



The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Religion: Denmark

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General presentation

The first case of Covid-19 in Denmark was reported on February 27, and while the initial reaction from the health authorities was that Covid-19 would probably be of little importance for Denmark, this evaluation was soon changed and Denmark went into an extensive lockdown from March 11. The lockdown targeted all ‘nonessential’ public institutions and private institutions of a certain size. The buildings were closed to the public and employees were asked to work from home if possible. As the personnel of the majority Lutheran Church are employed by the state, they were also sent home and the churches were closed to the public. In a video recorded by the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs on March 12, the minority religions were requested to do the same. The formal legislation that would require the religious minorities to close the religious buildings to the public was only in place from 5 April 2020 (Kühle and Larsen 2021; Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). In the summer 2020, the society opened more up again and from autumn it was again possible to gather in religious buildings (Larsen, Mauritsen, et al. 2020a). When the Danish society closed down again in the winter of 2020/21, both minority and majority religions were under the same restrictions.

Despite the enormous impact of the lockdown in the spring of 2020, there were initially very little debate on the restrictive policies and the restrictions imposed were generally accepted. In the fall of 2020, concerns regarding the spread of the virus through farmed mink arose, and in November 2020 Danish authorities ordered a stop to the mink industry and all minks killed to stop mink-related virus variant spreading.¹ It soon became clear that the government, after having received much praise for its initial handling of the pandemic, had in this case reacted too hastily and without legal backing. The debates therefore became more critical and both the opposition, which had previously supported the actions of the social democratic government and the media, took a more critical stance towards Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. Different groups, ‘Men In Black’, ‘Free Observer’ and ‘Danmark Vågner’ became active on Facebook and one of them, ‘Men in Black’ arranged several demonstrations and in one instance burned a dummy of the prime minister with the statement and discussion of conspiracy theories (Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021). Within these groups, ideas aligned with conspiracy theories like the QAnon would prosper. There were also criticism and actions coming from spiritual milieus in Denmark, who agreed that the handling of the

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/what-the-mink-coronavirus-pandemic-has-taught-us>.

pandemic by the Prime Minister was a sign of a democratic crisis, but in contrast to 'Men in Black' interpreted this as a spiritual predicament (Lehrmann 2020).

Religion was not a major topic of discussion during the Covid-19, although there were some debates (Andersen et al. 2021). These debates focused on three aspects. First, the media attention was almost entirely on stories about the spread of the virus by religious communities and activities abroad (Borup 2020; Fibiger 2020). Global religions were generally portrayed as sources rather than solutions to the calamities of the pandemic which in some cases amounted to scapegoating (Fibiger 2020). Second, debates turned to the behaviour of the Muslim minority in Denmark (Kühle 2021; Jacobsen, Kühle, and Christensen 2021). In general, the mosques in Denmark had abided to the instructions given to religions by Danish authorities. The virus became in periods more widespread in areas with a large Muslim population. This, along with the large attendance to the funerals of Yahya Hassan, a famous poet with an Arab background and Abukar Ali, a gang member with a Somali background, in the summer of 2020, fuelled public debates on the possibility of cultural or religious explanations for the spread of the disease (Westengaard 2020). Finally, while the closing of the churches for Easter had led to little debates, the restrictions on participating in religious gathering around Christmas time led to some debate. The main issue was that the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs was very slow to publicise the instructions. Therefore, when the restrictions were made public, many pastors and parish councils found that they did not have enough time to prepare and many services were cancelled. The state handling of the Christmas lockdown led to reflections on whether the state is considering and including sufficiently the member of the majority church as actors in decision-making processes (Videnscenter 2020).

The HOPE project, which followed the overall development in the reactions to the pandemic of the population, did not include any questions relating to religion. A quasi-representative panel survey, funded by the private foundation Velux, followed changes in the religious belief and activities of the population (Fallentin Nyborg et al. 2020) as well as the opinions in regard to the lockdown (Andersen et al. 2021; Mauritsen 2020). The consequences of the pandemic for the general population as well as for the majority church were also studied by FUV, the education and research centre of the majority Lutheran church (Videnscenter 2020). Extensive qualitative and quantitative research in regard to minority religion has been conducted by a group of scholars associated with the Center for Contemporary religion (Larsen, Mauritsen, et al. 2020b; Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). Other research worth mentioning is the research on Muslim women going online by PhD student Maria Lyngsøe (Lyngsøe 2022) and research on issues of relevance to church law by Professor Lisbet Christoffersen (Christoffersen 2020).

