

## Article

# “It’s Not Doctrine, This Is Just How It Is Happening!”: Religious Creativity in the Time of COVID-19

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**Abstract:** Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews with faith leaders in the UK (including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Sikhism), we examine the diverse ways religious groups reorient religious life during COVID-19. Analysing the shift to virtual and home-based worship, we show the creative ways religious communities altered their customs, rituals, and practices to fit a new virtual reality amidst rigid social distancing guidelines. This study offers a distinctive comparative perspective into religious creativity amidst acute social change, allowing us to showcase notable differences, especially in terms of the possibility to fully perform worship online. We found that whilst all faith communities faced the same challenge of ministering and supporting their communities online, some were able to deliver services and perform worship online but others, for theological reasons, could not offer communal prayer. These differences existed within each religion rather than across religious boundaries, representing intra-faith divergence at the same time as cross-faith convergence. This analysis allows us to go beyond common socio-religious categories of religion, while showcasing the diverse forms of religious life amidst COVID-19. This study also offers a diverse case study of the relationship between religions as well as between religion, state, and society amidst COVID-19.

**Keywords:** comparative religion; COVID-19; social change; intra-faith; interfaith; home theology



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## 1. Introduction

“It’s not doctrine, this is just how it is happening!”, Hindu leader Shaunaka Rishi Das remarked with a smile, as he described religious life amidst COVID-19. As places of worship shut their doors, religious pilgrimage was put on hold, and communal prayers were either cancelled or shifted to the streets; all faith communities were dramatically affected, facing the same challenges at the same time.

This study pursues a comparative approach in order to present the unusual challenges COVID-19 presented to religious practice and belief. Drawing on thirty interviews with UK faith leaders, this study identifies the similarities and differences in the religious responses to, as well as interpretations of, the meaning of the pandemic among Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs in the UK. It also sheds light on the diverse ways religious communities altered their customs, rituals, and practices to fit a new virtual reality amidst rigid social distancing guidelines.

Our adoption of a comparative study is concerned less with listing comparisons, but rather takes seriously and seeks to explore the varied attempts among religious leaders to react to COVID-19 and guide their faith communities in uncharted territories. We argue that religious responses to the pandemic are better understood when examined altogether because all faith communities faced similar challenges simultaneously. This study offers a distinctive comparative perspective into religious creativity amidst acute social change, allowing us to showcase notable differences, especially in terms of the possibility to fully perform worship online. These differences existed within each religion rather than across

religious boundaries, representing intra-faith divergence at the same time as cross-faith convergence. Thus, our comparative approach sheds light on the variations within faith communities as well as similarities and differences between faith communities. This study also offers a diverse case study of the relationship between religions as well as between religion, state, and society amidst rapid social change.

### *Religion, Change and COVID-19*

While COVID-19 poses unprecedented challenges to religious life, scholars of religion have heavily examined the effects of social change on religious belief and life, well before the pandemic hit. Perhaps most notably, in response to the ‘secularization thesis’ that predicted the death of religion (Turner 2011), sociologists and anthropologists of religion found that while modernity indeed constitutes a significant challenge to established faiths, it is also a fertile breeding ground for religious redefinition, innovation, and rejuvenation (Ammerman 1987, 2005; Casanova 1994).

According to these perspectives, religion is now conceptualised as a set of both emerging and established practices that innovatively fertilize one another, in both private and public spheres (Ammerman 2007; Wuthnow and Offutt 2008; Stadler 2009; Taragin-Zeller 2021). From Pope Francis’s Instagram and Twitter accounts (@pontifex in multiple languages with more than 50 m followers) to religious livestreaming (Golan and Martini 2019) to digital pilgrimage, the threat of the ‘internet’ (Fader 2020; Neriya-Ben Shahar 2016), for example, has been transformed into an opportunity, creating a robust sphere of new-media aimed at cultivating religious life and religious ‘publics’ online (Campbell 2010, 2012; Engelke 2010; Neriya-Ben Shahar 2018; Golan and Martini 2019, 2020; Golan and Stadler 2016). Taking this scholarship as a stepping stone, COVID-19 is a fertile case study to examine how religion is both challenged and rejuvenated at a particularly painful moment in time.

Even though COVID-19 is a recent phenomenon, a wide array of researchers from different disciplines began studying the relationship between religion and COVID-19 upon its emergence. Some scholars have focused on the psychological aspects of COVID-19 on religious life to understand whether COVID-19 enhances individual faith (Kowalczyk et al. 2020). Thomas and Barbato examined the role that religion plays in mental health (Thomas and Barbato 2020), while others have highlighted how individuals turn to prayer in times of crisis (Bentzen 2020), resonating with prior studies which have demonstrated how belief offers support to cope with anxiety, health, and well-being (Peteet 2020; Koenig 2020; Modell and Kardia 2020).

