics do not come from God because God could not cripple and destroy his beloved children through sickness. According to the pastor, death and sickness descended into the world with man's original sin in the Garden of Eden.

[29] In the teaching of Living Faith, pathogenic microorganisms such as viruses and bacteria are the work of Satan. He created negative energy in the spiritual realm, they argue, which could manifest as a disease in the material world through the agency of human speech and thought. When one either voluntarily or involuntarily utters the phrase "I am sick" or constantly thinks negatively, he or she activates energy in the invisible world that causes sickness in the body. The actions of people in this world have consequences beyond the ordinary course of events because people are situated in a web of invisible forces that continually influence their lives. This attitude suggests that for Living Faith, there are evil spiritual forces that underlie the materiality of pandemics. In the same vein, Oyedepo preaches that the only solution to the pandemic is faith in Christ, since it was his death on the cross that vanquished the devil who introduced sin and sickness into the world.

[30] Oyedepo and other leaders of Living Faith argue that when physical and mental health

18 All translations are by the authors unless indicated otherwise.
19 Interview with Malam Abubakar Muhammad, Izala's representative at Dadin Kowa Jos, August 2020.

reigns in a society people can worship God without distractions and achieve the success and prosperity that God designed for them. But the devil is not happy with this situation. Therefore, he introduced diseases, such as COVID-19, to torment believers, make them miserable, and ravage their lives. Mathew Osoji, a pastor of Living Faith in Jos, explains the reason for the rise of COVID-19 as follows:

> The devil enjoys creating and spreading deadly outbreaks of disease, particularly the powerful ones such as COVID-19, because they rejuvenate his life. As COVID-19 devastates some countries, the power of the devil is becoming more vigorous and powerful. This is why the devil will never stop creating powerful plagues that may defy conventional medicine.[20] [31]

This remark shows that the negative energy that manifests as sickness and saps the vitality of an affected person at the same time vivifies the life of the devil. According to Osoji, another means that the devil is using to weaken the shield of faith of born-again believers is by sending fear and negative thoughts into their minds. When people start to fear COVID-19, they become vulnerable to infection and allow the spreading of the virus. The preachers of Living Faith admonished the Nigerian public to desist from being terrified by COVID-19 because by doing so, they would strengthen the disease. [32]

Despite the quick spread of COVID-19 in Lagos, members of Living Faith believed that a truly born-again person could not be infected. John Adega, a pastor of the church, emphasized that "when referring to the true believers, Jesus said: 'They will pick up serpents with their own hands, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them […]' " (Mark 16-18). He said this prophecy could be applied to the COVID-19 virus. A believer who encounters the virus is protected by his or her faith, as promised by Jesus. [33]

Another means of controlling COVID-19 according to Living Faith is through affirmative prayer speech that commands the virus to disappear in the name of Jesus. In a sermon titled *Sound Code*, Oyedepo went as far as providing the mechanics of affirmative prayer speech. He stated that: [34]

> Whenever one speaks, one releases measurable energy with the sound wave from one's mouth. This energy is acted upon by the power of the Holy Spirit to make an effect on the material world. All subatomic particles contain sound codes that respond to human speech. If speech is energy and energy is matter, according to Albert Einstein's formula, then speech is also a matter. Furthermore, speech can release forces of destruction, and this is how diseases are destroyed by commanding them to disappear in the name of Jesus.[21] [35]

During the COVID-19 outbreak, pastors of various branches of especially Pentecostal churches applied this notion of the power of speech to cure COVID-19 infections. They maintained that sound codes uttered by believers attack the COVID-19 virus and disperse its atoms. [36]

There are several noteworthy similarities and differences between Living Faith and NASFAT in their imaginaries of the pandemic and their responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. Both trace the origins of peoples' susceptibility to various illnesses to the sin of Adam and Eve. After embedding COVID-19 in supernatural meaning, Living Faith and NASFAT offer a spiritual [37]

20 Oyedepo's preaching on YouTube, July 2020.
21 Interview with Muhyideen Aabdulkareem, a member of NASFAT, May 2020.

solution to the pandemic. The two groups do not reject the biomedical techniques employed by health professionals in tackling the disease but regard them as secondary to the deeper spiritual means of withstanding the outbreak.

[38] A significant difference between the two models of sickness proposed by NASFAT and the Embassy lies in their view on its causative agents—God and the devil, respectively. For NASFAT, since the ultimate source of the pandemic is divine, which is inherently good, the fundamental purpose of the pandemic is also good—it removes the sin and brings people closer to God. However, for Living Faith, all diseases, including COVID-19, originate from the devil, who is inherently evil. Therefore, the pandemic is essentially evil too. The spiritual means of tackling COVID-19 and other pandemics proposed by Living Faith and NASFAT are informed by their conceived meaning of pandemic.

[39] Vitebsky (2001, 98) writes that the "metaphoric logic of specific modalities of healing often follows from the associated model of the pandemic." The meaning ascribed to the COVID-19 pandemic by Living Faith and NASFAT plays a vital role in mitigating the terror and anxiety that dominated the minds of the people during the emergency period. In this vein, Daniel Moerman (1979, 60) argues that the metaphoric structure or system of meaning attached to illness and healing is as important as any "actual," "physical," and "pharmacological" aspects. Living Faith has provided a great sense of immunity and security to its members by reminding them that faith is the most effective shield they have and that they can even destroy the virus with the power of affirmative prayer. A pastor of Living Faith, Emmanuel Steven, stated: "I am not afraid of COVID-19. Even if all my neighbors perish from the outbreak, I will not flee because I have absolute assurance that I will not be infected." In their turn, many members of NASFAT found consolation in the notion that COVID-19 is not a haphazard tragedy that may randomly strike any unlucky person, but a disease deliberately created and controlled by God, which could not infect anyone except by divine permission.

[40] At the more radical end of the scale of religious responses to the pandemic were those influential Christian and Muslim leaders in Nigeria who dismissed the very reality of the COVID-19 pandemic and flouted all health regulations against the virus as an evil plan by the West to distract believers from worship. The most prominent among them were Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir, the leader of the Izala movement, and Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, the founder and head of the Christ Embassy Church. *Jamāʾat Izālat al-bid'a wa'iqāmat al-Sunna* (the Society for the Eradication of Innovations and Establishment of sunna), or Izala in short, was founded by Shaykh Isma'ila Idris (1934–2000) to purify Islam from innovations and non-Islamic customs perceived to be practiced or supported by the Sufi Orders in Nigeria. The movement has also been engaged in a bitter struggle against some Islamic folk practices such as using amulets, drinking washed scriptural verses written on slate, exorcisms, and sorcery (Abubakar 2020, 112). Izala was established in Jos in 1978 and today has branches all over Nigeria as well as in Niger Republic, Benin, Chad, Cameroon, and Ghana. In its turn, Christ Embassy, founded by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome in 1987, has now become a global church with about 13 million followers, according to its website, and 145 branches on five continents. Akukwe Obinna (2012, 42) reported that Christ Embassy has a regular membership of over three million in Nigeria in addition to many supporters who belong to other denominations, but regard Pastor Chris as their deputy pastor. The Church has penetrated most parts of Nigeria and spread in the Nigerian diaspora, reaching many African countries, such as Ghana, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, as well as Europe, Asia, and North and South America.

[41] Amidst the first wave of the pandemic, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir issued a fatwa instructing

his followers to continue with their normal congregational worship at all Izala mosques in the country. He encouraged handshakes as a religious ideal and refused the call to wear face masks and observe physical distancing in the mosque. Muslim scholars who approve Shaykh Sani Yahya's views often question the regulations which allow markets to remain open but force mosques to close. For example, Malam Abubakar Muhammad,[22] a representative of Shaykh Sani Yahya in Dadin Kowa, a district of Jos, insists that the spiritual ill of suspending congregational worship is much worse than the infection with COVID-19. In a similar vein, most Muslim theologians associated with Izala believe that nothing happens to the believer without the knowledge of God, and that God alone can protect and cure all forms of illnesses, including COVID-19 (Oginni et al. 2020, 1). Some of them went as far as to declare that suspension of congregational worship in mosques is a demonstration of weak *imān* (faith) on the part of Muslims who accept to do so.

[42] In several sermons and press conferences between April and November 2020, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir declared COVID-19 a farce, maliciously created by secret agents from the US to prevent Muslims from performing their religious obligations such as pilgrimage, congregational prayers, preaching, and handshakes. He stated that "COVID-19 is *fatalwar Yahudu*"—literarily "a ghost of the West"—an illusion fabricated and spread by the Western countries. To prove his point, Sani Yahya highlighted that the virus was foretold in a 1981 novel titled *The Eyes of Darkness* written by Dean R. Koontz. Sani Yahya and some of his followers also pointed to several dystopian movies featuring global pandemics, such as *Outbreak* (1995), *I am Legend* (2007), and *Contagion* (2011), as proving his claim that COVID-19 is a premeditated Western conspiracy. In August 2020, when the virus temporarily retreated, Shaykh Sa'id Hassan Jingir, the deputy leader of Izala, praised the stance adopted by Sani Yahya:

> [43] Our charismatic leader, may God bless him, had earlier denied the existence of Coronavirus and he instructed us to continue with normal prayers at our different mosques at a time when other Muslims were misled into suspending prayers in congregations, which is a major mistake in Islam. Now that people are back to their normal businesses, who is right, them or us? Where is Coronavirus in our midst today? People should understand that the whole issue about Coronavirus is a Western conspiracy to deny Muslims the blessings of praying in congregation.

[44] In a similar vein, the leader of Christ Embassy Church, Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, subscribed to a conspiracy theory that unites misapprehensions about 5G technology and COVID-19. According to this theory, various Western governments, media corporations, and scientific experts are masterminding a 'new world order' through 5G technology. Oyakhilome added a religious dimension to the COVID-19-5G conspiracy theory. In one of his online sermons uploaded on YouTube on April 8, 2020, he stated that both COVID-19 and 5G technology are the products of "satanic secret agents" from the US. According to the pastor, they will soon introduce a COVID-19 vaccine which will contain nano-microchips. The microchips, which are to be controlled via 5G technology, will be able to read and influence human thoughts. Consequently, they will undermine human agency and free-will, and force people to worship Satan instead of God. Oyakhilome further stated that the federal state lock- down of Abuja and Lagos was intended to allow the secret installation of 5G antennas and other equipment. He also claimed that the microchips that will be injected into human bodies through COVID-19 vaccines are the 'mark of the beast,' as foretold in the Book of Revelation of the New

22 Interview with Malam Abubakar Muhammad, Izala's representative at *Dadin Kowa* Jos, August 2020.

Testament. To prove his theory, Pastor Oyakhilome directed his audience to the dystopian Hollywood film *Divergent* (2014), which deals with the theme of mind control through a serum infused into the human body.

[45] As the above discussion shows, Izala and Christ Embassy are strikingly similar in their responses to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and against the subsequent strategies introduced by the government to protect the citizens against the virus. The leaders assume a certain affinity between the COVID-19 pandemic, dystopian movies and fiction novels, and conspiracy theories. COVID-19 lends itself to conspiracy theories because while it has had a devastating impact on the global economy, health, and all social institutions, many people find it difficult to reduce the global human suffering unleashed by the virus to a blind natural happenstance.

[46] In this context, it is important to note that the films the two religious leaders referred to are not simply false or fictional audio-visual narratives, but rather complex works of art designed to hook viewers to the screen till the end of the show. When certain scenes in a film coincide with spectators' lived experiences, flashes of recognition occur, which usually elicit an emotional response and excitement. As Birgit Meyer (2015) has stated in the context of the Ghanaian film industry and its relation to Christianity, "the success or failure of a movie for spectators depends on the capacity of filmmakers to mediate everyday experiences in such a way that the movie incited recognition by and participation of the audiences" (2015, 142). The recognition in this instance happens when the watching of a film occurs after the lived experience.

[47] However, we suggest that when lived experiences follow or mimic what was earlier seen in a film, then this sense of recognition is transformed into one of prediction. In the case of COVID-19, earlier dystopian/pandemic movies are assumed to have predicted current lived experiences. For Shaykh Sani Yahya and Pastor Oyakhilome, the convergences between the COVID-19 outbreak and the dystopian/pandemic films are beyond coincidence; there must be a sinister conspiracy behind the striking similarities. To further connect movies and conspiracy theories, we borrow from Birgit Meyer's (2015) notion of film as 'revelation,' which explores the capacity of film to visually reveal the invisible spiritual and occult forces and entities that form the bedrock of African and Pentecostal cosmologies. To Shaykh Sani Yahya and Pastor Oyakhilome and their followers, dystopian/pandemic films not only revealed hidden conspiracies against Islam and Christianity but also visually predicted the current crisis years before it happened.

Conclusion

[48] The COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria generated divergent reactions and views from the religious leaders in the country. As we presented in this article, Shaykh Sani Yahya Jingir from Izala and Pastor Oyakhilome from Christ Embassy based their rejection of the pandemic and state-introduced measures to counteract it on conspiracy theories, drawing on fictional novels and dystopic Hollywood movies. In their turn, other hugely popular Muslim and Christian organizations—NASFAT and Living Faith—turned to the discourse that focused on spiritual and moral causes of the pandemic, namely weak faith and disobedience to God. Consequently, they saw religious observance as the main remedy for the coronavirus.

[49] Since January 2021, most Nigerians have returned to their daily routines without much anxiety about COVID-19. Many people have not been using face masks or observing social

distancing, and religious and social gatherings have returned to normal. Sometimes, people have been teasing those who wear facemasks and joke that COVID-19 is gone. A respondent and a resident of Rimi town in Kano, Yakubu Nagana[23] stressed that "we do not recognize COVID-19 here and everybody goes about his/her normal business as usual."[24] This attitude has been at least partially influenced by imageries and interpretations of the pandemic by popular religious leaders who either openly rejected the existence of the virus or explained it in spiritual rather than medical terms. On the one hand, these imageries enabled many believers to find meaning in the disease and overcome the fear and terror that engulfed the nation. On the other hand, with so many different opinions on the pandemic and the ways to deal with it, ordinary Christians and Muslims were often confused about what to accept or reject about COVID-19. The real impact of the discourses we discussed in this chapter still awaits a full evaluation.

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23 Interview with Malam Yakubu Nagana, a resident of Rimi Town in Kano State, November 2020.
24 Interview with Yakubu Nagana, a resident of Rimi town in Kano State, November 2020.

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Pandemic, *homo somatis*, and Transformations of the Russian Orthodox Ethos

Alexander Agadjanian
Russian State University of the Humanities; Yerevan State University, Armenia

ABSTRACT The article examines the reactions within the Russian Orthodox Church to the coronavirus pandemic, especially its first year of 2020. Based on materials from the official institutions, press, religious and secular Internet portals, and online forums, the article systematizes the nature of the responses of church leadership, priests, and laity to the unprecedented curtailment of liturgical practices and social interactions during the quarantine period. The extraordinary challenges of the period of the pandemic made evident some important trends in the rhetoric and practices of the Orthodox environment and reveal tensions that are rooted in the ambivalent relationship of religious culture with the key epistemes of late modern society.

KEYWORDS Russian Orthodox Church, pandemic, Communion, late modern society

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed deep tensions in social and cultural systems, including religions. The pandemic and quarantine led to a crisis of the Church, as well as other social institutions, at all levels—in terms of its economic foundations (sharp drop in daily donations); the structure of power (decentralization of the decision-making mechanism); normative certainty (adaptation and transformation of some ritual practices); and social-political participation (crisis of public presence and political involvement). [1]

However, apart from all these various and particular aspects of the crisis I will try to use this material to come closer to the understanding of some fundamental cultural tensions manifested at the height of the crisis. My central task is therefore to look at how basic religious attitudes and habitus collided and correlated with the prevalent epistemes of late modern society. In addition, I will look at how the new challenges led to splits and a plurality of reactions and behavior within the religious environment—from clear 'identitarian' opposition against the societal mainstream to various forms of entanglement with it. [2]

In the Christian religious environment, these fundamental tensions were sharply intensi- [3]

fied by an explosion of emotional reactions caused by the fact that the start of the epidemic coincided with the key and most eventful period of the annual liturgical cycle—preparation for and celebration of Easter. In what follows I will especially concentrate upon this spring 2020 period when the new, unexpected challenges of uncertainties and swiftly introduced restrictions provoked most spontaneous responses and created typical patterns of dealing with these challenges.[1]

This study is based on texts from church documents, media, and social networks. The official [4]
instructions, messages, sermons, and interviews issued by the Moscow Patriarchate office or produced by the highest Church hierarchs during the epidemic constitutes the first set of relevant data. It contains both prescriptive rules for clergy and laity and their interpretations for a larger audience. The second set of data includes all sorts of spontaneous reactions to the official church's or to state-initiated guidelines—reactions coming from local hierarchs and particular priests as well as lay religious actors. Among the last group, the individual postings and messages in the open Orthodox forums—the direct speech of common believers—deserves particular attention here.

The plan of the article is as follows: First, I outline the essence of just one specific but a [5]
most acute issue of the quarantine period—the (im)possibility and (im)permissible forms of the central Christian rite, the Holy Communion. Next, I introduce some theoretical reflections, comparing the foundations of the religious ethos with the dominant cultural norms of late modern society manifested during the pandemic. Then, drawing on this analysis of cultural tensions and entanglements, I return to the empirical material examining the controversy surrounding the changing correlation of 'body and spirit' as well as forms of religious sociality. Finally, I will examine the shifting boundaries of a specific Christian Orthodox identity—an overall self-perception of those who identify with this religious tradition in Russia, inasmuch as such a generalization is possible; I will show that such boundaries have become both more porous and more tangible during the crisis. Ultimately, I will explore the issue of this identity in the broad sense: the ambivalent place of the religious (Christian) ethos and those groups that associate themselves with it within Russian society, and even more broadly, the issue of the relationship of this ethos with late modern culture.

Disputes Over the Chalice

The restrictions imposed by secular and ecclesiastical authorities in connection with the epi- [6]
demic have caused sharp controversy around the central Christian rite—the Eucharist. "Suddenly, we faced the need to answer the question about the very essence of faith—what do we believe in? What's in the chalice[2]? What is essential, and what can be dropped out?."[3] In these disputes, there were two main components, which I analyze below: the issue of the essential charismatic agency (transmitted through the Communion) and the issue of the meaning and value of religious sociality (conciliarity, *sobornost'*, in Eastern Orthodox terms).

1 The restrictions continued throughout the next waves of the epidemic, including the Easter time of 2021 and 2022, but the reactions and controversies I focus upon here were not that dramatic as during the first year. Most of my material therefore comes from 2020.

2 The chalice, or *potir* in the Russian usage (initially Greek), is a vessel reminiscent of that in Christ's Last Supper, containing the blessed wine during the sacrament of Eucharist. The priest normally uses a special spoon to scoop up the wine from the chalice and give it to each communicant, in addition to the holy bread. The same spoon is used for all—a practice questioned during the epidemic.

3 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs' crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona.

The introduction of the "non-working regime" (a partial lockdown) in March 2020 delegated the rights to impose restrictions to regional authorities, and they, in turn, introduced quarantine measures of varying severity; local dioceses had to comply with these different regimes. The Moscow Patriarchate gradually formulated recommendations of its own. The general principle was clearly stated and remained unchanged: The Eucharist in the temple, in situ, cannot be abolished under any circumstances and cannot be replaced by distanced forms; however, certain restrictions and innovations are inevitable.[4] Actually, the essence of the dispute was the question of the degree of permissible modifications of the ritual. [7]

The first official statement of the Synod, the Church ruling body, on March 11, was carried out in the same vein: "Full participation" in the sacraments is irrevocable, but "frivolous attitude" towards the epidemic is also unacceptable.[5] On March 17, a key document was published—*The Instruction*—confirming the preservation of the Eucharist (Communion) as the main sacred ceremony, but with a detailed listing of ways to observe many special "hygienic rules" in connection with the epidemic—from limiting the number of parishioners to using specific devices to reduce the risk of infection.[6] The *Instruction* confirmed the provision on the centrality and irreplaceability of the Eucharist: "The offering of the Bloodless Sacrifice in no case can be canceled, for where there is no Eucharist, there is no church life," and the "Holy Body and the blood of Christ are offered for the health of both soul and body." The *Instruction*, at the same time, grounded the restrictive measures upon canonical arguments. For example, it contained references to "historical practices" of divine service during previous epidemics; it also referred to the classic "Handbook for Clergy" by Sergey V. Bulgakov, published in 1913, and to "Pidalion," a book of canonical rules by the eighteenth-century Greek theologian Nikodimus the Hagiorite (see the *Instruktsiia*). [8]

In April 2020, in the messages on the church day of the saint Mary of Egypt, at the feast of the Annunciation, during Holy Week, and later on, the general decision to close churches and cancel the sacraments was never adopted, despite the growing epidemic. In this sense, the position of the Russian Church differed from the policy of most Christian, including Orthodox, churches, which closed their places of worship. However, the Moscow Patriarchate officially repeated its calls to refrain from worship when possible.[7] [9]

All specific decisions regulating access to churches and to the sacraments depended on local [10]

4 Vladimir Legoida: An Interview from April 5, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchy*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5617247.html. Same position in Greek Orthodoxy: John Zizioulas: "The Church without the Eucharist is No Longer the Church. An Interview by Jivko Panev." *Orthodoxie.com*. March 29, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://orthodoxie.com/en/metropolitan-john-zizioulas-the-church-without-the-eucharist-is-no-longer-the-church/.

5 Meeting of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, March 11, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5605029.html.

6 All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise. Here are some of the quite detailed prescriptions of the *Instruction*: "to offer the Holy Mysteries of Christ by wiping the spoon after each partaker with a wrap soaked in alcohol (with regular renewal of the inhibition) and then dipping it in water, followed by disposal of the water according to the practice provided for washing wraps"; "to offer washing [zapivka, *a few sips of water taken by each communicant after the Eucharist*] separately to each participant - in a disposable container"; "use disposable hygienic gloves to distribute the antidote"; "use of spoons followed by their disposal"; "organize temperature measurement", etc.). From: *Instruktsiia nastoiateliam prihodov i podvorii, igumenam i igumeniam monastyrei Russkoi pravoslavnoi cerkvi v sviazi s ugrozoi rasprostranenia koronavirusnoi infektsii* [Instruction for the rectors of parishes, hegumens of the monasteries of the Russian Orthgodox Church in connection with threats of the coronovirus epidemic]. Meeting of the Holy Synod, #30, March 17, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5608594.html.

7 On Easter 2020, Greek, Cypriot, Romanian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian churches and churches under the Patriarchate of Constantinople were closed to parishioners, as were Roman Catholic churches all over the world; The Russian and Georgian churches made an exception, although in fact the restrictions were significant

authorities and local bishops. The severity of the quarantine varied from region to region, and most bishops acted in accordance with the orders of the secular authorities. However, in some cases, the restrictions and new rules introduced by the secular and ecclesiastical authorities caused strong irritation and resistance. For some priests and laity, the threat of infection from the sacrament was difficult to fathom, while for others it seemed an inconceivable heresy and absurdity. The range of reactions was wide. Some Church hierarchs loyally accepted the restrictions: The abbot of the Valaam Monastery Pankraty cautiously avoided the word "quarantine," calling the restrictions "certain measures," and Metropolitan Mercury of Rostov, avoiding the word "prohibition," emphasized the "appeal" to believers to follow restrictions.[8] By contrast, at the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, the main Russian monastery, the first reaction was open disobedience, and then a hybrid solution was taken—to provide a choice between two chalices—'traditional' and 'hygienic,' that is, following the above-quoted official *Instruction*.[9]

[11] The position of resistance was most sharply reflected in the message of Deacon Ilia Maslov, a public figure with a somewhat marginal image but large outreach. The message was widely distributed and actively discussed in online Orthodox forums. Maslov spoke of the impossibility of infection within the walls of the church. He sharply condemned what he called "disposable theology" with a direct reproach to the influential Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev and "the blasphemous topic of spoons" (justification of the use of disposable spoons for Communion, see above and the *Instruktsiia*). He compared the refusal of holy services to the Soviet policy of ghettoization of the church.[10] Hilarion Alfeyev responded to the deacon's message a few days later with a sharp rebuke, speaking about the "Pharisaic" and "irresponsible bravado" of those who "push themselves out as self-proclaimed true confessors."[11] However, the Metropolitan also made a quasi-theological argument in the dispute about the chalice:

> [12] We firmly believe that no infection can be transmitted through the Holy Gifts. The Body and Blood of Christ are accepted by believers 'for the healing of soul and body,' that is, they themselves are the source of healing. But the cup and spoon for communion are those items that are not protected from bacteria and viruses falling on them. (Ibid.)

[13] Although there were reports of a relatively high infection rate among the priests, this information did not really affect the controversy, and the debates continued in the social networks. "If Christ is not resurrected, then our faith is in vain!" wrote one user; another one reminded readers that "the Lord Himself gave us the image of communion at the Last Supper" when all his disciples drank from the same cup, and referred to the chapter on Communion from the

here too (See *Orthodox Easter: Churches Largely Empty Amid Covid-19 Pandemic, Euronews*. Last accessed February 20, 2021. https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/19/orthodox-easter-churches-largely-empty-amid-coronavirus-pandemic.html).

8 *Valaamskii monastyr' vremenno ne prinimaet palomnikov* [The Valaam monastery temporarily refuses the pilgrims]. *RIA-News*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://ria.ru/20200317/1568745473.html. See also Georgii Maximov *Kak ponimat' slova patriarcha* [How to understand the words of the Patriarch]. *Youtube*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqSrfutO_w&feature=emb_logo.

9 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs' crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona.

10 Ilia Maslov: *Koronovirusnaia dressirovka tserkvi* [The traning of the Church by the coronavirus]. *Analiticheskii tsentr sviatogo Vasilia Velikogo*. March 19, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://stbasil.center/2020/03/19/koronavirusnaja-dressirovka-cerkvi/.

11 Metropolitan Hilarion: *Ne boishsia zarazit'sia sam—podumai o drugikh* [Not afraid to be infected yourself—think about others]. *An interview with RIA-News*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://ria.ru/20200324/1569073789.html.

"Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith" by St. John Damascene, a prominent Church Father from the eighth century; "it is impossible to distort the image of communion given by the Lord Himself," and therefore disposable spoons mean "doubts about the holiness of the Body and Blood of the Lord."[12]

Other participants of the same online forum, *Azbuka Very*, on the contrary, sharply rejected this extreme position. One of them posted that "all sorts of zealots have come out here, [they present themselves as] super-Orthodox" and then praised the "rationality" of the abbot of the Valaam Monastery with his more moderate position of accepting restrictions, in contrast to the zealous stubbornness of the monks from the Trinity-Sergius Lavra (*Azbuka Very* on March 20, 2020). The pragmatic and moderate position proceeded from the impossibility of opposing oneself to society as a whole: [14]

> It's one thing to say that you are all unbelievers, all you 98 percent of the population, and so leave us alone, we will do as we see fit … And it is another thing to say that we are part of the country, and as part of the country, we comply with sanitary requirements. (Ibid.) [15]

One of the priests, answering a question from the forum about the risks of infection though Communion, gives an answer that leaves the contradiction open: [16]

> So we, Orthodox Christians, believe that infection cannot be transmitted through Communion, because bread and wine at the liturgy in a mysterious, incomprehensible way are transformed into the Body and Blood of the Lord, and in them no infection and no virus can live. Therefore, there is no need to be afraid of being infected through the Sacrament. However, given the dangers posed by the spread of the virus, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church adopted instructions on how parish life, including Communion, should go in these difficult times. (Ibid.) [17]

Finally, there was a certain synthetic position in which there was a noticeable confusion of two languages, two explanatory strategies—roughly speaking, the language of faith and the language of science. As one user wrote, the blood of Christ kills all bacteria and viruses; and another one reproduced the differentiating argument of the official discourse that we have already met, that the Holy Gifts cannot be infected but the spoon and the cup can (ibid.). [18]

Life and Death, *homo somatis*, and Late Modern Epistemes

If we talk about the deep, fundamental basis of the discomfort and rejection that many Christians felt, as we saw in the debate about the Chalice, we need to turn to the most important principle, which revealed its almost absolute power over the minds during the pandemic—the unconditional priority of the value of physical human life, life as a biological given, above all other values. The domination of this principle manifested itself both in decisions on restrictions adopted by the ruling elites of most countries and in the overall consent of public opinion to their necessity. It is biological life as the last, exhaustive, and irreversible given—even though all other values or basic instincts could not be abolished or disappear—that became [19]

12 Quoted here the participants of the online forum Azbuka Very, S.K., Gloria, Sergii. *Azbuka Very*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://azbyka.ru/forum/threads/voprosy-pro-koronavirus-i-ne-tolko.23701/page-10#post-385112.

the unconditional starting point for decision making.[13] This priority of the bio-principle, remaining at the very center of late modern culture, may be not always consistent with some of the basic ideas of the 'Christian consciousness.'

[20] On what basis does this central element of the modern Zeitgeist rest? It is not enough to explain this fact, in evolutionary terms, by the 'self-evident instinct of self-preservation': After all, it is just important to understand why such an explanation goes as 'self-evident.' Never before has the threat of death associated with an epidemic generated such a broad consensus in the choice of action to protect human lives.

[21] In my opinion, supported by a few theoretical references provided below, this attitude I call bio-determinism rests on a combination of two cultural foundations, or epistemes, which stay in a tense, sometimes even contradictive co-relationship: scientism and exclusive-expressive subjectivity. The science-centered (scientistic) episteme, with the biological-evolutionary logic of species conservation as its central element, undoubtedly determined the strategy of the global response to the pandemic.[14] More specifically, we are talking about the centrality of biomedicine, an evidence-based medical industry and the health care system, which have a legitimate near-monopoly on the interpretation of health, illness, and death. The important thing is that, despite the search for some kind of alternative medicine—holistic or integrative, despite the significant development of bioethics and even despite a powerful postmodern critique of the scientific truth-claims—the medical and biological mainstream still seem to maintain the understanding of the person, in line with an Enlightenment paradigm, as *homo naturalis*, *homo somatis* for the most part, that is, the person whose mind and behavior are mostly explained through natural and bodily mechanisms.

