

Abstracts: Religious Rituals and Community in an Age of Social Distancing

A ReNEW Research seminar and workshop at University of Oslo, November 2021

Organizers: Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen (University of Oslo), Auli Vähäkangas (University of Helsinki) and Henrik Reintoft Christensen (Aarhus University) Co-organizers: Ånund Brottveit and Olaf Agedal (KIFO)

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. 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. 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.

Wednesday 17th: Regulating religious practice

Session 1: State and religious authority

Lene Kühle: (AU) Danish religious institutions handling the COVID19 crisis.

Danish religious institutions handling the COVID19 crisis According to economist Dani Rodrik, during Covid-19 "countries have in effect become exaggerated versions of themselves" (Rodrik 2020). Because the reactions of religious communities the Covid-19 lockdowns also revealed innate ideas about sociality and sacrality, about ritual formality and change, the pandemic represents a strong prism for the investigation of religion-state relations. A initial study of the level of religious restrictions found that neither levels of secularization nor the general level of democratic freedoms deliver a clear answer to why some countries restricted religion more than others (De La Ferriere 2020). The presentation will discuss whether Covid-19 instead helpfully could be investigated as 'the first postsecular pandemic'. This will be done on the basis of the reaction of the Danish state as well as majority and minority religions to the pandemic. The paper will focus on controversies around what the Danish government choose to limit or allow in light of the pandemic challenge and discuss what the pandemic reveals about the status of majority and minority religions, transnational relations and the dynamics of secular societies.

Giuseppina Scala: The Constitutional Protection of Religious Freedom during the Spread of Covid-19 Pandemic in Italy and Sweden. A Comparative Law Perspective.

The Covid-pandemic has brought to light a whole series of vulnerabilities that constitute a challenge to legal systems. When the virus first emerged on the global scene, it alarmed doctors, journalists, politicians, sociologists and of course legal scholars. Indeed, from a legal perspective, the pandemic has had an enormous impact on individual rights. This is true also for the freedom to manifest one's religion both in the private and public sphere. In this regard, Italy and Sweden represent two interesting case studies because the strategies the Italian Government has adopted to limit the spread of the virus are distinct from those adopted in Sweden. First, this paper investigates the two approaches in the context of the general legal framework. Second, the paper analyses how these two approaches affected specific religious confessions. Finally, considering that Italy and Sweden belong to two different legal traditions, the paper poses the question of whether a differing notion of "right" in its public and subjective declination has affected the way freedom of religion is being interpreted in the two countries during the pandemic

Research/stakeholder responses and discussion: Helge Årsheim (confirmed) (UiO), Ingrid Rosendorft Joys (confirmed) (The Council for Religious and Life stance Communities in Norway): How will normative choices made by civil and religious authorities affect the religious landscape?

Thursday 18th: Mediatized lived religion

Session 2: Mediatized religion and the COVID-19 effect

Iona Nord (Würzburg University)

Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen: Performed Religious Selves at Facebook: A comparative study of three Nordic majority churches

Even when the context is a pandemic creating different kinds of crises, digital media grant new possibilities for religious institutions to negotiate and re-present their religious selves and core values. This paper will analyze how three Nordic churches, known as “Lutheran folk-churches”, in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, have utilized Facebook, one of the most influential social media, whereas Christmas 2020 is the selected period. Studying churches’ enactments at Facebook during a phase of severe lockdowns can provide country specific insights into the how Corona has affected these churches. It can as well give glimpses into how media technology shapes liturgical practices, and other practices. However, this paper has a different focus. My approach is how these institutions present themselves at a public social media space, Facebook, in times of Christmas and Corona. In short, this presentation will identify the performed religious identity of three Nordic majority churches Facebook pages. Thus, how the churches frame Christmas during the Corona pandemic is understood as indicators representing the churches religious selves; how the churches construct their religious identity at this social media platform.

Laura Kallatsa and Sini Mikkola: (University of Eastern Finland): Online Communion during the First Wave of COVID-19 in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland

A lively debate on the celebration of the Eucharist during the COVID-19 pandemic has been taking place all over the Christian world, including in Finland. In the presentation, we discuss the views and experiences of vicars and parishioners of the ELCF concerning online Communion during the first wave of the pandemic. Our investigation is based on two sets of data collected in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (N=333). Our research shows that online Communion is primarily a theological problem for both vicars and parishioners, as only a few respondents addressed its practical aspects. The data is presented especially from the theoretical viewpoint of lived theology, which is part of the framework of lived religion.

Research response Knut Lundby (confirmed) (UiO) and stakeholder response Ingeborg Dybvig (Church of Norway) and discussion: How will digital media transform churches self-understanding?

Session 3: Virtual and Hybrid Communities

Merete Thomassen: @Coronaworship: Material and Digital liturgies

Ånund Brottveit (KIFO): Digital Easter, drive-in Id al-fitr, and Christmas on a distance.