Sociologists and anthropologists of religion turned to examine the ways different religious communities follow social distance guidelines (DeFranza et al. 2020; Taragin-Zeller et al. 2020; Goren et al. 2021; Schnabel and Schieman 2021). Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs found that in the US, the left were more likely to recommended precautions, while those on the (religious) right were more likely to disregard recommended precautions (Perry et al. 2020). Feminist scholars have also emphasized the gendered response to church closure orders. For example, Smother’s et al. found that men were more than twice as likely than women to say that they were continuing to attend worship services in person despite government guidelines (Smothers et al. 2020, p. 1067). However, most of these studies focus on one particular religious group, typically Christian (e.g., Campbell 2020), or draw on large scale quantitative data to examine quantifiable questions such as church attendance, adherence to public health guidelines, vaccine uptake (Kasstan 2020, 2021a, 2021b) and death rates in hospitals. Combining our different intellectual backgrounds in anthropology and sociology of religion and theology, our study takes a comparative and diverse approach to explore the challenges COVID-19 presents for religious practices and belief; we ask: what new formations of religious life have emerged amidst COVID-19? How do religious leaders cultivate religious praxis, ritual, and community amidst emergent forms of digital worship? How do these experiences differ within and between various religious groups? What are the implications of these shifts for the future of religious institutions and life in the UK?

## 2. Materials and Methods

We draw on thirty interviews collected between April and June 2020 to examine the diverse ways religious groups in the UK reorient religious life and worship during COVID-19. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with twenty male and ten female religious leaders of the following religious groups: Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism<sup>1</sup>. To account for inner diversity, we interviewed representatives of various denominations, attempting to include at least two faith leaders from each religious group. For example, we interviewed religious leaders from Liberal, Progressive, and Orthodox Judaism, as well as Catholic, Anglican, Pentecostal, Methodist, and Orthodox Christianity, and so forth. In this way, we were able to capture some of the nuances of each religion. We also sought interviewees who had experience with interfaith, whether these were faith leaders, practitioners, or academics. As we aimed to interview faith leaders during the initial stages of the pandemic, we drew on established relationships to access participants over a relatively short period of time.

Each interviewee was asked to reflect on the impact COVID-19 has had on their particular religion, belief, and practice. These semi-structured interviews included questions such as: What is the biggest challenge COVID-19 poses for your community? How are you and your community responding to these challenges? What do you think the impact of the coronavirus is on religious observance and practice, now and in the future? Follow-up questions were tailored to each individual interviewee, based on their particular circumstances.

The average interview time was thirty minutes and interviewees were also encouraged to offer follow-up insights as the pandemic brought forward new challenging conditions. Interviews were recorded on Zoom, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed on both a separate and comparative basis. Thematic content analysis was used in order to analyze the findings which were validated by three experts. This method is intended to develop understandings about what is common among a set of data, “from the bottom up” (Taylor and Bogdan 1984). The first step entails classifying the data into different themes and then combining and cataloging related patterns into sub-themes. At this point, individual experiences are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of a collective experience. For this study, we identified three themes: technology use, the meaning of presence, and religious practices and rituals in the home. Participants provided verbal consent, in line with the research guidelines outlined by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth. Finally, as many of the interviewees are public figures, all gave their consent to share their insights with the public without the use of pseudo names.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Moving Online

COVID-19 has turned many people, lay and cleric, religious and non-religious, into technology pioneers. As Rev. Jack Noble, a Church of England minister, put it: “it’s uncharted territory for everybody”. Navigating this “uncharted territory” entailed many challenges, technical, social, and spiritual alike. Many of the faith leaders reported how they and members of their communities were struggling with the rapid transformation to online platforms. For example, Rev. Giles Fraser, another Church of England minister said:

“You know, you’ll phone someone up and you’ll say, click on the link. And she doesn’t know what a link is. So, you know, you’re going right back to sort of basic things, which the young people are just completely conversed with!”

Technology, therefore, was a challenge, especially for the elderly and the more mature clergy, highlighting how digital gatherings can not only challenge but also reify various inner-communal hierarchies (Campbell 2010; Roberts 2004). Although the development of online communities can lead to a democratisation of religious expression and challenge traditional authority (Cohen and Lamagna 2010; Fader 2020), our research shows that a lack

of access to the internet or insufficient computer literacy can also reduce or even prevent participation in online community life.

As religious leadership attempted to make these new technologies accessible to all, they had to overcome many technical limitations that were part of the transition into the digital sphere. Many communities did not have a proper infrastructure, neither technical nor legal, in place. For example, congregation membership lists had to be updated, including contact details, as well as obtaining consent to send emails and messages so that GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) on data protection and privacy was followed<sup>2</sup>.

Once online infrastructures were put into place, religious leaders also had to find the right amount of time for online gatherings and worship. Imam Mogra shared he felt exhausted after many hours of screen time and he, like some other faith leaders, felt they were obligated to warn their communities of the perils of spending too much time in front of a screen, even for worship. It was his responsibility as a faith leader, he said, to remind his community that too much screen time is not recommended. He would tell his congregants:

“Use the technology to stay in touch, but don’t forget your humanity. Don’t forget your connection to the seasons, to God’s creation, you know, get away from your screens, be with your family, be with your spouses.”

Another challenge, faith leaders observed, was the unprecedented competition that technology created. While scholars of new-media have revealed how religious institutions use online platforms to gain a global public profile for their key leaders (Golan and Martini 2020), shifting all religious life online simultaneously created an immediate religious free market for all. Similar to an economic free market, which has little or no government control, religious adherents (‘consumers’) in the religious free market can choose to move from one place of worship to another with little (or no) restrictions (Ellis 2015). According to their observations, technology provides freedom to attend a place of worship anywhere in the world, which is available online, with only a ‘click’.

