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## Pandemic spreads conspiracies far and wide among a range of believers

Conspiracies seem to be a byproduct of a global crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic, and recent reports suggest they are not limited to any one religion or spirituality. What is known as the QAnon movement, which holds to conspiratorial ideas about the existence of a “deep state” seeking to bring down the presidency of Donald Trump, has found a home in a segment of the Christian right, writes Marc Andre Argentino in the online magazine *The Conversation* (May 18, 2020). The QAnon movement began in 2017 after someone known only as Q posted a series of conspiracy theories about Trump on the internet forum 4chan and has since embraced conspiracies concerning the pandemic. In researching the QAnon movement, Argentino found one of its strongest proponents is Omega Kingdom Ministry (OKM), part of a neo-charismatic house church network called Home Congregations Worldwide (HCW). The organization’s spiritual adviser is Mark Taylor, a self-proclaimed “Trump Prophet” and QAnon influencer with a large social media following on Twitter and YouTube. Aside from “draining the swamp” in Washington politics, Taylor says it’s “our” responsibility to drain the deep state church swamp. They believe the same deep state that controls the world has also infiltrated traditional churches. OKM also raises funds for the Reclamation Ranch, which is described as a “safe place” for children rescued after being held underground by the deep state. Argentino counted about 300 accounts participating in an OKM recent service, with the congregation moving from Zoom to YouTube to accommodate the growth in attendees.

Argentino does not discuss the prevalence of QAnon (or “Q”) conspiracies among other Christians, but an article in *The Atlantic* (June, 2020) suggests that its influence is far wider than that found in OKM. Writer



Adrienne LaFrance argues that it is also propelled by religious faith, with “the language of evangelical Christianity [coming] to define the Q movement. QAnon marries an appetite for the conspiratorial with positive beliefs about a radically different and better future, one that is preordained.” She cites the influence of evangelical Christian David Hayes, a “Q superstar,” who has 300,000 followers on Twitter and the same number of subscribers on YouTube, going by the

online handle Praying Medic. Hayes compares the movement to another “great awakening” in that “the exposure of the unimaginable depravity of the elites will lead to an increased awareness of our own depravity. Self-awareness of sin is fertile ground for spiritual revival.” Comparing the Q movement to the millennial Seventh Day Adventists and the Mormons, LaFrance concludes that “it already has more adherents by far than either of those two denominations had in the first decades of their existence. People are expressing their faith through devoted study of Q drops as installments of a foundational text, through the development of Q-worshipping groups, and through sweeping expressions of gratitude for what Q has brought to their lives.”

Yet the movement appears to have spread beyond a segment of conservative Christians and others in the far right. In the online magazine *Medium* (May 20, 2020), Julian Walker writes that “many yogis, ecstatic dancers, bodyworkers, meditators — you know, people focused on health and well-being, are all clogging my social feeds these days with the ever morphing paranoid conspiracy theories.” Walker writes that such conspiracy theorists “frame the quarantine, the pandemic, WiFi/cell tower technology, and vaccines as all being part of a vast conspiracy designed to take away our freedoms, track our movements, poison our bodies, and enact an ominous new world order.” In such circles, the metaphor of taking the “red pill,” meaning undergoing a conservative awakening from their perceived liberal conditioning, is becoming more common. A leader in the yoga community, comedian JP Sears, made a video (which has nearly four million viewers) satirizing people who believe the “mainstream media” on Covid-19. He recently published another video satire featuring a fearful quarantine-follower “who is painted blue (because he took the blue pill and chose to stay enslaved and asleep) weakly accepting being told what to do by the government and media,” Walker writes.

This patchwork of groups, teachers and spiritual practitioners overlaps with long-time New Age conspiracist David Icke and other groups ranging from liberal anti-vaccine activists to “full-blown believers in reptilian alien shape-shifters.” This the conspiracy mindset reasoning that is seen in an “ever larger Venn-diagram overlap between the alt-right/QAnon/libertarian/2nd amendment/prep bunker crowd and our pseudoscience/natural medicine/the Secret/higher truth crowd.” Walker concludes that the conspiratorial mindset is perceived as being skeptical, independent, open-minded and brave. This type of thinking can also be an outgrowth of an alternative spiritual outlook that tries to overcome self-limits and distorted thinking but then mutates into a view that “truth is illusion, and make-believe is true.”