[22] The second fundamental late modern episteme—what I have designated as exclusive-expressive subjectivity—is a continuation of the specifically modern 'I-project' and presupposes the central meaning of the individual subject, the autonomous personality; this category underlies the basic criteria of an ideal collective order and includes such priorities as well-being, security, individual rights, emotional experience, reflexivity, freedom of expression, and self-determination.[15]

[23] It is obvious that, as I already mentioned, the two epistemes are in a complex relationship with each other: The 'subjective' episteme in a sense opposes scientism with its claim for universal objectivity; on the other hand, it is quite consistent with bio-science because of its undoubted emphasis on somatic, *bodily* self-expression. Although during the quarantine period many motives of individual subjective self-assertion were temporarily curtailed, both epistemes, at the height of the pandemic, reinforced each other and merged firmly at the point indicated above—in the unconditional priority of the value of individual life as such. In

13 The tendency to establish a biological and even physiological determinism of this kind was famously noticed in the hierarchical pyramid of needs proposed by Abraham Maslow in the 1940s (1943) (I am not discussing here the question of the controversial empirical validity of the Maslow hierarchy).

14 Without pretending here to draw any complete representation of this episteme, I will refer to a recent book on scientism as a "new orthodoxy" and as a "religion of science" by Williams and Robertson (2015). Distinguishing between scientism and science, the authors write about "over-reliance and overconfidence in science as a source of knowledge about all aspects of human life and, ultimately, all human problems" (2015, 2–3).

15 In its most general form, the analysis of this trend constitutes a part of some classic studies: Anthony Giddens focused on self-reflexivity as an essential element of the society of "late modernity" (1991, 71–80), where he examines the influence of "I-reflectivity" on I-narratives, social roles and life styles. See also Zygmunt Bauman's idea of "I-emancipation" as the basis of "fluid modernity" (2000, 16–52). Finally, the most important generalizing work remains the book by Charles Taylor (1989); Taylor develops the concept of "exclusive humanism" in another book (2007, 18–19 and passim).

fact, in a sacralization of the physical life of an individual, as well as those actions that were aimed at protecting it and spontaneous forms of glorification of medical workers and the shift of the highest public authority from political leaders, show celebrities and big businessmen to doctors and biologists were not accidental.[16]

[24] It is not easy for a consistent 'Christian consciousness'—if such an ideal-typical expression can be permitted—to recognize individual bodily life as the highest value, and physical death as the greatest danger. Some radical Orthodox clergy voiced, in these terms, disagreement with the restrictions on the Eucharist and the ban on the liturgy. Andrei Tkachev, a popular priest and media preacher, declared the refusal to participate in the holy service as "the end of Christianity."[17] He argued, expressing a widespread opinion, that the abolition of Easter services for the sake of salvation from death is absurd, since the feast of the Resurrection is the triumph of life and the absolute 'trampling' of death as such: "Nobody will believe you that Christ has risen if you fear death" (ibid). One of the bishops (Bishop Methodius of Kamensk, Urals region) just as sharply asserted the fundamental impossibility of subordinating the values of the Church (in fact, the value of eternal salvation) to the fear of physical death:

> [25] In the temple, you can only become infected with eternal life … Here in the temple is the victory over death, not the fear of death … We will be brought here to the temple anyway, and it is better to go to the temple with our own feet … [because] you need to leave traces [by coming to the church] to make the road to the Kingdom of Heaven.[18]

[26] Another bishop, Metropolitan Kirill Nakonechny of Yekaterinburg, identified the following hierarchy of dangers: "The enemy of the Risen Christ, unfortunately, is real and much more dangerous than any virus. He wants to kidnap us from each other, steal our churches, and expel the Eucharist from churches."[19] The widely discussed petition "Open churches for Easter!" by the *Sorok Sorokov* society, one of the most active Orthodox NGOs, proclaimed that "for millions of people in Russia, Heavenly Bread is more dear than earthly bread, and to deprive them of this Bread at a time when grocery and other stores are open is a serious affront to their religious beliefs."[20]

[27] In one of the earliest works on Orthodox responses to the pandemic, such radical reactions were aptly labeled as "magical fundamentalism" (Chapnin 2020). Some doubts, in a less articulated form, were also felt in the statements of some bishops about the closure of churches, and so the controversy over the Eucharistic cup that I discussed in the first section fits into the same line of resistance to the dominant episteme of bio-determinism. One of the Orthodox

16 In Romania, this trend manifested itself in the appearance of billboards depicting doctors with attributes of Christian saints; the local church opposed these images as blasphemous: https://basilica.ro/en/romanian-orthodox-church-condemns-posters-of-doctors-as-saints-a-blasphemous-act/ (Last accessed April 14, 2022).

17 Andrei Tkachev: *Paskha doma – konets khristianstva* [Easter at home is the end of Christianity]. *Union of Orthodox Journalists*, April 2, 2020. Last accessed April 4, 2022. https://spzh.news/ru/news/70112-paskha-doma--eto-konec-khristianstva--klirik-rpc.

18 Bishop Methodius: *My tak ili inache umrem* [We will die anyway]. *Znak*. April 13, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.znak.com/2020-04-13/my_tak_libo_inache_umrem_na_urale_episkop_prizval_hodit_v_hramy_vo_vremya_pandemii.

19 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs' crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona.

20 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramyu na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition "Open churches for Easter"]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

publicists recalled that, from a Christian point of view, science could not provide decisive answers to the questions of life and death, in part referring to the classic conflict of "faith and reason."[21] Another advocate, politically leaning to the right, radically questioned the defining status of physical death: "If human life is the most important thing in the world, then all martyrs and heroes are just inadequate fools or religious fanatics"—in the same way, he recalls further, as those "heroes who sacrificed their lives for the Fatherland."[22] His invective was directed against "atheists" for whom, as he put it, "banana is a second cousin" - with a hint to environmentally friendly ethics (see Smolin 2020). The following diagnosis sounded most sharply: "today people are selling their faith and freedom for an idol called 'health'."[23] Patriarch Kirill, in one of his epistles at the feast of Annunciation on April 7, 2020, directly condemned the "anthropocentric civilization", which supposedly puts itself above God and relies on strictly scientific arguments.[24] In this condemnation, the patriarch continued the criticism he had been expressing for nearly thirty years (Agadjanian 2003, 323–33).

[28] Orthodox criticism of bio-determinism joined numerous other voices condemning quarantine restrictions. On the one hand, it differed sharply from the frequent condemnation of quarantine in Russia and other countries based on threat of economic stagnation and unemployment. On the other hand, it was in many respects consonant with opinions expressed by some European intellectuals. Consider, for example, the desperate and even provocative pamphlets—given the mass scale of the spring 2020 epidemic in Italy—by Giorgio Agamben, who accused fellow citizens of an "unthinkable" rejection of basic rights and values in favor of an "unclear risk" of infection.[25] Agamben explained such a "surrender of positions by the whole society" with the gap between biological and cultural human experience (due to the invention of medical technologies that artificially support vegetative existence). Of course, the criticism of Agamben, unlike the above-mentioned Russian religious voices, was not directed against anthropocentrism as such; nor did it refer to the transcendental. However, he did not fail to reproach the Roman Catholic Church for "having become the servant of science," for abolishing Easter Masses and forgetting the martyrs and saints who consciously (like St. Francis) took mortal risks for the sake of faith and love for their neighbor.[26]

[29] However, let us go back to the Russian Orthodox Church: We saw that its official position from the very beginning was ambiguous (and could hardly be different). This was evident in all the conversations that offered Christian (theological) justification of the restrictions. The arguments sounded more like a reminder of a special, different Christian hierarchy of values, which, however, must be temporarily canceled. Restrictions were introduced "while

21 Evgenii Shirokov and Vladimir Gorbulikov. *Ot konca sveta spaset Bog ili nauka*? [Will God or science save from the end of the world?]. *Foma*. April 9, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://foma.ru/koronavirus-ot-konca-sveta-spaset-bog-ili-nauka.html (Last accessed 14/04/2022)

22 Mikhail Smolin (2020). *Samoe strashnoe: vlast' ne boitsia odnogo – Boga* [The worst thing: the authorities are not afraid of God]. *Dvukhglavyi orel. Obshchestvo razvitia russgoko istoricheskogo prosveshchenia*. Last Accessed April 14, 2022. https://rusorel.info/samoe-strashnoe-vlast-ne-boitsya-odnogo-boga.

23 Ilia Maslov: *Koronovirusnaia dressirovka tserkvi* [The traning of the Church by the coronavirus]. *Analiticheskii tsentr sviatogo Vasilia Velikogo*. March 19, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://stbasil.center/2020/03/19/koronavirusnaja-dressirovka-cerkvi/.

24 Patriarch Kirill: *Patriarshee poslanie* [Patriarch's message]. April 3, 2020. *Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/5616517.html.

25 Giorgio Agamben: "L'invenzione di un'epidemia." *Quodlibet*. February 26, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia.

26 Giorgio Agamben: "Una demanda." *Quodlibet*. April 13, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-una-domanda.

maintaining firm faith in the good providence of God and in Divine omnipotence"[27]; yet, at the same time, other arguments were given in favor of ritual restrictions: a reference to the Gospel verse about the Lord's temptation (i.e., refusal to risk one's own life without the need)[28] and the commandment to love one's neighbor (we will return to this last argument later below).

[30] Yet, if we further interpret all the texts that reflected the official position of the Church, including the *Instruction* from March 17, we see motives directly and unequivocally fitting into the biomedical, scientific logic, which, as already mentioned, included detailed explanations for specific disinfectants and reproduced the formal medical vocabulary (see footnote 3 above). The justifications for restrictions were firmly embedded into the medical discourse. The two languages, reflecting different systems of view, *scientistic* and religious, were found next to each other but did not interact directly within the same text. In this sense, as it was rightly noted, the compromise of the two Communion cups in the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, which I mentioned above, was very symbolic.[29] It seems that at a deep level, there was a basic agreement with the late modern episteme of the centrality of *homo somatis*, even if this agreement was expressed reluctantly or silently; and, at the same time, the inherited Christian language, built around the concepts of spirit and grace, was preserved. This insoluble dichotomy was vividly expressed by Metropolitan Mercury (Ivanov) of Rostov (south of Russia), addressing the flock and agreeing to the forced closure of churches: "… Better condemn me [for supporting the quarantine] than later curse me for the coffins of your loved ones who will be carried through the streets."[30]

[31] There is another interesting angle for this controversy: The denial of the anthropocentric culture of *homo somatis*, both canonically fixed (as we have just seen) and practically voiced in various forms, should not obscure the fact that most orthodox religious traditions, and perhaps Eastern Orthodoxy in particular, are highly "somatic" in and of themselves. It is well known that 'orthopraxy' is specifically central to the Eastern Christian tradition (Hann and Goltz 2010; Bremer 2016). Moreover, the practice requires deep sensory involvement, active work of all five senses, and the veneration of the sacred materiality of consecrated matter (relics, icons, water and other objects). This style of mind and worship applies to both canonical and vernacular practices, and there is a fairly large anthropological literature providing evidence of such "somatic emphasis" (see, e.g., Luehrmann 2017; Lidov 2006; Kirichenko and Poplavskaya 2012; Kormina 2019). In addition, a strong ascetic orientation of Orthodox piety, traditionally following monastic patterns, lays a decisive emphasis on bodily practices. It is important that this cultivation of pious physicality can be transformed beyond the frame of monastic asceticism into its opposite—the cult of physical healing achieved with the help of various types of material objects and substances. The transubstantiated matter/substance of the Eucharist may be seen as the apex of these phenomena.

27 *Instruktsiia nastoiateliam prihodov i podvorii, igumenam i igumeniam monastyrei Russkoi pravoslavnoi cerkvi v sviazi s ugrozoi rasprostranenia koronavirusnoi infektsii* [Instruction for the rectors of parishes, hegumens of the monasteries of the Russian Orthgodox Church in connection with threats of the coronovirus epidemic]. Meeting of the Holy Synod, #30, March 17, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5608594.html.

28 The quote "'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matthew 4:7) means to not expose oneself to danger unnecessarily, relying only on divine help.

29 Ksenia Luchenko: *Muchenicheskaya korona* [Martyrs' crown]. *Takie dela*. April 1, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://takiedela.ru/2020/04/muchenicheskaya-korona.

30 Bishop Mercury: *Nuzhda zakon meniaet* [Needs can change the law]. Interview with Metropolitan Mercury in 2020. *Panorama*, Rostov-on-Don. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.panram.ru/news/society/nuzhda-zakon-menyaet-mitropolit-merkuriy-poprosil-zhiteley-samoizolirovatsya-na-paskhu/.

In this respect, 'caring for oneself' in physical, bodily terms, which we find among Orthodox believers and which, to put it in canonically rigorous categories, includes 'magical' actions, is comparable to caring for oneself within the framework of the scientistic and individualistic late modern epistemes. After all, the latter also presuppose certain actions, constraints, or 'sanctified' consumption—in this case, sanctified by modern science and driven by the *soin de soi* (caring of oneself). However, in spite of such affinity, we should be careful of not ignoring obvious differences between these two dispositions in their explanatory argumentation. The Christian worldview, of course, is not reduced to such pragmatic individual magic: Firstly, it theoretically always interprets the healing properties of 'matter' in terms of Divine grace; secondly, it puts the categories of earthly life and death in the perspective of the highest goal of salvation; and thirdly, it provides a sense of communitarian, collective quest for healing effects of the sanctified matter. [32]

In reality, however, such theoretical comparisons were hardly relevant in the time of the epidemic. The Church had to look for ways to replace the ritual practices cancelled by the epidemic with ones that would be just as effective. The patriarch made a tour of Moscow with the miraculous icon (*Umilenie* – "Tenderness") in the classical fashion of spatial apotropaic (protective) magic, and many diocesan bishops followed his example, performing "air processions"—flying by plane, with icons and prayers, over cities and territories.[31] On the other hand, the temples, if not closed, remained almost empty; as the epidemic has shown, the majority of people who considered themselves believers nevertheless preferred the medical logic of protecting physical life to the Christian logic of a 'blessed materialism.' [33]

However, even in this case, the rejection of the sensory, somatic mysticism of temple worship (and some accompanying vernacular practices) was felt as forced and involuntary. Full agreement with the non-religious episteme—'physical life above all else'—would mean the crisis of identity and cognitive dissonance; therefore, this rejection required some kind of rationalization. I would pick at least two forms of such rationalization: on one hand, the motive of 'love of one's neighbor,' and on the other hand, the discourse of spiritualization of religious belonging. [34]

Love One's Neighbor: Social Ethics Beyond the Sacred?

During the epidemic, in Russia as in other countries, arguments regarding social virtues and caring for one's neighbor (love for one's neighbor) were obviously very common. However, the argument of caring for one's neighbor can be interpreted in different ways. We saw above that for Agamben the reference to it served as a reminder of a sacrificial rebuffing of biodeterminism. However, on the whole, the argument of caring for one's neighbor during the pandemic, both in the voices of religious leaders and—possibly in different words—in secular discourse, was undoubtedly the main ethical justification for the need for quarantine: love of one's neighbor being, as it were, the reverse side of the *soin de soi*, is the most intuitive and universal ethical norm, going back to the 'golden rule' of ethics, the Kantian categorical imperative, as well as some texts of the Gospels. [35]

In the modern Catholic tradition, the argument of 'love of one's neighbor' is the most de- [36]

31 *Patriarch Kirill ob'ekhal Moskvu s ikonoi* [Patriarch Kirill traveled around Moscow with the icon]. *Novaya Gazeta*, April 3, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.gazeta.ru/social/news/2020/04/03/n_14245939.shtml; flights by the local bishops in Kursk, Zlatoust, Khanty-Mansiysk, Omsk, Kostroma, in Belarus and other places are recorded here: <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5618392.html; http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5618778.html> (Last accessed February 14, 2022).

veloped and firmly embedded in the broad discourse of the "common good" (Catechism, Part III, Section I, Ch. 2, Art.2)[32]. At a deep level, the argument of caring for one's neighbor is closely aligned with another important idea—the sanctity of human life as the highest value. The Catholic doctrine states: "Life and physical health are precious goods entrusted to us by the Lord. We must care for them judiciously, taking into account the needs of others and the common good;" yet immediately after this follows an important proviso that emphasizes the specific Christian position: "If the moral law calls for respect for bodily life, it does not, however, make it an absolute value. It revolts against a neo-pagan concept that seeks to spread the cult of the body…" (Catechism, Part III, Section II, Ch.2, Art.5).

[37] The Russian Church offers very similar ideas in its recent official documents. It "proceeds from the concept of life as an invaluable gift of God, based on Divine Revelation." But here, too, the same reservation follows: Although the "care for human health—mental and physical—is from time immemorial the concern of the Church," yet "maintaining physical health apart from spiritual health from the Orthodox point of view is not an absolute value." Also, "The Church warns against attempts to absolutize any medical theories, recalling the importance of maintaining spiritual priorities in human life."[33]

[38] As we have seen, the argument of caring for our neighbors was also voiced in the above-mentioned *Instruction* on the celebration of the Eucharist in an epidemic; Metropolitan Hilarion (in the interview cited above) and many others insisted on it. Moscow priest of Italian origin Fr. Ioann Guaita, representing the views of a liberal church tradition, argued that people should observe sanitary restrictions "as civilized people, as responsible citizens, and as believers, as Christians." He called the denial of limitations for the sake of "higher values" a manifestation of pride, temptation, and spiritual blackmail.[34] However, in most cases, this argument sounded more pragmatic, in the language of common sense, without direct and emotional references to theological rationales—in contrast to the aforementioned ascetic criticism of biocentrism. Such a 'theological colorlessness,' as one can call it, of the 'love one's neighbor' logic was apparently due to the fact that a special Christian language of social ethics still remained relatively underdeveloped in Russian Orthodoxy (Kostyuk 2013).[35]

Effects of 'Social Distance': Spiritual vs Material, Individual vs Collective

[39] The theme of the priority of 'spiritual' religiosity in conditions of physical restrictions was also heard very often. Answering the believer's question about the impossibility of the traditional blessing of the willow on Palm Sunday (a widely popular Orthodox practice), a priest

32 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

33 *The Bases of the Social Teaching of the Russian Orthodox Church XI.1. and XII on the Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/419128.html.

34 *Sviashchenniki o vere i zhizni v usloviiakh pandemii* [Priests on faith and life during the pandemic]. *Pravmir*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.pravmir.ru.

35 Kostyuk writes about the lack of a developed interest in the social (2013, 247, 387–92), about the "taboo" of the social theme in theology (234) and the isolation of the secular "religious philosophy" of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, which tried to fill these gaps (270). The discourse of the 'common good' as a whole is almost absent in Orthodox theology; a recent exception is the book by Aristotle Papanikolaou, who calls the idea of common good a kind of "transcendental" of modern secular democracy and substantiates the connection of this idea with the Orthodox discourse of "divine-humanity"—divine-human Communion (Papanikolaou 2012, 133–34, 157–59).

responded that such a blessing is no less valid when made at home, and not in the church, and he continued that, in essence, the blessing was not that important at all because the most important thing was 'inner faith': After all, he reminded his listeners, even among those who met Jesus in Jerusalem with palm branches there were those who, a few days later, shouted "Crucify him!."[36] The same was true of the sanctification of Easter cakes: After all, what we call "sanctification," recalled one bishop, is, in essence, the blessing by the Lord Himself (as written in liturgical books), and therefore every layman himself can ask God for it.[37] In addition, it is not at all unthinkable to give up some "pious habits;" the main thing is not whether there will be consecrated, blessed willows and cakes in the house, but what is happening within the soul.[38] Answering to a woman in an online group who regretfully spoke about the impossibility of coming to her mother's funeral because of the quarantine, another priest recalled that "there are no barriers to prayer, neither in time, nor in distance, and even death cannot cut off prayer communication."[39] Another priest said that it was God's Providence that thanks to the quarantine "we have learned what we lacked, and have corrected what was wrong in us," calling to focus on inner prayer before all the rest; another priest considered it a blessing that the quarantine gave more time to read the Gospel; and yet another one, echoing all the previous ones, compared quarantine with "a spiritual desert, from which the exit is to the Promised Land" (Fathers Fedor Borodin, Aleksey Uminsky, Alexandre Satomsky: see Sviashchenniki 2020 in the footnote above).

[40] Another aspect of the same challenge was the crisis of church sociality. Along with the question of the nature of the sacrament, the Eucharist, on the verge of matter and spirit, there was another prominent theme—about the liturgy as a 'common service', as an act of 'conciliarity,' 'togetherness' (the famous Russian concept of *sobornost'*), the need to come together as a key principle of grace-filled (charismatic) communication. The collapse of live, physical sociality, of course, affected the entire liturgical cycle (and not just the Eucharist), and was felt especially painfully on the most important Easter days. The impossibility of *conciliar* participation seemed nonsensical from the point of view of the Christian logic, as much as the assumption that the Chalice or the Gifts could be contagious.

[41] The leadership of the Church, in addition to the 'common sense' and medical arguments supporting social distancing, offered a more canonical justification, essentially ascetic, with references to the monastic experience of solitude. In a message dated April 3, the patriarch urged believers to follow the example of St. Mary of Egypt and take upon themselves "the feat of permanent stay in their homes," to "make their homes a desert."[40] Many priests also expressed this metaphor of solitude by calling for intense prayer and spiritual focus, in the spirit of the same tendency towards the spiritualization of faith already discussed. The motive of gratitude for the fact that the quarantine "providentially" left believers alone with Christ was often repeated (Priest Alexander Nasibullin: Sviashchenniki 2020). The Belarusian Metropolitan (Pavel of Minsk), persuading the faithful to refrain from church services, urged: "Pray at

36 *Voprosy sviashchenniku*. *Foma*. Last accessed April 10, 2022. https://foma.ru/kak-osvjashhat-verbu-na-karantine.html.

37 Bishop Savva Tutunov. *V RPTs raz'asnili vopros osviashchenie kulichei i paskhi…* [The Church explains the blessing of Easter cakes…]. *RIA-News*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://ria.ru/20200416/1570106544.html.

38 *Voprosy sviashchenniku*. *Foma*. Last accessed April 10, 2022. https://foma.ru/kak-osvjashhat-verbu-na-karantine.html.

39 *Batiushla online* [Priest online]. *VKontakte*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://vk.com/topic-25505827_26391950?offset=4480.

40 *Patriarshee poslanie* [Patriarch's message]. *Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/print/5616517.html.

home, as our grandmothers did during the years of [Soviet] persecutions against the Church. Believe me, just as no one could take away the Easter holiday from our grandmothers, so no one can take away the Resurrection of Christ from us!"[41]

[42] For engaged believers, the most painful experience was apparently the break of sacramental and pastoral communication with the priest. Speaking about the modern Catholic Church, a French sociologist fixed the opposition, exacerbated during the quarantine period, between the "Church of the Shrine" (*Église du sanctuaire*), based on belief in the special "ontological properties" of the priest, to the "Church of the periphery" (*église des périphéries*), that is, the Church of the laity who can go without priests; he linked the promotion of this latter model to the ecclesiastical ideology of Pope Francis and gave examples of a conservative resistance against it in the months of the epidemic (Rauwel 2020). This phenomenon, which we can call charismatic decentralization, is much less developed in Russian Orthodoxy. Compare a typical reminder by one of the priests—a counterweight of sorts to the appeals for internal spiritual work—that "although Christianity is not reduced to a ritual, to 'going to Church', it is not a speculative doctrine either."[42]

[43] Hardly anyone in the Church could dispute such a statement. Some priests turned to the most important canonical metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ. "For many, the Church is, first of all, the walls of temples, external prescriptions, rituals, and hierarchy. But today the Church is revealed to us as the mystical Body of Christ." "To be the Body of Christ" means, of course, to be together, as the texts say; "but there is always a certain gap … between these texts and what penetrates into our heart, into our consciousness;" a general answer is impossible, and the main thing is to find the right answer for yourself (Priests Dimitrii Sikhonenko, Aleksei Vtulov: Sviashchenniki 2020).

[44] This reflection certainly attempts to find an internal, individual solution of 'being mystically the Body' in the situation when the usual requirement of 'being together' becomes problematic. The physical and mystical meanings of corporeality are correlated; however, the forced restrictions of the quarantine highlights their opposition. The mystical, spiritual dimension of conciliarity (togetherness), in which everyone finds his own model 'according to his heart,' creates a community that exists beyond physical sociality and adds an emphasis on the individualization of faith.

[45] To what extent were these emphases a forced response to what one essay called the "charismatic helplessness" faced by the Church?[43] The reduction of the fullness of liturgical and daily practices caused strong embarrassment, and calls for inner individual spiritual concentration might be seen as only a temporary measure. But even in this case we can assume that implicitly, these calls, accentuated during the quarantine, revealed a certain tendency, a movement towards *église des périphéries*, more independent from the *sacra*. This movement also fits into the second late modern episteme mentioned above - the episteme of self-exclusivity, for which social distance - not only physical, and regardless of epidemics - becomes the norm. This norm is projected onto the Christian consciousness and makes it inevitable to modify practices in the direction of greater virtuality. The opposite logic can also be valid: the explosive growth

41 *Metropolit Minskii Pavel sovershil oblet granits Belarusi* [Pavel, Metropolitan of Minsk, made a flight over the borders of Belarus']. *Official Website of Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5616445.html.

42 Andrey Kordochkin: *Mesto tserkvi – v sfere dosuga?* [Does Church belong to leisure sector?]. *Pravmir*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.pravmir.ru/mesto-czerkvi-v-nishe-dosuga/.

43 Alexander Soldatov: *Test dlya patriarha* [A test for the Patriarch]. *Novaya gazeta*. April 4, 2020. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/04/84707-test-dlya-patriarha.

of new digital, virtual practices using the Internet during the quarantine period became the catalyst for this deep tendency towards spiritualized and individualized religiosity.[44]

Babylon, Leviathan, and the Borders of Christian Identity

Summarizing all that has been said, let us try to assess what the systemic crisis associated with the pandemic has revealed in terms of our understanding of the place of religion in today's Russian society. Our starting point would be to look at those rhetorical frames in which religious identity is assessed from within the religious community itself. Obviously, this particular self-identification (or a spectrum thereof), however shaken by the pan-social effect of the epidemic, could not completely disappear and even became, in a way, more apparent. [46]

A skeptical attitude towards the limitations of church life presumed the rejection of what was felt as the exclusion of religion from the cultural and social 'center,' its displacement into the category of phenomena outside the 'primary sphere of life support'; as if 'the production of spiritual goods,' if we speak in terms of the theory of religious economics (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Iannaccone 1997), were excluded from the category of production of 'goods of prime necessity.' Challenging this opinion, a Patriarchy spokesperson believed that the ministry of priests was as important as the work of doctors, law enforcement officers and social workers.[45] Equating temples with beauty salons, theaters, and even schools in the time of quarantine seemed unacceptable; "the Church is not Disneyland," as one of the priests exclaimed, adding that reducing religion to the area of leisure and entertainment was offensive.[46] This rejection was most consistently expressed in the above-mentioned petition "Open churches for Easter!"[47] This rhetoric is comparable to a similar petition by Roman Catholic activists according to which "something terribly wrong was happening to a culture that leaved open abortion clinics and liquor stores, but closed places of worship."[48] The disappointed statement of the limited influence of religion in a deeply secularized society is combined with criticism of consumerism, through which one can hear criticism of dominant late modern epistemes. [47]

The second frame of this kind of 'identitarian resistance', which manifested itself with varying degrees of radicalism, was distancing itself not only from consumer society but also from the state—not so much from (and independently of) the current political and ideological regime, but rather from the state's presumed meta-ideological 'non-religiosity.' The aforementioned *Petition* was addressed to the Russian president, and the authors sharply criticized the "spiritless arbitrariness" and "cynical disrespect for the Orthodox faith" on the part of the local authorities for their decision to close the churches; the *Petition* reminded them that these hostile actions ran the risk of diverting the usually loyal believers to the political op- [48]

44 In this article, I do not consider separately the topic of new practices related to electronic media; this critical topic requires special attention and detailed analysis. For the mediatization of religion in general, see Campbell (2013). For mediatization in Russian Orthodoxy, see Luchenko (2015, 2021); Ostrovskaya (2019).

45 Vladimir Legoida: An Interview from April 5, 2020. *Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchy*. Last accessed April 4, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5617247.html.

46 Alexei Kardochkin: *Mesto tserkvi – v nishe dosuga?* [Does the Church belong to leisure industry?]. *Pravmir*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://www.pravmir.ru/mesto-czerkvi-v-nishe-dosuga/.

47 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramyu na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition "Open churches for Easter"]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

48 Open Letter 2020. *We are Easter People. An open letter to bishops*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://weareaneasterpeople.com.

position.[49] Open rejection of the harshest forms of administrative interference on the part of the secular authorities often occurred in the provinces: The Saratov Bishop was angry at the "attitude of the local authorities to their people"; the reaction of the Krasnodar Metropolitan was just as harsh; in Kirov, social networks sharply rejected the policy of the local governor, and local Orthodox Cossacks refused to participate in the "isolation" of churches; in the Komi Republic, activists were going to sue a state body over the closure of churches; in Volgograd and the Republic of Mari El, local bishops refused to close churches, despite requests from the authorities and the doctors' recommendations. In fact, partly hidden resistance to tough politics could be found, as we saw above, in the compromise decisions of the Moscow Patriarchy itself.[50]

Tactical disagreement with secular authorities was undoubtedly fueled by more fundamental idiosyncrasy about the potentially hostile Leviathan, just as it was about Babylon, the 'culture of consumption.' Actually, the image of the state could be easily associated with both symbols. In a more straightforward form, this rejection was expressed in apocalyptic fears of total control (a common motive among ordinary believers: "the government is preparing an electronic state on earth") (see forum *Batiushka-online*). This deep distrust of the state among many Orthodox Christians is apparently deeper, as I said above, than the national-conservative sympathies for the Putin's political regime, and this fact correlates with the abounding scholarship showing deep ambiguities within an apparent "symphonic" narrative of church-state relations (Papkova 2011; Richters 2013; Stoeckl 2018; Koellner 2021; Agadjanian 2021). [49]

It goes without saying that in these fears we can also still see the echoes of the memory of Soviet anti-religious violence, such as in the above-mentioned comparison with the "openly godless government" in the above-quoted *Petition*[51] and similar references in the comments in the *VKontakte* social media group. The impact of collective memory of forced secularism and not-fully-completed post-Soviet 'revival' can be felt in how religious groups perceive themselves in today's Russian society.[52] [50]

These special attitudes can be included, however, into a broader interpretative frame: In this silent or open opposition to the modern state's claims to what Michel Foucault called *surveiller et punir*, discipline and punish (Foucault 1975), Christian and other believers joined a fairly widespread rejection of the quarantine found in Russia and elsewhere throughout the years of the pandemic. Such an opposition could be caused by economic difficulties, libertarian instincts, or some other reason, and it might be justified either in utilitarian categories or [51]

49 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramyu na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition "Open churches for Easter"]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

50 The quote of Metropolitan of Saratov Longin (Korchagin) in *Achilles*, April 19, 2020. Last accessed February 14, 2022. https://ahilla.ru/saratovskij-mitropolit-vozmutilsya-namereniem-vlastej-ne-puskat-veruyushhih-v-hramy-na-pashu/; statements of Metropolitan of Yekaterinodar Isidor (Kirichenko): https://www.yuga.ru/news/449671/ (Last accessed February 14, 2022).; on Kirov region, the Komi Republic, the Volgograd region and the Mari El Republic see the report "In urgent need". - 7x7. Horizontal Russia, April 16, 2022.