Liberal rabbi Charley Baginsky identified another consequence of the religious free market, reporting that congregants might also try the religious services of other faith communities, not just other denominations of their own community:

“I think we have always felt in competition with each other, whether that’s internally as Jewish denominations, even if that’s even more intently between one liberal congregation and another, and suddenly we’re in this challenge of there being so much and no affiliation in the sense of I have to go to my synagogue service or even a Jewish service. I can attend a Christian Easter service, or I can go and watch what the mosque is putting on in a discussion...How do you maintain a sense of identity in such a market place? And it is a marketplace!”

In addition to the (technological) ease of visiting another community, attending online services or visiting other places of worship does not require a physical crossing of the threshold, which can be intimidating if you are unfamiliar with its practices or members. Exploring someone else’s community online is straightforward and less threatening because it does not require a face-to-face encounter and sometimes even allows for anonymous presence.

A free market and the ease with which it is possible to visit or join an online community may explain why interviewees mentioned a growth in numbers participating in communal activities. Most faith leaders reported that they were able to reach a larger and more diverse community online, with high attendance at lectures, community prayers, and other communal gatherings. Roman Catholic Nun Gemma Simmonds’s own experience reflected this phenomenon:

“A friend of mine, who’s a parish priest in a Catholic parish in London has seen his congregation multiplied by 300%. He’s got three times more people, as it were, coming to church on a Sunday, and certainly over the Holy Week liturgies,

than he would ever normally expect and that he would ever physically be able to fit into his church.”

While our data does not provide insights as to how many people actually “joined” new religious communities, these large numbers might reflect a few factors. First, this might suggest that some people “return” to their religious communities during times of crisis. Alternatively, this spike in numbers might be a consequence of the shift to online services which offers physically remote people a chance to attend services with more ease, including asynchronous attendance.

Attendance growth went beyond those living in the locale or in the same region, extending beyond normal geographical boundaries, as the Muslim leader in Nottingham, Musharraf Hussain shared:

“I was actually invited to give a lesson in Italy about a week ago. And I’ve been contacted by some people from India in Kerala, where they want me to do a series of lectures . . . and they’re going to have hundreds of people on there. So, I think it’s sort of brought us closer. This whole concept of a global village is becoming a reality now, to be honest!”

Many respondents similarly spoke about the expanding ties within and between communities that went beyond local collaborations. Enhancing the current rise in transnational religious networks (Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2021; Wuthnow and Offutt 2008), this seems to result in both a broader and deeper sense of community and group solidarity (a topic we will return to later on). The faith leaders we spoke to also reflected on the effect of 24/7 access to sacred space and to being able to participate in religious practice. While online access enabled pilgrims to visit holy places (Golan and Martini 2020), Hindu leader Shaunaka Rishi Das suggested that around the clock availability to sacred spaces provided also much-needed sustenance to faith communities:

“Ceremonies that people would expect to go to a temple for are now all online; Darshan (to go and see the deity) are all online from 4:30 in the morning, till 9 in the evening. In India, originally they closed down all the temples and then began to open them up again, not for congregation, but for this facility, so that people could have access on a daily basis, an hourly basis, to ceremonies in the temple that were performed on a very small scale; or even just seeing the forms of the deity which just brings comfort to everyone.”

24/7 virtual access to sacred space is a new phenomenon in religious practice and can attract a global audience to a local arena. The association between global and local (sometimes called ‘glocal’) has been adopted by professionals in marketing and business (Ángel Lopez-Lomelí et al. 2019; Schueller 2018) but our interviews show that responses to COVID-19 also reveal that it plays an increasing role in religious practice. Hence, as online worship became the new normal, new spaces and communities were brought together, creating new forms of religious competition as well glocal forms of prayer and connection.

### 3.2. Finding Creativity Amidst Emerging Technologies

Together with the shift from traditional forms of worship, many religious leaders also pointed to the emergence of increased personal responsibility which entailed being proactive about spiritual practice because, as Rev. Dr Rowan Williams put it, “some of the more obvious props are taken away”. All interviewees agreed that responding to the pandemic required and fostered creativity. The necessity to produce original ideas and old-new religious rituals affected everyone: religious and lay leaders as well as community members and parishioners alike. Charley Baginsky shared how, for her Jewish community:

“The biggest impact has been a sudden emergence of creativity in all of our communities. Whether they’re large or small, they have really put so much thought and energy into how to adapt and create new rituals, new practices, new ways of connecting with their communities. And that’s a challenge.”



Religious leaders employed a multitude of new creative practices that exploit existing technologies, both for worship and for continuing pastoral support online. Faith leaders, like Imam Ibrahim Mogra, discussed restrictions on pastoral service, for which physical presence was traditionally understood as a pre-requisite by ministers of religion. He explained how hard it was to effectively fulfil the pastoral demands of ministry via online platforms:

“I just think it’s difficult to meet the needs of people and certain people because of the lack of ability to meet with anybody face to face. I mean, I think that is really hurting our opportunities to minister”.