(*The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/the-church-of-qanon-will-conspiracy-theories-form-the-basis-of-a-new-religious-movement-137859?>; *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/?>); *Medium*, <https://medium.com/@julianwalker111/the-red-pill-overlap-19ad346c62f0>)

## 'Prophecy voters' forming core of Trump's evangelical base

Much of Donald Trump's evangelical base of support comes not from "value voters" or nostalgic "white Christian nationalists" as much as "prophecy voters," those charismatics who see the president as an anointed leader who will have a part in bringing God's kingdom to earth. This group is likely to continue to influence and reshape the Christian right during the 2020 elections and beyond, writes Damon Berry in *Nova Religio* (May 11), a journal on new religious movements. The belief that Trump is anointed by God has become more prominent among American Protestants since his election in 2016. Writing in the *Religion in Public* blog (May 11), political scientists Paul Djupe and Ryan Burge note that belief in Trump as anointed by God grew from 29 percent in 2019 to a remarkable 49 percent by late March of 2020 among regularly church attending white Protestants (and increasing among all Protestants). Djupe and Burge argue that church leaders and clergy have driven up the religious significance of Trump, but Berry's article pinpoints the source of such beliefs directly to the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement. The New Apostolic Reformation movement consists of networks of charismatic churches and leaders who teach that New Testament apostolic and prophetic ministry and leadership is still operative and that believers are called to establish God's dominion on earth. Pioneered by the teaching of the late Fuller Seminary professor C. Peter Wagner, the NAR is based in networks of leaders, megachurches, and prayer ministries, such as POTUS Shield, Bethel Church in California, Paula White (Trump's key spiritual advisor), and Lance Wallnau [though not all NAR leaders are ardent Trump backers].



Several NAR leaders claim that God chose Trump as a vehicle to destroy leftist influence in the U.S. and allow for the restoration of Christian society. Berry writes that conspiracy-based thinking is prominent among such leaders, as they argue that the "deep state" and Democratic operatives are under satanic direction to thwart God's plans for the Trump presidency. Such charismatic support for Trump has been noted in RW in past issues [see vol. 35, no. 2 RW], but Berry argues—and Djupe and

Burge's research would agree—that much of the NAR's drive for Trump is having powerful influence on the broader Christian right in this election season. Such religious right leaders as Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., and Gary Bauer of American Values have adopted the "spiritual warfare" language of the NAR. That Trump is aware and involved in such networks of support could be seen in his campaign's establishment of Evangelicals for Trump in January, which was hosted by Miami-based NAR "prophets" Guillermo and Ana Madonado at the biggest Spanish-speaking congregation in the U.S. Berry concludes that the NAR "will continue to shape political discourse among the American Christian right throughout the 2020 presidential election season and after. The groundwork is already laid for explaining the election result as either God's victory with President Trump's re-election or as Satan's triumph in the election of a

Democrat...It is clear that these particular voters are not values voters...but neither are they purely nostalgia voters. They are prophecy voters struggling to inaugurate the Kingdom of God.”

(*Nova Religio*, <https://online.ucpress.edu/nr/issue/23/4>; *Religion in Public*, <https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/05/11/trump-the-anointed/>)

## **The pandemic as a driver for change and ritual adjustments in religion**

According to Italian journalist Iacopo Scaramuzzi (writing on his *Facebook* page), the coronavirus epidemic has succeeded in pushing reforms into the Catholic Church in a way nothing else has—with laypeople organizing their own domestic liturgical life and a variety of creative responses to an unexpected situation preventing the gathering of faithful in places of worship. While the long-term effects envisioned by Scaramuzzi remain to be confirmed, the pandemic has indeed become a source of changes, both in encouraging new ways of keeping religious life alive and through preventive measures with a direct impact on religious rituals. Since there have been many instances of virus propagation apparently being caused by singing (including entire choirs having been infected), choir and congregational singing is now being frowned upon in many places, or very limited (for instance in Austria). In the Catholic diocese of Berlin, Germany, congregational singing should be avoided, and only one singer plus the organ are allowed.

In an article published on the website of the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) (May 19, 2020), Robert Freeman (Director of Music at Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary) comments that “as we prepare to reopen our churches, we must carefully consider the high risks associated with choral singing.” He argues that clergy and singer should be reduced to a bare minimum. “One isolated chanter replacing the choir will undoubtedly help reduce risk.” Freeman goes as far as asking the question: “Will we embrace more silence in our services?” Asking such a question in itself shows the potential for changes brought into the life of religious groups by health considerations. The ways of experiencing community life are also bound to change, at least in the short term. Social distance between people not living in the same household will now be enforced, beyond various other measures. Pews will no longer be full, and there will be empty seats and empty rows; in some churches people will be assigned specific spots. It presents a special challenge for congregations accustomed in packed halls. Congregations of various denominations will now require people to register in advance of attending.