51 Petition 2020. *Otkroite khramyu na Paskhu! Petitsia* [Petition "Open churches for Easter"]. *CitizenGo*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. https://citizengo.org/ru/rf/178484-otkroyte-hramy-na-pashu?utm_source=wa&utm_medium=social&utm_content=typage&utm_campaign.

52 The theme of the legacy of Soviet secularist past and its reversal definitely deserves special elaboration that cannot be fully developed here and goes beyond the frame of this paper. The major contributions to the anthropology of Post-Soviet secular legacy—as well as desecularization—include Rogers (2005); Steinberg & Wanner (2008); Pelkmann (2009, esp. Introduction); Luehrmann (2011); Kormina, Panchenko & Shtyrkov (2015).

with the help of vague or explicit conspiracy theories. At the same time, it is significant that, despite associations with the Soviet past and suspicions of repressive intentions of the secular authorities, anti-quarantine resistance rarely manifested itself in terms of opposing restrictions of 'religious freedoms' ('freedom of conscience'). Apparently, the comparative weakness of these arguments can be explained with the general underdevelopment of the religious freedom discourse in Russian society, as well as by the fact of the privileged public status of the Orthodox Church. (The motive for protecting freedom of conscience sounded much stronger in Western countries.)

[52] Of course, despite the listed examples of distancing oneself from consumer society and secular power control, the majority of Orthodox priests and laity accepted the rules of the game grounded in key late modern epistemes and generally enforced by the authorities. This acceptance was in many cases dictated by pragmatic loyalty, but in other cases by a deeper recognition of the priority of the value of an autonomous individual life.

Conclusion

[53] As we have seen, the pandemic has made certain tendencies in religious life more apparent: a movement towards a greater internalization of practices and faith; greater extra-ritual, extra-sacramental 'spirituality'; wider separation of believing (faith) and belonging. These trends have been intensified by the unprecedented shift of religious practices into the space of virtual media. The development of these tendencies have been confirmed by those examples of principled resistance which outlined, within the society, a relatively narrow space of a deliberately different, 'identitarian' religiosity. The Christian identity thus revealed was, however, all but persistent or solid. On the one hand, the borders of this identity blurred when believers followed mainstream responses to the pandemic—either under institutional pressure or by their own choice. On the other hand, this identity was reassembled, revived, and strongly articulated—either with fundamentalist fervor or with modified new emphases—by those groups and individuals who resisted this erosion of identity.

[54] All these processes, in their deep content, were animated by complex negotiations between the perceived Christian ethos and hegemonic contemporary cultural epistemes, which I have designated above as scientistic bio-determinism and exclusive-expressive subjectivity. As the Russian patriarch proclaimed, the Church needed a specific response that would "significantly differ from the 'new normality' currently promoted by some public and political groups, which includes a radical restructuring of social relations, growing individualization, and the deepening of divisions among people."[53] Here we can feel obvious tensions with late modern epistemes; but what follows is a complex dialogue that does not imply either straightforward acceptance or absolute rejection.

[55] To make the very last statement, it should be remembered that the 'epistemes' themselves, despite their dominance, are by no means monolithic or possess indisputable explanatory means, and the years of the pandemic revealed these uncertainties. However, this is another, different theme that goes beyond my scope here.

53 Patriarch Kirill: *Doklad na eparkhial'nom sobranii Moskvy* [Report at the Moscow diocesan assembly]. December 24, 2020. *The Official Website of the Moscow Patriarchate*. Last accessed April 14, 2022. http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5739902.html.

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‘Popular *Ijtihad*’ and Entangled Islamic Discourse on the Covid-19 Pandemic in Russia

Sofya Ragozina
Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences

ABSTRACT In this article, I examine initial reactions of the Russian Muslim community in social networks to the spread of the Coronavirus. My two main questions are: Who reinterprets the category of Islamic piety in the context of the pandemic and how, and to what extent does the online environment transform the Islamic tradition? To answer them, I focus on the following key narratives of Russian Muslims’ online discourse on the pandemic: Covid-19 as a retaliation against China for the persecutions of Muslim Uygurs in the Xinjiang region, the search for signs of the coming doomsday, as well as various approaches to the reinterpretation of religious piety. Moreover, I consider how the pandemic sped up an entangled glocalised discourse. In the context of the increased role of the transnational online Muslim community, I suggest the term ‘popular *ijtihad*’ to describe individualised forms of religious engagement that the crisis situation stimulated.

KEYWORDS Islam in Russia, coronavirus pandemic, sociology of Islam, religious authority, ijtihad

Introduction

First reactions of Russian Muslims to the news about the Coronavirus reveal several fundamental problems related to various aspects of the Islamic faith. The first of them is the problem of identity. What does it mean to be a devout Muslim in such ambiguous and difficult circumstances? Searching for the answer to this question re-articulated Muslim solidarity and led to the convergence of global and local discourses on Islamic piety within the pandemic. Secondly, the fundamental debate between the proponents of divine predestination and free will has assumed a new dimension. Rooted in the medieval polemics between the *qadarites* (defenders of human free will) and *jabarites* (who advocated predestination), in the pandemic context the question has been formulated as follows: If it is presumed that ‘everything is the will of Allah’, is there a need for additional action to counter the spread of the Coronavirus? Thirdly, there is the question of religious authority. Should an *imam* (a worship leader of a mosque) be obeyed if he fails to cancel collective prayer, thereby endangering the life and [1]

health of the *ummah* (Islamic community)? Fourthly, the bioethical aspect of the pandemic has also become important. What do the sacred texts say about quarantine and the permissible means of medical treatment? Last but not least, during the lockdown, social networks have become almost the only domain where these matters can be discussed, thus vividly demonstrating their performative role in the transformation of the Islamic tradition. Hence, the question arises what the role of the Internet is for Muslims today, particularly in Russia.

In this paper, I will first discuss traditional patterns of knowledge production in Islam and how these are changed in the context of the mediatisation of religion. I will draw on theoretical approaches by Bryan Turner, Gary Bunt, Olivier Roy and Peter Mandaville in order to operationalize key terms that I use in my research, namely religious authority, 'new *ulema*[1]', individualisation of Islam, and digital Islam. Then I will briefly describe first reactions of Russian Muslims to the Coronavirus and identify the main narratives of Islamic discourse on pandemics based on textual analysis of publications on social networks. Examining the relationship between global and Russian Muslim discourses on the pandemic, I will discuss the transformation of the institution of religious authority. I will discuss such tendencies as the erosion of traditional authority represented by Muslim agencies close to state authorities, the increasing number of new online *ulema* aimed at the maximized personalisation of their messages, and the phenomenon of 'popular *ijtihad*'[2] as a manifestation of individualized strategies of religious search. [2]

Cultivation of Knowledge among Islamic Communities

Ulema have gained special legitimacy in Muslim society: They not only produce *fatwas* (legal statements) but also ensure their implementation because of the authority they build within a Muslim community, whether it is a whole country or a small village. Any crisis situation stimulates the search for religious explanation and therefore increases the importance of *ulema*. Today, the main question with which Muslims turn to their *ulema* is how one can remain a devout Muslim during the rapidly changing situation of the pandemic. This is the question that political elites or secular governments imposing lockdowns and other restrictions are unlikely to answer. Following Max Weber's (1946) classical typology of legitimacy—traditional, charismatic, and legal—and his idea that none of these three ideal types of legitimacy is self-sufficient, it can be assumed that rational and legal authority associated with bureaucratic institutions is often insufficient for Muslim communities under the pandemic situation. Consequently, the traditional or charismatic legitimacy of the *ulema* can be called upon to 'translate' the decisions of secular governments into the 'language of Muslims'. The need for 'translation' depends on the level of secularism in a given state. For example, in Iran or Saudi Arabia the bureaucratic apparatus itself 'speaks' the language of Islam. Conversely, in Europe, according to Talal Asad (2018), the Islamic discursive tradition is subject to "secular translation." In Russia, the Spiritual Administrations of Muslims adopt the state-bureaucratic language in their interaction with the community and become main agents for the project of 'traditional Islam,' promoted by the state as a moderate version of Islam that remains loyal to national interests and secular authorities; this system is quite similar to the relation between the Orthodox Church and the Russian state (2020). [3]

Nowadays the problem of legitimacy and the emergence of new *ulema* takes on a new [4]

1 *Ulema* are transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge in Islam.
2 *Ijtihad* means an independent individual statement on Islamic legal questions.

dimension. The appearance of a large number of religious authorities, whose *fatwas* have legitimacy with a fairly large number of Muslims, was a consequence of the 'opening of the gates' of *ijtihad*. In the formative period of Muslim doctrine, "*ijtihad* meant the possibility of choosing the most appropriate decision for a given case from among the contradictory specific injunctions of the Sunna and the individual decisions of the Prophet's companions" (Syukiyaynen 1986)[3]. In the age of social media, traditional forms of authority are being eroded now as the credibility of a theologian is measured by the number of followers and likes rather than by the traditional legitimacy of the institution of *ulema*. Traditional hierarchies are becoming disrupted while new horizontal and de-hierarchised social ties take their place. The polyphony of voices from the global Muslim community has become available to Muslims anywhere in the world, from Morocco to Indonesia. A Muslim from Moscow can now listen to a translated sermon by a Qatari theologian or read an Al-Azhar *fatwa*, watch a video of an Algerian imam in France or view an Instagram profile of a mosque in the city of Khasavyurt in Dagestan. Does this mean then that the Internet, in particular social networks, is playing a decisive role in the modern formation of the Islamic tradition? Scholars have studied a number of causal connections between Islam and digitalisation.

[5] Bryan Turner argues that global information technology has been a decisive factor in transforming the institution of religious authority in Islam. According to Turner, electronic technologies have greatly expanded Islamic discourse since they "gave voice" to previously invisible social groups. Thus, the balance in the distribution of power resources has changed. For example, in these new conditions *Ismailism* (a branch within Shia Islam) can appear to be as mainstream as other movements in Shiism (Turner 2013, 201–5). Furthermore, the Internet has created a competitive environment where everyone can independently check the sources of information. Turner paints an idealistic picture where the development of "new intellectuals" reflects the spread of higher education in the Islamic world (Turner 2013, 206). However, such an idealistic view forms a dichotomy: The bony, formalist conservative traditional of *ulema* versus the independent, mobile and charismatic "new intellectuals".

[6] Gary Bunt (2018) supports the idea of the formatting effect of the online environment on religious authority in Islam. According to him, the Internet reduces the distance between the average Muslim who may be seeking answers to religion-related questions and the scholar who is qualified to make a judgment based on sacred texts. This new situation brings about different effects. On the one hand, it is possible to localise Islamic knowledge and even personalise it. Now the key to the success of an individual *ulema's* YouTube channel is the recognition of the specific identity of its target audience and taking into account not only identification with a particular movement in Islam, but also given political views, age groups, regions, and so on. On the other hand, this massive 'opening of the gates of *ijtihad*' raises the question of the authority of the *ulema*. The anonymity and accessibility of the Internet has provided everyone with the opportunity to act as a religious authority, based more on their own convictions than on years of theological training (Bunt 2018, 83).

[7] However, not all researchers share this hyper-attention to information technology. They rather prefer to view these trends in a broader social context. For example, Olivier Roy (2004) wrote at length about the individualisation of Islam. Democratisation, manifested in the increasing use of informational technologies, plays a significant role but does not change the religious message. More precisely, it affects the form, not the dogma. The diversity observed

3 The online version of the book was consulted under the following link: https://www.gumer.info/bogoslov_Buks/Islam/Syk_Pravo/ (last accessed May 17, 2022).

today is not based on any new religious concepts, but on the specific choice of each individual Muslim who has the need to reflect on his or her own religious experience.

[8] Peter Mandaville is critical of the idea of the "progressive democratisation" of knowledge production: "[…] a widening of the public sphere—does not in itself produce more pluralistic (in the sense of being more tolerant or open-ended) knowledge" (Mandaville 2007, 102). Democratisation takes place, but it does not change Islamic discourse. It merely "*reinforces the tendency to decentralise power that has always been present in Islam*" (Mandaville 2007, 102, italics original). Pluralism is an intrinsic feature of the Islamic tradition, so globalisation must be seen in light of the changing scope and intensity of the debates surrounding the meaning and nature of authority in Islam.

[9] These different and seemingly contradictory views actually complement each other as they shed a different light on the question about the extent to which information technology affects Islamic religiosity. When one looks at specific empirical material, such as Russian Muslims' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of "new intellectuals" proposed by Turner dovetails with Mandaville's thesis on pluralised authority, as well as Roy's analysis of the individualisation of Islam. The individualisation of Islam, as analysed by Roy, is perfectly traceable in the "digital Islam" of Bunt (2018). Based on this conceptual framework, in the next part of this article, I will discuss the first reactions of Russian Muslim social networks to the spread of the coronavirus in China, Russia, and the rest of the world from February to May 2020. Already during this period, the main lines of discussion among Muslims about the pandemic were defined and remained mostly unchanged until the beginning of 2021.

[10] The data for this research were collected in snowball fashion. In April/May 2020, I monitored social media daily for posts related to the Coronavirus. The examples below do not always represent the most popular or 'viral' stories. Rather, I applied a bottom-up approach, as it were: I paid special attention to the posts from average accounts with few followers. Taking into account the news agenda, I monitored themes that average users react to and then identified how these elements became part of a broader discourse of 'new *ulema*' and official Muslim representatives. Analysing the various manifestations of Islam in the online environment in this way makes it possible to move towards 'lived religion' and see the real dynamics of religiosity.

[11] As for the specific social networks that are the subject of our analysis, I am primarily talking about Vkontakte (InContact) and Instagram and, to a lesser extent, YouTube, Facebook and Telegram. It is difficult to judge the greatest popularity of certain social networks among Russian Muslims, as there are no studies on this topic or any statistics. Based on our observation experience, we can say with a degree of certainty that the top three are Vkontakte, Instagram and Telegram. The first social network is the most popular among the Russian-speaking audience, where you can often find all sorts of commercial projects connected with Islam (online schools, Islamic cosmetics, etc.). Whereas Instagram and Telegram are least controlled by the authorities for the potential distribution of extremist materials, they offer a greater variety of religious and theological materials. On YouTube, lectures and sermons by foreign *ulema* are hugely popular and are translated by numerous Muslim activists.

Reinforcing Muslim Identity and Following 'Active Piety' through 'Popular *Ijtihad*': The First Reactions of Muslims to the Coronavirus on Russian Social Media

[12] At the time when the first cases of the Coronavirus were discovered in China, there was a surge of xenophobia against the Chinese in Russia, not only among Muslims. However, the negative feelings of Muslims were particularly strong. They were fuelled by the rhetoric of retaliation against China for its oppressive policies toward Uygur Muslims living in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region[4]. The 'Islamic sinophobia' became the first manifestation of a blended glocal discourse. As one user of the Russian social networking service VKontakte put it:

> [13] It is possible that this new virus emerged in China due to their policy of oppressing Uygur Muslims who are being forcefully de-Islamised and made to abandon the Religion of Islam and embrace the Communist heresy (Ideology of Atheism).[5]

[14] In the early stages of the spread of the Coronavirus, this idea was common to many publications not only by ordinary Muslims, but also by certain leaders of the Russian Muslim community. From 2018 onwards, many Russian Muslims protested against the policies of the Chinese authorities in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. In early 2020, the new type of Coronavirus seemed to be an 'ordinary' phenomenon, along with SARS and swine flu, and was perceived exclusively as a Chinese problem. On February 3, the Moscow Spiritual Department of Muslims posted an appeal by Mufti Ildar Alyautdinov in which he wrote about the virus in terms of divine justice and the protective power of God:

> [15] For example, the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah mention the Dabbatul-ard, a creature commonly regarded as one of the harbingers of the Day of Judgment. The Arabic word "dabba" describes this animal as "creeping, silent," which can be compared to a snake.
>
> [16] The rapidly spreading coronavirus (scientists believe its probable source to be snakes or bats) raises the question of the approach of this Day.
>
> [17] We should consider whether these circumstances are not a manifestation of Divine Will, when Allah, through the actions of tyrants, restrains us from sinful, forbidden things, gives us the opportunity to change ourselves, to adjust our beliefs and attitudes.

4 The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China, where approximately 60% of the population are Muslims. The East Turkestan independence movement was active at the beginning of the twentieth century in this region. Mass state-orchestrated migration of Han Chinese from the 1950s to the 1970s, Chinese cultural politics, and severe suppression of separatist movements have contributed to tensions between the Uyghurs and the Chinese government. Nowadays Uyghur extremists are framed by the Chinese government as one of the main threats to national security. At the end of 2015, China's first anti-terrorism bill was passed. In 2017, several 're-education camps' (according to state terminology) were founded in Xinjiang to promote social integration and to counter extremism. Many countries and international human rights organisations criticise the Chinese government for human rights abuses. According to different expert evaluations, in 2019 an estimated 1.5 million Uygurs were held in these internment concentration camps (Nebehay 2019).

5 Mirzoeva, M. "Na foto letuchaia mysh' v supe ili sup iz myshi, kak vam udobno.. [In the photo a bat in soup or soup from a mouse, as you like]." VK.com, January 25, 2020. https://vk.com/km1234321?w=wall136290690_2765 (in Russian). All translations by the author unless indicated otherwise.

> Certainly, we as Muslims should not gloat when any nation suffers misfortune, upheaval or distress, but we must be able to reap the benefit and wisdom from all that is happening (*Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Moskvy'*, February 3, 2020).[6] [18]

In early March, when there were already more than a hundred thousand infected people worldwide,[7] Chechen Mufti Salah Mezhiyev also turned to the rhetoric of retribution and oppression: [19]

> It is God's wrath that this disease arose in China. Whether it is because of oppressed Muslims or for some other reason. If God was angry at Muslims, the disease would have started in a Muslim country. However, that does not mean it will not reach Muslim countries.[8] [20]

Another Russian Muslim expressed this logic of punishment in more emphatic terms, listing all the 'sins' China committed against its Muslim citizens: [21]

> They called Islam a disease and they got the disease. [22]
>
> They called Qur'an a virus and got a coronavirus. [23]
>
> They imprisoned Uygurs for their religion and their cities became prisons. [24]
>
> They banned the hijab—as a result the whole city is walking around in masks. [25]
>
> They banned Islam—as a result many countries have banned entry from their country. [26]
>
> They said—where is your punishment? No one will stop us, but now they realise they can be stopped by the smallest thing on earth (the virus). [27]
>
> China is a warning to us, just a little warning. Come to your senses![9] [28]

Despite the occasional appeals in the comments sections below these and other publications not to gloat and not to tar all the Chinese with one brush,[10] politically and religiously motivated xenophobia prevailed in the Russian Islamic discourse at the initial stage of the pandemic. Why did it became so popular? Apparently, creating an opposition between 'good' Muslims and 'bad' Chinese was an effective strategy in reinforcing religious identity. It also [29]

6 *Dukhovnoe upravlenie musul'man Moskvy'*. "Za poslednii god pritesneniia musul'man v zapadnom Kitae stali odnoi iz samykh obsuzhdaemykh tem' [Over the past year, harassment of Muslims in western China has become one of the most discussed topics]." Facebook, February 3, 2020. https://tinyurl.com/3oo22mnq. (in Russian)

7 "Coronavirus Cases", *Worldometer*. https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-cases/. (last accessed April 12, 2022)

8 "Muftii Chechni: koronavirus—bozh'ia kara za ugnetennykh musul'man [Mufti of Chechnya: coronavirus—God's punishment for oppressed Muslims].", *Kavkaz. Realii*, March 6, 2020. https://www.kavkazr.com/a/30472043.html. (in Russian)

9 "2019: Kitai priznal religiiu Islam bolezn'iu… [2019: China recognized the religion of Islam as a disease]." Facebook, February 10, 2020. https://web.facebook.com/koran.sunna.media/photos/a.131846236158524 6/2593147817450021/?type=3&theater. (in Russian)

10 Nurkai, Azamat. Interview with admin of VK-community "Islam bot," March 19, 2020.

allowed coping with anxiety and growing uncertainty in a crisis period. For example, in February 2020 there was a fairly widespread thesis that eating animals such as snakes and bats (considered the causative agents of the new virus) was unacceptable in Islam, while the Chinese "eat everything that lives and crawls even those creatures that are revolting and dangerous for human health; still they eat them and do not observe any hygiene when cooking food or in their mouths."[11]

Beyond the 'sinophobia', Islamic piety became the second important element of the discourse. How does one deal with the spread of the disease? How to be a good Muslim in times of pandemic? While in mid-March the recommendations and explanations provided by *ulema* on the internet became more specific (how to behave in quarantine, how to pray when access to mosques is restricted, etc.), the first few publications about the spread of the epidemic were not very detailed. Materials circulating on social networks in late February and early March focused primarily on the fundamental principles of Islamic doctrine: submission to Allah since "all things are in Allah's hands", meeting all adversity "with patience and hope for reward", and remembering that "the biggest trouble is a trouble in religion."[12] The discussion about these initial publications that offered no precise guidance on how to act in rapidly changing circumstances has given rise to a wave of spontaneous 'popular *ijtihad*' among users of social networks. Radical fragmentation of the transmission of Islamic knowledge has shifted the emphasis to individual everyday religious experience and 'active piety', as it were, meaning everyday manifestations of belonging to the Islamic tradition. Hence, the idea of obedience to Allah quickly became transformed into the "fear Allah, not the virus." [30]

> Maybe I'm wrong, but how can one not go to Mecca for namaz?! After all, everything is from Allah, why fear an incomprehensible virus that does not exist for me.[13] [31]

The rhetoric of 'enhancing' religious worship satisfies the demand of Muslims for reinforcing their identity. Discussing ways of belonging to *ummah* gives a feeling of stability during the crisis, and the individual contribution to the transmission of knowledge to the *ummah* that we are calling 'popular *ijtihad*' turns out to be an effective strategy of articulation of Islamic piety. [32]

Moreover, the 'popular *ijtihad*' discussion on religious authority during the pandemic has touched upon the question whether religious methods are enough to protect believers from COVID-19 or not. Some social media users have interpreted the 51st *ayah* of Surah 9 of the Qur'an—"Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us; He is our protector." And upon Allah let the believers rely. (Quran 9:51)[14]—as saying that no other special action against COVID-19 needs to be taken except for prayer, reading the Qur'an, and ablution five [33]

11 Mirzoeva, M. "Na foto letuchaia mysh' v supe ili sup iz myshi, kak vam udobno.. [In the photo a bat in soup or soup from a mouse, as you like]." VK.com, January 25, 2020. https://vk.com/km1234321?w=wall136290690_2765. (in Russian)

12 Biblioteka islama ot A do Ia. 2020. "Koronavirus [Coronavirus]." Vk.com, March 4, 2020. https://vk.com/biblioteka.islama?w=wall-42391762_30142. (in Russian)

13 Ram_Zan (@_ram_). "Mozhet ia oshibaius' no kak mozhno ne khodit' na namaz v Mekku?! [Maybe I'm wrong, but how can you not go to Mecca for namaz!]." Instagram commentary, March 17, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B9163aulXFj/. (in Russian)

14 References to this ayat can be found, for example, here: Religiia Islam'دين الإسلام. "Luchshii sovet protiv koronavirusa' v soobshchestve"Religiia Islam 'دين الإسلام [The best advice against coronavirus]." Vk.com, March 18, 2020. https://vk.com/islamnapominanie?w=wall-83046556_1084846. (in Russian)

times a day. According to such interpretations, the strength of faith is a sufficient protection against the disease, the threat of which had deliberately been exaggerated.[15]

[34] Thus far, I have predominantly been talking about the early reactions of Muslims to developments in the Coronavirus situation. Although initially xenophobia against the Chinese formed a large part of their discourse, a little later the main demand for a re-articulation of the category of Islamic piety and normativity was formed. As a result of the need many Muslims felt to find answers to their concerns, Islamic theologians became actively involved in the Coronavirus debate with the aim to provide more exact explanations of how to remain a devout Muslim during the pandemic. In the next section, I will consider how, from the middle of March 2020, the Russian Muslim discourse on the pandemic was converging with the global discourse and what issues became the main crosspoints in this period.

How the Global *Ummah* was Deconstructed in Muslim Everyday Communication: Building an Entangled Islamic Discourse During the Pandemic

[35] The numerous translations of video addresses by foreign *ulema* dominate the content of the Russian-speaking Muslim segment of YouTube. Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the search for theological answers to questions of everyday life was fuelling the demand among the Muslim community for such materials. The radical personalisation of strategies for transmitting and receiving knowledge, in terms set forth by Bunt (2018), has led to a permanent shortage of information and opinions that would satisfy the entire spectrum of individual needs. This lacuna has been filled, at least partially, by translations of foreign 'new *ulema*'. This way, the Russian Muslim community has become part of a global online Muslim society with its transnational market of Islamic knowledge. During the pandemic, different techniques of piety and devotion have become particularly sought after on this market. Editors and content creators of Muslim websites and forums have immediately responded to this demand. This has become most evident in the numerous materials offering *dua* (prayers) against the Coronavirus.[16] Such a commodification of religious piety in no way diminishes the importance of Islamic values. On the contrary, it promotes their importance in the individual strategy of religious commitment.

[36] The other reason for the popularity of such translations is the underrepresentation of official local *ulema* in the online space. Turner draws a distinction between the not so mobile "official" *ulema* and the "advanced" Internet *ulema* focused on ordinary Muslims (Turner 2013, 206) that is relevant to the Russian case. Actually, official *ulema* put the Coronavirus in the framework of searching for religious piety as well, as we have already seen in the first reactions among ordinary Muslims. For example, the official appeal by the Ulema Council in connection with the spread of the Coronavirus localised the official requirements (to wash hands more often, to try not to touch one's face, and so on) in the Islamic context. Citations from *hadiths* (stories about Muhammed's life) became the main instrument for Islamizing technical

15 Svet Imana (@svet.imana) "Strakh i panika opasnee koronavirusa' na stranitse [Fear and panic are more dangerous than the coronavirus]." Instagram video, March 16, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B9zabKLhMcG/. (in Russian)

16 Islam today (@islam_today_tv). "O Allakh, Eta bolezn vsego lish odin iz tvoikh voinov [O Allah, this is only one of your fighters]." Instagram video, March 18, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/B94GVSEFWLg/. (in Russian)

recommendations on behaviour in the time of pandemic. For example, the need to cover nose and mouth with tissues when coughing or sneezing was explained by the following *hadith*: "The Prophet said: 'If one of you sneezes, let him cover his face with both hands'."[17] Another document explained the permissibility of quarantine as an "invention of Islamic civilisation" and emphasized the unity of the Islamic world in fighting against epidemics. It describes Ibn Sina (Avicenna) as a person who, at the turn of the second millennium, introduced quarantine as an efficient method to stop the spread of diseases.[18] After this historical overview, the document discusses the measures against the pandemic taken nowadays in different Muslim countries. Making the Saudi, Turkish, Egyptian, and Iranian affairs part of the Russian agenda stimulates representing Russia as an organic part of global *ummah* discourse.[19] Despite attempts to engage in the global discourse, as in online discussions, the foreign *ulema* nevertheless dominate in the Russian Muslim online space. The traditional institution of religious authority is eroding and ordinary Muslims using 'popular *ijtihad*' and videos of online ulema are appropriating the global Muslim agenda into their thematic repertoire at the level of everyday communication.

By the middle of March 2020, social networks of Russian-speaking Muslim communities were filled with translations of appeals by foreign Muslim theologians describing proper Muslim behaviour during the epidemic. In their speeches and texts, they addressed many themes that were already mentioned in earlier 'grassroots' discussions among Muslims: justification of quarantine with a reference to the *hadith*, searching for signs of the coming doomsday (*qiyamat*), as well as accusations against the Chinese in the situation. However, as soon as the pandemic covered more Muslims countries, the religious agenda changed and some new narratives appeared. Egalitarianism and an awareness of the illusory stability of the material world have come to the fore. The material entitled "Coronavirus from the Islamic Perspective" is very revealing from this point of view.[20] It was published on a popular Russian Shiite channel and also resonated with Sunni Muslims, showing the possibility of smoothing the contradictions between Sunnis and Shiites: [37]

> What exactly is the specificity of the current situation with the coronavirus? This disease has shown the absurdity and unnaturalness of the artificial world system in which we live. Within this system huge funds are spent on completely unnecessary goals and projects, such as flights to Mars, space exploration, the creation of the latest weapons and murder weapons, support for sexual perverts, but when real trouble came, it turned out that people all over the planet simply lacked masks.[21] [38]

This anti-globalisation message is coupled with the discourse of shared Muslim solidarity. One of the most poignant moments has been the panic over the empty Kaaba that engulfed [39]

17 "The Appeal of the Ulema Council in connection with the spread of the coronavirus COVID-2019." *Muslim of Russia*, March 10, 2020. http://dumrf.ru/islam/sermon/16801. (in Russian)

18 His figure is widely recognised, not only in the Muslim world, as an outstanding physician and thinker and one of the symbols of the Islamic Golden Age. "Koronavirus shestvuet po planete: reaktsiia islamskogo mira [Coronavirus is marching over the planet: the reaction of the Islamic world]." *Muslim of Russia*, March 20, 2020. http://dumrf.ru/common/event/16860. (in Russian)

19 "Koronavirus shestvuet po planete: reaktsiia islamskogo mira [Coronavirus is marching over the planet: the reaction of the Islamic world]." *Muslim of Russia*, March 20, 2020. http://dumrf.ru/common/event/16860. (in Russian)

20 "Koronavirus s tochki zreniia Islama [Coronavirus from the Islamic Perspective]." Youtube, April 22, 2020. https://tinyurl.com/3h778rtc. (in Russian)

21 Ibid.

the Muslim world. On February 27, 2020, the Saudi authorities temporarily closed entry to Mecca and Medina to pilgrims. On March 4, the *umrah* (minor pilgrimage) was restricted, and on March 5 the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina were closed for the first time in forty years. This was interpreted by many believers both as a sign of the imminent coming of the Day of Judgment and as interference in divine predestination, and hence an action violating the fundamentals of Islamic doctrine.