The difficulty of offering support without bodily presence was met with various creative solutions. For example, Anglican minister, Rev. Susan Bowden-Pickstock started a Zoom coffee, immediately after the morning church service, in lieu of informal chats. She explained these generated encounters which are no less important than the actual service. She also said that she had started using the word ‘love’ in her emails:

“Whereas in the past there’s been more of a sort of professional sort of, you know, “bless you” kind of ending to an email, I’m now putting “with love” because it’s important now because I can’t show that [love] in other ways that I might normally do, like with a touch on the shoulder or a being next to someone and exchanging a glance.”

Religious holidays and special events, in particular, required a different format which exploited technology and generated creative activities enabling participation in religious rituals. Rabbi Reuven Leigh, for example, reported how congregants searched for ways to celebrate Passover as they realised they would be alone or without most of their extended family around the festive table. One Jewish congregant decided to make a traditional family dish for Passover in her own kitchen, streamed live on Facebook for all of her community to virtually join. Sikh academic and communal leader Dr Jagbir Jhutti-Johal also described how her local community looked for creative ways to celebrate the festival of Vaisakhi (which celebrates the founding of Sikhism):

“You were remembering what you did in the past, looking at social media and the photos that people have posted. One of the things in the West Midlands they did was a virtual Vaisakhi, where people were posting on social media pictures of them in their saffron coloured clothes and blue and everything . . . The celebration was still happening, but it was in a different format”.

Thus, for Sikhs in the West Midlands, embodied celebrations from the recent past were shared by the community as part of their virtual celebration of the present holiday. Bridging key historical events with the present is a crucial aspect of many religious holidays, but, amidst COVID-19, embodied celebrations of the past became a strategy for creating shared celebrations online today.

However, the move to online platforms was not the same for all groups. The choices that religious leaders made largely reflected religious difference regarding who can use technology to worship and those who cannot (due to religious restrictions about the use of electricity for Orthodox Jews or the need for physical presence for congregational prayers among Muslims)<sup>3</sup>. Reform Jewish leader rabbi Laura Klausner-Janner explained that at the heart of ultra-Orthodox Jewish life is the religious obligation to perform prayers face-to-face with other Jews. Indeed, prayer, boys’ Torah study, and women’s ritual immersion cannot be moved over to Zoom. A consequence of the closure of the yeshivas or when men cannot pray together is that the very work of spiritually “repairing the world” ceases. In this sense, the shift online disrupts the very essence of Orthodox Judaism (Avishai et al. 2020).

A similar disruption was noted by Orthodox Christian priest Fr Dragos Herescu who asked:

“How does the practice of the Orthodox ritual work? Because people can’t take the body and the blood of Christ sitting at home.”

Anglican priest Giles Fraser agreed stating:

“The Eucharist, which is central to certainly the way in which I practice Christianity is, if it’s a physical thing, there’s no getting around it. You know, I have to give you a piece of bread and you can’t! Whatever you can do on Zoom, you can’t do that on Zoom. So, you have to sort of spiritualize the community, but in actual fact, you know, we long for that time that we could, we can come back together again and become the body of Christ, around the table. Christianity, in particular, is an incarnational religion. It’s a religion of physicality and there are, you know, this digital, your digital presence here, to me, it is not like the real thing, and it can’t ever be”.

Thus, there is a significant division within faith communities. Some successfully moved their regular religious practice online, while, for others, communal worship could not take place virtually. For example, the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Nichols, (the head of The Catholic Church in England and Wales) consulted the bishops of all the dioceses and archdioceses under his jurisdiction and stopped masses and other liturgies from 20 March 2020, but most Protestant denominations quickly streamed religious services online, enabling their congregants to take part, albeit from their homes; whilst Orthodox Jews could not participate in communal worship, Progressive Jewish communities were unimpeded.

It is noteworthy that some of these divisions existed not between but among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, demonstrating internal divergence in religious observance. In other words, religious responses to COVID-19 provide a complex picture: divergence **and** convergence **among** and **between** religions. Our comparative approach thus sheds light on the variations within a faith community as well as similarities and differences between faith communities.

The move from physical to virtual created disturbance for those Jews, Christians, and Muslims who were members of more strictly observant communities and could not, for religious reasons, use technology to perform the ritualized aspects of their spiritual life. This disturbance was neither fully understood nor taken sufficiently seriously by outsiders (such as the state authorities), which might explain why some members of these communities complied less with the COVID-related restrictions than their more liberal co-religionists and wider society. There were a small number of examples across the UK, when lockdown rules were broken for acts of worship and life cycle events such as weddings.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst the faith leaders we spoke to, both strictly observant and progressive, used technology to create social gatherings, offer thought provoking lectures, and classes, the pandemic interfered with and for many, prevented “real” spiritual work, which could not be replaced. This was painful for religious communities to experience. During the second and third lockdowns, these painful experiences led some groups to come together to resist the temporary state closure of all places of worship. This imposition by the state authorities on public and communal religious life amplifies tensions already inherent in the collision of ‘secular’ and ‘religion’ realms in the UK and elsewhere, where faith groups argue that their sensitivities were not given enough consideration in state decision-making amidst the pandemic (see: [Taragin-Zeller et al. 2020](#); [Kravel-Tovi and Özyürek 2020](#)).