Some congregations intend to celebrate several Sunday worship services, while some mosques have experimented with splitting Friday prayers into several sessions, although this does not seem to be widespread. For many religious communities, livestreaming services will remain a crucial channel beside physical gatherings for reaching as many members as possible. In Switzerland, a condition for the resumption of public services is that a full list of participants should be kept during 14 days by every congregation and made available to civil authorities in case one of the participants tests positive in the meantime. In Christian churches, giving communion to the faithful has become a challenge. In Switzerland, where public religious

services can take place again from May 28, the initial project of the Swiss Federal Office for Public Health mentioned that sharing of food, including communion, would not be permitted during religious services. While the Reformed Church accepted the limitation, neither Catholics nor Orthodox would, and they asked for an adjustment of the general rules in order to make them compatible with their traditions. Many Catholic dioceses insist that communion should continue to be received in the hand only, without any word being said by the priest to the communicant.

In Orthodox Christian congregations, the issue of the reception of communion has given rise to debates (*Balkan Insight*, April 27, 2020), with the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Augustinos of Germany announcing that the official rules would make it impossible to give communion to the faithful with a single spoon, and thus only the clergy would commune, while Metropolitan Arsenios of Austria, on the other hand, has decided to give communion in the hand. More churches seem inclined to use individual metallic spoons, sterilized after the service. In an article on the debate (*Public Orthodoxy*, May 21), Deacon Daniel Galadza (University of Regensburg) remarks that ecclesiastical authorities should be “mindful that these decisions and changes might remain in force for some time after the pandemic has passed.” This indicates how the current responses to an emergency situation might possibly have lasting consequences in the very practices of some religious traditions.

(The short article (in Italian) by Iacopo Scaramuzzi had not been published online, but has been reposted on his Facebook account:

<https://www.facebook.com/jesus.sanpaolo/posts/3060281954063641>; Robin J. Freeman, “What COVID-19 Means for Singing in Church,” <https://www.oca.org/reflections/misc-authors/what-covid-19-means-for-singing-in-church/>; Yiannis Baboulias, “Communion and the Coronavirus: COVID-19 Triggers Deep Orthodox Divisions,”

<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/27/communion-and-the-coronavirus-covid-19-triggers-deep-orthodox-divisions/>; Daniel Galadza, “‘Remember, O Lord...’: Liturgy, History, And Communion Spoons In A Time Of Pandemic, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/05/21/liturgy-history-and-communion-spoons/>)





## Jehovah's Witnesses' find new interest through online innovations

While the Jehovah's Witnesses have not assigned a unique prophetic significance to the coronavirus outbreak, the pandemic has confirmed their end-times beliefs, created new interest in the religion's teachings, and strengthened its online presence and innovations, writes George D. Chryssides on the blog *CennSam* (April 30, 2020) of the Centre for the Critical Study of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. The Witnesses have long taught that such signs as "pestilences," along with war, famine, and earthquakes are indications that Armageddon is near, and thus the pandemic naturally fits into their end-times scenario. Chryssides, a long-time JW specialist, adds that "Because Jehovah's Witnesses expect massive disruptions of these kinds, they are well prepared," stockpiling food, medical supplies, and even face masks. The Witnesses' weekly Bible study and Kingdom Hall meetings can and have been easily adapted to cyberspace. But their annual Memorial meeting presents more challenges, as it is the main communal and evangelistic gathering of the faith, and the "emblems" of bread and wine are required to be present and passed around the huge assembly. The banning of large gatherings might be thought to compel Jehovah's Witnesses to protest such government restrictions, something they have faced in the past. But realizing that such measures are temporary and that they could do more harm by potentially spreading the virus through holding mass gatherings, the Witnesses have complied with such rules and have instead innovated alternatives, Chryssides writes.



