

# Religious Rituals and Community in the Age of Social Distancing

A ReNEW Research workshop at University of Oslo, November 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> 2021

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## **An altered religious landscape**

The present global pandemic alters people's lives in a wide range of ways. It also alters the religious landscape in novel and unpredictable manners. One key characteristic of almost all religious practices and traditions is, as Baker et al. underline, the centrality of face-to-face gatherings (Baker et al. 2020). Given the need for social distancing, the pandemic might be a trigger for an increased need for religious traditions; on the other hand, the pandemic causes significant changes to these traditions (Baker et al. 2020, Rafoss 2019, 2020). The number of research initiatives addressing religion related to COVID-19 is still relatively modest. The purpose of this workshop is to investigate how religious institutions, congregations and individuals in the Nordic region have been affected by the social changes brought about by the COVID-19 regulations. Analytical themes regarding religious rituals and community will be primary, but methodological issues will also be on the agenda because conducting research in an age of social distancing calls for methodological rethinking and innovation. Our thematic design ties directly to three of the cross-cutting research clusters within ReNew: democracy, governance and law; multiculturalism and globalization; and Nordic culture and media.

## **Regulating religious practice**

*AIM: To foster a reflexive space where stakeholders and researchers discuss how normative choices made by civil and religious authorities affect the religious landscape in both the short and the longer term.*

The first introductory section of the workshop connects to the theme “Democracy, governance and law”. Our workshop will focus on how civil authorities have regulated and restricted social life, and discuss possible tensions and contradictions to religious rules. Limitations on religious freedom on the grounds of public health are allowed in international law, but Balsamo and Tarantino emphasize that the restrictions on religious practice are unprecedented on a global scale (Balsamo and Tarantino 2020). Our workshop will examine the regulations of religious practice in the Nordic countries, and research on how religious institutions have responded to these restrictions will be presented. Research findings from Denmark shows that most religious authorities were committed to lockdown regulations (Larsen et al. 2020). Presenting and discussing legal and governance-oriented research related to both majority and minority religions from other countries having different historical and cultural trajectories, such as Italy, will enable a comparative perspective on the Nordic responses to state regulations.

## **Changing patterns of Lived Religion**

*AIM: To explore how social distancing transforms rituals and communities at different levels of everyday religious life and discuss how this challenge theoretically differentiates between institutionalized and private religion.*

The other workshop sections are attuned to the themes “Nordic culture and media” and “Multiculturalism and globalization”, and we will address them as integrated and intertwined topics. Our workshop will critically discuss one of the prevailing characteristics of religion in the Nordics as one of the most secularized regions in the world (Zuckerman 2009, Thurfjell 2015, Voas 2009). Additionally, this Nordic religious culture of “belonging without believing” (Davie 2015, Botvar 2000) is often referred to as “the Nordic paradox” (Pettersson 2013). However, as Willander argues, this conceptualization rests on a normative conception of religion where religious faith is perceived as a total package of regular attendance, membership and particular beliefs (Willander 2020).

An alternative is to employ a *lived religion* perspective emphasizing how religious institutions and practices transform under new circumstances, and what ordinary people do as part of their everyday religious lives (Ammerman 2020, 2016, Nielsen and Johansen 2019, Johnsen forthcoming). This perspective is well suited to investigating and discussing how the pandemic alters the religious landscape in the Nordic countries. As Baker urges, the lived religion approach to religion is of utmost importance in the present situation. To analyze how the pandemic changes religion in the suspension of in-person gatherings, and how the necessity for social distancing forms novel ways of interactive religious services and rituals, will be of societal importance (Baker et al. 2020).

Several of the presentations at the workshop will analyze empirical material from the Lutheran majority churches, but the workshop reflects that the Nordic countries are multicultural societies where Islam is the largest migrant religion. The selected case studies, as well as survey research, will present how people responded to lockdown and restrictions that closed down churches and mosques and their reopening as digital platforms. We will especially consult research on Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Easter and Christmas as calendric religious events, and funerals, both Christian and Muslim, as family-related religious events. A particular focus will be put on how digital or hybrid institutionalized religious and more emergent practices enact community. Additionally, research on how staff in Christian and Muslim congregations conduct and experience worship services during periods of lockdown and semi-open periods will be tackled.

## **Mediatized lived religion during COVID-19**

*AIM: To discuss the consequences of the lockdown and the forced turn to various media platforms to maintain existing religious communities and the establishment of new forms of community.*

The Nordic countries have been the social and cultural backdrop for the formulation of what is known as the theory of the mediatization of society (Lundby 2018a, Hjarvard 2016, 2008, Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019). With its majority churches and relatively secular populations, the uniquely Nordic religious landscape has made media a crucial arena for knowledge on religion, at the same time as the pandemic has made media crucial platforms for religion in order to connect with people (Hjarvard, Lövheim, and Reintoft Christensen 2012). Generally, the level of interest in the majority churches has been declining in all the Nordic countries (Furseth 2018, Lundby 2018b). It is mainly when these churches are regarded as out of sync with society that an intensified attention on media is shown (Hjarvard 2016). The importance of media, including social media, can hardly be underestimated in the current situation. Our interest at the workshop will be to analyze how media has dealt with religious issues and religious institutions during the COVID-19 period, but also to focus on how religious actors have employed and developed their own use of media. Various news media have showed considerable interest in what religious minorities and the majority churches are doing, especially with regard to regular weekly services, important seasonal events (Easter, Eid al-Fitr, Ramadan, Christmas) and also life-cycle events such as funerals.

However, it is also interesting to examine how churches, mosques and other religious and emergent communities have used platforms such as Facebook or many of the new virtual meeting rooms (Zoom, Teams etc.). Several of the Nordic majority churches have had social media on their strategic agendas for some years, but this has suddenly become very important to pursue. Moberg argues that this social media strategy goes together with a general marketization logic that has become key within all the majority churches (Moberg 2017). Analyzing how secular media portray religious institutions and how religious institutions operate in media during the pandemic will provide new knowledge into this research field.

## **Collaboration across disciplines**

*AIM: To foster a network of Nordic researchers interested in collaborating on interdisciplinary research into how COVID-19 alters the religious landscape, and thereby challenge established theoretical understandings within the fields of religious scholarship.*

Overall, discussions at this workshop about how COVID-19 as a global, macro phenomenon affects religious practices on individual and institutional levels, can contribute novel insights about how people in the Nordic region deal with religion when their everyday lives have been transformed. We have invited scholars from four Nordic countries that are already involved in

research projects into how COVID-19 alters religion in the Nordic region. However, most of these projects are individual projects. The workshop will contribute to a collaboration between junior and senior researchers from practical theology, religious studies, sociology of religion and media. Bringing these initiatives together will facilitate publications at a high scientific level. The selected scholars are some of the most experienced researchers on contemporary religion in the Nordic, and our ambition is to move forward the research frontier on religious rituals and community in an age of social distancing. The workshop will contain many original contributions, not previously published. It will be available for interested researchers, but not to the public. Our primary reasons for keeping the workshop to invited presenters and guests are that we want to discuss the possibility of larger interdisciplinary projects, and that we aim at a thematic issue in *The Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, a top ranked journal in our field.

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