### 3.3. A Home Theology

The closure of religious buildings, as well as lockdown, provided fertile ground for renewing as well as creating new religious practices. Following scholarship on lived religion ([Bender 2003](#); [Ochs 2007](#); [Eichler-Levine 2020](#)) this section explores how faith communities searched for ways to connect with the sacred in their everyday lives at home. We begin with the home, a familial setting which seeded innovative practices to renew daily life. Some people shared with us the tactics they used in striving to create a sanctuary at home and establish a ‘home theology’. Whether praying at specific times with their communities, or creating a designated prayer space through religious props, there are attempts to carve out an accessible space for the sacred in a domestic environment. For

example, Rev. Susan Bowden-Pickstock explained that she needed to think carefully about the location of religious accessories during Zoom services. Before the service started, she would ask herself:

“What do I need here to make this more of a sacred space that people immediately recognize as a sacred space, rather than just my bookshelf? So, I had to put my cross in a place . . . And then I bring a candle in, and you have to position that right”.

Rev. Giles Fraser discussed how bringing faith into his home in a new way overcame some pre-existing barriers:

“I think we are beginning to understand what it might be as Christians to bring faith into our homes in a way that we might’ve been a bit, I don’t know, awkward about. For instance, I’ve never said grace before something. We’ve never done that in our house until COVID-19”.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols also emphasised the importance of the home and home-based rituals, which:

“Help us strengthen the more domestic understanding of the church, something that, for example, the Chief Rabbi has spoken quite eloquently about. The understanding that the home is a holy place, a place of God.”

He was not the only Christian leader who touched on the intricate and intimate relationship between Christianity and Judaism and identified the Jewish practice of prioritizing family and home to feed both body and soul as important to Christian life in lockdown. Church of England Minister, Rev. Dr Mark Scarlata, explained why the opportunity to share a prayer space was meaningful for his family:

“I think we have a great debt in Christianity to Judaism for this connection between altar and table and the connection between home and sacred space. And I think it is one very interesting thing that’s been happening in the lives of our parishioners and people that I know is that the home is becoming more of a place of sacred worship of holiness, of teaching, of all of these types of things. I mean, I’ve experienced this in our own family. And so, I think that rebalancing . . . Don’t get me wrong, I still desperately miss the sacred space of the church. And I think there is something powerful in that, but I think what we see in ancient Israel is that balance between the sacredness of the home and the sacredness of the sanctuary or the temple space”.

Of course, it was not straightforward to shift formalised prayer, which previously took place in a house of worship, to the home. This raised many issues, particularly about gender dynamics as well as cross-generational themes. The move to prayer at home was especially hard for people who were used to daily congregational prayers such as Muslim men for example, who not only had to abandon attending the mosque (traditionally five times a day) but also had to come to terms praying at home, in a domestic space. According to Sayeeda Warsi, there was an upside for women:

“I’ve sensed my mum’s gain in all of this...I think a much bigger sense of family, because these important moments of prayer are now done as a family, rather than as you know, my dad going off praying somewhere else and my mum having to pray somewhere else.”

Another Muslim female communal leader, Julie Siddiqi, also commented on the gender implications of the shift to prayers at home, which she suggested, offered Muslim women an opportunity to critique the status quo. She explained that most mosques in the UK either offered limited space or no space for women and said:

“When we first realized the mosques were going to close, I couldn’t resist putting on my own social media: ‘Maybe we as women tell the men in our families, there



isn't enough space for them to pray in the home and see what the reaction is'. I didn't want to belittle what is a very serious situation, but I just wanted people to think about it in a way that maybe they hadn't up to now, particularly men who are used to just going into the mosque during the prayers, coming home and never really having to think about what the situation may be for others . . . I think each family is different, but I think there's definitely an opportunity maybe for people to think about family prayers, where people worship and do things together."

In Judaism, Liberal, Reform, and Conservative groups pray without gender segregation, and in Islam, cultural and more progressive Muslims advocate prayer without gender segregation at all. The more 'Orthodox' parts of Judaism and Islam are still grappling with securing female leadership ([Raucher 2019](#); [Taylor-Guthartz 2021](#)), whereas female rabbis are long established in progressive Jewish communities and female imams are beginning to gain traction among progressive Muslims ([Hammer 2012](#); [Ochs 2007](#)). Gender equality was a theme running through the comments of Julie Siddiqui. While it might not be ideal to pray in a chaotic, albeit warm, environment, she remarked, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to recalibrate gender relations in the performance of prayer and worship now that Muslims are confined to the home setting<sup>5</sup>. This meant developing creative ways to gather as a family and reassessing the usual state of affairs.

Framing this as fertile ground for change, as well as thinking about the implications for gender dynamics in a religious household, came up in the reflections of Sikh leader Dr. Jagbir Jhutti Johal who explained that although there is, theoretically, gender equality in Sikhism, in practice, Sikh men generally lead prayers in the gurdwara while women are expected to perform other tasks, such as providing food, reflecting how gendered notions are reified in religious tasks. However, she pointed out, lockdown meant the whole family was often confined to the home and, consequently, teaching and leading prayers were likely to take place with "more equal responsibility."