Yet celebrating the Memorial online was no simple task: existing in 240 countries, online material was made available online in over 500 languages, with members and friends encouraged to meet in groups in cyberspace. The bread and wine emblems, which are intended for the 144,000 "anointed ones" mentioned in the Book of Revelation, are not often partaken of by members and are usually passed from one member of the congregation to the next, unconsumed. Online attendees were encouraged, but not obliged, to have a glass of wine and a plate containing unleavened bread beside them and, unless they were alone, to pass it to those at the same screen. Chryssides adds that Jehovah's Witnesses' online innovations "have been

good for publicity. In various parts of Africa, they were able to persuade national media to broadcast the Memorial on television and radio stations... Visits to the JW website have increased substantially: the Society reported a 40% increase in visitors in March, and in the 48 hours surrounding the Memorial there were approximately 1000 online Bible study requests,

compared with the more usual 250 a day. Particular interest has been shown in articles relating to the last days, particularly one about the four horsemen of the Apocalypse...”

(*CennSam*, <https://censamm.org/blog/jehovahs-witnesses-and-covid?fbclid=IwAR0xbhmHjDuCJnSbw06y7GWE52DFE119vaPJBHltKC7koM6OSI46vJoIxu>)

## Rising role of chaplains revealed during pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has revealed that the sources of religious support for many Americans are less focused on clergy and more on chaplains and more unconventional spiritual-care providers, according to sociologist Wendy Cadge writing in the *Atlantic* magazine (May 17, 2020). Cadge cites a survey conducted last year showing that 21 percent of Americans reported having contact with a chaplain in the previous two years, mostly through health-care organizations. More than other religious professionals, “chaplains name death for individuals and organizations in our death-phobic society,” she adds. In interviews with 65 chaplains in the Boston area, Cadge found that dealing with death is what unifies these religious professionals “across sectors and distinguishes them from social workers and others they work alongside.”

Both the numbers of theological schools offering chaplaincy programs and the enrollment for such training is increasing. She finds that there is a growing diversification in the ranks of chaplains—from those partnering with social service organizations to newly created chaplaincy positions in veterinary. The Faith Matters Network in Nashville, TN, recently launched training program for chaplains working with social movements. She concludes that the “chaplains at the

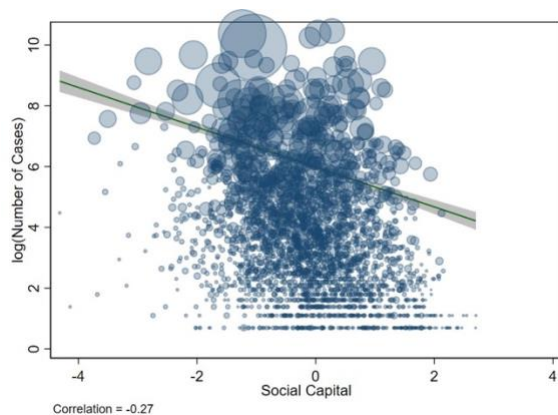


doors ICU rooms are whispering prayers, connecting the ill to family members through FaceTime, and, when someone dies, supporting the next of kin by phone. Chaplains usually do this work quietly, around the margins. But with the pandemic, their work has moved to the center of American religious experience.”

## CURRENT RESEARCH

● **A community’s greater degree of social capital, as generated by congregations and other voluntary organizations, is likely to lessen the severity of the coronavirus as well as help in recovery from the crisis, according to research by Christos Andreas Makridis.** Writing in the online newsletter *Public Discourse* (May 13), Makridis finds that greater social capital, a term used to describe the degree of connections and level of trust between people, leads to greater resilience from the pandemic and its aftermath since it provides networks of support. It seems like a non-controversial finding, but some researchers have found that greater social capital, such as demonstrated by the close interactions among soccer fans at a game in Bergamo, Italy, was a “superspreader” event that led to the significant outbreak of the virus in that country. He looked at data on over 2,700 counties, linking their number of and weekly growth of infections with their social capital (as defined by such Joint Economic Committee measures as family unity, social support, collective efficacy, and philanthropic health).

Makridis finds that the positive effects of social capital outweigh any negative effects of social interaction spreading the virus, particularly local community involvement and compassion for neighbors “could lead people to socially distance, returning to greater levels of social interaction once the pandemic is over and a vaccine is out.” He adds that even when controlling for differing levels of population density and poverty rates within counties, the results remain robust. In seeking to explain the mechanisms and policies that play a mediating role in social capital, Makridis focuses on the role of religious institutions “in helping individuals stay connected and



meet real needs, including even handing out groceries and holding drive-in services.” He cites research he conducted (with ISR director Byron Johnson) that shows that Christians who were active in their churches maintained greater well-being during the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath than inactive Christians.