Noora Palmi: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Employees’ Experiences of Meaning in and Wellbeing at Work in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) adapted rapidly to the emergency conditions corona pandemic caused in Finland in spring of 2020. Sudden changes the ELCF had to do to adjust impacted the work of many employees, and the totality of the situation might have caused some unwanted turmoil among them. Saarelainen’s research investigated ELCF employees’ experiences of meaning in and well-

being at work during the pandemic. The mixed-method data (N=397) was gathered in the latter part of the first corona wave. Participants were invited through social media and deans of the dioceses. The questionnaire included items measuring the experiences of meaningful work and wellbeing at work. In addition, two open-ended questions were included. This presentation focuses especially on the qualitative part of the research, which Palmi analyzed thematically. Analysis revealed that the reported situations and experiences varied among participants. Whereas some had not experienced much of a change at work, others recounted almost a complete one. Similarly, some seemed to do well during this time, whereas others felt stressed and fatigued. More detailed main themes will be discussed in the presentation.

Research response and discussion: Nina Hoel.

Session 4: Deaths and farewell

Auli Vähäkangas: Experiences and emotions related to funerals during Covid 19. The Covid 19 pandemic has disrupted and radically reshaped experiences of bodily disposal, grief and memorialization around the world. One key characteristic of almost all religious practices and traditions is the centrality of face-to-face gatherings (Baker et al. 2020). Aim of my presentation is: which emotions the participants felt while attending funerals during Covid 19? The 45 letters that form the qualitative data of the reported research were received between October 2020 and February 2021 and offer some important real-time insights into how funeral practices have been experienced during the pandemic. The results show a variety of emotions connected to funerals during the pandemic. Organizing a funeral during the restrictions was hard and resulted in a variety of difficult emotions. The experiences of attending a funeral consisted, however, of both positive and negative emotions. The Covid 19 pandemic has disrupted experiences of funeral in Finland but has not radically reshaped them. As a whole, the issue of virtual attendance seems not to be as significant in Finland as in some other countries.

Carsten Schuerhoff Pandemic Funerals. Temporary or permanent changes in the ritualization of death? Pandemic Funerals. Temporary or permanent changes in the ritualization of death? The starting point for the presentation is an empirical project which analyses ten interviews with priests in the Church of Norway and three interviews with employees at different funeral homes. The aim is to identify whether, and if so in what ways, the corona-crisis has influenced the planning and the performing/conducting of funerals and to outline the temporary/permanent (?) changes. In order to do so, the project takes two steps back. 1) As a background for the interpretation of the empirical findings a kind of "normal situation" before the corona-crisis is pictured. This helps to shed (new) light on some discussions already taken place. 2) These discussions will be further developed by drawing on German a) theological and b) sociological conceptions and approaches. It seems that the corona-crisis has affected many of the small and significant details in the ritualization process. Some of these will persist, some of these will not. May be more important: it looks as if the corona-crisis should be viewed more precisely as a catalyst for current trends, more as the actual cause of fundamental changes.

Research response and discussion: Birgitte Lerheim (confirmed) (UiO) and discussion: Digital or hybrid funerals - a worship service or a commercial product?

Friday 19th: Changing patterns of Lived Religion

Session 5: Beliefs and practices

Erika Willander: The existential crises among care professionals and hospital chaplaincy in Sweden This paper include two parts: An attempt to position the existential in Sweden and an empirical enquiry into chaplains' responses of the Covid-19 pandemic at Swedish hospitals. The positioning departs from the influential hypothesis that Sweden is one of the most secularized societies in the world proposed by Norris and Inglehart (2005). In their theorizing, Sweden's secular condition is explained by high levels of existential security in the form of physical and material resources. Justifications of chaplaincy in Sweden also place emphasis on the existential. Here, however, the

existential comes across as a synonym to the spiritual or as a way to broaden the horizon of social-psychological care. The latter, I argue, comes closer to classical sociological definitions of existential questions, central for defining the content of religion. In the first part of this paper, I attempt to bring these two perspectives of the existential together in order to define the existential crises care professionals may have faced during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the second part, I present an overview of Chaplains' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic at Swedish hospitals. I then conclude by sketching out approaches for future research.

Henrik Reintoft Christensen: Religious beliefs and practice in a population under COVID-19 restrictions. The Danish survey

The VELUX foundation funds research from the humanities and social sciences and decided to issue a call for collecting data that could be used to study the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic. One of the projects focuses on religion and existential issues. This presentation examines ideas about the coronavirus (its cause, how it should be handled, attitudes towards lock down and other restrictions) among the most and least religious parts of the population. Among the most religious respondents the survey identifies not only a clear sense of social deprivation but also of religious deprivation. Many in this group have participated in online religious activities but few find them to be satisfactory alternatives to activities with actual physical presence.

Tore Witsø Rafoss: Religious beliefs and practice in a population under COVID-19 restrictions. The Norwegian survey.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, KIFO (Institute for Church, Religion, and Worldview Research) has studied how the pandemic has affected religious and public rituals in Norway, such as Christmas and the Norwegian national celebration. As a part of this research, KIFO conducted three national surveys: Two studying the impact of Corona on the Norwegian Christmas celebration, and one studying how it affected the 17th of May national day celebration. In this presentation Rafoss will present and analyze some of the main findings from these surveys.

Research response Pål Ketil Botvar (UiA) (confirmed) and discussion: How will COVID-19 transform established religious patterns in the Nordic countries?