Underestimating the significance of the virus was the other manifestation of an entangled discourse on pandemics. The 'corona dissidence' movement emerged in some Islamic circles right from the start of the pandemic. For example, religious authorities in Iran downplayed the threat of the virus in order to oppose access restrictions to Shiite shrines in Qom. In their opinion, the recommendation of the health authorities to limit pilgrimages was evidence of the "hidden hands of the enemy: …defeating Qom is the dream of treacherous Trump and his pet mercenaries, but that dream will not be realised even in their grave… he wants to make the coronavirus an occasion for a cultural blow to Qom's prestige" (Khalaji 2020). The Internet Russian Muslim community turned to conspiracy narratives in a similar vein: [40]

> The number 19 in this name [COVID-19] is for a reason: it is the original number of the God. God who sent down the Qur'an and promised to guard it until the day of judgment. The next three years will be even more intense… as I wrote earlier, soon we won't recognise some states …. 1444 the year on hijra will be a multiple of 19…. and simultaneously the number of sura 76 "People" ….and it is not an accident that the virus appeared at the time when China has ventured to change the Qur'an ….[22] [41]

At the end of March, the DUM[23] of the Russian Federation seemed to enter into a polemic with those who underestimate the significance of the virus by appealing to the principle of predestination. [42]

> The considerations of our co-religionists regarding the ethical inadmissibility of closing mosques and their appeal to one of the basic pillars of Iman—predestination—are understandable. However, the suspension of prayer grounds and spiritual offices in Moscow and other Russian regions should not be perceived as contradicting the principles of Islam.[24] [43]

COVID-19 has made the question of corporality an essential part of Muslim discourse around the world. According to the Islamic tradition, the body belongs to Allah, and physical health is a gift from Him which the faithful should take care of and protect from contamination. The concept of *taharah* (ritual purity) obliges every Muslim to maintain purity of body and soul. The extraordinary situation of the pandemic has made these religious requirements entangled with political and medical responses to the Coronavirus (Ragozina 2020). For example, political-medical-religious entanglement was manifested in building a positive image of [44]

22 Mullagalin, S. "COVID-19. eta tema nyne vezde… [COVID-19. this topic is everywhere nowadays…]." Vk.com, March 10, 2020. https://vk.com/is.yabalak?w=wall376700610_511. (in Russian)

23 Russian acronym of Spiritual Administration of Muslims, the main unit of the institutional structure of the Muslim community in Russia. DUM of the Russian Federation claims to be the central organization of Russian Muslims. It is headed by Ravil Gainutdin and Damir Mukhetdinov is his first deputy.

24 "Koronavirus shestvuet po planete: reaktsiia islamskogo mira [Coronavirus is marching over the planet: the reaction of the Islamic world]." *Muslim of Russia*, March 20, 2020. http://dumrf.ru/common/event/16860. (in Russian)

Islam. Many Western journalists have remarked upon the 'advantage' of Muslim countries in counteracting the pandemic due to the high level of hygiene thanks to the religious tradition of fivefold ablutions and importance of ritual purity.[25]

[45] The normative functioning of the body no longer remained a part of individual religious experience, but became an obligation for the whole political (not just religious) community. The Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance launched a wide program of *sharia* investigation on COVID-19 where *taharah* is studied as a subject of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) documents (Taqdīmu albuḥūṯi 2020). Popular Egyptian *ulema* Ahmed Al-Muhammadi Al-Maghawri connects ritual purity with strengthening immunity:

> [46] Just as we take care of our bodies, we must also take care of our hearts. The heart and the body are inseparable; purity of soul leads to strong immunity. Therefore, we must cultivate a high soul and disseminate peace of mind among people.[26]

[47] The same ideas can be found in the rhetoric of the Russian official *ulema*. They have to 'translate' not only medical terminology into Islamic discourse, but also the rhetoric of the state authorities, legitimising their actions in religious ways. Damir Mukhetdinov claimed that to "care for the body is a fundamental vocation of Islam, the body is a spiritual issue" and that "the body is not something bad in the essence—it can become ill because of its unworthy treatment."[27] Moreover, he puts body in the discourse of disciplinary power:

> [48] […]Effective measures are needed that take into account the requirements of the present moment. In this dark and disturbing period, bodies at all levels (individuals, social groups, state, society as a whole) must be subjected to discipline. To a discipline that will protect our lives and our freedom.[28]

[49] Thus, bodily practices turn out to be not only part of individual religiosity but an important marker for belonging/not-belonging to the Russian political community. Corporality became an organic part of discussions on identity, especially in societies with Muslim minorities, such as Russia. During the pandemic, the issue of wearing hijab gained a new, medical, dimension. Social networks have been full of posts similar to this one: "They banned the hijab—now the whole town is wearing masks."[29] In public debates in many countries, including Russia, the hijab used to be the red line for distinguishing between secular and religious identities. The Coronavirus pandemic offered an unexpected opportunity to challenge this division: equating masks and hijabs underlines the artificiality of religious-versus-secular dichotomy while allowing for a significant expansion of the religious sphere at the expense of the secular.

[50] Finally, the pandemic not only provided a common agenda for Russian Muslim communities and the global *ummah* but also leveled out geographical distances in Muslim world. The epidemic changed many modes of temporality and gave maximum acceleration to the trends

25 Aslan, Rose. 2020. "What Islamic hygienic practices can teach when coronavirus is spreading." *The Conversation*, March 16, 2020. https://tinyurl.com/y6nk3smu.

26 Al-Maghawri, Ahmed Al-Muhammadi. "Risālihi kūrūnā linā wa lil'ālimi (in alllahu yuḥibbu alttawābayna) [Corona's message to us and to the world (God loves those who repent and loves those who are purified)]", *Al-Mesryoon*, March 30, 2020. https://tinyurl.com/yfpqz3c2. (in Arabic)

27 Mukhetdinov, Damir. Facebook, March 16, 2020. https://tinyurl.com/qwc32nn6. (in Russian)

28 Ibid.

29 Koran.Sunna. "2019: Kitai priznal religiiu Islam bolezn'iu… [2019: China recognized the religion of Islam as a disease]." Facebook, February 10, 2020. https://web.facebook.com/koran.sunna.media/photos/a.118462361585246/2593147817450021/?type=3&theater. (in Russian)

of digitalisation, forcing the rapid development of online religion. A local community, which previously seemed central for a multitude of religious practices, was suddenly weakened under the condition of lockdowns and bans on gathering. Restrictions on travelling and closure of religious sites caused great anxiety, as exemplified by reactions throughout the Islamic world to the sight of the empty Kaaba. The crucial question emerged: How does one maintain a sense of *ummah* in the virtual domain?

[51] The most common response was to move religious practices online while keeping them as 'real' as possible. However, what does it take to digitalise ritual in an effective manner? Carmen Becker, studying Salafist online communities in the Netherlands and Germany, has identified three criteria for successful virtual religious rituals. They must: 1) protect the sacred from the profane; 2) be the result of community efforts in which a large part of the community participates and/or recognises them as legitimate; 3) support and reproduce the core values of religion. The success of transferring ritual to a new environment depends on the availability of appropriate technology that meets the requirements of this ritual (Becker 2011, 1186).

[52] Digitising Islamic practice started with collective Friday prayers. As the Russian DUM announced: "March 20, 2020. — 25 Rajab 1441 Hijra will go down in Russian Muslim history as the day when Russian Muslims performed Friday prayers online from the Moscow Cathedral Mosque for the first time."[30] Almost immediately after, the organisation declared this event a success based precisely on the criteria proposed above. The legitimacy of the decision to switch to online prayer was explained by the high number of people who watched the broadcast: "compared to the total capacity of our three mosques not exceeding 25 thousand people, today's broadcast was watched by more than 94 thousand."[31] Moreover, it was legitimated by the interests of the *ummah*, to which all actions are aimed, and the general humanistic message of Islam: "Therefore there is good and edification in the situation of the coronavirus for the sincere believer as well". Finally, the greatest emphasis, in my view, was precisely on rearticulating the realm of the sacred, not only in the face of the new threat of the spread of the virus, but also in the context of the "old" warnings about the Muslim community as a whole:

> [53] We have heard many times that the huge crowds of Muslims outside the mosque are caused not by religious necessity, but by a desire to demonstrate strength and show off muscles. Today's event proved the complete invalidity of those hypotheses. On the contrary, we have taken the decision to rule out prayer gatherings on principle for the duration of the pandemic, without any guidance from outside, guided exclusively by Islamic moral principles and the desire to protect society from danger.[32]

Conclusions

[54] Are social media changing the character of Islamic piety during the pandemic crisis? Before the pandemic started, participation in collective prayer was deemed extremely important, but today "the Ulema Council has confirmed not only the permissibility, but also the desirability

30 Mukhetdinov, Damir. "Razmyshleniia Damira Mukhetdinova ob itogakh pervogo v istorii Moskvy dzhuma-onlain [Reflections of Damir Mukhetdinov on results of the first-ever Moscow Juma-online]." *Council of Muftis of Russia*, March 21, 2020. https://muslim.ru/articles/277/26753/. (in Russian)

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

of not allowing believers into mosques."[33] As a consequence of the pandemic, several fundamental issues of the Islamic tradition have come to the fore: the legitimisation of religious authority; the problem of the transmission of Islamic knowledge; and the interpretation of piety. As the example of Russian Muslims shows, the rapid spread of the Coronavirus made many adherents of Islam rethink and articulate anew their identity. The repertoire of their discursive strategies proved to be quite broad. The first of them was the dichotomy between good and evil, the latter of which was China, responsible for the oppression of Muslims, and the former a righteous Muslim (the main remedy for the Coronavirus being personal faith in Allah). Secondly, the crisis situation, interpreted by some Muslims as a presage of the Day of Judgement, has led to increased manifestations of piety and stimulated the demand for information and instruction about Islamic normativity. At the same time, the commodification of religious piety ultimately led to the individualisation of religious experience. Finally, the pandemic led to religious and medical discourses becoming closely interrelated.

[55] The pandemic has also stimulated changes in the system of knowledge production among Muslims in Russia. The traditional institution of religious authority—represented by official Muslim agencies—is eroding because of underestimations regarding using online space. At the same time, 'new *ulema*' and 'popular *ijtihad*' are coming to the fore. Within the scarcity of religious information, each Muslim (actively engaged in the search for piety) turns into an interpreter and social media becomes a space of theological discussion and individual interpretations that I called 'popular *ijtihad*'. It may seem that it is a kind of break from the rich Islamic hermeneutical tradition now reduced to a relatively insignificant discussion of narrow questions by non-specialists in Islamic theology. However, from my point of view it is much more productive to consider this phenomenon as an organic part of the discursive Islamic tradition which is rapidly transforming nowadays. 'Popular *ijtihad*' is nothing else than searching for the original interpretation of the topical religious problems accommodated within new media and the new social reality. The pandemic has intensified the production of a new sets of religious meanings, dramatically making 'popular *ijtihad*' one of the crucial methods of this production.

[56] Entangled glocalised discourse is one of such newly articulated sets of meanings: Translated foreign *ulema* became an authoritative and mobile source of information on the virus and religion and, therefore, of various individual interpretations that I called 'popular *ijtihad*'. Ordinary Russian Muslims are incorporating elements of the global Muslim agenda into their thematic repertoire at the level of everyday communication, so online religion turns out to be lived religion (Helland 2005). Throughout this article, I identified several elements of this entangled discourse, namely egalitarianism, anti-global statements, Muslim solidarity, the underestimation of the significance of the virus, corporality, and biopolitics. Actually, there is nothing new in such a list—each of these narratives was in high demand in Muslim public space for a long time. However, the pandemic reconfigured this space, shifting the focus from the socio-political issues of Muslim representations to religious ones.

[57] As with the example of hijabs and face masks, the 'political' agenda against Muslims has been refuted by strengthening religious rhetoric. The narrative of opposing Islamophobia present at almost all levels of Islamic discourse—from the official statements by DUM of the Russian Federation to individual posts in VKontakte and other social media—has resulted in a

33 "Musul'mane Rossii s ponimaniem otnosiatsia k meram po predotvrashcheniiu rasprostraneniia koronavirusa [Muslims of Russia are sympathetic to measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus]." *Council of Muftis of Russia*, March 24, 2020. https://muslim.ru/articles/759/26761/. (in Russian)

completely different resonance. Within the pandemic, the socio-political component has been sidelined as issues of discrimination and the unfair distribution of symbolic resources have been overshadowed by existential questions of life and death.

The construction of these discursive strategies would be impossible without a virtual environment characterised by a polyarchic community of online *ulema* and the digitalisation of religious practices. The online environment became an organic part of the transforming Islamic tradition. We have listed three criteria for the success of moving rituals online—but the real effect will probably be seen much later, after the pandemic is over. Will believers want to go back offline then? Will ritual practice remain unchanged after the experience gained under such extreme conditions? If the answer to these questions is negative, then perhaps 'cyber-religion' will become much closer to the now so popular concept of "lived religion." [58]

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Hijab and *Niqab*: A Cross-Religious COVID-19 Safety Measure in Madina *Zongo*

KAUTHAR KHAMIS
Leiden University, Netherlands; Utrecht University, Netherlands; University of Ghana; Islamic University College, Ghana

ABSTRACT Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of *hijab* and *niqab* (face veil), typically associated with Islamic fundamentalism and banned in some parts of Europe and Africa, have gained currency in multi-religious communities such as Madina *Zongo* (strangers' quarters in Hausa) in Accra, Ghana. For some Muslim women in Madina, *hijab* and *niqab* appeared to be a perfect replacement for the face mask even without an official statement from medical authorities or state officials on its protective capacity. Wearing these veils allowed them to simultaneously follow their religious tradition and attempt to protect themselves from the disease. Interestingly, some Christian women in the community have also been donning these Muslim veils. Employing Laura Fair's (2013) proposition that *veiling* contains a wide range of possible material uses, in this article, I show why and how *hijab* and *niqab* are adapted to suit COVID-19 safety measures and appropriated as a face mask by some women in Madina. The article also discusses the implications of these innovations in the religiously pluralistic setting of Madina *Zongo*.

KEYWORDS hijab, niqab, COVID-19, cross-religious appropriation, face mask, Madina Zongo

Introduction

Vignette

> For the first time, it feels good to be a niqab wearer in Madina Zongo. Some of our Muslim sisters are beginning to use it due to the outbreak of the corona virus. I have started making niqabs for sale and some Christian women have expressed interest in using it. I think the outbreak of the corona virus is a blessing in disguise. [1]

These are the words of 30-year-old Shareefa, one of the interlocutors for my research on [2]

women's beauty practices in Madina *Zongo*[1], in Ghana's capital city of Accra. She narrated how, prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, some Muslims and non-Muslims in the *Zongo* passed derogatory comments on her *niqab* (face veil) anytime she was in the public domain. She was nicknamed *Boko Haram*, *Al-Shabab*, or *Al-Qaeeda*, which linked her *niqab* to the activities of Islamic militant groups in different parts of the world. However, COVID-19 changed the attitude of many *Zongo* residents to the *niqab*; they began to consider it as one of the protective materials likely to prevent the spread of the disease.

Research Focus

Examining the appropriation of the *hijab* and *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask, this article asks how the new, more positive evaluation of Muslim veiling practices have affected the relationship among Muslims and between Christians and Muslims in the Madina *Zongo* community. In so doing, it explores how *hijab* and *niqab* are entangled with the sartorial practices of *Zongo* women and highlights the religious, cultural, security, and health implications of its use as Ghana is fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. [3]

The research presented here is based on my on-going ethnographic fieldwork conducted since 2018. Data included in this paper comes from my 2020 to 2021 interviews with Muslim and Christian women in Madina, including health personnel, and *Malama* (female Muslim teachers)[2] as well as *Imams*. I categorised women in *niqab*, who constitute a minority among female Muslims in the *Zongo*, as a hard-to-access group; therefore, I used purposive sampling[3] as a research method. Since the *hijab* is part of the everyday sartorial practices of Muslim women in Madina, the same research method was employed to interview women who adopted the corona *hijab* because of outbreak of COVID-19. [4]

As a native of the community and a Muslim, on some occasions, I put on a *niqab* or the corona *hijab*[4] during focus group discussions with Muslim women in Qur'anic schools as well as at Friday congregational prayers. To reduce the frequency of face-to-face interactions, I also conducted one-to-one interviews over the phone. Finally, I used the Internet to access materials and information about issues related to the COVID-19 situation in Ghana and beyond. [5]

Established in the late 1950s, Madina *Zongo* is a cosmopolitan community within the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipality in southeastern Accra. In the Hausa language,[5] *Zongo* means 'camping place of a carrier,' 'lodging place of travelers,' or 'strangers' quarters' (Schildkrout 1978; Pellow 1988). In West Africa, the term is often used to name a part of a settlement [6]

1 *Zongo* in Hausa means a stranger or settler community. In Ghana, they were originally founded by Muslim traders from different parts of West Africa. Even though *Zongos* are dominated by Muslims, within the larger Ghanaian community Muslims are considered a religious minority (they count for less than 20 percent of the society), with Christians as the dominant religious group (over 70 percent of Ghana's population, out of whom members of Protestant and Pentecostal churches form the majority).

2 The highest religious office a Muslim woman qualifies for in the *Zongo* community is a teacher, also called *Malama*. In this position, she teaches the Qur'an and Islamic practices to her fellow women. The *Malama* may also be seen preaching during funerals, weddings, and naming ceremonies where the congregation is mixed.

3 Due to differing opinions about *niqab* use by Muslim women in the *Zongo*, I needed to be selective in choosing my informants for this ethnographic research. It was my aim to specifically engage Muslim and non-Muslim women who have adopted the *niqab* for various reasons.

4 This is a special kind of *hijab* developed during the outbreak of the pandemic that differs from the *niqab*. It is a single piece of veil which covers not only a woman's body but also her head, neck, mouth, and nose. See picture below.

5 An Afro-Asiatic language and a lingua franca of most ethnic groups in the Sahel region and some parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

inhabited by Muslim traders and migrants. The Hausa language, Islamic religion, and food practices are unifying factors (Ntewusu 2005; Pellow 1987) for most people in the *Zongo* community irrespective of their places of origin.[6] However, the opposite is the case in relation to dress or veiling practices of women in Madina. While some are attracted to the *hijab* for religious, cultural, and aesthetic reasons, other beauty practices including the use of *niqab* are highly contested and hence not part of the everyday beauty practices of majority of Muslim women in this community.

[7] Currently, Madina *Zongo* hosts people of diverse religious, ethnic, and social backgrounds[7]. The ethnic composition of Madina's inhabitants is more diverse than its religious structure. It is mainly inhabited by a multiplicity of migrant social groups (Sackey 2013). One group is known as 'aliens' who migrated from the Sahelian region, Nigeria, and Francophone West Africa including the Busanga, Fulani, Gao, Kotokoli, Losso, Mossi, Wangara, Dandawa, Chamba, and Zambrama ethnic groups. A second group comprises migrants from northern Ghana: Dagomba, Mamprusi, Gonja, Gurunsi, and Wala, among others, who are identified as 'indigenes' of the country but 'strangers' in Accra. The third group is made of Akan[8] and Ewe[9] ethnic groups. Due to the fact that all these ethnic groups are 'strangers' in the Zongo, leadership is often organised along ethnic, professional, or religious lines.

[8] Muslims are the dominant religious group; their practices are usually more visible to the larger community than those of Christians and adherents of African indigenous religions. However, Christians do constitute the second largest religious group in the community.[10] Their number is significant due to relatively cheap accommodation, safety, and proximity to state institutions such as the University of Ghana and University for Professional Studies. For decades, Christians and Muslims have gone to great lengths to maintain peaceful relationships. For example, they share compound houses and certain outdoor public spaces, such as parks. Both groups buy *halal* meat from butchers in the Madina market, while some Christians ensure that a fowl is slaughtered according to *halal* standards during Christmas so that they can share it with their Muslim friends and neighbours (Alhassan Adum-Atta 2020). According to Ntewusu (2005), the relatively peaceful relationship between the two religious groups in Madina *Zongo* is a result of the fact that polemical preaching is absent in the community.[11] The relationship between Christians and Muslims in the *Zongo* is also enhanced through mutual imitation and

6 There are about four hundred *Zongos* scattered over different parts of the country (Brady and Hooper 2019, 10), categorized as inner cities or slums and identified as marginalized communities. Since Ghana gained independence in 1957, state authorities have made different efforts towards the integration of *Zongo* communities through the development of social and infrastructural facilities (Brady and Hooper 2019, 11–13). Some have described this engagement as an attempt to score political points in the *Zongos*. For instance, a special ministry called the Ministry of Zongo and Inner Cities Development was established in 2017 with the aim "to coordinate, collaborate and facilitate critical interventions through affirmative action that progressively addresses economic and infrastructure deficits, and promotes socio-economic development of the Inner City and Zongo communities" (Brady and Hooper 2019, 12). Four years after the introduction of this ministry, the president scrapped it in an attempt to reduce the number of ministers and cut public administration costs.

7 With a population size of about 137,162 in 2012, it is described as the twelfth most populous community in Ghana. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madina,_Ghana#cite_note-World_Gazetteer-1 (accessed April 23, 2021).

8 A major ethnic group, located in the middle belt of southern Ghana.

9 An ethnic group found in the Volta region of Ghana, some of its people trace their roots to parts of Togo and Benin.

10 The presence of Christianity in the *Zongo* is evidenced by several large church buildings located in its different parts.

11 Sometimes this peaceful relationship can be disrupted. For instance, Joseph Fosu-Ankrah (2018) reported that the Methodist Church in Madina was sent to court by the Muslim community on issues related to noise pollution as a result of the church's nightly activities.

copying of each other's religious practices and clothing styles. For instance, some Muslim brides have appropriated the white wedding gown often used by Christians. Conversely, the *hijab*, and—more recently—the *niqab*, have also been donned by some Christians.

[9] This article draws on Laura Fair's (2013) assertion that the *niqab* contains a wide range of possible uses. She argues that—contrary to the idea that the *niqab* only connotes piety, women's subordination to men, and Islamic fundamentalism—twenty-first-century Muslim women in Zanzibar use it to affirm their authority and economic independence. For her, the meaning of *niqab* is fluid and subject to transformation as women appropriate it to fit different settings. According to Fair, the *niqab*, thanks to the variety of its designs, suits women who want to look trendy and cosmopolitan. In addition, the black colour of the *niqab* offers unlimited sartorial possibilities. This idea is corroborated by José van Santen (2013), who examines how, in Cameroon, most women who returned from pilgrimage to Mecca added the *niqab* to their sartorial practices as a status marker. However, as I will show, in Madina the *niqab* as well as *hijab* are not so much used for sartorial purposes as in the case of women in Zanzibar but are rather religious materials embedded in an Islamic cultural practice which have become instrumental in the fight against COVID-19. To highlight this shift, this paper employs the concepts of adaptation and appropriation. Adaptation involves people's changing attitude towards *hijab* and *niqab* as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic, whilst appropriation is used in reference to the creative process of attributing a new meaning to *hijab* and *niqab* different from what they are originally meant for. The paper discusses the modification and transformation of *niqab* and *hijab* as protective materials, substituted for face masks even though their use has not been sanctioned by health officials. Muslim and Christian women who were formerly not *niqab* and *hijab* wearers are now 'shopping for protection' by using them as COVID-19 safety measure.

[10] The appropriation of these veils as a face mask is by no means unique to Madina *Zongo*. In Saudi Arabia, the Minister of Health, in responding to a twitter question, stated that in situations where face or surgical masks are unavailable, they can be substituted with a *niqab*.[12] Likewise, *hijab* and *niqab* wearers in Britain also used them as face masks, confirming that they no longer received strange looks and hateful comments they had been subjected to prior to the outbreak of COVID-19.[13] As masks also cover faces, the *niqab* and *hijab* are becoming less extraordinary in times of COVID-19. While it remains to be seen whether, thanks to the experience of the pandemic, the veils might become more acceptable in the long run, the current situation offers an opportunity to rethink their use in public spaces.

[11] In the following, I will offer, first, a brief account of the measures put in place as far as the wearing of face masks is concerned in fighting COVID-19 in Ghana. Secondly, I will highlight how the usage of *hijab* and *niqab* were framed in Ghana and in Madina *Zongo* before the outbreak of the pandemic. Finally, the cross-religious appropriation of these veiling practices as a substitute for the face mask by Muslims and Christians in Madina will be addressed as well as its implication for religious co-existence in the *Zongo*.

12 'Niqab' or 'Shmaagh' can be worn as a face mask: Health Call Center. https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/593682 (accessed February 4, 2021).

13 Khan Shuaid Muslim women: How coronavirus face-mask ruling has changed attitudes towards the veil. https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/18716232.blackburn-muslim-women-say-covid-face-mask-rule-changed-attitudes-towards-wearing-veil (accessed January 20, 2021).

Fighting 'the Invisible Enemy' with Face Masks

[12] Ghana is a multi-religious country, with its citizens belonging to Christianity, Islam, and African indigenous religions. Religion plays an important role in Ghana's political, economic, social, and medical landscape. Abamfo Atiemo (2013, 96) shows how, in times of difficulty, Ghanaians "resort to religious functionaries with reputation for spiritual power such as prophets, *Malams*, priests or diviners, outside their normal religious traditions." Similarly, in his discussion about the Akan[14] worldview of disease and health, Kofi Appiah-Kubi (1981) shows that religion plays an important role in the quest for holistic health. He writes that the kind of healing religion offers restores an "equilibrium in the otherwise strained relationship between man, his fellow men, environment, ecology and God" (Appiah-Kubi 1981, 81). This stance persists across Ghanaian society. Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ghanaians of different religious orientations intensified their prayers, fasted, and offered sacrifices in an attempt to stop the spread of the virus and restore their lives to normality[15]. Biblical expressions such as 'The Battle is the Lord's' and 'This too shall pass' were used by president Nana Akufo-Addo to provide some hope and encouragement to Ghanaians during these difficult times.

[13] The face mask has been identified by health officials as one of the best forms of protection, since it allows individuals to conduct their daily activities while keeping relatively safe.[16] To curtail the disease, the government of Ghana saw the need to resource local manufacturers to produce face masks from African print fabric.[17] In addition, individuals were advised to maintain a distance of 1.5 to 2 meters to ensure maximum protection, though this recommendation proved to be impossible to observe in most situations. Subsequently, the government introduced a Legislative Instrument (LI) to punish with fines and imprisonment persons who did not follow the mask-wearing directive.[18] This law remained on paper as most individuals continued to go about their daily activities without wearing a face mask. Likewise, in the months prior to the country's national elections in December 2020, politicians of all parties campaigned with complete disregard for the mask-wearing protocol.

[14] When Ghana experienced the second wave with its daily infection rate not exceeding 100 cases as of May 2021[19], health officials warned of a possible third wave if preventive measures including face masks were not taken seriously. Consequently, there was a joint effort by the government and health officials to educate Ghanaians about the importance of wearing face masks. As an alternative to fining and imprisoning people who disregarded the mask-wearing directive, some Metropolitan Municipal and District Assemblies initiated various forms of minor punishment. In Madina, for instance, the City Council ordered people who disregarded the mask-wearing protocol to drain gutters and sweep the streets. After providing this general background, I will now turn to the different veiling practices in Ghana with a special focus on *hijab* and *niqab* in Madina *Zongo*.

14 The Akan are a major ethnic group in Ghana.

15 Ntewusu, Samuel. Fighting COVID-19: Interventions from Ghana's Traditional Priests. https://religiousmatters.nl/fighting-covid-19-interventions-from-ghanas-traditional-priests/ (accessed June 15, 2020).

16 *Ayeni Tofe Coronavirus: Is Ghana Winning the Fight Against the Virus*? https://www.theafricareport.com/27592/coronavirus-is-ghana-winning-the-fight-against-the-pandemic/ (accessed May 11, 2020).

17 *Okeke Chidera Global Mamas' Face Masks Protecting the Public and Preserving Women's Livelihoods*. https://www.wabicc.org/global-mamas-face-masks-protecting-the-public-and-preserving-womens-livelihoods/ (accessed October 14, 2020).

18 https://ghanasummary.com/ghanaweb/284841/mandatory-wearing-of-face-mask-in-public-places-is-a-private-car-a-public-place (accessed February 2, 2022).

19 https://www.statista.com/statistics/1110883/coronavirus-cases-in-ghana/ (accessed May 31, 2021).

Veiling Practices of Muslim Women in Ghana

Veiling is a term loaded with ambiguity. While most Muslim societies associate veiling with concealing the body, face, and head of a woman from the gaze of unrelated men in public spaces, among the Tuareg men, veiling (especially the face veil) conveys social values including modesty and respectability. Furthermore, some non-Tuareg men in the Sahara may occasionally veil their faces to protect them from desert wind and sand (Rasmussen 2013). In Kano, northern Nigeria, veiling among men is also a status marker used by emirs as a symbol of royalty and authority. Even though women from different religious and social backgrounds practice diverse forms of veiling, the Muslim veiling practices of donning the *hijab* and *niqab* have gained currency in public discourses in Ghana and across the world (Bolaji 2018; Burchardt 2020, 132–54; Moors 2009). The religious and political discourses around these veiling practices have social, gender, and historical dimensions. For example, in Afghanistan, the *niqab* signifies women's modesty or respectability (Abu-Lughod 2013, 35). However, in discussing the trends and causes for changing veiling habits of Muslim women in Zanzibar over the last century, Laura Fair (2013, 13) states that "wearing the veil is intended to elicit not piety, rather esteem and admiration." Also, Leila Ahmed (2011) frames the Muslim veil within the context of gender equality and minority rights, adding that the meaning making of veiling largely depends on its geographical context. [15]

Like elsewhere in the world, in Ghana, veiling reveals ideas about identity, character, and status. Prior to the introduction of Islam in Ghana, women of different religious and ethnic backgrounds practiced a cultural veiling form known as *duku*, a head tie (Sackey 2013), which is still part of the female dress style in Ghana. *Duku* was a head cover style associated with African women's beauty practices. Among African Americans, enslaved black women used *duku* to protect themselves from being exposed to the sun as they worked on plantations. The connotation of *duku* depends on who uses it as well as how and where it is used. Elderly women in Ghana use it as a symbol of maturity. Also, newly married Muslim women in the *Zongo* use a special type of *duku* called *wodasubo* as an indication of their new status. During funerals, a widow covers her head with a black *duku* to show her grief. However, the practice of wearing a *duku* as a demonstration of cultural and religious orientation has transformed in the twenty-first century, as young women mostly use *duku* for sartorial purposes. [16]

Global religious entanglements have contributed to the transfer of new veiling practices such as the *mayaafi*[20], *hijab*, *arewa*[21], gele[22] *as well as the* niqab* from Muslim countries to most *Zongo* communities in Ghana. According to Yunus Dumbe (2009), these entanglements—including educational and economic exchanges as well as the pilgrimage to Mecca—exposed Ghanaian Muslims to the Qadiriyyah,[23] Tijaniyyah,[24] Sunni, and Shia doctrines during the pre- and post-Independence era.[25] The Tijaniyyah doctrine occupies a dominant position in [17]

20 *Mayaafi* literally means 'that which covers.' It is a two-and-a-half-yard-long veil mostly donned by married women in the *Zongo*.