(*Public Discourse*,  
[www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/05/63479/](http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/05/63479/))

Graph from *How Social Capital Helps Communities Weather the COVID-19 Storm*, Christos Andres Makridis

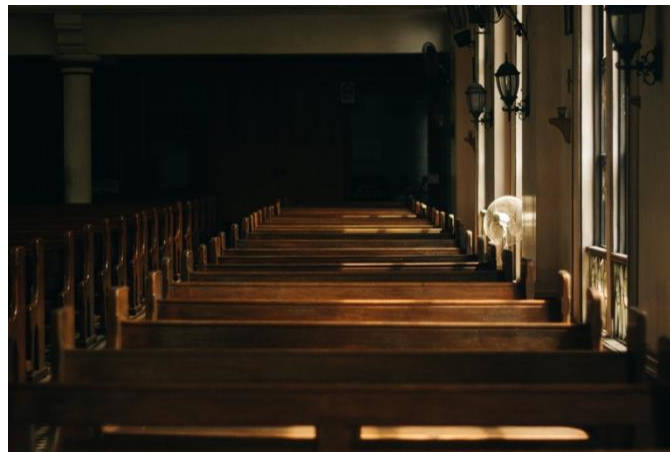
● **A new poll found that 31 percent of Americans who believe in God feel strongly that the coronavirus is a sign of God telling humanity to change, with the same number believing this to “some extent.”** The poll, conducted by the University of Chicago Divinity School and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, found that evangelical Protestants are more likely than others to believe this about the pandemic strongly (43 percent), compared with 28 percent of Catholics and mainline Protestants. The question was asked of all



Americans who said they believe in God, without specifying a specific faith (though the sample sizes of Muslims and Jews were too small to be included).

African-Americans were more likely than those of other racial backgrounds to say they feel the virus is a sign that God wants humanity to change, regardless of education, income or gender. Forty-seven percent say they feel that strongly, compared with 37 percent of Latino and 27 percent of white Americans. But the virus did not have large impact on Americans' belief in God, with two percent saying they believe in God today, but did not before. Fewer than one percent say they do not believe in God today but did before. Meanwhile, the poll asked respondents about opening up congregations and found that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say prohibiting in-person services during the coronavirus outbreak violates religious freedom, (49 percent to 21 percent). A majority of Democrats say they think in-person religious services should not be allowed at all during the pandemic, compared with 34 percent of Republicans. Most of the other Republicans say they should be allowed with restrictions, while 15 percent think they should be permitted without restrictions.

(The study can be downloaded here: <http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/Religious-Practice-in-the-Time-of-Coronavirus.aspx>)

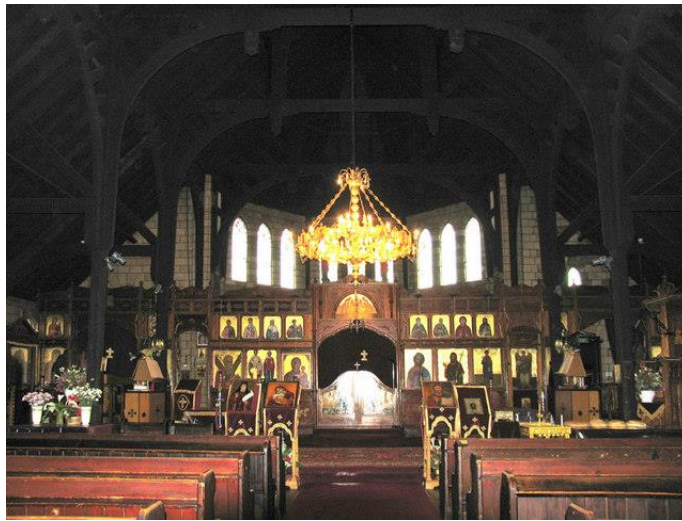


● **A survey of Eastern Orthodox parishes in the U.S. provides a more micro view of how religious institutions are dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, suggesting more adaptability with online usage, and a less dire future for congregations than found in many forecasts involving church finances.** The online survey of Orthodox clergy, conducted by Alexei Krindatch, with 234 responses, and part of the Faith Communities Today (2020) study, found that a majority of respondents said that because of the pandemic, they began live-streaming services or posting them online— a total of 77 percent of parishes currently offer online worship. The majority of respondents perceived their current online attendance to be higher than in-person attendance prior to the pandemic. A smaller percentage (24 percent) indicated that their online attendance is about the same as their in-person attendance prior to the pandemic, while 21 percent noted that it is lower, and 11 percent were unsure or unable to directly compare attendance. Asked about whether these clergy will continue to offer online services after in-person liturgies resume, just under half (46 percent) said they will. Although