Legal Aspects

The Danish constitution contains no general constitutional provision on the state of emergency. Art. 23 of the Constitution allows the government to issue provisional acts, if not violating the Constitution, if the Parliament is unable to convene (Fallentin Nyborg et al. 2020),

but as the Parliament was kept open during the pandemic, the extraordinary means employed during the pandemic were done with reference to the Danish Epidemic Act (2019), which allows restrictions in order to prevent or contain a dangerous contagious disease (Saunes et al. 2022, 420-1). The legal framework for handling a pandemic was therefore produced as the pandemic developed, and not something that was in place already. In regard to the regulation of religious life, Art. 6 of the Epidemic Act and Art. 12B of the revised Epidemic Act² restrict gatherings (funerals and burials being exempt from the regulation) to a maximum of 10 participants, and prohibit and restrict access respectively to premises of general public access. These restrictions were mentioned by the Prime Minister, when she announced the lockdown on March 11. The legislation ensuring this came into effect on 18 March 2020, stating that all public cultural, church (in effect the majority Lutheran Church of Denmark) and leisure institutions must keep their premises closed to the public (BEK No. 224 of 17/03/2020³) and respect the norms for social gatherings BEK No. 539 of 26/03/2021⁴. With effect from 5 April the buildings of the minority religions were also formally closed to the public (BEK no 370 of 04/04/2020⁵). Funerals, burials, marriage ceremonies, baptisms and other religious acts were exempt from the regulation, but it was still as the suspension of Art. 67 of the Danish Constitution, which protects freedom to practise one's religion as long as it is not 'contrary to good morals or public order'. It has been argued that because the temporary shutdown of religious buildings aimed at containing dissemination, the restriction is within the scope of Art. 67 (Klinge et al. 2020, 137). The closure of the majority church and the buildings of minority religions was in force until 18 May 2020, when a specific relaxation on the restrictions on assemblies allowed religious buildings to reopen under certain conditions (BEK no 630 of 17/05/2020⁶). This was revised twice again (BEK no 687 of 27/05/2020⁷; BEK no 795 of 08/06/2020⁸). The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs published the detailed regulation on May 17, and in a revised version on June 9⁹ and August 20, 2020¹⁰. In the winter of 2020/21, as the pandemic re-emerged, restrictions were once more applied, but the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs simply adjusted the regulations whenever needed – for instance 7 January 2021¹¹, 21 April 2021¹², and 2 July 2021¹³. The regulations were very complicated and distinguished for instance between services with and without song, indoor/outdoor and whether participants

² <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/1444>

³ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/224>

⁴ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2021/539>

⁵ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/370>

⁶ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/630>

⁷ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/687>

⁸ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/795>

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https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/dokumenter/Reviderede_retningslinjer_for_ansvarlig_genaabning_af_folkekirken_og_andre_trossamfund_version_pr._9._juni_2020_.pdf

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https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/dokumenter/officielt/Reviderede_retningslinjer_for_ansvarlig_genaabning_af_folkekirken_og_andre_trossamfund_version_pr._19._august_2020_-konverteret.pdf

¹¹ https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/dokumenter/nyheder/Retningslinjer_fra_7._januar_2021.pdf

¹² https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/dokumenter/officielt/Retningslinjer_210421.pdf

¹³

https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/dokumenter/officielt/Retningslinjer_pr._02072021_uden_rettelsesmarkeringer.pdf

were sitting or standing, as well as face masks and corona passports.¹⁴ By 1 February 2022, all regulations were removed as Covid-19 was reclassified as no longer being an illness of special concern.

The impact of the pandemic on the regulation of religion in Denmark is high. First, it is worth noticing that the pandemic prevention systems in place did not mention religion (Sundhedsstyrelsen 2013), so there does not seem to have been any plan or legislation in place to regulate religious life in the event of a pandemic. When the pandemic developed, the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs produced a highly bureaucratic system of regulation, which included both minority and majority religion.