Hindus faced particular challenges in undertaking prayer at home because of the religion's emphasis on silent reflection, meditation, and self-isolation ([Flood 1996](#)), which are particularly difficult to achieve in a busy home environment. It is sometimes impossible to find a place of calm among a large family where there is plenty of noise and distraction. Shaunaka Rishi Das explains how Hindus are adapting to a new situation when isolating from society is not possible because:

"People are spending a lot more time in their family spaces, a lot more time meditating and chanting and time together as a family doing that, which is very interesting because a lot of them have commented that modern life, whatever that is, has taken us away from family observance in the home. So, a lot of reports about people spending more time together, worshipping together, praying together, chanting together, which is very interesting. As I say, it's not doctrine, this is just how it is happening."

Shaunaka's striking concluding remark, "it's not doctrine, this is just how it's happening", implies that responses to COVID-19 and living in a digital age have implications for theology. In this case, religious practice at home is leading the change. For his part, Orthodox Christian priest Fr. Dragos Herescu wondered whether the restrictions at home, and COVID restrictions to the performance of religious ritual, might mark the beginning of a change in Orthodox theology. His experience of performing communion in isolation led him to propose a "theology of communion that is a little bit more communitarian". In other words, lockdown has prompted him and other Orthodox priests to foster communitarian participation from a distance, which, he mused, might develop into normative Orthodox religious practice in the future.

Even though places of worship were closed, home theologies still epitomised ecumenical as well as local distinctiveness ([Burns and Clive 2013](#)). Anglican priest Rev. Giles

Fraser explained this in terms of differences between Roman Catholic and Protestant views of the significance of the church building:

“This very difficult business about clergy not being allowed into their churches, that really strikes as a sort of Catholic/Protestant type of divide, where those on a certain Protestant end of the scale, who think churches are nothing more than glorified rain shelters, really. And so, you know, you can practice your faith. It doesn’t matter. Whereas Catholics have a richer sense of the sort of theology of place, the importance of place. And I would be in that tradition, and I very much miss that. You know, that church-based exercise of my ministry”.

Similarly, to the divergence we found between different faith groups regarding the limits of technology, differing “theologies of place”, as Rev. Fraser put it, reflect how different theologies create particular sensitivities and challenges. The home was the new setting for theological debate.

### 3.4. *Between Human and Divine Presence*

Whilst creative practices emerged within the walls of one’s home, many of the participants noted that they missed the intrinsically communal aspects of religious life and worship. Indeed, attending religious services produces social connections (Putnam 2000). As Robert Putnam famously found, not only do religiously involved people know more people, but religious life also provides a sense of community and group solidarity. Amidst the social distancing guidelines, we ask: how did religious people cope with the lack of a physical community? This section explores the dearth of physical presence caused by the pandemic as well as perceptions of presence, both human and divine, within and across the religious divides and how, in the words of Roman Catholic priest Fr. Alban McCoy, communities have “had to reconfigure the notion of presence”.

Although, as we mentioned above, all faith communities have taken advantage of technologies which allow them to connect with one another, there was recognition that online connection is not a substitute for face-to-face, physical contact. As Orthodox rabbi Herschel Gluck explained:

“Technology is not the same as real human contact. It is lacking a very fundamental element that human beings require to be in the company of others and to work together with others.”

Imam Musharraf Hussain agreed, suggesting that a deeper appreciation of one another is a positive consequence of the loss of physical presence:

“It’s only when you are deprived of something, you begin to value it. And I think as we have been deprived of that physical contact, shaking hands, hugging, touching . . . where human warmth is really felt, and human presence is really noticed. I’m beginning to miss that now. And when we come out of this, I think we will see how valuable that experience of being next to somebody, being near to somebody . . . you know, the touch, the smell, the sounds . . . they’re a really important part of our humanity.”

The lack of human interaction and absence of physical contact due to the pandemic represented a major challenge for all people, not just people of faith. Human interaction is, of course, a universal need, but there is also a distinctive religious element because belief requires (human) presence and (divine) Presence. Christianity, for example, is based on the belief in incarnation because Jesus is understood as the incarnate (“enfleshed”) Word of God (John 1:14). The presence of God coming to dwell in human history is not so far away from other religions as well. Judaism and Hinduism, for example, insist no less strongly than Christianity on the transcendent God being present with God’s people, illustrated by the concept of the avatar in Hinduism and the *shechina* in Judaism.

Christian celebration of the eucharist symbolizes the ascended presence of Christ in or at the sacrament and the believer’s participation in the body of Christ. For many Christians,

however, the physical presence of Christ exists within the bread and wine, which means, as Anglican priest Rev. Jack Noble explains:

“The physicality of the relationship is vital. And as a Christian, of course, we have that deep stream of sacramental theology that says: stuff matters. You know, people present bread, wine, oil, water, fire, those things are ways in which God reaches us.”

Since divine presence is central to religious belief in general, not just Christian, COVID-19 prompted faith leaders to consider the significance of the presence of God in a crisis. Rev. Neil Thorogood, minister in the United Reformed Church, spoke for many faith communities when he said that:

“At the heart of faith is the sense of the presence of God . . . I think one of the things that we’re seeing is that all of this is, in a way, speaking into the cultural need, the social need, the community need, human need in the midst of all of this chaos and crisis to have a word that says there is One who loves us, cares for us and is present with us.”