21 A head tie style originating from the northern part of Nigeria.

22 A head tie of the Yoruba people.

23 A Muslim mystical order founded by Abdul Kadir Jaylani from Bagdad in the twelfth century. This mystical orientation was introduced in Ghana by traders and scholars from northern Nigeria and Jegu. See Dumbe (2009).

24 A Muslim mystical order founded by Ahmed Tijani in 1815 in Cairo. The development of the Tijaniyyah orientation in Ghana can be traced to the missionary activities of Sheihk Ibrahim Niasse from Senegal in 1900. See Dumbe (2009) and Pontzen (2021).

25 Ghana gained independence from the British in 1957.

Ghana, to the extent that national chief imams in the country are always from the Tijaniyyah orientation (Dumbe 2009; Weiss 2008).

[18] The office of the National Chief Imam has been instrumental in addressing issues of discrimination against female Muslims who wear the *hijab* in public spaces. During a national campaign to allow female Muslims to don the *hijab* in Ghana's public spaces, the spokesperson of the Chief Imam, Sheikh Armeyaw Shuaib, was emphatic about the security implications of sidelining and discriminating Muslims who constitute a religious minority in the country, adding that this could be a breeding ground for terrorist activities.[26]

[19] Most Muslim women who received secular education in Ghana did not use the *hijab* until the early twenty-first century (Sackey 2013). It was associated with illiteracy, poverty, and female oppression. The situation started to change with the emergence of Muslim women associations in the 1990s, including the Federation of Muslim Women Association in Ghana (FOMWAG) (Sulemanu 2006) and the Islamic Charity Centre for Women Orientation (ICCWO) (Khamis 2009). These groups, through the organisation of public fora and Qur'anic study groups, educated people about the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam. This subsequently led to the adoption of different veiling styles, depending on the social background of the *Zongo* women. For instance, the *mayaafi* style of veiling became associated with female Muslims who never had a secular education.[27] The secularly educated Muslim women in the *Zongos* tried to distinguish their veiling style by using a *mayaafi* smaller than its regular size of two-and-a-half yards. In such situations, they used the *mayaafi to* cover their shoulders but not their head. Pilgrimage to *Mecca*, the media (BBC and Al-Jazeerah), and trading activities of Muslim women in West Africa and the Arab world have also recently influenced the changing veiling styles of both secularly educated and non-secularly educated Muslim women in the *Zongo*[28].

[20] The *hijab* has been a matter of contestation among Muslims and non-Muslims in most public institutions in Ghana over the last two decades. It has raised issues concerning the implementation of secularism in Ghana, religious diversity, and minority rights in shared public spaces. The discourse on the *hijab* interrogates the conceptual framework of secularism in Ghana, where the constitution grants religious practitioners the freedom to choose and manifest their religion but leaves this constitutional right unregulated in practice (Bolaji 2018). For instance, the debate about rights of female Muslims to don the *hijab* in secondary schools owned by Christian missionaries and in formal working environments such as hospitals, where dress codes are integral parts of these institutions' professional culture, continues to stain the relationship between Christians and Muslims in the country.

[21] Unlike the *hijab*, the *niqab* is not a popular veiling practice in *Ghana, as is the case in* some Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Morocco, and Sudan. Muslim women who don the *niqab* in the *Zongo* are in a minority. This practice is subject to debate among Muslim scholars. The debate concerns issues around the *awra*[29] of female Muslims and questions whether the face is a constitutive part of it. In this regard, Al Qaradawi[30] (2006) and Khan (2016) have argued that the Qur'an recommends women to dress modestly and cover their heads but not their faces. Their position is based on the Qur'an, Chapter 24,

26 https://ghanaianmuslim.wordpress.com/2019/10/14/hundreds-march-over-hijab-rights/ (accessed April 16, 2021).
27 Interview with Hajia Fati, 2020.
28 Interview with Dumbe, 2021.
29 Private part of a woman's body, expected to be concealed from unrelated men.
30 http://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/Qatar/al-qaradawi-says-wearing-niqab-not-mandatory-1.264527 (accessed May 31, 2021).

Verse 31, which states "And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity and not to reveal their adornment except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chest, and not reveal their adornment except what normally appears…" Furthermore, they refer to one *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammed which stipulates that when a woman reaches the age of puberty, she should cover her whole body except for her hands and face. Based on this, Al Qaradawi and Khan argue that the *niqab* is not obligatory for female Muslims. In my interviews with male and female religious leaders—*Malam* Sultan and *Malama*[31] Sarata—in Madina *Zongo* they emphasized that the *niqab* is not a requirement for Muslim women's dress as is the case with the *hijab*.[32] *Malama* Sarata equates the use of *niqab* with a non-obligatory prayer. According to her, using it attracts a reward from God but if a woman does not practice it, she would not be punished.

In Madina *Zongo*, Muslim women who wear the *niqab* cite social and religious reasons for its adoption prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. One informant, Hajia Rashida,[33] recounts her pilgrimage to Mecca. During this pilgrimage, she observed that Arab women who adorn themselves with expensive jewelry and designer clothes covered themselves with *hijab* and *niqab*. As she puts it: [22]

> When I went to the bathroom to perform ablution, I saw an Arab woman in Baby Phat[34] jeans and top, which she wore under her *abaya*[35]. Her gold bangles were a beautiful sight, including her gold earrings and necklace, but all these were covered with *abaya* and a niqab. I said to myself: if an Arab woman who lives close to the *ka'ba*[36] is this modest why shouldn't I emulate her? [23]

After her pilgrimage, she returned to Ghana with several *niqabs* for her personal use. Another informant, Hajara, who belongs to a *tabligh jamaat*[37] *movement,* explains that Qur'an 24:31 is the inspiration behind her adoption of the *niqab*. According to her, the verse not only implies covering the head and the body, but also the face. Most of the interviewees who wore the *niqab* before the pandemic also refer to this garment as a devotional material which ensures a closer relationship with God. They explain that they feel rewarded by God for using face veils. At the same time, the *niqab* screens them from the gazes of unrelated men. One typical characteristic of the *Zongo* community is the phenomenon of 'bases' (Muhammed 2015), where Muslim men gather to socialise after work. Usually, a woman can expect unnecessary gazes and calls from these young men anytime she walks by, but *niqab* wearers reported that they could pass without any form of harassment. According to them, the *niqab* offers them *daraja*—respect from the opposite sex. The *niqab* wearers have also attributed their lighter faces, a beauty ideal in the *Zongo,* to the face veil, mentioning that it screens them from the scorching sun. [24]

Notwithstanding the social, sartorial, and religious significance of donning veils in the *Zongo,* my informants also pointed to the challenges they face in shared spaces such as markets, hospitals, and public transportation. They explained that their family members, who are [25]

31 A female Muslim teacher of Islam in Hausa. Unlike their male counterparts, *Malam*, who may offer spiritual healing, the *Malama* focuses solely on religious education.
32 They explained that the Qur'an and hadith are explicit about the importance of the *hijab* for Muslim women.
33 *Hajia* is an honorary title used for one who has embarked on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Rashida is the interviewee's real name.
34 A fashion label for women developed in America around 1999.
35 A loose over-garment used by Muslim women.
36 A Muslim shrine located in Mecca, regarded as the most sacred place on earth.
37 A multi-national Islamic missionary group which originated in India and Pakistan.

also Muslims, have attempted to discourage them from wearing the *niqab* because the social setting in Madina *Zongo* does not support it. This is attributed to the fact that women from Saudi Arabia, whom the *Zongo* Muslim women claim to emulate, are not actively engaged in public life. By contrast, a majority of women in the *Zongo* are involved in various types of economic, social, political, and religious activities in the public space. One of my informants, Sumaya, stated that she had to put a stop to her use of the *niqab* due to her profession as a fashion designer, which requires a constant face-to-face interaction with clients. Realizing that the *niqab* is likely to deter clients from choosing her services in a competitive fashion industry in the *Zongo*, she decided to uncover her face.

[26] However, the attitude of people in Madina *Zongo* towards the *hijab* and *niqab* took a different turn with the surge of COVID-19. Wearers could now be identified as responsible citizens who tried to protect themselves and prevent the spread of the virus. Female Muslims in the *Zongo* who were non-*veil* wearers began to use it, while some Christians also adopted it because of the 'comfort' it provides. In the following sections, I will discuss this phenomenon in more detail.

Cross-Religious Appropriation of *hijab* and *niqab* as a Face Mask in Madina Zongo

[27] Religious boundaries in Madina *Zongo* are often porous, as members of different religions imitate and appropriate each other's practices at different levels. In the *Zongo*, everyday practices of religious groups are embedded within negotiations of ideas and practices of the 'other' to the extent that religious identities are blurred and religious dichotomies partly dissolved. So far scholars have paid little attention to such negotiations. Against this lacuna, Marloes Janson (2021) argues that it is important to realise that religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, are not as mutually exclusive as many scholars still seem to assume (see also Soares 2010; Larkin and Meyer 2006; Janson and Meyer 2016). Rather, religious practitioners mix each other's practices in their everyday lives, a process labelled by her as 'religious shopping'. With this article, I respond to her call to pay more attention to the dynamics of copying and mixing. These dynamics, which also include the mutual adoption of dress styles, are at the heart of the complexities of religious entanglements in a religiously pluralistic setting such as Madina.

[28] Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the *hijab* and *niqab* have become a strategic medium which highlights the dynamics of religious co-existence among Muslims and between Muslims and Christians in Madina *Zongo*. In this section, I discuss the appropriation of these veils by Muslim and Christian women in Madina *Zongo* as 'shopping' for protection against the disease. Within this discussion, I focus on the cross-religious appropriation and reinterpretation of the veils from devotional materials to protective ones and explain the implications of this shift for the *Zongo* scape.

[29] My fieldwork in Madina *Zongo* shows that some individuals transformed their handkerchiefs and *hijabs* into a sort of face mask. Typically, a handkerchief is folded into a V-shape and tied behind the head. Some Muslim women also wrapped their *hijab* in such a way that it not only covered their heads and necks, but also their faces. Also, some tailors in the *Zongo* designed what they called the *corona hijab,* which not only covers the head and parts of the body but also the mouth and the nose. Alongside these inventions, the attitude towards the *niqab* in the *Zongo* also took a new turn. While some adopted it instead of a face mask,

Figure 1 The author in a corona *hijab*, picture taken by Abdulai Adam Eliasu.

others supported its usage even though they did not have any personal experience with it. The *niqab* has thus been transformed from a devotional material used by a specific group of Muslim women to a protective material used by women of different religious orientations. As a result, it became impossible now to label women who used the *niqab* as conservative or radical Muslims. In other words, the *niqab* has become a part of Ghanaian culture regardless of religious or political affiliation.

[30] With the outbreak of the pandemic, dealers in Muslim dresses imported from Dubai, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt cashed in on selling *niqabs*. The price of *niqabs* skyrocketed in Madina *Zongo*. Hajia Rashida, a boutique owner, mentioned that more women than before have been coming to her shop to buy *niqabs*. Also, as noted in the beginning, two other informants—Shareefa and *Malama* Hamida—confirmed that they started making *niqabs* from *gumama* (second-hand clothes imported from the Arab world) for sale due to increased demand in Madina. However, Shareefa had to stop using the *gumama* materials for her *niqabs* because some customers were afraid that these second-hand materials could contain the virus. She therefore resorted to using brand new satin materials from the Madina market.

[31] Since most women in the *Zongo* are employed in the informal sector, where they earn very little, the *niqab* turned out to be a more affordable solution for them than disposable face masks. Some Muslim women who were previously not using the *niqab* explained that due to the outbreak of COVID-19 they now own more than one *niqab*, which they are able to wash after use. Similarly, during a focus group discussion in a mosque, one woman remarked that

Figure 2 A *hijab*-like face mask (left) and niqab (right), pictures taken by the author.

her Christian neighbours commend Muslims for using the *niqab*: "They said our dressing will prevent us from being infected with the disease since it looks just like face masks." Another respondent from a focus group discussion with members of a *tabligh jamat* women's group in Madina explained that the pandemic brings a great relief to the *niqab* users because "previously some people did not even like to sit by us in the *trotro* (public transport). At the Madina market a woman described me as a dangerous person just because of my *niqab*, saying that she does not sell her things to people like us. But thank God for corona, we all look the same now."

[32] According to the Muslim women who used the *niqab* prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, they never attempted to use face masks during the pandemic. This is so because they saw the *niqab* as offering similar protection to a face mask without the downsides of the latter. These women explained that the design of the face veil does not subject it to a frequent touching with one's hands like face masks and does not lead to pain on the ears. They also referred to videos circulating on social media about a man who had difficulty breathing in a face mask and eventually fainted. One informant said she challenged a nurse in one of the public hospitals in Accra who told her that the *niqab* cannot be substituted for a face mask: "I told the nurse that *niqab* is even better than a face mask and she allowed me in." According to this informant, the *niqab* shields the nose and mouth just like the face mask, while making breathing easier than in a face mask.

[33] In a multi-religious and multi-ethnic community such as Madina *Zongo*, where Muslims and Christians live together and often share the same compound, markets, and houses, I noticed different forms of cross-religious imitation and appropriation among Christian and Muslim women. For instance, it is not unusual to see some Christian women donning the *hijab* and wearing dresses perceived as Muslims' attires. According to these Christian women, being identified as Muslims gives them a sense of belonging to the *Zongo* community. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the wake of the Corona pandemic, some Christian women have chosen to wear the *niqab* even though they never used it before. Sister Doreen, a member of the Charismatic Evangelical Ministry in the North Legon (a neighborhood in Madina), who operates a mobile money shop and shares a house with Muslims in the *Zongo,* explained that she was attracted to the *niqab* as a result of COVID-19. According to her, she had difficulty

Figure 3 A focus group discussion with Muslim women at the *Malam* Yunus mosque in Madina *Zongo*, picture taken by the author.

breathing every time she wore a face mask and, therefore, found the *niqab* more convenient. She added: "I sometimes dress my three-year-old girl in the *hijab*. My Christian friends have asked if I wanted to be a Muslim, but I told them I just admire their dressing." Sister Doreen also mentioned that when she decided to wear the *niqab*, her Christian friends asked her if she married a Muslim man. Other people asked her whether she has *tuba,* i.e., converted to the Islamic faith. In contrast, Muslims often expressed their approval when she used the *niqab* by saying that she looks more beautiful in it.

Daavi[38], a member of the Global Evangelical Church in North Legon[39] who has lived in the [34]
Zongo for twenty-seven years, never attempted to use the *hijab* even though her daughters (six and fourteen years old) occasionally wear it because of their Muslim friends. She explained that, even though they look beautiful in it, their father disapproves of it. She added that the children still need a more profound understanding of the Christian faith; otherwise, they could abandon their faith and accept Islam if allowed to continue with their *hijab* practice. Daavi admitted that even though she does not use the *hijab*, her dress styles have also been influenced by Muslim women's fashion in the *Zongo*; usually she would prefer ankle-length dresses over knee-length dresses, which most Christians in the *Zongo* wear. In her words, "anytime I travel to my hometown in the Volta region my sisters say that because I live in the *Zongo* I dress like a *Zongo* woman." This implies that there is a kind of a mixing of dress styles among Muslim and Christian women in Madina who encounter each other on an everyday basis. Even though Daavi never used the *niqab* before the pandemic, she thought of it as the best alternative to a face mask. According to her,

In a tropical climate of Ghana, wearing face masks is very uncomfortable. As a market [35]
woman who does not have the luxury of working in an air-conditioned office, I am exposed

38 The name of this research participant has been altered.
39 A suburb of Accra neighbouring Madina.

to the heat of the sun daily. Keeping the face mask on for a long time attracts a lot of heat around my mouth and nose area and prevents me from breathing in and out properly. This is why my face mask has most often been on my chin.

[36] For Daavi, the *niqab* is the best substitute for the face mask because it has an opening at the base which allows the circulation of air around the mouth and nose area. However, Daavi also emphasizes the limits of appropriating the *niqab*. She was quick to add that the idea of female Christians adopting the *niqab* should not be overly encouraged since it may lead to tensions between Muslims and Christians in the community. For example, the *niqab* is often used with a *hijab*, but in the case of sister Doreen she donned the *niqab* without a *hijab*. Daavi states, "I am afraid that if this practice becomes widespread, this may generate tensions between Muslims and Christians in the *Zongo*, since some Muslims may describe this appropriation as a misrepresentation of their religion."

[37] Another respondent, Ewura Adwoa, a member of the Victory Bible Church, a branch of the Methodist Church in Madina, mentioned that she sometimes uses the *hijab* but never had a personal experience with the *niqab*. However, she sees the use of both religious apparels as orthodox Islamic practices, and as a Methodist she admires and approves religious orthodox practices. For her, the presence of *hijab* and *niqab*-wearing women in the *Zongo* evokes ideas about religious piety similar to the habits of Catholic nuns. After seeing pictures of fashionable *niqab*-like face masks on social media, she is of the view that if the *niqab* is designed with colorful African fabrics, most non-Muslim women would be glad to wear it.

[38] However, even the traditional black *niqab* has become attractive to some Christian women. As one fashion designer in Madina *Zongo* told me, two of her Christian customers requested a *niqab* when she sewed funeral clothes for them. She explained that the black color of the *niqab* fits the Ghanaian traditional mourning dress and that the *niqab* offers 'convenience' when compared to the face mask. These women ordered their *niqab* specifically for the funeral as they thought that it was important to take extra safety measures, even though the government had restricted the number of attendants to funeral grounds.

[39] As the above examples show, wearing the *hijab* or *niqab* is a practice that reflects and responds to changing religious and social circumstances. Formally a symbol of Islamic conservatism and radicalism, during the COVID-19 pandemic these veils have assumed new meanings in Madina *Zongo*. They are no longer restricted to conservative Muslim women, or Muslim women alone, but are also worn by Christian women.

Conclusion

[40] In this article, I have discussed the religious and social worlds of the *hijab* and *niqab* as well as their role in fighting the coronavirus pandemic in Madina *Zongo*. Inspired by Fair (2013), I highlighted the notion of veiling as an unstable religious material, the meaning of which continuously changes in different settings. The *hijab* and *niqab* in Madina have crossed a threshold from being seen as contentious pieces of garments to more acceptable ones, from devotional materials to sartorial ones, and from materials restricted to conservative Muslim women to protective pieces of clothing worn by women of different religious backgrounds, including Christians.

[41] In employing the *hijab* and *niqab* as a substitute for the face mask, the meaning of veiling is expanded. It is no longer simply a symbol of piety or Islamic fundamentalism but also a protective device, just like a face mask, that could be used by all women. This makes women

wearing veils multi-interpretable, and less 'suspicious' as they would have been seen prior to the pandemic. This article reveals that in Madina *Zongo*, the additional value attributed to the *hijab* and *niqab* has directly or indirectly affected the relationship between and among women of diverse religious groups. The entanglement of these veils and face masks has produced intra- and interreligious encounters among Muslim and Christian women in the *Zongo*. Some Muslims appreciate the adoption of *hijab* or *niqab* by the 'other' as an approval of their religious practices and as an action that promotes healthy relationships in a pluralistic community. Others, however, interpret this encounter as having the propensity to strain relationships in the event of 'inappropriate appropriation.'

In the *Zongo* scape, beautifying the face is a very important practice of most women; the lips, cheeks, nose, and eyes are accentuated to fit into *Zongo* beauty standards especially during social gatherings such as weddings. In contrast, the *niqab* covers most parts of the face, leaving only the eyes visible. However, in addition to its original religious meaning, and on top of its protective features that became so essential during the pandemic, *niqab* can possibly become a part of *Zongo*'s dressing style that attracts women of different religious convictions. It is, therefore, important to study further whether this expanding meaning of the *niqab* will hold once the pandemic is over. [42]

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Dancing for the Saints in the Time of Covid-19: Responses to the 2020 Lockdown in Central Mexico

David Robichaux
Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México (Mexico)

Jorge Martínez Galván
Universidad Iberoamericana, Ciudad de México (Mexico)

José Manuel Moreno Carvallo
Université Jules Verne-Picardie, Amiens (France)

ABSTRACT During religious feasts in the Teotihuacán and Texcoco regions northeast of Mexico City, people 'dance for the saint,' often to fulfill a vow made in a supplication for healing. Based on fieldwork carried out between 2011 and 2019, and online interviews and monitoring of Facebook postings in late 2020 and early 2021, in this article we explore the impact of the coronavirus on the devotional dances staged in the context of religious feasts. In particular, we examine the cases of new practices adopted during the lockdown. Drawing on Jeremy Stolow's (2005) concept of "religions as media," we show how a combination of digital and in-person media make it possible for local Catholic communities to maintain the relationship with their patron-saint during the pandemic, based on the principle of *do ut des*, "though differently." We conclude by raising questions concerning the future of the devotional dances and religious feasts in these regions as pandemic restrictions entered their second year.

KEYWORDS devotional dances, Mexico, popular religion, coronavirus lockdown, media

Introduction

Abundant use of flowers, music, fireworks and dances in ritual situations that bring together large numbers of people characterize the religious feasts celebrated in the Texcoco Region and the Valley of Teotihuacán, adjacent regions near Mexico City. All this came to an abrupt halt with the quarantine measures implemented by the Mexican government on March 23, 2020 to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus. Non-essential businesses were closed, in-person classes suspended, and extreme limits were placed on gatherings, including the [1]

closing of churches for three months. Dances, when performed, were staged on a reduced scale, termed "symbolic representations" ("representaciónes simbólicas," in Spanish) by some of our informants. *Representación* (singular) is the equivalent to a performance as in a play or a dance, while in this context *simbólica* means "token." Thus, a "symbolic representation" is a token performance, one of reduced scale, a substitution for what is usually considered proper and was permitted by the authorities or what was possible given the lockdown measures and perceived danger of contagion during the pandemic. In some cases, increased use of digital media appears to have resulted in more online postings of photos and videos than in the recent past, possibly another form of "symbolic representation."

[2] In this article, we look at a form of public religious practice rooted in towns of pre-Hispanic origin where a specific type of lay religious organization was imposed during the sixteenth-century evangelization process. The complex town-centered ceremonialism in the present-day successors of these ancient communities is self-managed, i.e., in the hands of lay people, and in this sense, it is truly "popular religion" (Carrasco [1970] 1952, 1976; Giménez Montiel 1978; Nutini 1989).[1] By using this term, it is not our intention to suggest that the specific brand of popular religion we look at here is an entity completely apart from the 'official church.' A priest is required in some of its practices and only he can say mass. As Kirsten Norget (2021) has noted in her study of lay-organized mortuary rituals in Oaxaca in southern Mexico, there is a dialectic encounter between official Catholicism and the practices we term here as popular religion. We believe that the term is warranted by the complex, laity-controlled organization involved in ensuring that highly visible community rituals prescribed by local custom take place during the annual religious cycle.

[3] In the ritual calendars of the towns in the two regions, the great and frequent expenditures on music, floral arrangements and fireworks in religious feasts, along with masses and the performance of dances, all form part of a large-scale offering to the patron saint in a contractual relationship whose object is the assurance of collective and individual health, prosperity and general well-being.[2] Our previous research has found that many individuals participate in or organize dances to fulfill a vow to a saint or to God (Robichaux, Moreno Carvallo, and Martínez Galván 2021). In curtailing the celebration of these feasts, the Covid-19 lockdown brought to an abrupt halt the most salient practices of a highly public type of religiosity. The usual media of religious expressions were thus hampered or completely blocked, giving rise to alternate solutions to fulfill the communities' and individuals' part of this contractual relationship. Some people spoke of fulfilling their obligations to the saints, "though differently," referring to substitution or scaled-down use of the customary media.

[4] In this article, we consider 'media' in its widest sense and identify masses, music, flowers, fireworks and dances as the primary media in local public popular religious practices. In this approach, we draw on Jeremy Stolow's (2005) concept of "religion as media." He argues that

1 Such communities are usually not categorized by the Mexican State or anthropologists as "indigenous" as twentieth-century Mexico witnessed a state-promoted "de-Indianization" process in which language loss determined the passage from Indian to "mestizo" (Bonfil Batalla 1987; Robichaux 2007). Today, only three towns in the two regions where we conducted our research are identified by the State as "indigenous." However, despite language loss, all the towns retain forms of community ritual organization originating in the aforementioned sixteenth-century evangelization process. "Post-indigenous" is an apt term for the towns in this and other regions of Mexico that have been often classed as "mestizo" by both the state and anthropologists, thus contributing to erase these distinctive traits and histories (see Robichaux and Moreno Carvallo 2019, 23).

2 Each town has a patron saint, and in many instances the name of the saint is part of the town's name such as San Jerónimo Amanalco or San Pedro Chiautzingo.

religion can only be manifested through a process in which techniques and technologies are employed. In his words:

> Throughout history, in myriad forms, communication with and about 'the sacred' has always been enacted through written texts, ritual gestures, images and icons, architecture, music, incense, special garments, saintly relics and other objects of veneration, markings upon flesh, wagging tongues and other body parts. It is only through such media that it is at all possible to proclaim one's faith, mark one's affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. In other words, religion always encompasses techniques and technologies that we think of as 'media', just as, by the same token, every medium necessarily participates in the realm of the transcendent […]. (Stolow 2005, 125) [5]

In this same vein of thought, Birgit Meyer (2015, 336), quoting Robert Orsi (2012), has emphasized that, in seeking to make "visible the invisible," religion involves multiple media for "materializing the sacred." She, too, understands media "in the broad sense of material transmitters across gaps and limits that are central to practices of mediation". To this effect, Meyer (2015, 338) coined the term "sensational forms," which include body techniques and serve as "formats" that "make present what they mediate." Undoubtedly, the dances and other media characteristic of the religious tradition we deal with here can be described in this way. Viewing dances and the other media common in our regions in these terms helps us to understand why people continue to use them and to celebrate feasts, even in reduced form, during the pandemic. [6]

This paper is based on three types of sources: 1) fieldwork involving extensive participant observation since late 2011 focused on devotional dance groups in more than twenty-five towns in the Texcoco and Teotihuacán regions (see Figure 1); 2) monitoring of Facebook profiles of town governments, parishes, dioceses, local religious authorities (*mayordomías*), dance groups and individuals from the two regions; and 3) fifty-two interviews, conducted on Teams or Meet platforms and by telephone between October 6, 2020 and February 18, 2021 with twenty-six informants from fifteen towns. The authors already knew most of the interviewees from their previous fieldwork, while a few new research participants were contacted via Facebook. [7]

When we responded to the call for papers in July 2020, we assumed that the pandemic would soon be over and that we would be able to engage in in-person fieldwork. As it became evident that this was not to be, we took a new tack in our research and resorted to a particular version of what has been called "digital" or "virtual" ethnography (see Hine 2005; Pink et al. 2016). This involved contacting people who at one point had given us their phone number over the years of our fieldwork since 2011. Some were people with whom we had spent many hours during dances and rehearsals and had spoken with frequently, sometimes over the course of several years; others were but casual acquaintances with whom we had established little rapport in the field. As it turned out, more than half of the numbers were no longer in service. As in our regions of study it is considered improper for women to give out their numbers to males outside their circles of kin, none of our informants were women. Although we did manage to contact a few informants through Facebook, our best interviews were with people with whom we had previously established rapport in the field. We also privileged interviews with persons with computers, as this facilitated face-to-face contact which [8]

enhanced rapport, while enabling us to record for later transcription. In view of these strictures, all our informants were men, heavily involved in dances in different ways, as organizers, participants or musicians.

[9] It is important to stress our particular approach to dances and what is known in the literature as the "cargo system", or community organization of religious feasts. Early twentieth-century Mexican ethnographers recognized the religious functions of dances in communities such as the ones we study here (see Adán 1910; Noriega Hope [1922] 1979). However, the secular, anti-clerical Mexican State promoted what it termed "regional" dances, viewing them as the expression of the soul of the nation, useful in promoting national identity, but which had to be "polished" and divested of their religious symbolism (Gamio [1935] 1987, 181).

[10] A similar neglect of the religious dimensions in studies of the "cargo system" is also noted. Early studies viewed this institution as a barrier to economic development, or as a means of gaining prestige, and religious functions and motivations of participants were given short shrift (Wolf 1957; Cancian 1966). Building on Danièle Dehouve's (2016, 15–30) critique of this approach in studies of the cargo system, we posit that figures other than the formal office holders also play a ritual role in ensuring community well-being and prosperity. These include the organizers of dances and dance groups which, together with officials in the cargo system, make up a somewhat acephalous community organization, a local bureaucracy whose purpose is to make sure the customary rituals of the local annual cycle are properly financed and carried out. While the dances of Mexico undoubtedly lend themselves to analysis from the point of view of performance or theatre, our interest here is centered on their ritual function as part of an offering to the invisible. We share this standpoint with our informants, which we came to understand through long years of interacting with them and participating in many of their experiences.[3]

[11] This paper is divided into three sections followed by final considerations. In the first section, we briefly describe the historical antecedents and current operation of a type of community-centered ritual organization controlled by the laity. Next, we describe the devotional aspects of the dances and their role as an offering to the saint as part of a contractual relationship. In the third section, we present some of the responses to the lockdown measures affecting religious feasts, focusing on the experiences of specific dance groups and individual dancers. These include use of electronic media, what some of our informants referred to as "symbolic representations" of dances, and other substitution strategies. In the final considerations, we summarize our findings and reflect on the future of the feasts and dances which, in some cases, have now been suspended for two years in a row.

3 An observation in 2011 in one of the towns we have studied brought the question of the function of the dance and music to the fore. At a religious feast, two of the authors watched as some thirty dancers performed before a public half that size and a 24-piece orchestra played for hours in front of the church without an audience. While such renditions can be analyzed from the standpoint of performance, the term comes up short if the presence of an audience is part of the quotation. Is performance the right concept to capture the full dimensions of a costly display that took hours and days of preparation if performers outnumber the spectators? This insight led to the particular perspective that has guided our research, a perspective inspired by Dehouve's (2016) work. The fact that one of our informants stated that, under lockdown conditions, there would be no problem in staging the dance in the church behind closed doors, with no spectators, supports our position (see below).