there is some financial uncertainty over the pandemic, just under half of respondents in an earlier phase of the study (with 87 respondents) indicated they have the sufficient resources to carry them through the summer, while 30 percent noted that there are financial strains and that they might have to make minor budget changes to manage. A smaller percentage said they'll have to make more significant changes to their budgets (12 percent) or funding sources (9 percent).

(The study can be downloaded here: [https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CoronavirusUSOrthodoxParishesReport\\_Phase2.pdf](https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CoronavirusUSOrthodoxParishesReport_Phase2.pdf))

The earlier phase of the study can be downloaded here: <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CoronavirusUSOrthodoxParishes.pdf>)



## **Islam and the pandemic in Belgium—crisis as a step toward more integration?**

The restriction of various Muslim practices dictated by the coronavirus pandemic may have long-term effects in the Islamic community in Belgium, according to several papers written by scholars associated with the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Islam in the Contemporary World (Catholic University of Louvain). Not only could congregational prayers no longer take place, and moreover in the sacred month of Ramadan, but a number of important practices were restricted, such as washing the bodies of deceased people and the recitation of communal prayers for them, writes Naïma El Makrini. For those older Muslims who had requested to be buried in their home countries after their death, the crisis made it impossible. This is likely to lead to an acceleration of the already existing trend toward choosing of being buried on European soil.

Islamic institutions also seized on the opportunity provided by the crisis for showing the solidarity of Muslims with the wider society, for instance through giving money for supporting local hospitals, reports Brigitte Maréchal. Islamic institutions in Belgium, like in other European countries, have expressed full support for public health measures, but some individuals were less willing to comply. Ghaliya Djelloul, who has conducted an international survey of contrasting reactions among Muslims, sees differences in how to deal with the pandemic that range across the different religious schools of Islam, also revealing different views on science. Those who

express support for the health measures consider service to society as a key guiding orientation and perceive ethical religious principles as harmonious and complementary with scientific expertise. On the opposite, those who are defiant see respect of divine sovereignty and obedience to God’s commandments as paramount, and claim that the believer should fear God, and not the illness—fulfilling one’s religious obligations is the best protection. However, such views disputing medical authorities are in the minority, and seem to be nearly absent in European Muslim circles.

(“Musulmans et islams face à la pandémie et au confinement: Balises et enjeux divers”, CISMOC-CISMODOC, April 2020 - <https://cdn.uclouvain.be/groups/cms-editors-cismoc/paper-on-line/cismoc-papers-on-line-avril%202020%20%282%29.pdf>)



### **Pandemic driving wedge between Russian state and church?**

The spread of the coronavirus in Russia has provoked a mood of apocalypticism as well as resistance to shut down orders in the Russian Orthodox Church, according to several reports. The *New York Times* (May 5, 2020) reports that the “clash between faith and public health has been particularly divisive in Russia, where memories of religious persecution in the Soviet Union have made priests and their flocks highly sensitive to any limits on their rituals.” The split between the Russian church and the government approaches on church shutdowns is likely to break the strong loyalty of Orthodoxy to the Putin regime. Some of Russia’s most important monasteries and religious institutions have been infested with the virus and the church has been riven by internal tensions over how to deal with the crisis. While Patriarch Kirill has urged worshippers to stay away from church services, although belatedly, he has left it up to bishops as to whether to follow these directives.



This has also permitted priests to strike out against government restrictions, some of whom have made conspiratorial and apocalyptic claims about the virus or have told parishioners that they will be miraculously protected against it by faith and engaging in church rituals.

In the blog *Public Orthodoxy* (May 11, 2020), Regina Elsner writes that the pandemic has brought unacknowledged issues of church-state relations among church leaders and clergy to the surface. She writes that in “more quiet times, the systemic relevance of the ROC was based on saving the Russian world from the dangers of the sinful liberal society. Now, however, she finds herself in a crisis, which, for once, can be blamed on Western liberalism only to a very limited extent.” The divisions between conservative and liberal elements in the church are now visible and can no longer just be a matter of debate or papered over by leaders to foster unity. And the Russian state is no longer automatically on the side of the conservatives when it comes to public safety and the public good, Elsner argues. All this points to the fact that the church has long lacked a concept of social solidarity; “there is almost no bio- or social ethics capable of speaking either to the secular dealings with the virus or to broader questions of social justice in times of pandemic,” she concludes.