Pentecostal bishop Joe Aldred reflected on divine presence in terms of God’s care for humanity, especially at a time when humans are suffering. After mentioning that some of his friends had died from COVID-related illness, he discussed the problem of theodicy, that is, the problem of the existence of evil. What was the purpose or theological meaning of human suffering?

“God is presence. So, he’s not absent and he’s suffering with those who suffer, and possibly this is a way to maybe push theology even further, that God is learning again, how to be with his people in a time of trouble.”

The bishop also took his reflection further and reflecting on the biblical figure Job who famously questioned God for the existence of suffering and theodicy; Joe Aldred offered this critique:

“And you know, somebody said to me just today that we just have to keep on praying and hope that God will step in and say enough. And the cynical side of me said, well, he didn’t step in during 300 years of the transatlantic slave trade. So, I’m not quite sure what incentive he would have for stepping in now. So, there’s that bit of me saying where is God? Where is God?”

Bishop Aldred was not the only faith leader to ask some Big Questions in response to the impact of COVID-19, especially to the increasing numbers of people who were dying as a result of an illness about which little was then known.

During the period when interviews were being undertaken, the end-of-life stage was the subject of much public debate. When a family member or close friend is dying it is an emotional and difficult situation, made even more distressing if you cannot visit and be present with them, which was often the case. The death of a parishioner posed a new challenge for faith leaders who were used to accompanying their congregants during their last moments. “How do you sit with someone online when they are dying?”, Rev. Dr Rowan Williams asked painfully. It was disorienting not to be present during such moments. Amidst COVID-19, the means of offering pastoral support had to be assessed and revised.

In addition, only a very small number of friends and family were allowed to go to funerals (the exact number varied from county to county). The limited number of people who could attend, as well as the need for all mourners to observe safe social distancing, were further challenges faced by faith leaders and their communities. Yet, new ways were developed to overcome the lack of physical presence. Orthodox rabbi Reuven Leigh explained how it was possible for large numbers of mourners to participate and be present at a funeral without breaching government guidelines:

“The way that they’ve been doing the funerals has been driving [the hearse] through the community. When people come out onto their doorsteps to offer

their last respects and there's a video going behind [the hearse], it's strangely gripping. You would think there's nothing to see, but I sat there for a good half an hour, just watching this column weaving its way through the community."

This strategy not only recognises the importance of presence during life-cycle moments but extends the meaning of being present. In the example of funeral rituals, it extended from a physical presence in the cemetery to the doorstep. Indeed, it could be argued rabbi Leigh even participated in the funeral from his living room. This resonates with Fernández and González's research which found that although technology cannot replace emotions, individuals can remain close, in such a way that emotional distance and physical isolation do not correspond to existential isolation amidst grief and mourning (Fernández and González-González 2020).

Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, a leading Muslim politician and communal leader, offered a similar account of a Muslim funeral:

"And so, one of the things that I saw, which I thought was beautiful, was that an amazing community guy from West Yorkshire passed away not so long ago. And the way they dealt with him was that as they drove the [hearse] to the graveyard, they drove through all the local streets. And people just came out onto the road. Everybody was socially distancing, but just came out to the front of their garden and just stood in silence. And it was a really, really moving moment of being allowed to pay your respects."

Developing new ways to be present seems to have broadened the way faith communities understand connection. Our interviewees indicated that religious communities have discovered new ways of connecting and what it actually means to be bound together. (Interestingly, one explanation for the origin of the term 'religion' is that it is derived from the Latin *religare* 'to bind'.) It is this binding and connection that carries contemporary significance, as Anglican bishop Tim Stevens explained:

"People are looking to their faith communities, to their faith tradition, but also to themselves to ask, what can I hold onto here, that's going to give me meaning? Can you give me a sense of connection and give me strength?"

Connection in this sense implies that faith leaders and their communities are connected via a network of commitments and responsibilities that support one another. Connection can also reinforce faith identity. Rev. Richard Harries, former Anglican bishop of Oxford, highlights its impact on Christian identity:

"There is this remarkable digital community now, which is making us feel that we do belong together. We're doing things together. And if I can be a bit mystical about it, it's the Christian people throughout the world and those who rejoice with us ... the whole sort of communion of Christians on earth and heaven, united in this invisible kind of way."

The significance of religious connection was also noted by other faith leaders. Muslim community leader Musharraf Hussain raised the concept of *ummah*, (an Arabic word which means 'community' and is often used as a synonym for the global Muslim community), suggesting that it has taken on a new reality in light of COVID-19. A sense of being connected with co-religionists can be extended from within one faith to all people of faith, as bishop Tim Stevens explained:

"What I've very much been struck by is that friends of mine, from my days as Bishop of Leicester from the Sikh and Hindu and Muslim community who have been in touch asking me how I am and how I'm getting on. And we've corresponded about that. This is a shared experience that transcends faith boundaries."

While Bishop Tim Stevens's reflections about interfaith connections amidst the pandemic might be unique to the UK context, where interfaith initiatives have been state-

funded since 1987, his comments open up new ways to think about how faith boundaries shift amidst acute moments of change.