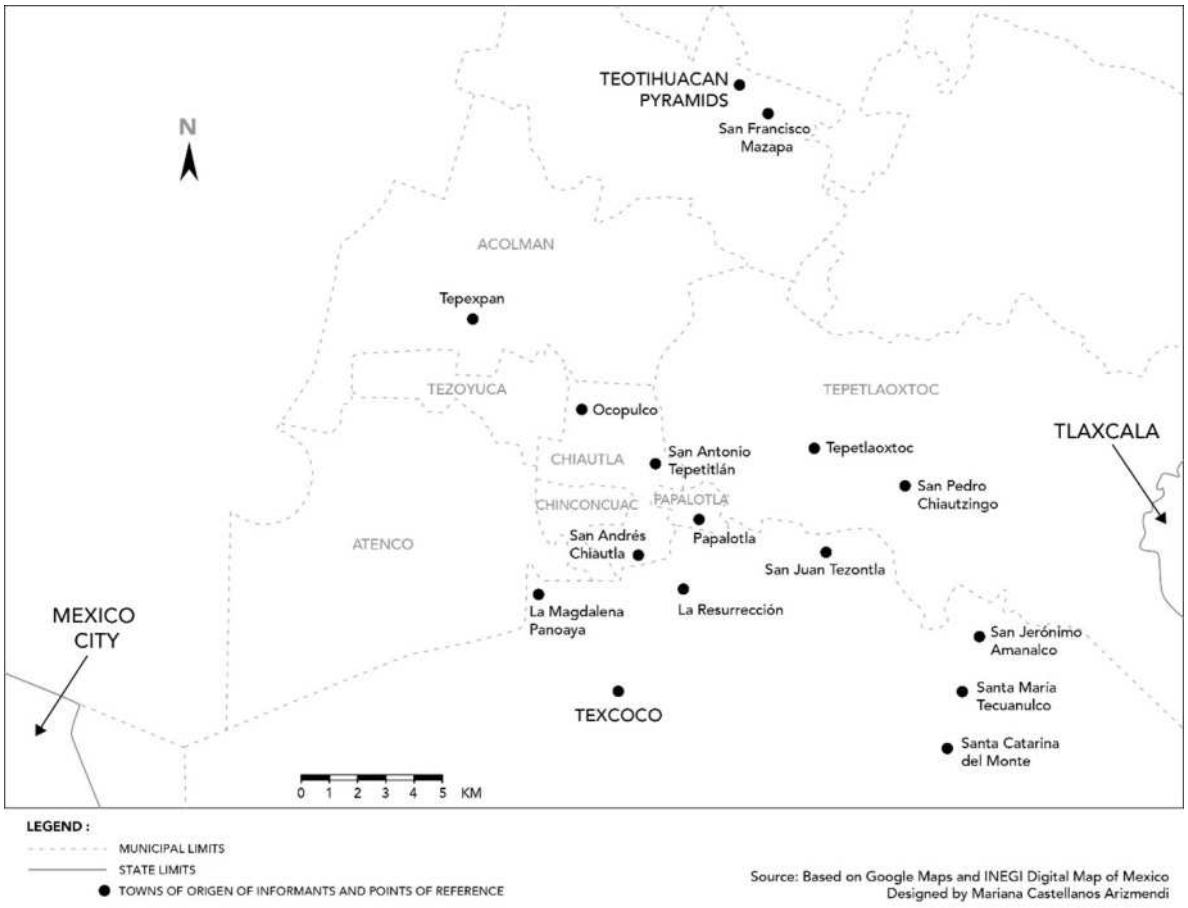

Figure 1 Towns of origin of informants interviewed for this article.

How Public Popular Religion is Organized in the Texcoco and Teotihuacán Regions

The term "popular religion" has been used in different contexts to refer to diverse practices and beliefs diverging from what has sometimes been called "official" or "organized religion" (Vrijhof 1979; Isambert 1982; Lanternari and Letendre 1982). Some authors have proposed discarding the term altogether, considering it to be "badly tainted by pejorative connotations" (McGuire 2008, 45), and alternative terms such as "lived religion" (McGuire 2008), "vernacular religion" (Flueckiger 2006) and "local religion" (Christian 1981, 178–79) have been put forward in its stead. "Popular religion," "popular Catholicism" and "folk Catholicism" have all been used in Mexico since the second half of the twentieth century to account for different practices and beliefs outside the 'official' teachings of the Catholic Church (Carrasco [1970] 1952, 1976; Giménez Montiel 1978; Nutini 1989). We use "popular religion" or "popular Catholicism" here to refer to a specific type of public religiosity based on a lay community organization whose purpose is to ensure that the rituals of the annual calendar are carried out according to custom. [12]

In the process of contact between Catholicism and pre-Hispanic religion and its transfer to native populations in sixteenth-century Mexico, the missionary friars trained trusted Indian assistants to enforce obligatory attendance to mass and catechism. In smaller towns with no resident priest, these lay assistants registered and even performed baptisms or burials and reminded residents of their religious duties (Ricard 1947, 206–7). Empowerment of lay officials in the early colonial period laid the groundwork for what became known as the "cargo system"—also known as the civil-religious hierarchy, fiesta or *mayordomía* system—in twentieth-century Mesoamericanist anthropology (Carrasco [1970] 1952; Cancian 1966).[4] Popular Catholicism, as discussed in this article, sprang from this tactic used by the official Church during evangelization, but today it has an existence and logic of its own. [13]

It is important to note that Catholic missionary parishes and their divisions were usually a continuation of pre-Hispanic socio-political and religious units, many of which had a long history of migration of specific groups that were under the protection of and identified with a tutelar deity. With Christianization, the deity was replaced by a saint who in some cases had some of the attributes of that deity (López Austin 1998, 49–50, 69, 76–77). Furthermore, churches were commonly erected on the sites of pre-Hispanic temples, thus facilitating the transfer of loyalty to the Christian saint. Aztec gods were thought to provide material means; failure to comply with ritual would incur their wrath, and loss of their protection would lead to want (Madsen 1967, 370). The friars gave pagan songs and dances Christian motifs, and they were performed in Catholic ceremonies (Madsen 1967, 376). In what William Madsen calls a process of "fusional syncretism," "almost all visible vestiges of paganism" were eliminated and Our Lady of Guadalupe-oriented Catholicism became "the focal value of Aztec culture in central México"[5] (1967, 378). Patron saints replaced tutelary gods in each village and received offerings, similar to practices in pagan times. Religion today remains "the means of obtaining temporal necessities" and, "as in ancient times, the neglect of ritual obligations subjects the individual or the whole community to the vengeance of supernatural beings who punish […] with sickness, crop failure, and other misfortunes" (Madsen 1967, 380–81). What Madsen [14]

4 *Cargo* means office in Spanish, as in an office held by an official.

5 The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, the Mexican national symbol, replaced a mother goddess formerly venerated on the site where the Virgin appeared in 1531 (Wolf 1958).

describes in terms of syncretism can truly be termed an "entangled religion." As he notes, at one level Christian saints replaced pagan deities, but the contractual relation oriented towards protection and ensuring temporal needs has persisted to this day.

[15] Stressing the contractual relationship between the patron saint and the community in Mexico, Hugo Nutini (1989, 88)[6] writes: "[B]y the end of the seventeenth century a folk Catholicism had been structured encompassing diverse elements of the indigenous and Spanish religions. Superficially, this folk religion had a predominantly Catholic appearance, i. e. structurally, ritually, ceremonially, and, in general, its physical manifestations were not much different from urban Catholicism of the time." However, it included (and does so to date) "many ideological and structural elements of pre-Hispanic polytheism", such as "the conception of supernatural beings and figures and the principle of *do ut des* that obtains in the relationship between the individual and collective body with their makers." For Nutini, "it is here that the pre-Hispanic contribution is most important and acts as a counterweight to the preponderance of more visible Catholic elements."

[16] "[T]he essentially lay character of ceremonial organization" in the cycle of public religious festivities has been noted by Gilberto Giménez. When a priest is involved, his role is reduced to that of a "ceremonial auxiliary subordinated to requirements of the popular ritual." As diocesan priests replaced the religious orders that introduced community ceremonial institutions in colonial times, a process of "autonomization" began and, with Independence in 1821 and separation of Church and State in 1857, the gap between the clergy and popular religion further widened. The community institutions introduced by the missionaries in the sixteenth century were appropriated and became "traditional," operating "parallel to the Church and, at times, outside of, and even against the Church" (Giménez Montiel 1978, 150–51).

[17] Although much has been written on the cargo system, scholarly attention has centered on topics such as its function as a leveling mechanism that erased budding wealth differences in supposedly egalitarian communities; its role in reinforcing existing internal differences; acquisition of prestige by cargo-holders; and individual versus community financing of religious feasts (Carrasco [1970] 1952; Wolf 1957; Cancian 1966; Chance and Taylor 1985). Following Arthur Maurice Hocart (1970), we view the cargo system in our regions of study as a ritual bureaucracy whose purpose is to organize collective ritual in order to ensure health and prosperity and to ward off illness, misfortune and death (Dehouve 2016). We consider the dance groups to be part of this ritual bureaucracy as they provide an offering to the saint, complementing those of flowers, music, fireworks and masses, for which the cargo-holders are responsible.

[18] The term *mayordomo*, recurrent in the literature on the cargo system, literally means "steward," a reference to the fact that these office-holders were formerly stewards of plots of ground cultivated to finance religious feasts (Carrasco 1961, 493). Today, *mayordomos* in the two regions under study are responsible for overseeing the organization of religious feasts. They usually hold office for one year and, depending on the town, are selected in different numbers and organized in different ways. While in some towns, a single group of *mayordomos* is appointed or elected to be in charge of the entire annual cycle of feasts, in others there are specific *mayordomos* for each feast. Certain towns have a system in which different offices rotate from house to house and all households eventually assume specific responsibilities in organizing the annual ritual cycle. Whereas in one town a group of as many as 100 *mayordomos* is responsible for most of the ritual expenses, in other places each married male or male

6 All translations by the authors unless indicated otherwise.

eighteen years of age or older is responsible for contributing to help the *mayordomos* cover costs. Collectively, the group of mayordomos is known as the *mayordomía*.

[19] The responsibilities of this ritual bureaucracy include organizing the usual celebrations of the Catholic liturgical calendar, particularly those related to the birth and death of Christ, and that of the patron saint or other major feasts specific to each town. The major feasts usually take place over a nine-day period, from one weekend to the next. During this time, in the church and forecourt, many months of *mayordomos'* work materializes in its most evident manifestations as masses, flowers, music, fireworks and dances all form a collective offering to the saint.

[20] The *mayordomo* or *mayordomos* have the obligation to reserve the masses and pay officiating clergy. They are also responsible for having the interior of the church decorated by professional florists with flower arrangements sometimes covering practically all the walls and even hanging from the ceiling (see Figure 2). They must also provide special floral adornments, known as *portadas,* that bedeck the façade of the church. In 2018 and 2019, the cost of interior floral decoration varied from US$2,000 to US$7,500, depending on the size of the church and elaborateness of the floral arrangements, while the *portada* cost US$1,000 or more. The *mayordomo* or *mayordomos* must also contract one and sometimes two wind-instrument or other orchestras with sixteen to twenty-five musicians to perform in honor of the saint in the churchyard during some sixteen hours each day and to accompany processions. In 2019 a wind-instrument orchestra of this size cost some US$2,500 to play for five days, with three meals provided daily in addition to this fee, a substantial sum, given the fact that many of the towns' inhabitants are employed in the informal sector.

[21] *Mayordomos* are also responsible for fireworks used profusely during the celebration. Rockets are shot off along the entire route of the procession in which the effigy of the saint is paraded through the town, an event that may last up to eight hours. Dozens of rockets are fired off at the beginning and end of the masses celebrated during the feast, and in long bursts at the time of the consecration of the host. The feast ends with the lighting of a *castillo* (literally, a castle with one or several turrets), a structure erected in front of the church (see Figure 3). Some *castillos* are as much as thirty-five meters high, and they contain explosive charges that often set off gyrating wheels flying into the air, as well as pyrotechnic representations of the saint or religious motifs or phrases. A large *castillo* with several turrets may cost up to US$7,000.

[22] As we have seen here, public popular religion in the two regions under study is a highly organized, community-oriented affair aimed at providing the customary offerings to the saints. In the next section we specifically deal with the dances, one of the five media that, along with flowers, music, fireworks and masses, are the salient manifestations of a contractual relationship with the invisible.

Devotional Dances at the Religious Feasts

[23] Dances were an important part of the elaborate rituals in honor of the gods in pre-colonial times and were considered by some missionaries as a form of prayer (de Mendieta 1870, 99). *Maceua,* one of the Nahuatl equivalents of an English verb "to dance," can also be translated as "to do penance," "to obtain something," or "to deserve or merit something" (Siméon 2010, 244). Pointing out that *itotia,* another Nahuatl equivalent of a word "to dance," shares a common root with *itoa*, the equivalent of the verb "to speak," Alfredo López Austin (2007,

Figure 2 Interior decoration, Parish of Saint Mary Magdalene, Tepexpan. Feast in honor of Our Lord of Graces, 2019. Tepexpan, Acolman, State of Mexico. Copyright: Isaac Trenado MX.

Figure 3 Burning of fireworks 'castles' during the feast in honor of Our Lord of Gracias, 2019. Tepexpan, Acolman, State of Mexico. Copyright: Isaac Trenado MX.

186–87) has proposed that dancing was a way of "speaking" to gods and a dancer was "a bridge" between people and deities. Sixteenth-century reports indicate that missionaries tolerated dances as long as they were Christianized. New words were set to pre-Hispanic rhythms and chants and Spanish songs were translated into Nahuatl. It was preferred that dance celebrations take place in public in churches, churchyards and houses rather than clandestinely, away from the vigilant eyes of the missionaries (Ricard 1947, 340–41).

In most towns in the two regions under study, the celebration of major feasts is inconceivable without dances. Together with the numerous masses, flowers, music and fireworks, they are the key elements of a massive collective offering, or gift to the saint, in the sense of Marcel Mauss (1983). These five elements constitute the media through which the contractual relationship between humans and the divine is maintained.[7] In interviews and casual conversations during our fieldwork, terms such as "devotion," "penance" and "sacrifice" often appear in connection with the dances offered to the saints. This is not surprising considering the physical exertion involved in some dances. Furthermore, the dance principals[8] must pay for musicians, rent sound equipment, tarpaulins and platforms to dance, as well as organize meals, sometimes three each day, attended by hundreds of dancers and their families. They must also spend long hours in rehearsals and in some cases learn lines in dances with speaking parts. A common reason why some men and women organize or participate in a dance is to fulfill a vow made in an appeal for divine intervention in cases of personal illness or that of family members, and to give thanks for a divine favor received. The motivation may also be more diffuse, such as expressing gratitude for enjoying a general state of good health or for having a favorable economic situation. These individual motivations take on a collective dimension as part of a community's offering to the saints (Robichaux, Moreno Carvallo, and Martínez Galván 2021, 235). [24]

The devotional character of the dances is clearly evidenced in the rituals carried out at the beginning and the end of their performance, especially on the first and final days of the feasts.[9] Public staging of a dance is always preceded by a group entry into the church in which the dancers make the sign of the cross and genuflect or kneel in prayer before the effigy of the saint. In some cases, they intone a chant (a prayer to the saint with references to their purpose) and perform a small part of the dance in the church. This opening ritual often takes place after a mass. On the last day of the performance, a ritual known as the "coronation" takes place with great pomp and ceremony inside the church. It is accompanied by a slow, repetitive music and intricately choreographed movements, in which each dancer successively embraces each of his or her companions. This highly emotional ceremony may last two hours or more and some of those who have been "crowned" (*coronado* in Spanish, meaning they have made a vow to dance) or have fulfilled their vow give speeches, giving thanks to the saint or asking for his or her aid to keep their vow the following year. It is believed that if the vow is not kept the wrath of the saint can be incurred and the dancer or a member of his family will be punished in the form of illness or an accident. [25]

The dances take place in designated spaces in the forecourt of the church or nearby, and in [26]

7 The procession could be viewed as a sixth element. We consider, however, that the five we note here are clearly offerings, while the procession is a specific moment that brings together several of these elements, in other words, a diffused setting in which the offerings of fireworks, music and dances, as well as the physical efforts of those participating, are made.

8 *Principales*, in Spanish. Persons in charge of organizing the dance, referred to in at least one town as *mayordomos*. Among their responsibilities are collecting money to pay musicians and offering a meal to dancers and their families during the feast.

9 Depending on the town, dances are usually performed one to five times during a feast.

Figure 4 Serranos dancer with daughter in arms during the celebration of the feast of Saint Sebastian, 2018. Tepetlaoxtoc de Hidalgo, Tepetlaoxtoc, State of Mexico. Copyright: Manuel Moreno Carvallo.

some towns as many as five or six groups of usually forty to sixty dancers may simultaneously perform from four to six hours with little rest. While certain dances have always had both female and male roles, others have been exclusively for men, children, or young girls. In the last few decades female versions of certain dances have appeared in some towns and women have assumed roles traditionally assigned to men. It is common to see parents dancing with babies and young children in their arms, and children dancing alongside their parents (see Figure 4). Many dancers in their thirties and forties spoke of first dancing with their parents at age four or five, and some stated that only as they grew older did they understand the full religious significance of what they were doing. In most cases, with the assistance of paid specialists, known as *ensayadores* (literally, "rehearsers"), rehearsals begin four to six weeks prior to the first performance (see footnote 4). These ritual specialists not only teach the dancers the steps, choreography and lines of dances with spoken parts, but, acting as ritual specialists, direct the previously described initial ceremonies and the coronation.

The dances—of which the authors observed twenty-one types and their variations—always [27]
have a leading theme. But regardless of their content, the opening rituals and final coronation show that all the dances are dedicated to the saint and that vows and devotion are ever present (Robichaux, Moreno Carvallo, and Martínez Galván 2021, 235–38). As we will discuss in the following section, the lockdown was a challenge for dance groups, most of which were not able

to dance. However, some groups did manage to perform, "though differently," and creative solutions were developed to fulfill the contractual relation with the saints.

Lockdown, Social Distancing, and New Ways to Fulfill the Contractual Relation in Religious Festivities and Dances

[28] The Mexican Federal Government's declaration of the health emergency on March 23, 2020 meant the immediate cancelation of nearly all activities involved in the celebration of the feasts in the towns of the Valley of Teotihuacán and Texcoco regions. The media, without which the celebration of the religious feasts had once been unthinkable—masses, floral adornment, fireworks, music and dances—were put on hold or their use was greatly modified. For three months or more following the outbreak of the pandemic, masses were said behind closed doors with no one in attendance and livestreamed on Facebook.[10] Religious processions were held with the effigy of the saint paraded in the back of pickup trucks with people watching from their homes. The few dances staged were performed with a greatly reduced number of dancers and for a much shorter time than usual.[11] Digital media, already used before the pandemic by some groups of dancers, *mayordomos* and parishes, increased in importance in some towns and became the primary means of communication and display.

[29] The varied strategies adopted during the feasts in different towns can be explained in part by the severity of restrictive measures at the time of the feast. In towns with feasts soon after the lockdown, *mayordomos* and dancers had little time to adapt. For example, on March 21, the parish in the town of La Resurrección posted a program on Facebook of activities for Holy Week and the week following (April 5–19, 2020) when the patron saint's (Our Lord of the Resurrection) feast is celebrated. It included the usual Holy Week processions and masses in addition to the participation of five different dance groups, scheduled to perform on two different days as in any other year during the week after Easter. But on March 28, following the declaration of the health emergency, it was announced that these activities would be "modified." In fact, all processions were canceled, and since churches were closed, masses were celebrated behind closed doors and livestreamed on Facebook. Thinking the epidemic would soon be over, it was announced that the dances, music, floral arrangements and fireworks would be postponed until Pentecost (May 31), the town's second major feast.[12] This did not happen, as it was soon announced that the Pentecost celebrations would also be canceled.

[30] The different *mayordomías* and dance groups of La Resurrección had already made partial payments for various services, including US$12,000 for two *castillos* and all the rockets. One of the dance groups had made an advance payment of US$1,000 for music and sound equipment. Another group had made a contract for US$10,000 with an expensive group of celebrity

10 Depending on the parish, after three or more months attendance at mass was resumed, but initially with limited seating, a thirty-percent maximum capacity in the church, obligatory use of masks and use of hand sanitizer before and after communion, and without the handshake of peace. In some places, attendance at mass was initially by appointment only and livestreaming has continued. The general tendency has been toward increased capacity, with adjustments made with each new wave of Covid-19.

11 As of this writing, the first quarter of 2022, dances have resumed, but with restrictions. In the cases of dances in feasts that have taken place or that were in the planning stage, the number of dancers has been limited, dances have been performed, or are planned to be performed with masks; and the number of attendees has been restricted or plans are in place to limit attendance.

12 *Facebook Parroquia*. Accessed January 3, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/ParroquiadelaResurreccionTexcoco/photos/a.1743867959053187/2595250977248210

Figure 5 Serranos dancers during the celebration of the feast of Our Lord of Graces, 2019. Tepexpan, Acolman, State of Mexico. Copyright: Jorge Antonio Martínez.

musicians and had already paid half the amount before cancelation. With cancelation of Pentecost, the advance payment on contracts for music, flowers and fireworks were 'lost.' With the new surge of the pandemic in December and early January 2021 severely affecting the town, festivities for 2021 were also canceled. It was decided that the *mayordomos* responsible for the 2020 celebration would remain in office in 2021 as they were not able to fully discharge their duties, and it remains to be seen what will happen next.

[31] With time, some dance groups developed creative solutions to substitute traditional practices and renew the contractual relationship with the saints. One case in point is that of the *Serranos* dancers of Tepexpan, who dance in honor of *Nuestro Señor de Gracias* (Our Lord of Graces), celebrated on May 3. Performed only in this town and on that occasion, this dance is unique in that it brings together up to 700 participants (see image 5). After a meal attended by as many as a thousand people, the dancers go to the church in slow rhythmic steps in two rows numbering as many as 350 each, and file in, intoning a melancholy chant that opens the dance. Many have their eyes fixed on the image of Our Lord of Graces above the altar and are visibly moved. After kneeling in prayer and making the sign of the cross, the dancers perform some of the dance steps. They then file out of the church and dance for five to six hours, in the view of hundreds of spectators.

[32] None of this occurred in 2020. As one informant put it, the feast was celebrated "to the extent possible and with all means that were allowed [by the authorities], but with an enormous

amount of faith to receive the blessings of Our Lord." Although there were "few flowers, little music, few fireworks" and no dancers in the churchyard, digital media served to remind the town's inhabitants of the dancers' normal offering. In early April, when it became evident that the May festivities would be canceled, the principals of the *Serranos* dance group opened a Facebook account and appealed to the townspeople to share photos and videos from previous years.[13] People were also requested to display arches, crowns, hats and other regalia used in the dance outside their houses beginning at 3:00 pm on May 3. Several pickup trucks paraded through the town carrying pictures of the patron saint and playing recorded music from the dance, all the while livestreaming on Facebook. People from the households of many of the dancers came outside to greet the procession, some dressed in their dance costumes, and at one point a group of children in costumes performed some of the steps of the dance.[14] Some dancers used their personal Facebook profiles to post photos of their household altars where they had placed dance regalia (see Figure 6). Symbolically, at the end of the procession, the pickup trucks backed away from the churchyard gate, replicating the recessional movement of the *Serranos* when they file out of the church, never turning their back to the saint, all to the accompaniment of a recording of the chant intoned by the dancers on that occasion. Those riding in the back of one of the pickups ended the procession with applauses and shouts of *Viva el Señor de Gracias* and hugged each other as in the coronation ceremony.[15]

[33] Over time, as people became accustomed to what Mexican federal authorities termed *la nueva normalidad* (the new normality), some groups of dancers succeeded in honoring the saints by dancing, but on a much-reduced scale. The town of San Francisco Mazapa celebrated Pentecost (May 31, 2020), one its two major feasts, while lockdown measures were still in full force. The church was closed, and mass was said behind closed doors and livestreamed. The statues of the saints, normally displayed inside the church, were set up in the forecourt and honored with floral offerings and a band. In ordinary years, the *Alchileos* and the *Santiagos* dance groups, each with thirty to forty participants, perform for five to six hours. On this occasion, a group of *Alchileos* dancers paraded through the streets, and a small group of their representatives entered the churchyard, made 'reverences,'[16] and placed a floral offering before the statues of the saints, though they did not dance. A group of eighteen *Santiagos* dancers, accompanied by musicians, entered the churchyard and, after making the sign of the cross and kneeling before the saints, performed for about twenty minutes.[17]

[34] As cases of Covid-19 dropped off, sanitary restrictions were relaxed in early July and *mayordomos* and dance principals in San Francisco Mazapa began organizing and collecting money for the coming feasts. Churches were now open, but only at thirty percent capacity. For the

13 One of the authors of this article, Jorge Martínez Galván, edited four videos from the recordings we made since 2015. These movies were posted on the "*Serranos de Tepexpan*" Facebook Profile and viewed thousands of times. *Serranos de Tepexpan Facebook Profile*. Accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/109660100706637/?extid=bEFwUPk1zlbskHsA https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/118844669788180/?extid=2dghGE972RzIAm0h https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/121994952806485/?extid=ZeWgdU1x9gTeLbeL https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/124921319180515/?extid=LMnDuwJ6ygrJeCEQ

14 *Facebook Parroquia*. Accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/ParroquiaTepexpanOficial/videos/234357064327879/

15 *Facebook video*. Accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/122478216091492/

16 A movement typical in this dance, in which dancers lower their upper bodies with outstretched hands in a "bowing" motion.

17 *Facebook page*. Accessed December 6, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/106066384062216/videos/1520194508140138/

Figure 6 Special home altar with dance paraphernalia during the celebration of our Lord of Graces, 2020, Tepexpan, Estado de México. Copyright: Andrés Jaime González.

feast of the town's patron saint, Saint Francis of Assisi, on October 4, a greatly reduced number of *Alchileos* dancers performed, beginning with 'reverences' at the home of one of the principals. They then paraded through the streets and danced for a short while in the church forecourt.[18] These symbolic representations or acts substituting normal performances did not free the dance principals from their obligations, since they were expected to organize the full dance in 2021.

In San Jerónimo Amanalco, some six dance groups usually perform to celebrate the town's [35] patron saint, St. Jerome, on September 30. In April, although the number of deaths was rapidly rising in the town during the first wave of the pandemic, the principals of the *Arrieros* dance group decided that, regardless of the circumstances, they would perform the dance, at least on a reduced scale, either in front of the church or in some other open space. In May, the father of one of the principals, formerly active in the dance himself, died of Covid-19. No funerals were allowed then and when his ashes were interred in July some forty members of the group danced in the cemetery and at the municipal offices where the deceased had worked. Despite the fact that other dances were not performed and although other *Arrieros* dancers and members of their family had been stricken and died of Covid-19, the rest of the group became even more determined to dance for the saint and began rehearsing in August. As one of our informants put it, "those who died knew that we were going to dance. Let's do it now for them. Let's continue with this devotion to honor their memory."

The *mayordomos* allowed them to provide a morning serenade and leave a floral offering for [36] the saint, and the principals went into the church to pray before the saint's statue. Next, some forty dancers, most of them wearing protective masks, danced a while outside the church. Leaving the churchyard, the dancers also performed outside two of the town's small chapels before proceeding to the home of the dancer where the rehearsals had taken place; there they

18 *Facebook Danza Alchileos*. Accessed December 6, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/DanzaAlchileosOficial/videos/335114391053998/

danced for several hours. Photos and a video posted on the Facebook profile of a person close to one of the dancers elicited varied comments. One said: "This wasn't like other years, but they danced with great faith for our holy patron." But another, more cautious comment read: "It's great for those who had the courage to dance. But those of us who choose to respect the confinement measures join in the sorrow of the families who have lost a loved one. San Jerónimo is in mourning!!!"[19]

[37] A curious set of circumstances enabled some dancers from Papalotla to perform and honor the town's patron saint in a unique way. None of the nine dance groups scheduled for the feast of the town's patron saint, Saint Toribio of Astorga (April 16), was able to perform. The town has a strongly entrenched tradition of the *Santiagos* dance, which reenacts a conflict between Christians and Moors in medieval Spain. In 2017, encouraged by local and state officials seeking to promote tourism, a group of thirty dancers obtained certification from the International Dance Council, an affiliate of the UNESCO. This was the subject of controversy, as some less-experienced dancers with greater financial resources paid the 164 Euro fee, while others could not afford it or chose not to be certified because they felt this was contrary to the dance's devotional character. In October 2020, when the spread of the coronavirus was abating, Santiago dancers were invited to perform at a virtual cultural event sponsored by state authorities near the state capital of Toluca.

[38] The interpretation of the dance, promoted on the festival program as one of the "cultural values of Texcoco," was far removed from its religious significance. Nevertheless, one of the most seasoned dancers, who had adamantly refused to be certified in 2017, was more than happy to participate, explaining that this was an opportunity to dance for Saint Toribio. The festival organizers were informed that the *Santiagos* dance was not a "ballet or folk dance" like other dances on the event program, but a religious expression, and that a special wooden platform would have to be erected for the performance. On Sunday morning of October 18, before traveling to the festival venue, a group of twenty-six dancers, accompanied by a few relatives and fourteen musicians, gathered at the church. Their temperatures were taken, masks were required, a safe distance was maintained, and hand sanitizer was in abundant supply. For our informant, the purpose of going to the church was to "do honor to and ask permission" from Saint Toribio for "his consent to perform his dance in his honor, to stage the dance away from his temple."

[39] As the video posted on Facebook shows, what took place inside the church was much like the initial ceremony prior to performance in the context of religious feasts. The ceremony started with a rendition of the Mexican birthday song, *Las Mañanitas*, by the musicians. The dancers next made the sign of the cross and knelt in prayer before the statue of the saint, and briefly executed several of the different dance steps.[20] Once at the festival venue, the statue of Saint Toribio was placed on the platform set up for the dance. The dancers recited segments of the spoken parts, and the performance was livestreamed and later posted on the festival's Facebook profile.[21] In the view of our informant, participating in the festival allowed the dancers to honor, "though differently," the saint in times of the quarantine. Although the dancers were formally required to wear masks, they took them off for the performance. As

19 *Facebook video*. Accessed October 21, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/100010996571284/videos/1216982425344965/

20 *Facebook video*. Accessed December 8, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/Cr%C3%B3nicas-de-Papalotla-M%C3%A9x-108439897360858/videos/1010572529459590/

21 *Facebook video*. Accessed December 10, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/FestivalInternacionalQuimera/videos/2135356990105397/

our informant put it, "once we were on the platform, with the blessing of God, practicing our religion, demonstrating our faith, we felt we would be aided. Although we were aware of the risk, God took care of us and no harm came to pass."