(*Public Orthodoxy*, <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/05/11/russian-orthodox-church-and-coronavirus/>)

## **Pandemic in Japan shows supply and demand for healing rituals**



The coronavirus pandemic in Japan has highlighted the differences between traditional and new religions and has also shown the strong hold that healing rituals still have in a secular society, according to a special report published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal* (May 1, 2020). Japan did not take the early precautions against the spread of the virus, but among the groups responding the earliest were new religious movements. Most such groups, such as Sokka Gakkai, shut their offices and decided to communicate with members remotely by mid-February, while traditional temples and other religious associations suspended their face-to-face activities in mid-March, writes Levi McLaughlin. The reason for the difference is that new religious movements, with a long history of controversy with the media and the government wanted to fend off any criticism about potentially spreading the virus, as was the case with a new religious movement in South Korea that received wide negative attention [see RW, vol. 35, no. 5]. Meanwhile, a widely heralded article in the *New York Times* reported that the Japanese new religion known as Happy Science claimed to have the cure for COVID-19 as well as persisting in its mass gatherings up until mid-March. That reinforced the stereotype of the “nefarious cults.”

In reality, McLaughlin writes, both traditional and new religions in Japan have offered spiritual rituals and remedies to stave off and cure the virus—from cleansing rituals to meditation techniques. Japan is considered a secular society, with the “vast majority [relying] on data-driven



scientific understandings of the coronavirus epidemic to guide their actions and to seek treatment, but aid from kami [deities] and buddhas for deliverance from pestilence still holds appeal.” He adds that like other societies, most religions in Japan have gone online, though these cyber-services and rituals are mainly arranged by local activists rather than religious leaders and denominations. A wide range of ritual activities have proved adaptable to online usage; even such a tradition as Shugendo, which is based on initiations and pilgrimage, have used Zoom and Facebook to conduct rituals and training [although the global Sokka Gakkai has had a weak Internet presence, preferring phone calls and letters for communication]. McLaughlin concludes that the main motivator for religious professionals to move their services online is fear of losing income. This is especially the case for temple priests who rely on contributions rather than salaries. The closing or reducing of community-related activities, particularly funerals, from which donations are drawn has resulted in serious losses of income. A bill to have priests included in unemployment and stimulus payments will face constitutional hurdles against government funding religion.

(*Asia-Pacific Journal*; <https://apjff.org/2020/9/McLaughlin.html?>)

### **Pandemic adding to stigmatization of Muslims in India by Hindu nationalists**

Indian Muslims are facing a new wave of discrimination and stigmatization as the coronavirus has spread throughout India. The German newspaper *Deutsche Welle* (May 14, 2020) reports that “After the Indian government linked hundreds of coronavirus cases to a Muslim gathering in March, social media users began spreading angry messages and sharing fake news articles purporting that Muslims were conspiring to spread the virus.” Many of accusations took place after a surge in coronavirus infections was found to be linked to a three-day meeting of an Islamic missionary group, the Tablighi Jamaat. The 8,000 people gathering has been widely seen as a “superspreader” of the virus. The group's chief, Maulana Saad, was later charged with culpable homicide and negligence.



The outcome was that many Muslims faced renewed stigma, threats, and boycotts in India, where Hindu nationalism has already targeted Muslims for discrimination. Fake videos showing Muslims flouting social distancing rules and spitting on people have circulated on the Internet, with increased cases of violence, as well as boycotts against the Islamic community. Some members of Prime Minister

Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party, which embraces Hindu nationalism, have openly blamed Muslims for the spread of the virus, while Modi has distanced himself from such view and has urged all Indians to unite against the virus.

