



Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic

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To cite this article: Wesley J. Wildman, Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis & Uffe Schjoedt (2020) Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic, Religion, Brain & Behavior, 10:2, 115-117, DOI: [10.1080/2153599X.2020.1749339](https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2020.1749339)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2020.1749339>



Published online: 15 Apr 2020.



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Religion and the COVID-19 pandemic

What does a virus have to do with religion? Well, more than you might think, and we are not referring to the transmission of religious ideas, which some have described using epidemiological models. No, we're talking about the role of religious practices in spreading SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Let's begin with South Korea. As of the end the first week of March 2020, almost two-thirds of coronavirus infections (nearly 5,000 cases) were traced back to "Patient 31," an individual who worshipped at Shincheonji Church of Jesus in Daegu.¹ The church had insisted on in-person meetings, banning health masks, praying while touching others, and refusing to turn over its membership list to health officials. Routinely accused by mainline Protestant Christian denominations of being a secretive sect, now it is being blamed for contributing to the local epidemic of COVID-19. It didn't help that the church's leader, 88-year old Mr. Lee Man-hee, explained the epidemic as the Evil One fighting back against the rapid growth of the church he founded. Koreans are outraged and urging the government to prosecute Mr. Lee for murder due to gross willful negligence. The 27% of Koreans who identify as Christian are distancing themselves from the Shincheonji Church of Jesus as fast as humanly possible.

Next, consider Trinidad in the West Indies. One of us was contacted for advice from a young man confronting a conflict between government health officials and some pastors of local churches. The health officials were pleading with stores and places of worship to cease gatherings until further notice. Meanwhile, these pastors were continuing to hold in-person services on the basis that a failure to attend worship in person is evidence of a lack of faith—arguably bullying church members to show up against their better judgment.

Here's a third example. Rev. Tony Spell is pastor of Life Tabernacle Church, a Oneness Pentecostal congregation in Baton Rouge, USA. Explaining his defiance of the Louisiana Governor's order banning meetings of more than fifty people, Rev. Spell was quoted as saying, "It's not a concern. ... The virus, we believe, is politically motivated. We hold our religious rights dear and we are going to assemble no matter what someone says."² About three hundred people gathered on the Tuesday after the ban and over a thousand on the following Sunday. Rev. Spell is handing out anointed handkerchiefs, preaching against fear, and telling his people, who are mostly bussed in from poor regions all around the city, that this is an extreme test of faithfulness brought on by the spirit of the antichrist. As we write, a petition calling for Rev. Spell's arrest and prosecution for reckless endangerment has been signed by over 7,000 people.³

In one important way these three examples resemble the famous snake-handling churches in Appalachia, USA. Those churches pick up on a thread of biblical narrative stretching from the Genesis story of expulsion from the garden of Eden with a divine curse involving enmity between humans and snakes to the New Testament stories of people being bitten by poisonous vipers but remaining unharmed. In a region where rattlesnakes are common and often kept as treasured pets, the members of these churches see themselves as proving their faith and celebrating divine love and care by taking the snake out of its cage and handling it in an ecstatic trance-like state, thereby taking a serious health risk. When handlers are bitten and get sick or die, they are deemed to have suffered the judgment of God. But when a rattler bites one of the faithful in those settings, it is calmly collected before it bites anyone else. In sharp contrast, churches who defy health directives in combating COVID-19 endanger people well beyond congregational boundaries. In a manner of

months, the novel coronavirus has spread to every corner of the world. Collective worship is an effective mechanism for accelerating its spread. Is religion, then, complicit in the most daunting global health crisis of our time?

Though recalcitrant religious congregations are accelerating viral transmission, it is notable that most religious groups are innovating in response to opposing demands of collective worship and social distancing. For example, religious communities all over the world are conducting online services, stretching the world's data bandwidth at certain times of the week to stream live videos of suitably modified rituals, sermons, and prayers. Many religious communities are also disseminating practical health information and offering urgent financial help in the wake of rapidly degrading economic conditions. The behaviors of problematic churches are attracting the media's attention, but in many regions of the world religious communities are more beneficial than harmful. While it is impossible at present to sum over the global diversity of religious communities, the fact that so many religious communities are active in the fight against COVID-19 is a vivid reminder that that concept "religion" does not carve human social behaviors neatly at any joint. For this reason, the question of whether religion is contributing to the global COVID-19 health crisis is poorly formulated.

Of course, science should make informative, insightful generalizations where possible. Though we think the question of whether religion is a force for help or harm is ill-formed, we nevertheless might ask whether there are recurring features across the diversity of religious responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. We think so. Though religious groups do not line up neatly on one or another side of the global pandemic response, religious community-making tends to be an *intensifier of response*, strengthening resolve and motivating action.

A similar story can be told about the role of religion during the civil rights movement in the United States. Among Christians, most black churches were agitating for change. They had support from many non-black churches in the North and a few in the South, as well as coalitions of Jewish, Muslim, and secular groups. Yet a large majority of Southern Christian churches were opposed to legislative reform. A century before the civil rights movement, coalitions of religious and secular groups opposed coalitions of religious and secular groups on the issue of slavery. Today, we find alliances of religious and secular groups on both sides of hot-button issues such as women's rights, marriage equality, abortion, the death penalty, and gun control. Evidently, knowing that people are religious does not tell us as much as we might imagine about their ethical judgments. However, knowing about the depth of religiosity can often predict the level of motivation and interest. Religion makes ethical battles fiercer and the combatants more self-assured—on all sides of whatever issues happens to be at stake.⁴

Returning to COVID-19, we can say that religious community-making directly impacts viral spread either by inhibiting or accelerating social transmission, depending on the specific religious group being considered. We think the scientific study of religion can help tease apart reasons for religion making one kind of impact rather than another.

Standard epidemiological models of viral spread don't take account of human factors such as religious ideologies and values. Human beings are complex and the way religion weaves itself through the lattice of human life is incredibly intricate. Surfacing such human value factors is a public obligation. Just as health officials try to explain their recommendations, so experts in the scientific study of religion need to surface religion-abetted value judgments that impact behaviors relevant to viral spread. Experts need to explain where religion is causing problems and find creative ways to communicate alternative ways of thinking.

Notes

1. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/09/opinion/coronavirus-south-korea-church.html>.
2. See <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/pastor-defies-coronavirus-order-draws-over-1k-people-to-services/ar-BB11HwQ3>.

3. See <https://www.change.org/p/john-bel-edwards-we-demand-the-prosecution-of-pastor-spell-of-life-tabernacle-church>.
4. The ethical pattern is laid out in Jeffrey Stout's unpublished Gifford Lectures, "Religion Unbound: Ideals and Powers from Cicero to King," available online at <https://www.giffordlectures.org/lecturers/jeffrey-stout>.

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