[40] The new surge of the pandemic in December 2020 and January 2021 dashed whatever remaining hopes of dancing as in normal times, at least for early 2021. "Symbolic representations" substituted the normal dances, and Facebook and other social platforms came to play an important role in this process. During the eleven-day feast of Saint Sebastian (January 20) in Tepetlaoxtoc, eight dance groups performed in 2020. In early January 2021, the Facebook account "*Tepetlaoxtoc Historia, Tradición y Cultura*" invited its followers to "virtually celebrate" the feast by posting photos from past years of different events of the festivities.[22] One of the *mayordomías* opened the *Mayordomía San Sebastián 20 de enero 2021* account and posted videos showing numerous displays of the traditional media—flowers, fireworks and music, as well as symbolic representations of two dances. One of the symbolic representations was that of the *Sembradoras* dance. Instead of the usual sixty to eighty dancers, a group of twelve heard mass on the second day of the feast and entered the chapel where they genuflected and crossed themselves before dancing some twenty minutes. The other took place on the final weekend of the feast and, instead of the usual three to four hundred dancers, thirteen participants in the *Serranos* dance heard mass and performed several steps of their dance for about twenty minutes.

[41] During the feast, masses were said at the entrance of the church with few in attendance and the space in front of the church was cordoned off to limit access. Nevertheless, the façade of the small chapel was lavishly adorned with flowers and different musical groups played. Some of the videos posted have a professional quality and seemed to have been made specifically for livestreaming and viewing on Facebook. One of them attracted more than 8,000 views in just two days after it was posted on January 20. The fireworks display was, in fact, a sophisticated combination of pyrotechnics and laser technology. Geometric shapes and the figure of Saint Sebastian with the words "Saint Sebastian, Bless Us" were projected on the walls of buildings on the chapel plaza, accompanied by recorded music. All of this, including shots taken from a drone, was livestreamed and later posted on Facebook.[23]

[42] In the town of Tepetitlán, symbolic representations of two dances were performed during the festivities of the Purification of the Virgin Mary (February 2, 2021). Every year, on the occasion of this feast, the *Santiagos* dance group puts on a spectacular and costly performance (see Figure 7). Although in 2020 a new set of principals had committed themselves to organizing the dance in 2021, they decided not to perform. The reason was that their commitment included having several sets of costly costumes, as the combats in this dance nearly always result in torn and soiled costumes, making it necessary to have replacements on hand to continue the performance. Principals must also offer three meals a day during the three days this dance is put on, in addition to paying musicians. However, as the date of the feast approached, a group of dancers who had danced in previous years and thus had the costumes and knew the lines decided that it would be an insult to the Virgin if this dance was not staged for her feast. Some sixty men, all wearing protective masks, danced for one hour to the accompaniment of

22 *Facebook website*. Accessed January 22, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/Tepetlaoxtoc-Historia-Tradici%C3%B3n-y-Cultura-620321778108590/photos/a.623882814419153/1870976586376430

23 *Facebook video*. Accessed January 22, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/Mayordomia-San-Sebasti%C3%A1n-M%C3%A1rtir-20-de-enero-2021-101745744811188/videos/d41d8cd9/762130577744155/?_so_=watchlist&_rv_=related_videos

Figure 7 Santiagos dancers during the celebration of the feast of the Virgin of Candlemas, 2021, San Antonio Tepetitlán, Chiautla, State of Mexico. Copyright: Eladio Cerón Sol.

musicians hired by the *mayordomos* for the general ritual needs of the feast and recited some of the lines.

The other symbolic representation made in Tepetitlán, that of the *Vaqueros* dance group, [43] was somewhat different. In 2020, a group of several brothers and sisters and their adult children made a collective vow to organize this dance in 2021 in gratitude for the recovery from cancer of a daughter of one of the brothers. Instead of the traditional three full days of dancing, they performed in front of the church for about an hour in a space closed off to the public. Our informant, a member of this kin group, described this act as a "a small symbolic advance [payment]." In this way, they partially fulfilled their vow to the extent allowed by local authorities, making a partial payment of their commitment that they expect to be able to fully honor in 2022. This will include rehearsing, paying musicians and offering three meals a day to hundreds of guests during the three days they dance.

In early 2022, the symbolic representations characterizing the devotion of the saints in 2021 [44] became a thing of the past. As more and more people were vaccinated and developed natural immunity from the successive waves of the virus, the case loads dropped off. The elaborate ritual cycle described above was resumed, although not yet with the intensity of pre-Covid times. Dances took place under rigorous sanitary restrictions, reflecting the so-called "new normality." At the time of writing, maintaining a safe distance and the use of masks, sanitizing gel and even disinfectant aerosols are now the norm as far as we can ascertain throughout the two regions under study (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 Principal dancer, Serranos dance in the procession of the feast honoring Our Lord of Graces, 2021. Tepexpan, Acolman, State of Mexico. Copyright: Isaac Trenado MX.

Final Considerations

Drawing on Stolow's (2005) concept of "religion as media," we have identified masses, the lavish public displays of flowers, fireworks and music along with dances as the five principal media characterizing the religious feasts in the regions of Texcoco and Teotihuacán in central Mexico. Although all five were severely curtailed by the measures adopted to slow the spread of Covid-19, the dances have been affected to the greatest extent. Most dance groups simply did not perform, although we learned of scattered instances of dance principals presenting a floral offering to the saint. All told, there were few instances of "symbolic representations," a term we have adopted from one of our informants to refer to scaled-down or modified forms of dancing. These instances bring to mind other cases of substitution or reduction of offerings in contractual relations with the divine. For example, according to E.E. Evans-Pritchard, among the Nuer of South Sudan a cucumber can either replace an ox or be offered with the promise of a future sacrifice of an animal (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 128, 148, 197, 205, 279). In a context much closer to our research, Danièle Dehouve (2009, 140–41) found that among the Tlapanecs of the Mexican State of Guerrero, in case of need, an egg or chick could replace a chicken in some sacrifices. The Tlapanecs even haggle and inform the power to whom the sacrifice is made that they are getting an egg instead of a goat, while presenting excuses explaining that they were not able to provide the customary offering (Dehouve 2009, 38).[24] [45]

Already considering the probable cancelation of the dance he was supposed to participate [46]

24 One important difference with the examples of substitution reported by Evans-Pritchard and Dehouve should be stressed. As Roberte Hamayon has noted, in ancient Rome, wax and bread figures could replace real oxen when they were not easy to obtain, and while among the Nuer a cucumber could serve as an

in, one of our interviewees expressed an idea echoing these customs. He said that on the day of the feast, he imagined going to the church dressed in his dance costume, kneeling and making the sign of the cross before the saint's statue and saying: "I have come to see you, but You know how things are. I have to go now." Other informants imagined a near future with performance of the dance under quarantine in terms similar to the symbolic representations we have described in the previous section. One said that the combat dance in which he is involved would have to be performed with a much smaller number of dancers who would wear gloves and simulate the battle, all the while keeping a safe distance. Another informant noted that some members of his group were considering an hour-long performance of twenty-five masked dancers instead of the usual three to four hundred, one day instead of two, with recorded music and lots of hand sanitizer available. He was aware of the possible risk of being fined by the civil authorities, but said he would gladly pay it: "After all, I owe more to the patron saint." He also noted that the opening chant of the dance says, "We are here to fulfill our vow, Father", and that most of the dancers had made a vow to dance, whatever the circumstances.

[47] The words of another experienced dancer and *ensayador* reveal how important the religious significance of the dances is for many people in the two regions. They also bring out the deep principles underlying observable behavior that has often been seen as folklore in Mexico, where 'folk dances' have been promoted by the State as one of the performing arts and part of the national identity. He envisioned a version of the dance in quarantine, stripped down to its bare essentials. The customary visits and performances of the dancers at key points in the town, along with the meals offered by the principals to dancers and townspeople, would all have to be canceled. Instead, they would provide food only to the musicians, as this is a customary part of their payment. The dance would be performed inside the church, after mass, once everyone had left. He emphasized that the spirit of the dance, its true purpose, was to perform for the saint. Omitting adjacent traditions, all carried out in normal times, would not be a problem.

[48] The similarities between actual and imagined symbolic representations reveal that "the spirit of the dance, its true purpose"—or "the essence of the dance," as another informant put it—is, indeed, an offering to the saint. They also show that these substitutions aim at maintaining an ongoing relationship with the saint in times of severe restrictions. But the use of livestreaming and posting on Facebook reveal another important religious need that we believe many people in the two regions have felt during the lockdown. In calling for an understanding of religion as 'mediation,' an attempt "to bridge the gap between the here and now and something 'beyond'," drawing on Orsi (2012), Birgit Meyer (2015, 336) has stressed that multiple media are involved in "making the invisible visible." To the same end, she coined the term "sensational forms" to give account of "body techniques as well as sensibilities and emotions that become embodied in the habitus" (Meyer 2015, 338). Dancing is a sensational form and, as a public act, serves to make visible to the audience and the townspeople in general the covenant with the saint. It is in this sense that we believe that livestreaming symbolic representations, as well as posting pictures of dance regalia and videos and photos of past dances on Facebook all constitute an attempt by those with access to this technology to convey at least part of the sensorial dimensions involved in the performance of the dances

acceptable offering for the ancestors, it could not replace an ox in marriage prestations (Hamayon 2015, 3–4).

in normal times. In this way, they remind viewers of the ongoing contractual relation that will one day be made visible again through the traditional means.

It is still too early to weigh in on the full impact that the Covid-19 pandemic will have on [49] the dances and religious feasts. The examples we have provided of limited use of traditional media, substitution practices, symbolic representations and use of digital media offer only a partial picture of a truly catastrophic situation that has disrupted the customary sociability revolving around an inordinately rich public religious life. Due to the complexity of human emotions, the inner feelings of actors are not easy to penetrate, making the full breadth of the religious dimension of the dances difficult to capture even in normal circumstances. Furthermore, due to the pandemic, our research was mainly limited to people with telephones and internet access with whom we were acquainted before the lockdown and to those towns where substitution practices were posted on Facebook. Notwithstanding these limitations, we identified several crucial questions that warrant further study: Have illness and recovery from Covid-19 been a common motive for making a vow to dance as it was for one of our informants? Did the symbolic representations, in addition to maintaining the relationship with the saint, take on the added function of a supplication to end the pandemic? Has the pandemic shaken people's faith, preparing the way for a possible repudiation of traditional practices due to perceived abandonment by the saint? Or, on the contrary, will it result in a reinforcement of the dance offering as a means to ward off future disasters? Further research, including in-person fieldwork, is needed to answer these questions and gain a better view as to how popular Catholicism in Mexico has weathered the effects of Covid-19.

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Masks, Mosques and Lockdowns: Islamic Organisations Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Germany

ARNDT EMMERICH
Max Weber Institute of Sociology, Heidelberg University, Germany

ABSTRACT The article investigates COVID-19 related responses by Islamic associations and local mosques based on fieldwork in the German state of Lower Saxony. The inquiry focuses on the time prior to the first lockdown, during mosque closures, and around the opening phase, covering the months between February 2020 and November 2020. Drawing on organisational sociology, Islamic studies, and research on pandemics, the article contributes to the debate on the contested nature of Islamic representation and the institutionalisation of Islam in Germany by analysing internal and relational dynamics, different and converging strategies, external challenges, and cooperation by Islamic authorities during the first COVID-19 wave. By taking into account Germany's multilevel political system including the national, state, and municipal level as well as transnational dimensions, the analysis integrates external expectations on Islamic organisations and local mosques and internal discussions within these institutions to relate their responses and navigation to the contested representations of Islamic organisations in public discourse as well as to the current debate on Islam in Germany.

KEYWORDS Pandemic-related governance, organisational sociology, Islamic studies, Muslims in Germany, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

On March 22, 2020, a national lockdown was declared in Germany due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).[1] The lockdown resulted in unprecedented contact and movement restrictions including a ban of social, cultural, and religious events and congregations. Ten days earlier, on March 13, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), Germany's [1]

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largest Islamic association, closed all its 900 mosques for the Friday prayer and subsequent gatherings. It became the first macro-religious institution in the country to take such a drastic step. In the following days, local mosques, other Islamic associations and the Coordination Council for Muslims (*Koordinationsrat der Muslime*, KRM) followed until the lockdown became legally binding across Germany. Around April 20, 2020, after Easter and before Ramadan, lockdown measures were slowly lifted, including the opening of shops and schools. Religious communities, which were not immediately allowed to congregate, started to assert their wish to open through public statements and court cases in defence of religious freedom. Leaders of mainline churches in particular argued that Christians had sacrificed extensively during the Easter closure and expressed discontent of prioritising commerce over religion. Politicians, health experts, and Islamic leaders, however, expressed concerns that Muslim communities would be unable to organise the Ramadan festivities safely and that large festive gatherings could turn into superspreading events. Germany's largest tabloid newspaper, *Bild Zeitung*, published a front-page article with the title "Churches remain closed for fear of Ramadan Chaos,"[2] accusing Muslims of being unorganised and, therefore, preventing other religious groups from opening up. At the same time, grassroots pressure from local Muslim communities grew, demanding mosques to be reopened. The increasing internal and external demands forced KRM and Islamic associations to develop an opening strategy. In response, they adopted a slow and gradual approach with only three daily mosque prayers from May 9. Some independent mosques, however, did not follow KRM's guidelines, and started to fully reopen in early May with Friday prayers organised according to their own safety concepts. Overall, mosques largely stayed out of the headlines due to pragmatic navigation, compliance, and adaptation during the crisis and remained open during the second lockdown from November 2020 onwards.

[2] This brief overview provides the background for the main objective of this article, namely, to analyse the navigation strategies of Islamic associations and local mosques, including different forms of compliance and involvement in pandemic-related governance. Within the public discourse, mosque responses have been described as a united effort, collective restraint and sacrifice among German Muslims, and unilateral support of governmental orders regarding shutdowns and social distancing. Whilst it could be assumed that mosques complied with government regulations and mosque closures to be protected from the devastating consequences of COVID-19, this article discusses a number of different rationales, plans, and degrees of adaptation. Drawing on organisational sociology, Islamic studies, and research on pandemics, the empirical analysis inquires about the changing nature of Islamic authorities during the first lockdown in Germany. In particular, it focuses on the state of Lower Saxony, which serves well as an average case in the German context when it comes to the negotiation and accommodation of Islam in Germany.

[3] Because of Germany's federal structure, which includes 16 states (*Länder*), and related cultural and religious policies, the governance and institutionalisation of Islam is negotiated predominantly at the state level (Körs and Nagel 2018). Negotiations over a cooperation treaty between Muslim leaders and the state government of Lower Saxony began in the early 2000s. State-level integration via Islamic education in schools (2012), prison chaplaincies (2012), and Islamic theology chairs at the University of Osnabruck (2013) was achieved in Lower Saxony. However, issues regarding the constitutional loyalty of Muslim associations and concerns over Islam's incompatibility with gender equality rules accompanied the negotiation

2 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from German are by the author.

process (Ceylan 2017). In January 2017, the state government of Lower Saxony stopped the treaty negotiations with its Muslim partner associations (DITIB and Schura[3]). Their failure was a result of the increasing political tension between Berlin and Ankara after the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016, the allegations against Turkish imams to spy on political opponents in Germany, and an internal leadership contest within the Schura. These Islam-related politics of and emerging tension in Lower Saxony mirror the national framework of institutionalising Islam through cooperation treaties (Spielhaus and Herzog 2015; Körs 2019) and reflects the situation of Muslims in Germany regarding regional integrations. Lower Saxony constitutes a relevant case study for the inquiry into the crisis navigation of Islamic actors during COVID-19, which can inform and be compared to other state-level, national, and international polities.

Thereby, the article contributes to the debate on the contested nature of Islamic representation and the institutionalisation of Islam in Germany by documenting and analysing internal and relational dynamics, external challenges, and cooperation of Islamic authorities at different organisational levels during the first COVID-19 wave. The study further inquires whether the centralised leadership and decision-making system as well as transnational organisational ties of KRM and its constituent members, which have been criticised in the past for hampering grassroots initiatives, served as a buffer against conspiracy theories and internal resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the theoretical framework, research questions, and Islamic organisational context are laid out before the fieldwork and case studies are introduced. The subsequent discussion uses empirical data from the negotiations within and between KRM members and their respective local mosques over centralised responses, autonomy, and internal resistance. Finally, fieldwork findings from within an independent mosque (IM) outside the fold of KRM are analysed which show different and converging strategies in responding to the pandemic. By considering Germany's federal system (i.e., national; state or *Länder*; and regional/municipal level) as well as transnational discourses, the analysis integrates external expectations on Islamic organisations and local mosques and internal discussions within these institutions to relate their responses and navigation to the contested representations of Islamic organisations in public discourse as well as to the current debate on Islam in Germany. [4]

Compliance and Resistance of Religious Organisations During Crisis

To analyse internal interpretations and decision-making processes regarding the navigation of Islamic associations and local mosques during COVID-19, insights from organisational sociology (focusing on legitimacy, compliance, and resistance), medical anthropology of pandemics, and research on Islamic authorities are discussed in this section. Earlier research on organisations focused on how structural environments and institutional expectations determine organisational behaviour, and how compliance with external demands may enhance the group's legitimacy and resources (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995). More recent studies questioned this static understanding and developed an agency perspective by focusing on membership interests, internal diversity, and different strategies to deal with the varying internal and institutional demands and contradictions arising from them (Oliver 1991; Hirsch 1997; Rosenow-Williams 2012). By using an agency perspective, the article aims to answer [5]

3 The Schura Lower Saxony is the state-level association representing more than 90 mosques. DITIB mosques are not part of the Schura.

three research questions in the empirical sections. First, *does organisational compliance with and adaptation to external expectations result in increased public legitimacy as well as increasing internal resistance of members?* To answer this question in the COVID-19 context, I analyse how leaders of Muslim communities in Germany complied with external expectations such as extensive mosque closures; how central decision-making by Islamic association was received, negotiated, and resisted among different groups and local congregations; and how these internal and external expectations were managed by different Muslim actors and Islamic organisations.

[6] To deal with membership diversity, (voluntary) organisations often introduce formal and informal hierarchical structures due to different characteristics and competencies of their members (Simon 1962; Bano 2012). From this, the second question arises: *Do organisational hierarchies and professionalised leadership structures alienate supporters at the grassroots level, especially during the time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic?* Through different accounts from local members and leaders of Islamic associations I will respond to this question by showing how contested debates over pandemic-related measures and centralised decision-making emerged at different intra- and inter-organisational levels and temporal stages, and how they were dealt with. We may assume that internal power struggles between imams and mosque committees, or between local members, mosque chairmen, and state-level leaders, over organisational adaptation and appropriate responses intensify or that interests align because of an existential threat (Chaves 1998).

[7] Finally, the third question I will answer throughout this paper is: *Did Muslim leaders in Germany sideline local congregations during the pandemic in order to comply with external expectations and increase public legitimacy?* By employing an agency perspective within organisational research, this study analyses different navigation strategies of Islamic associations, from passive rule adaptation to moderate resistance and active non-compliance in response to institutional demands and internal negotiations (Oliver 1991; Rosenow-Williams 2012). Since open resistance or outright dismissal of institutional expectations by Muslim leaders at the official organisational level were rarely observed during the first German lockdown, it may indicate that Islamic organisations successfully employed the strategy of de-coupling, displaying a united front to outsiders while dealing with dissent and resistance in the backstage area (Meyer and Rowan 1991). This article is interested in these assumed backstage negotiations, suggesting a pragmatic desire for compromise and participation among Muslim leaders.

[8] During the Ebola pandemic in West Africa, medical anthropologists inquired why people refuse or comply with vaccination and other health initiatives and resist or support state-led interventions. Their results demonstrate a complex connection between community behaviour and histories of structural discrimination and institutional distrust (Richards 2016; Tengbeh 2018). For Muslim minorities, who have an ambivalent relation to German state agencies (next section) and are confronted with structural discrimination, motivations to comply may also differ at various organisational levels. However, public officials often associated religious authorities with resistance to health regulations and disease control (Chandler 2015). These accusations reflect the persistent assumption that local mosques and Islamic authorities induce auto-segregation through the use of heritage languages and traditional and anti-scientific teachings which are incompatible with democratic policies (Sahgal and Yuval-Davis 1992; Bayat 1996; Tibi 2000). However, recent studies from scholars of pandemic outbreaks have pointed to the constructive role of religious capital and faith leaders (Abramowitz 2015). For instance, by using historical and religious examples, including how the Prophet Muhammad

and leaders of the Ottoman Empire acted during epidemics, the Turkish state together with the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and other religious authorities legitimised the closing of mosques, quarantines, and lockdowns of public life during Ramadan while holding less risk-averse religious groups at bay. Diyanet could rely on its religious capital including thousands of imams and mosques to communicate its public health messages (Balci 2020). Similar messages by mosques and local clergies have been conveyed during the 2006 bird flu pandemic, while mosques in Germany invited health experts to inform congregations about the 2009 swine flu outbreak and became proactive in the COVID-19 vaccine rollout in 2021. The next section will introduce the role of Islamic associations within the German institutional context, which provides the background to analyse the ways Muslim communities navigated through the pandemic.

Islamic Associations in Germany

Today, Germany has between 2350 and 2750 mosques, Alevi community centres (*cemevleri*), and prayer rooms (Halm et al. 2012). Germans of Turkish descent represent over 60% of the approximately five million Muslims in Germany (Haug, Müssig, and Stichs 2009). From the 1970s, mosque communities formed various Islamic associations (*Dachverbände*), which can be described as socio-religious lobbies with different and sometimes competing theological, cultural, and political positions (Halm et al. 2012). While maintaining ties with heritage centres such as Turkey or in the Middle East, Islamic associations started to focus increasingly on local resources of German Muslims and established themselves as political and administrative partners of the German government from the late 1990s (Schiffauer 2003). [9]

Since the early 2000s, increased efforts were made among leaders of Islamic associations to reduce competition between various Muslim groups and emerge with a united voice under a representational structure of Islam in Germany (*Einigungsprozess*). The unification and institutional negotiations culminated in the German Islam Conference in 2006—a dialogue platform for Muslim, government, and civil society actors, initiated and tightly controlled by the Federal Ministry of the Interior (for a critical review, see Tezcan 2012). The Islam Conference led to the creation of the KRM in 2007, consisting (by now) of six major Islamic associations[4], suggesting "a process of adaptation both to the demands of the German institutional environment and to internal interests" (Rosenow-Williams 2012, 450). The aim for the KRM is to institutionalize Islam in Germany (Spielhaus 2014) by obtaining the status of a public corporation (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*) and becoming a recognized state partner to collect taxes, open Islamic schools, and operate social service facilities, which mostly remains unaccomplished (Rosenow-Williams and Kortmann 2011). The unification process of Islamic organisations was influenced by various external and internal demands, including [10]

4 DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) is the largest and increasingly controversial umbrella organisation in Germany. It was founded in 1984, after the German state requested state-monitored imams from Turkey to prevent the rise of political Islam in Germany (Ozkan 2019). Within KRM, DITIB is the most powerful member, provides most of the organisational infrastructure in its own headquarters in Cologne, and retains a veto right (Rosenow-Williams and Kortmann 2011). IRD (Islamic Council for the Federal Republic of Germany) is part of KRM. Its largest constituent member is IGMG (the Islamic Community Millî Görüş), which was founded (under a different name) in 1976. In this study, I will mainly refer to IGMG, due to my interview sample. Because of IGMG links to the Turkish politician Necmettin Erbakan, it is monitored by the German intelligence service (Schiffauer 2010). ZMD (Central Council of Muslims in Germany) was founded in 1994 and is characterised by its multi-ethnic membership. The other KRM members are the Association of Islamic Cultural Centres (VIKZ), the Union of Islamic- Albanian Centres in Germany (UIAZD), and the Central Council of Moroccans in Germany (ZRMD).

Muslim communities' search for public legitimacy in the post-9/11 context as well as the German government's expectation of a single negotiation partner to reduce divisions among Muslims and diminish the impact from Islamic authorities abroad (Laurence 2006).

[11] Over the last two decades, German Muslims also started to participate in negotiations over religious governance within Germany's 16 federal states (*Länder*) via regional and local treaties. The resulting decentralisation of Islamic authority is reflected in the introduction of regional branches of Islamic associations and state-level cooperation, such as the Schura in Lower Saxony, Hessen, Bremen, and Hamburg (Spielhaus and Herzog 2015). Regional integration of and local partnerships with German Muslims challenged the clout of national and foreign-based Islamic authorities, which became increasingly concerned about losing influence on local mosques and regional leaders (Rosenow-Williams 2012). DITIB, for instance, blocked regional alliances and developed its own centralized dialogue program and imam training to restrain grassroots initiatives (Rosenow-Williams and Kortmann 2011; Klinkhammer 2019).

[12] The ongoing debates over centralization and autonomy within Islamic associations are reflected in the contested role of the KRM as the main Islamic umbrella platform and state partner. Through its constituent members, KRM claims to represent more than 85% of German Muslims who are organised in local mosque communities.[5] However, its legitimacy is contested, in particular in the light of intergenerational changes and religious individualization of German Muslims (Halm 2013). Haug et al. (2009) showed that only 40% of Muslims "feel" represented by KRM, which does not speak on behalf of many Muslim minority groups such as Alevis, Shias, and Ahmadiyyas and various independent mosques. Only around 13% of mosques in Germany (145) have no affiliation to a larger Islamic association. Most of these independent mosques are characterised by ethnically diverse congregations (Halm et al. 2012).

[13] Internal tension and competition over the trajectory and actual decision-making power have been recorded among member associations in KRM, which challenges the unification process. In many instances, state governments in Germany tend to directly negotiate with individual associations, thereby diminishing the influence of KRM. This is further elaborated by Rosenow-Williams (2012), who illustrated the different strategies of public engagement of three KRM members, namely ZMD, DITIB, and IGMG, ranging from mainly timid and compliant to confident demands and criticism of the German state. For instance, while IGMG has taking up court cases, published assertive press statements, or approached schools when Muslim minority and religious rights were violated, DITIB and ZMD follow a less confrontational approach, abstaining from legal battles. Despite substantive organisational autonomy by members and internal tension, KRM's constituent associations still believe in the unification project to be continued as a consulting and communication platform, which could be observed in the pandemic. During the COVID-19 crisis, KRM appeared to have regained relevance within the German public and local mosque communities. KRM has been in direct contact with the German Interior Ministry, speaking on behalf of German Muslims and an-

5 Such claims of Muslim representation by Islamic associations are contested and difficult to assess, given that very few mosque attendees are registered members. Similarly, the head of the family is often the only official mosque member, which does not account for other family members. Moreover, the securitisation of Islam in Germany and negative perceptions towards mosques by the majority society may partially explain the lack of motivation to compile detailed membership lists and the reluctance of ordinary Muslims to become official mosque members from the fear of negative repercussions.

nouncing hygiene and opening concepts to which other Islamic associations would refer on a regular basis.

Case Studies and Methods

In October 2020, I conducted fieldwork in Lower Saxony to understand how Islamic associations and local mosques navigate through the COVID-19 pandemic during the closures and opening phases. Respondents and selected institutions in this study were members of the KRM, including the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), the Islamic Community Milli Görüs (IGMG), the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), as well as one independent mosque (IM). This IM was selected due to its outright and vocal opposition to Islamic associations and mosque umbrella platforms such as KRM, which provide protection, resources, and guidance to local communities but also limit organisational autonomy. 12 interviews with local mosque committee members, state and national leaders of Islamic associations, and government officials, including health and integration officers, were carried out. Four respondents from DITIB, ZMD, and IGMG were directly involved in the national crisis management of KRM and their respective associations. In addition, a week-long participant observation in IM was conducted, including evening seminars, a Friday prayer, and a sport event. Like various conservative *da'wa* (proselytising through Islamic education) movements, such as the Tablighi Jamaat or quietist Salafi groups, but also liberal Islamic institutions such as the Ibn Rushd-Goethe Mosque in Berlin, IM shares through its theological understanding and negative experience with mosques and individuals affiliated to KRM a tangible scepticism towards mainstream, hierarchical, and organised Islam in Germany. Through these nuanced examples of macro-, meso-, and micro-organisational levels, the article contributes to a better understanding of pandemic-related responses and the contestation of Islamic representation in Germany. [14]

The analysis is complemented by the results of my previous fieldwork between 2017 and 2020 in the same Muslim communities, and through online research on social media platforms during the pandemic.[6] As I conducted my research during the pandemic, it was crucial to be aware of local hygiene regulations and to inquire into what respondents were comfortable with. In some cases, it was important to move interviews online or conduct them via telephone. Towards the end of October, the situation started to change with increasing infection rates prior to the second lockdown, so that I decided to stop the physical data collection, following the public health advice. The inquiry focused on the time prior to the first lockdown, the mosque closures, and the opening phase, covering the months between February and November 2020. By including actors from different Islamic associations and affiliated mosques within the lower and upper leadership as well as an independent mosque, the comparative analysis focuses on internal and relational dynamics, different and converging strategies, external challenges and cooperation, but also on subjective experiences and emotions of my respondents during the first COVID-19 wave in Germany. Due to the participant observation, I could see how one mosque committee and congregation experienced and adapted to the changing situation with new rules and restrictions being introduced in October 2020. Although the data only covers a relatively small sample in one geographical region, this re- [15]

6 Since 2017, I have done extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Lower Saxony on language and institutional changes within local mosques (Emmerich 2021), Islamic education and interreligious dialogue (Emmerich 2022), and the governance of Islam in rural areas of Lower Saxony (Emmerich Forthcoming, 2022).

search reveals a variety of pragmatic responses to the pandemic that counter some monolithic displays of Muslims in Germany and invite further research. In the empirical section, I switch between using KRM as well as their constituent members such as DITIB, depending on my respondents' emphasis, which mirrors the decentralization of Islamic authority structures in Germany. To ensure anonymity of respondents and local communities, names and other identifiers have been changed or omitted.