#### 4. Discussion

This comparative study has explored the various ways religious leaders reacted to COVID-19 and guided their faith communities through the unexpected challenges the pandemic brought forth. Even though the doors of sacred spaces were shut, we found that many faith communities attracted increased numbers to their online offerings and new participants originated, well beyond the local area of worship. In continuation with the large body of scholarship, which describe religion as a set of both emerging and established practices that must be constantly documented (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008; Ammerman 2007), we found that online worship opened up new possibilities for faith communities.

Whilst faith leaders struggled to keep up with the birth of a rapid virtual “religious market”, a long-term consequence of the exploitation of technology is the coming-into-the-mainstream of a market economy ethos, enabling members of faith communities to more easily access and experience the ‘products’ of other faith communities. Amplifying pre-COVID global trends (Ellis 2015; Golan and Martini 2020; Campbell 2012), it is possible that creative responses among lay and religious members will attract larger numbers of attendees and enable communities to increase their numbers through online services.

The study identified cross-religious cutting convergence such as the willingness of faith communities to be creative in their responses to the challenges COVID-19 brought. We uncovered a multitude of strategies to foster connection between parishioners and adherents of all religions. Some may be retained in the long term (e.g., streaming of services, funerals). Whether theological development will also occur is too soon a question to answer, although the remark “it’s not doctrine, this is just what it is happening” suggests that new (or renewed?) religious practice (such as access to Hindu temples 24/7) is taking place. It is still early to say whether this creativity reflects mere adaptations to life amidst COVID-19 that might evaporate as soon as social distancing measures cease. However, if religious responses to COVID-19 lead to theological change, which some of our interviewees have observed, it will likely originate from the home where changes in gender dynamics and equalisation are already noticeable.

Whilst technology allowed, to a certain extent, the overcoming of an absence of physical encounters, reflection on the significance of human and divine presence reinforced the value of contact and connection. Religious responses deepened the importance of connection, within and between religions and reinforced a sense of religious identity. Whilst views diverged on the consequences of the lack of physical presence, there was convergence on its significance to religion and practice, an acceptance that presence could be extended from standing (or sitting) next to one another in a place of worship to being social distant (and even further away).

One of the most notable differences we found is that whilst all faith communities faced the same challenge of ministering and supporting their communities online, some were able to deliver services and perform worship online, but others, for theological reasons, could not offer communal prayer. These differences existed within each religion rather than across boundaries and represent intra-faith divergence at the same time as interfaith convergence. As noted above, the strictly religiously observant groups share more in common across religious boundaries than with their co-religionists. Whilst these findings were exacerbated by the particular conditions of life amidst social distancing, they serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of studying religion comparatively, especially amidst acute moments of social change in which all religious groups must respond to the same challenges.

A small number of religious communities, mainly the most strictly observant, occasionally (and consciously) broke government guidelines, and there was a noticeable disconnect between them and the (non-religious) authorities. Whether and how religious



organisations and individuals are restricted from religious practise has raised fundamental questions about the legal parameters of religious freedom. Waves of court cases have already begun in the US, such as the *South Bay United Pentecostal Church v. Newsom* (2020) case, where the US Supreme Court denied injunctive relief to a church that did not want to follow social distancing restrictions on public gatherings. These cases reflect how “legal boundaries surrounding religious freedom are remade in the ongoing and eventually post-pandemic landscape” (Baker et al. 2020, p. 366; see: Wenger 2017).

In the UK context, some of the religious leaders we spoke to felt their particular religious needs were being overlooked. Based on our findings, we argue that there must be more attention paid to the challenges COVID-19 poses for diverse faith groups in public policy decision-making amidst state-sanctioned social change. We must find more creative ways to go beyond Christian or non-religious sensibilities and pay more attention to other types of religious needs and sensitivities. As scholars of religion, we must also search for more creative ways to diversify intellectual depictions of religious life (Ecklund 2020), which would offer better tools to both policy makers and media commentators. We must put forward more nuanced approaches to the intersection of religion in the public square, especially regarding issues of health. Novelist Arundhati Roy writes that “historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (Roy 2020). These powerful words embody the paths we must take as scholars of religion.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Many of these interviews were part of the Woolf Institute Covid-19 Chronicles series, which are available online: <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/videos/series/covid-19-chronicles> (accessed on 1 September 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> The GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) is a new data protection and privacy regulation in EU law. This set of guidelines (enforced since 2018) propagated new systems for data collection and privacy protection within many institutions as well as religious initiatives, who were struggling to implement these guidelines before and after the pandemic outbreak and the quick shift online.
- <sup>3</sup> See (Kasstan 2019; Bowen 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> For example, see: <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/why-i-ve-decided-to-break-the-law-and-open-my-church-during-lockdown>. And, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london55764673#:~:text=Police%20broke%20up%20a%20wedding,about%20150%20people%20had%20gathered.&text=Guests%20fled%20from%20the%20strictly,fine%20for%20breaking%20lockdown%20rules> (accessed on 1 June 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> While many religious leaders referred to the gendered challenges of religious life for their congregants, most did not refer to their own. In addition, during our analysis we did not find different coping criteria for male and female religious leaders.

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