## Findings & Footnotes

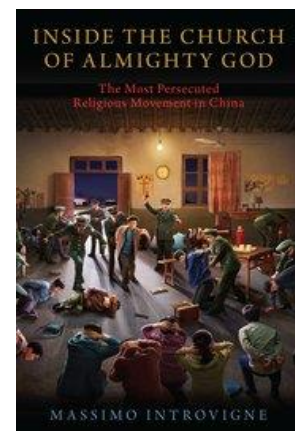
■ Despite common perceptions that China remains communist only in name, the recent book *Rouge Vif: L'Idéal Communiste Chinois* (Paris: Editions de l'Observatoire), by Alice Ekman (European Union Institute for Security Studies), contends that—despite reforms and opening taking place after 1978—communist ideology continues to be a key component of the Chinese approach, and even more so after Xi Jinping took control. It is true that the current Chinese system is hybrid, mixing a variety of influences. However, not only does the Communist Party remain in control, but instruction in Marxism-Leninism has been reinforced at universities and more party cells have been established in private firms over the recent years. One should not underestimate the lasting significance of ideological beliefs, writes Ekman in this well documented book. Before examining the consequences of those realities for China and the world, Ekman provides an overview of the situation in ten chapters, each devoted to specific aspects that



shows how communism and the control exercised by the Party with its 90 million members are still shaping Chinese society. One chapter of the book is devoted to religion, where Ekman finds that some level of tolerance exists—insofar the party can be in control of religious life and practice. Religious groups outside of official, State-controlled religious institutions are always at risk of being repressed or have their places of worship destroyed.

Moreover, a policy of sinicization is being enforced, in order to cut out foreign influences in China. Religions are seen as potential counter-powers if they escape State control. Atheism remains a principle of the Communist Party, and it has become again more strongly affirmed in recent years that no Party member can belong at the same time to a religious organization, even if it is a legal one. Those who don't comply are expelled from the party ranks. Interestingly, the Party may sometimes use of a quasi-religious vocabulary, speaking of the “Marxist faith” (something that goes back to Mao Zedong himself). Other concepts and terms are also borrowed from a religious vocabulary. Despite obvious limits in comparing a political organization with a religious one, Ekman sees the party as being analogous to a religious organization, with its doctrine, rituals, clothes, and moral principles. Communist fervor is far from dead in China, with young Party members sometimes being among the most enthusiastic and committed followers.

■ *Inside The Church of Almighty God* (Oxford University Press, \$29.95) by Massimo Introvigne, a specialist on new religious movements, provides interesting historical, and sociological insights about this controversial and fast-growing Chinese group, treating it within the framework of political and religious freedom in China. The church is based on un-orthodox Christian and end-times teachings, often criticizing the communist party, becoming the main target of China's anti-religious policies. Introvigne bases his research on interviews with members, Chinese police, and anti-cult activists, and clearly sees China's stance against the CAG, including its detaining and imprisonment of members, as representing the “new Falun Gong” in the level of hostility the communist party has against the group.



The book argues that the Chinese government views the CAG as a dangerous competitor and subversive “cult” in society yet it has been consulting with scholars—including Introvigne himself—who are clearly critical of that view, suggesting some division in the communist party.

But one result of viewing the CAG as an “evil cult” means that issues of religious and political freedom are off the table compared to less stigmatized groups. CAG has experienced fierce conflict with other Christian group who also label them as a cult, often for their aggressive proselytization efforts, spreading what the author calls “fake news” about them on the Internet (includes an unsubstantiated murder). Introvigne finds that the persecution of CAG has led to members migrating around the world—a “globalization” that leaders now seen as divinely led. The rest of the book contains interesting accounts and small-scale surveys of Chinese members as well as non-Chinese converts, with Introvigne finding that the church is growing more through contacts on social media than the more usual kind of family networks that a new religion would draw on. In the conclusion, Introvigne turns his legal acumen to the plight of CAG members from China who he finds are often unfairly treated by other countries in their application for refugee status.

## **On/File: A Continuing Record of People, Groups, Movements, and Events Impacting Contemporary Religion**

**The Bosnian Pyramids** in the village of Voskija in Bosnia have become a prominent New Age pilgrimage site. The formation is part of a series of pyramid-shaped mountains and tunnels in central Bosnia and Herzegovina that have long been a center of nationalist pride. Under the administration of **Semir Osmanagic**, a Bosnian-American businessman, what he calls the Bosnian Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon was increasingly portrayed as mystical structures that were created by an ancient civilization. In opposition to mainstream archeologists, who see the pyramids and tunnels as being a natural formation and part of mineshaft from the Middle Ages, Osmanagic holds to an alternative science that sees the pyramids as emanating electromagnetic energy that have healing powers. The pyramids have become increasingly popular with spiritual tourists as sites of meditation and healing, something that Osmanagic has commodified in the form of tours, lectures, media, books, and other merchandise. (Source: *Nova Religio*, May 2020)