Centralised Leadership Decisions and Responses to COVID-19

In the weeks before the national lockdown, DITIB mosques were instructed by the central leadership in Cologne to decide autonomously in cooperation with local health authorities whether to stay open or close. However, after a late-night emergency meeting on March 12, 2020, consisting of national and state-level DITIB representatives, the association instructed mosques across Germany to suspend the upcoming Friday prayer and subsequent gatherings. The decision was communicated to local mosques, the other Islamic associations, and state-level platforms such as the Schura in Lower Saxony. DITIB's rationale for the early closure was two-fold, according to a senior spokesperson in Lower Saxony. First, DITIB was not involved in the government's emergency planning, unlike church authorities, who have a "historical insider status." The DITIB leader recalled that "we could not afford to wait until the last minute, when the government decided what happens with the mosques. It would have led to chaos… So, we used our right of self-determination [*Selbstbestimmungsrecht*] as Islamic association to close our mosques and argued that health is more important than religion." Secondly, DITIB used this historical moment to indicate "constitutional loyalty" (*Verfassungsloyalität*) - an often-encountered obstacle during state contract negotiations in the past. "Although religious freedom is utmost important, we could prove that we do not cherry pick, but are loyal to all constitutional rights," as stated by the same respondent. [16]

Before the closure, Islamic associations were concerned that members would go to the well-attended Friday prayers, which is compulsory for Muslims, before returning to their workplaces and families, potentially infecting others. By pre-emptively suspending the Friday prayer, DITIB reduced the "ambivalent feeling" ("*mulmiges Gefühl*") many believers had expressed with regard to whether to attend the obligatory event or not. On March 13, the day of the Friday prayer, local committees were instructed to symbolically lock the mosque gates and stand in front of them to explain the situation. At that time, the national leadership and local committees feared resistance from local congregations, as "every mosque has a different DNA," noted by a DITIB officer-bearer in Hanover. Authority disputes over who can forbid the Friday prayer, persistent cultural beliefs ("If you don't go three times to the *jummah* [Friday prayer], your heart will close"), and alleged overreactions to the pandemic were mentioned as potential hurdles by my interviewees. A local DITIB member from a provincial mosque far away from the headquarters in Hanover described her distress that day: "We are talking about religion here. It is totally different if you tell everyone to work remotely from home. But to say we are closing the mosque for the Friday prayer is another level." However, her fear of resistance was unfounded. Instead, some interviewees described feelings of gratitude for the central decision, where local authorities felt relieved of their responsibility and burden to decide on this delicate matter. Studies on local mosque management illustrated that it is mainly done by volunteers from the more inward-looking second generation with limited resources and administrative knowledge, while German-born members of the third generation may yet [17]

lack confidence or interest in representing the mosque (e.g., Jonker 2005; Nagel and Kalender 2014; Körs and Nagel 2018). Hence, (internal) rule compliance and the fast adaptation by local communities to the pandemic-related restrictions can be interpreted as an alignment of leadership interests with grassroots concerns.

Concepts, Innovation, and Impatience

[18] KRM and Islamic associations worked on central concepts to engage local constituencies during the lockdown. A state-level and recently elected IGMG national representative, who drove 400 kilometres from Lower Saxony to the headquarters in Cologne the day after the mosque closure, recalled that "for eight hours" the entire IGMG leadership discussed how to come up with "online plans, zoom classrooms, and telephone helplines." During the meeting, concerns over circulating conspiracy theories were voiced. "We couldn't afford to do nothing for the next three months," he said, mirroring DITIB's pre-emptive emergency considerations. Although it took some mosques until the beginning of Ramadan, Islamic associations eventually set up a vast online programme. A local member in her late 20s, who was in charge of a mosque's youth program, noted that "right after closing [on March 13], everyone felt a bit paralyzed and worried about what comes next. But the community life was reactivated during the lockdown with the beginning of Ramadan [on April 23], when social media started to play a big role." The lockdown led to technological innovation and digital knowledge transfers within local mosques with "many members of the first generation now being able to attend online conferences and virtual spaces," according to her. The committee member further noted that social ties in the community were strengthened as members were reminded of "how precious the mosque community was. We longed for it. Even some youth, who rarely came to the mosque [prior to lockdown], asked me when *sohbets* [youth discussion groups] will start again." More affluent mosques assisted smaller mosques with IT expertise and established online channels, while Islamic lectures from Turkey were streamed by smaller, semi-rural and economically weaker mosque communities in Germany. A recent study showed that KRM members such as IGMG and DITIB have successfully used the pandemic to expand their online portfolio for religious outreach and administrative tasks (Tabti 2020).

[19] Moreover, KRM leaders were involved in daily crisis management, communicating to local mosque committees the latest announcement by the government and health departments regarding new rules on open-air congregations, funerals, or body returns to Turkey. In case of Lower Saxony, the headquarters of Islamic associations became emergency centres where requests, updates, and strategies were bundled, evaluated, and executed. A senior participant described this time as follows: "Every day we worked until late at night, while our phones were ringing 24/7." Simultaneously, local communities were urged to contact the central leadership whenever "they didn't know what to do, and if we can't answer it, we can use our direct channels in the state chancellery [Staatskanzlei]." From an organisational perspective, KRM members could still rely on previous co-option, such as institutional ties and coalitions within the incumbent government in Lower Saxony, which contributed to effective crisis management and communication with local communities.

[20] The plan on how to reopen mosques in early May was again centrally decided within KRM, in which members discussed such prevention measures as wearing masks, introduction of personal carpets, and a three-meter distance rule inside mosques. For the first few weeks, only the three less frequented early prayers were allowed, while Friday, evening, and (the additional) *tarawih* prayers during Ramadan remained suspended. Although different rules

and laws existed across Germany's federal system, KRM announced a homogeneous rule catalogue for mosques. The rules and guidelines were restrictive and exceeded requirements by local health authorities. In contrast, churches followed a regional and less prescriptive opening strategy, where masks remained optional. Before the reopening, state-level DITIB leaders in Lower Saxony hosted an online meeting with all 80 local mosque presidents across Lower Saxony. As the DITIB respondent explained, "In March, we decided to close without grassroots consultation, but at the end of April, we wanted to open with more local participation." Central leaders informed local constituencies about health risks in case they held the daily *tarawih* recitations, and recommended remaining closed during Ramadan. The plan was to open before Eid al-Fitr (Islamic holiday celebrating at the end of Ramadan) in mid-May. Interestingly, in Lower Saxony no chairperson voted against the gradual opening strategy although it was legally permissible to fully reopen according to the German government. The reason for a 'minimalistic' opening strategy was to not overburden the local communities given the constant changes and newly introduced regulations.

[21] The central approach by KRM leaders revealed a degree of paternalism towards local mosque committees, which was expressed during my research and reflected the tension within voluntary organisations regarding membership diversity. A state-level DITIB leader in Hanover explained that "we don't have the professional know-how in all the mosques. Yes, some are very professional—but smaller ones with mainly first-generation committees and little German media exposure might be well-meaning but mix it up." In some cases, local members were reigned in and reminded of their responsibility to the public. "It's better to break one's heart than having 300 people infected. We told local members not to let people who show symptoms pray and to demand negative [COVID-19] tests from those who travelled." KRM leaders also used examples of individual mosques which tried to open on their own. One mosque within KRM went ahead and opened during Ramadan. According to a ZDM national-level respondent, the local committee tried to 'enforce' extra-strict hygiene rules, but quickly got cold feet because of the fear of negative press." A large number of believers, including refugees, showed up when only 20 people were allowed inside. "Imagine the stress for these few brave pioneers," the interviewee described with a degree of schadenfreude. KRM leaders expressed concerns over losing control and increasing internal tension if more autonomy (dependent on individual mosque capacity) were allowed. The micro-management of Islamic associations during the crisis mirrors the wider debate and internal concern over the decentralisation of Islamic authority structures in Germany, which could be further eroded (Klinkhammer 2019).

[22] KRM members used theological explanations as well as examples from different times and places, such as the limitation of the *hajj* (pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia or the rigid mosque closures in Turkey, to manage internal expectations around Ramadan. The same ZDM national-level leader explained that "we said to our members: how can you justify to fully open in Germany, when religious life in Turkey has been banned by the health ministry and Diyanet? In Germany, we won't be the guinea pig [*Versuchskaninchen*], but will follow the Robert Koch Institute[7] and local health departments." Since Turkey was strongly affected by COVID-19, local mosques were "aware of the gravity [*sensibilisert*]," according to a DITIB state-level interviewee: "If the Turkish health minister had said it was all fake—similar to what [President] Trump did, I suspect that we would have seen more resistance." Locally, the central

7 Germany's main government agency responsible for disease control and prevention.

KRM guidelines were passed down and monitored by imams, described as supervisors by a local member: "They watch out that no one goes against it."

[23] The centralized and proactive pandemic response and largely top-down decision-making by KRM as well as their professional leadership with linkages into German and Turkish politics has been effective, considering the low infection rate within mosques and external political validation. National, state, and regional leaders were proud that no mosque in Germany was associated with super-spreader gatherings or resistance against COVID-19 restrictions, whilst various Christian communities allowed such events and joined protests against COVID-19 measures. In retrospect, the successful crisis management and overall compliance by local congregations was seen as a substantive improvement regarding Muslim relations with the wider German public. Interviewees mentioned grateful remarks and praises by the German President, the Health Minister, and the Chancellor. Local mosques benefitted from symbolic campaigns, reaching out to key workers and offering their services to city councils, including a knitting campaign of masks and gift donations to hospitals. Moreover, top-down and preemptive mosque closures demonstrated "constitutional loyalty" that speaks to the agency perspective within organisational sociology. In line with research question one, the crisis allowed Muslim organisations to *adapt to external expectations* and thereby build a more positive public image of Islam in Germany.

Internal Resistance Over Federal Structures

[24] Albeit the strong focus on pan-Muslim unity and consensus in the political discourse, media, as well as KRM's own public relation campaign, this section provides a more complex picture of the response by KRM, Islamic associations, and local mosques, answering research questions two and three, i.e., whether the emphasis on external legitimacy has alienated, sidelined, and increased internal resistance of members due to considerable social costs and prolonged restrictions. DITIB's decision on March 12, 2020 to suspend Friday prayers within less than 12 hours was swiftly communicated to partners within KRM and other state level actors. A DITIB state-level official in Hanover recalled the message given to other associations that night: "Try to get it through or we can't have a united front this time." However, not all partner associations and mosques followed the unilateral decision, including the Schura in Lower Saxony, largely controlled by IGMG members. Instead, IGMG mosques used the Friday prayer's *hutbe* (sermon) on March 13 to address "health and hygiene" (*Gesundheit und Hygiene*) measures, including regular handwashing, sneezing in elbows, airing of rooms, and following the advice of local health departments. Without official state restriction, the *hutbe* concluded, *ibadas* (congregations) and Islamic education in mosques would continue until further notice. However, one day later, on March 14, IGMG also announced that all its mosques would shut down. A state-level IGMG interviewee recalled the reason to allow the Friday prayer on March 13: "We didn't close to avoid chaos. Many people came to the mosque." He laughed when he described DITIB's ad hoc decision: "Our General Secretary in Cologne was informed at midnight that DITIB would adjourn the Friday prayer, but you have to communicate such a massive step well in advance. We operate 600 mosques all over the world. There is a chain of command. So, we were overrun. In some mosques, they had to pray three to four times, since so many people showed up." Interestingly, both DITIB and IGMG used the phrase of "avoiding chaos" to justify their dissimilar strategies, which indicates organisational agency in navigating the crisis.

As discussed in the previous section, DITIB and ZMD argued for a centrally coordinated and monitored opening strategy. *Islamrat* (IRD) and IGMG, on the contrary, prepared hygiene concepts for each federal state, which were "case and population sensitive" to account for the varying rules across Germany's federal system. Equally concerned about internal resistance, IGMG allowed their mosques to open one week earlier compared to DITIB and ZMD and to individually obtain permissions from local health departments. The state-level IGMG respondent stated that "larger mosques like ours with a long tradition, brain power, and political networks were ready after a few days, while smaller communities needed more time or remained closed." Through this flexible approach, the IGMG leadership imbued local mosques with more autonomy but also intended to alleviate the growing grassroots pressure and internal tension. The same IGMG leader, who started his organisational career as an ordinary youth member in his hometown mosque, emphasised local expertise: "The centre can prescribe a lot, but it has to be implemented by people on the ground, who have a better sense of the situation." While IGMG mosques were given more autonomy, leadership hierarchies at DITIB were centralised, partly due to the stronger organisational ties with Turkey and more professional staff. According to him, "DITIB imams have a lot of authority. This explains why DITIB was more comfortable to delay the opening, because mosques in Turkey were still closed. We [IGMG] decided not to follow Diyanet and opened according to the German law." [25]

Dissimilar views on appropriate opening strategies were also expressed within DITIB itself. Although some mosque committees expressed gratitude for the centralised system of decision-making, other local actors preferred a regional approach ("*vor Ort entscheiden*"). A local DITIB member who ran the mosque affairs in his hometown for several decades voiced his discontent: "Why does [the DITIB headquarters in] Cologne decide over a small mosque in Schleswig Holstein with no Corona cases? It is the same top-down decision for a mosque with 50 members and with 800 members, regardless whether some mosques want to opt for a different approach and have the capacities." For him, the central leadership inadequately inquired about local needs during the crisis. "I didn't see our leaders or the attaché to make an appointment to visit us on weekends. It is possible to meet again. You can get a room with safety distance measures in place. Corona can't be an excuse anymore." The publicly praised and centrally designed hygiene rules also caused distress for local congregations for being too strict and intimidating. What came through in these conversations were not only concerns to practically implement the rules, but also the top-down instructions and warnings that mosques must not become spreaders and stay out of the limelight. Hence, the self-imposed regulations were at times followed out of fear of internal and external sanctions. [26]

Consequently, mosques affiliated with KRM offered a minimum of social services after the lockdown in May 2020, as social spaces remained closed, community life was on hold, and youth groups were only recently re-starting under heavy regulations from the centre. The disappointed local DITIB member described the situation in his mosque: "It hurts that many people don't come anymore. They think it is too exhausting to register, wear masks and bring carpets [for each prayer]." In this context, respondents expressed wider anxieties about inactive mosques, which could lead to a reduction in KRM membership and religious practise. "People become complacent," "lose their din [religion]," and "get used to being in front of the laptop in their pyjamas." In an almost envious manner, the local DITIB member described his fear of losing Muslim youth to Salafi groups: "They are independent, they can decide locally, and they are super good with social media. So, they can offer more to teenagers, who will say 'our mosque is closed, why not go to their meetings.' " To reinvigorate the membership, he [27]

argued that "we have to invest a lot of money in social programs." Government and security experts already expressed concerns over increasing segregation and radicalisation of Muslim migrants, recommending more online initiatives. Hence mosque committees described the ongoing digitalisation as a first step for more transparent online spaces, which were so far dominated by religious hardliners (Tabti 2020). Scholars were quick to announce that COVID-19 "changed the way religious institutions function, with Zoom-mediated religious sermons and practices" (Sachedina 2021). However, smaller mosques were lagging behind, only recently having introduced basic online programs and predominately offering such services in heritage languages, which excluded other ethnic groups and refugees.

[28] After Easter and prior to Ramadan 2020, associations within KRM in my research had to deal with internal tensions accompanying the question when to reopen mosques. The ZMD interviewee recalled that "it was a real achievement to keep the bourgeoning dissent under control," suggesting the difficulty to communicate restraint to congregations. A female committee member of a local KRM-affiliated mosque noted that "some members from the first generation became a bit pushy, insisting that they are coming to the mosque, saying 'what shall we do at home?' or 'I don't have Corona.' It was the first time in 15 years that my own grandparents did not go to Turkey for Ramadan." While some members were influenced by Turkey's hesitancy to reopen, others criticised that shops were open again in Germany, but religious life was still restricted. The grassroots pressure stemmed partially from a desire to recreate normality in particular around Ramadan. The ZMD respondent described the sentiment where "Ramadan without the mosque can't happen." He also linked it to the ongoing "realpolitik" from assertive local mosque chairmen and over-confident regional actors intending to prove that "they can do it," thereby framing KRM leaders as "cowards" who "boycott local congregations." Among those who attempted to open was the conviction that through the implementation of hygiene concepts, normalcy could be re-established. The differencing standpoints between the headquarters and regional level within KRM created a "tense competitive environment."

[29] The internal tension was further intensified by a judgment of Germany's Federal Constitutional Court on April 28 that mosques, synagogues, churches, and other places of wordship could re-open provided that they have a convincing hygiene policy. The court decision was the result of an emergency appeal by an independent Muslim organisation, the Federal Islamic Union (*Föderale Islamische Union*, FIU),[8] offering legal advocacy in Muslim minority affairs. It was one of the few examples of open resistance against external institutional expectation by German Muslims during the pandemic. KRM interviewees harshly discredited the Muslim group behind the court decision as "maniacs," "idiots," and "radicals." The verdict was largely inconsequential, due to the ongoing opening promises and concessions by Islamic associations and state governments. Locally, however, there were some repercussions, especially when independent mosques acted upon the verdict and started to open up for Friday prayers in early May, ignoring the KRM guidelines. A KRM leader admitted that the verdict caused "inner Muslim critique […] People who didn't know the FIU were happy about it and criticized us. These so-called Islam experts wanted to gain personally from it and show that they are the

8 The Federal Islamic Union in Hanover was launched by two converts in 2017. The Union has undertaken legal action against the niqab ban when driving, defended the right for students to wear a veil on campuses, and started a petition to urge the government to create a "Federal Commissioner for the protection of Muslims and Muslim Life" in the wake of the anti-Islamic terror attack in Hanau in 2020. Critics perceived the court case as an attempt to erode democratic institutions and introduce components of Sharia law through the back door.

real custodians of Islam." In the two weeks between Ramadan and Easter 2020, KRM came under pressure through increasing internal tension, which accelerated the development of the centralised opening concept for KRM-affiliated mosques.

[30] Based on the above examples, this section addressed research questions two and three, namely how KRM and Islamic associations dealt with internal resistance arising from changing local opportunity structures and expectations as well as how this dissent over a feeling of being sidelined was expressed by segments within the local membership. Unlike the media portrayal of a unified response, the analysis revealed diverse crisis management strategies within KRM, from providing a certain degree of autonomy (IGMG) for mosque members to the prevention of local agency and independence (DITIB and ZDM), due to different organisational capacities and external, political concerns.

Flexible Responses of an Independent Mosque

[31] This section analyses how an independent mosque (IM) outside the fold of KRM in an urban location of Lower Saxony navigated through the pandemic by employing a more flexible strategy, which was manifested in swift adaptation of government regulations and religious practise as well as a pragmatic attitude in dealing with risk.[9] Since its inauguration in 2005, IM uses German as language of instruction and is characterised by its multi-ethnic and convert-friendly membership (approximately 300 members). The mosque is led by German-born committee and lay members with professional credentials and degrees, many of them having reported a lack of autonomy in and negative experiences with KRM-affiliated local mosques and organised Islam in Germany. After the judgment of the Federal Constitutional Court, IM was one of the first mosques in Lower Saxony to develop a hygiene concept to re-open for the Friday prayer on May 8, 2020, well before the majority of KRM-affiliated mosques, which makes it an interesting case study.

[32] Although DITIB announced the closure on March 13, IGMG on March 14 and KRM on March 15, IM stayed open until March 17, when the official government lockdown commenced. Prior to that, the mosque consulted scholars at the University of Medina to theologically justify the continuation of mosque activities to its members. One day after the closure, on March 18, the mosque encouraged supporters to donate money to pay rent and utilities for the following months. The chairman thanked the large "YouTube community" for its financial and symbolic support with more than six million viewers from 15 years of online activities. On March 19, the congregation received instructions on how to pray the Friday prayer at home as it became clear that mosques would remain closed in the near future. Within four days after the official closure, IM started to offer extensive online programmes with slogans such as "Netflix is out. Don't waste your time and get your rewards for free;" information about how to behave as a Muslim during the pandemic; and motivational videos entitled "What do winners do during an enforced break?" During the lockdown, there was more time to "cut and edit video material… [and] clicks were naturally much higher, as people stayed at home," according to a committee member.

[33] Moreover, the lockdown offered IM an opportunity for new forms of *da'wa* (proselytising through Islamic education). From early April, the mosque saw an unprecedented number of

9 IM's name, location and some other details are withheld to ensure anonymity, given the sensitive COVID-19 context and IM's negative experience with state authorities in the past, including mosque raids and allegations of youth radicalisation.

"Skype conversions," as noted by its leader: "Sometimes up to three per day… mostly teenagers between 17 and 19 years, but not exclusively." He explained it by the fact that people were less distracted during the lockdown and had more time to think about the "purpose of life." The chairman further explained that "we lost our pre-Corona hesitancy regarding intimate acts such as online *shadadas* [creeds] or virtual weddings and became more adventurous in that compartment." Soon, IM offered online spaces for pre-wedding meetings that were supervised by imams or committee members.

Swift Opening

While member associations within KRM debated about hygiene and safety concepts, eventually deciding for a gradual opening strategy initially excluding evening and Friday prayers, some smaller mosques, such as the discussed IM, opened for all prayers, including the Friday prayer, already in early May. On May 6, IM published a hygiene concept explaining the legal framework for its opening, limiting the number of people attending prayers, and implementing hygiene and distancing regulations. For instance, masks were recommended, but, similar to churches, not made compulsory. The committee prepared designated prayer spots for each attendee, pioneered an advanced online registration system with three different time slots for the Friday prayer, and provided an introduction video showing how to sign up online. Children and women (for whom the mosque visit is not compulsory) were not allowed to attend. After the first successful Friday prayer on May 8, a relieved chairman noted that [34]

> we are so happy that we could pull it off […] DITIB and IGMG decided not to do it […] Their mosques don't have the same autonomy [*Handlungsspielraum*] as we do. They have voluntarily agreed to much stricter rules: No toilet use, no *wudu* [ritual washing], obligatory masks, and fewer prayers. But we didn't prohibit ourselves from having this compulsory prayer, especially since it is legally allowed by the government. [35]

The chairman explained the rationale for reopening despite KRM's decision: "When the state allows us to fulfil our religious duty such as the Friday prayer, we can't be more cautious as it is required from us by law. We have a responsibly in front of Allah to fulfil this duty." There was a sense of pride in having managed opening safely before everyone else. Within the congregation, there was a feeling of gratitude to the committee to reopen as soon as possible. As a young attendee summarised his emotions, "when the mosque was opened again, it was the best time of my life. It was like an awakening [*Erweckung*]. Being back in the mosque was incredible. Praying at home alone felt numb and depressing." [36]

After the initial opening phase, all members were encouraged to attend mosque events in person. One mosque message said in June 2020, "during your presence in the mosque, angels will pray for your forgiveness […] Pure happiness is waiting in the sunnah mosque for you […] The reward for coming to the mosque with pure intention is like going to *hajj*." In addition to its regular congregation, the mosque attracted visitors from across Germany. Waiting for the third Friday prayer outside IM, one attendee from another city noted that "watching an online video is not the same as visiting a mosque." By June 2020, IM was fully operational, including weekend programmes, youth education, evening seminars, Islamic information stalls, and sport events with teenagers. The swift restart can partially be explained by the financial model of the mosque having a higher reliance on donations, compared to state-supported [37]

associations like DITIB and a mosque committee led by confident converts and German-born Muslims, asserting their constitutional rights. In addition, IM emphasised on *da'wa*, as noted by a committee member, which may explain the swift opening: "We are happy about every day where we can do *da'wa* […] and if it ever comes to an end, we can say that we had a beautiful time. Fear is a bad consultant."

[38] Although often seen as completely autonomous, IM relied on outside assistance by a Muslim advocacy group with "very good lawyers" to navigate through rule changes and updates in the pandemic. This legal assistance allowed IM to react and adjust to new regulations within—at times—a couple of hours, which I observed when a new face mask rule was introduced in Lower Saxony during the beginning of the second wave of the pandemic. I was in the mosque for an evening talk with 25 attendees on October 14 when government rules where tightened. Wearing masks indoors became compulsory, including for imams. Being informed of the new hygiene rule, IM installed a pane of plastic in front of the speaker to comply and ensure the safety of the mosque. Prior to the event, the chairman drove 60 kilometres to find a suitable manufacturer for the protective device. Imams with masks were regarded as "unattractive," diminishing the quality and appeal of online streams and videos. For the Friday prayer on October 16, the committee hung up the pane of plastic from the ceiling so that the imam could deliver the sermon while standing on the *manabir* (pulpit). In this way, due to their flexible approach, IM was able to locally respond to changing circumstances.

Rumours and Compliance

[39] Earlier, I demonstrated that KRM leaders were concerned about and monitored the dissemination of conspiracy theories and deviant online behaviour within local congregations, reminding local chairmen of their public responsibilities. On the contrary, IM followed a laissez-faire approach in dealing with critical voices and did not restrain its members to express their concerns online and in person. In early February 2020, COVID-19 was often described in Muslim internet forums as a divine punishment of China for the mistreatment of Muslims. Similar opinions also circulated in an IM online space: "China says Islam is a disease, now China became sick. First, they isolated the Uyghurs, now they are isolated." In March, an online flyer appeared which parodied the AfD, Germany's far right party, saying "no handshakes; avoid parties and sex outside of marriage; wash hands, face and nose five times a day; follow Islamic hygiene rules; maintain unity; *inshallah*, the AfD." Furthermore, wider fears of militarisation and vaccine enforcement was discussed while the committee supported an online petition against vaccine laws, which was signed by more than half a million people at that time. However, during my fieldwork, I also participated in nuanced and critical discussions among IM members with various standpoints. In a conversation over lunch, a student suddenly criticised another IM member for showing us a video mocking the president of the Robert Koch Institute: "We should not trivialise them [scientists] and should take their work seriously." While IM would not restrict the dissemination of rumours in online spaces and discussions, the committee and members were compliant of health regulations, communicating the implementation and decision-making process to the congregation.

[40] Although the IM aimed to open as soon as possible after the first lockdown, the committee invested substantive energy in reminding the congregation to follow the rules, mentioning government fines of 25.000 Euros and permanent mosque closures. As an IM imam put it, "Let's not donate this money to the government, but invest it instead in our *da'wa* work." Before the sermons and prayers, office bearers went through the prayer hall, occasionally in-

structing people that "you can't sit like that." The chairman explained to the audience that it was his duty to keep the mosque running, for which he would "answer during judgment day." IM's balanced approach was also apparent during Ramadan. Although legally permissible, the committee decided against the nightly *tarawih* recitations in the mosque. The chairman explained the decision: "It is not compulsory to carry it out in the mosque. We realized that it will be a huge challenge to organize, because of the combination of *iftar* [the evening meal to end the daily fast] and recitation […] In Corona times, we can't have collective food, so you have to eat at home, and rush to *tarawih*. Many would not make it in time to the [nightly] *Isha* prayer… There would be too much stress and uncertainty for our members." These health concerns and ethical considerations indicate a pragmatic desire to compromise by IM and - like the organisational crisis navigation of KRM and other Islamic macro-associations—displayed awareness and compliance of external policy expectations regarding Muslim actors in Germany.

Conclusion

This article used insights from the agency perspective, including the notion of compliance and resistance, within organisational sociology to study the interplay between external institutional expectations regarding Muslim minorities and internal discussions over the centralised and autonomous strategies within local mosques and Islamic associations in Germany. Pandemic-related responses by the Coordination Council for Muslims (KRM), national and state-level Islamic associations, and an independent mosque in Lower Saxony revealed a variety of approaches and strategies pursued by Muslim leaders and local congregations, which is in line with the agency perspective and goes against the dichotomy presenting mosques as either entirely compliant or fully opposing integration. The empirical analysis documented different forms of compliance, navigation, and internal resistance within KRM and its constituent members. [41]

The notion of agency in relation to KRM and Islamic associations must be understood in the context of Germany's public discourse with its often racialized, stereotyping, and discriminatory media headlines. This could also be seen in an increase of attacks on Muslims and mosques in Germany in 2020, despite COVID-19 lockdown measures such as movement restrictions.[10] Aware of their structural position, leaders of Islamic associations as well as local mosques opted for a conservative application of organisational agency, resulting in rule compliance while causing internal tension. In other pre- and post-COVID-19 scenarios, however, this structural context may limit institutional innovation and the capacity of Muslim actors to navigate, as internal dynamics and reform are strongly shaped by public discourse and external expectations. The empirical discussion offered by this article demonstrated that the responses by Islamic organisations to pandemic-related governance took these debates into account and influenced how Muslim actors navigated and responded to the crisis. [42]

ZDM and DITIB followed a centralisation approach in line with KRM's guidance; IGMG allowed somewhat more individual mosque autonomy through the partial de-centralisation of decision-making, and IM rejected KRM's guidelines and representational authority and developed its own safety and opening concepts. All actors used transnational religious networks [43]

10 Der Spiegel, "Mehr als 900 Angriffe auf Muslime und Moscheen im Jahr 2020." Last accessed 22 March, 2022. https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/islam-in-deutschland-mehr-als-900-angriffe-auf-muslime-2020-a-5542fed3-dee0-4878-979b-150582b474b8.

as well as guidelines from Germany's health authorities to socially justify their diverse navigational strategies. Without the internal control and compliance by KRM, politicians and segments within the media may have instrumentalised the situation, which was briefly seen during the beginning of Ramadan in 2020. However, KRM's top-down crisis management caused internal resistance by members such as DITIB and IGMG and was dealt with in backstage negotiations, which reflects the concept of decoupling within organisational sociology. Anthropologists have shown that rumours, denial, and disagreement of preventive measures by governments and community leaders are rarely about the pandemic per se but more often about notions of fairness, inclusion, and tense relations with macro-level institutions (Enria 2016). This may lead to opposing views but does not change the overall compliance within a crisis. In particular, the often-criticized transnational ties of migrant communities have played a constructive role in pandemic-related governance, serving as buffer against rumours and internal resistance.

Through the crisis, KRM and its affiliated associations regained some of their societal relevance at the grassroots level and in the wider German public, which had been lost over the last decade. Other scholars already assume a wider "shift in governance and modes of consensus-building," where public perception of Muslims has become more accepting (GhaneaBassiri 2020). Interestingly, the same attributes, namely centralisation and transnationalism, including foreign imams, which have been heavily criticised in the past, substantively contributed to the coordinated and effective crisis response by German Muslims and led to public appraisal by health departments and state-level and national politicians. What the crisis situation and case studies therefore reveal is the paradoxical condition of an "Islam debate" divided by the two-fold realization that German Muslims cannot be overly centralised and transnationally organised, nor can they be overly autonomous. However, given that the newly established Islamic theology departments in Lower Saxony and across Germany are not yet producing domestic imams, as well as the general dearth of an Islamic infrastructure, it becomes a challenging navigational endeavour for Muslim communities and Islamic associations, who nonetheless manage to assert agency through pre-emptive actions, backstage negotiations, and organisational adaptations. Whether financial hardships faced by mosque communities due to COVID-19 will lead to further institutionalisation of Islam in Germany, a reduction of organisational ties with Islamic authorities abroad, a decentralization through mosque fusions, and departures of local communities from Islamic associations remains to be seen. Insights from organizational sociology and medical anthropology, with its focus on complex histories, external policy demands, and internal membership interests, can be beneficial for future research along those lines. [44]

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