These regulations mainly concerned access to religious buildings, which with the bureaucratic regulations came to concern the number of participants allowed to specific types of arrangements. Another highly regulated area was funerals. Initially, the strict rules for gatherings did not apply to funerals, but indoor funerals would have to apply to rules about distancing (BEK no 370 of 04/04/2020¹⁵). When the reopening started on 18 May 2020, the first round of regulation from the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, retained this understanding, but in the regulations from 20 August 2020 contained a reduction of participants at outdoor funerals at 200, and the regulations from 7 January 2021 a limit of 50. The reduction of the number of participants at outdoor funerals changed the balance of most restrictive from indoor to outdoor and could be seen as a reaction to the public debates on Muslim funerals as conforming to the widespread conception of funerals in the majority church as indoor. The regulation of funerals led to many frustrations within the majority church as the employees found the regulations unclear. It also led to many frustrations for the pastors who had to act both as civil servants and people providing pastoral care (Videnscenter 2020, 127). An area, which seems to have been little regulated is chaplaincies, where there was little discussion on the rights of ministers of religion to visit patients.

Despite the fact that restrictions on religious freedoms were high, there has been very little criticism regarding any potential violation of religious rights. There were no court cases either.

Sociological Aspects

Collective religious life was massively affected during the pandemic. During the first lockdown, Denmark had one of the most restrictive regimes in regard to religion (De La Ferriere 2020) so during the spring of 2020, there was very little collective religious life in Denmark. Even if legislation allowed for baptism, weddings and funerals, most people would postpone weddings and baptisms and people would limit their participation in funerals. Some of the baptisms were moved to the summer period after the reopening of the majority Lutheran Church. Confirmations were collectively postponed until after the reopening and, therefore, show the most marked decline in church activities (Videnscenter 2020). There was also

¹⁴ https://www.km.dk/fileadmin/share/dokumenter/officialt/Bilag_1_02072021.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2020/370>

disruption in regard to participation in major religious holidays like Easter and Christmas, but also Ramadan and Eid, Pesach, Vaisakhi, Vesak (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020).

There was a rise in the use of digital media, but this was unevenly distributed among groups (Kühle and Larsen 2021), and while some found that they would definitely continue after society opened up, others clearly said, that they would not. (Larsen, Mauritsen, et al. 2020b). Changes included many small changes, of which some may be permanent. One example is how baptism was increasingly performed outside of Sunday service to lower the number of participants (Poulsen et al. 2021, 49). A long discussion regarding online communion took place within the majority church (Holm, Rønkilde, and Thorsen 2022; Kühle and Larsen 2021).

For many, the online solution was practical, but it lacked something. In regard to a group of Muslims women, it was said that,

“the flavour of being physically together was lost during coronavirus. Hence, it appears that digital infrastructure is endowed with ambivalence between, on the one hand, an immediate nearness that enables users to integrate participation easily into daily practicalities and makes home a territory of religious activity and community building, and, on the other, a physical distancing that impairs religious and emotional connections.”(Lyngsøe 2022, 197)

Unlike what has been the case in other countries, the pandemic did not seem to increase people’s religiosity (Christensen, Kühle, and Jacobsen 2021; Poulsen et al. 2021). While some religious groups increased their pastoral care and charity activities, others did not (Larsen, Mauritsen, et al. 2020b). Also when asked what they had missed most during the 2020 lockdown, very few mentioned religion (Christensen, Kühle, and Jacobsen 2021). It is symptomatic, than when a mosque and a church decided to perform a common act of church bell ringing and public call to prayer to symbolise solidarity, this message was not apprehended in public debates and ended up in politicians discussing whether to entirely outlaw the access of Muslims to perform a public call to prayer (Kühle 2021).

The relation between religious groups and the state during the Covid-19 pandemic can be described as collaboration or perhaps more precisely compliance. Religious groups facilitated the adherence to public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus by applying the regulations often eagerly, and (for some) sharing information on social media (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020).

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